SEMINARIES, BIBLE COLLEGES AND MISSION

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How relevant is seminary education to mission work?
Category: Short-Term Mission

One of the recurring themes of this blog is that the world is changing rapidly and so the way in which we do mission needs to change to meet the new context. A corollary of this is that the way in which we train missionaries also needs to change. Rollin Grams has recently explored this question in an excellent and wide ranging post. I'm going to post a few extracts to give you a feel for what he says, but I do recommend that you read the full article.

> *Seminaries also focussed their mission studies departments in certain ways that one might question.Â We might ask, â€˜What is missiology?â€™Â It is a discipline that will combine a variety of studies, but which ones, and with what emphasis?Â In this paragraph alone I could make myself a target of not a few missiologists, so let me tread as lightly as I can.Â First, let me say that a great variety of mission studies can be valuable to the Church.Â Yet, second, I would like to suggest that most missionaries do not need to focus their studies on missiologyâ€"without at all implying that missiological studies are irrelevant.Â The training of missionaries does not necessarily involve increasing the enrollment of students in degrees focussed on missiology.Â This would be like teachers focusing their studies on education rather than what they are teaching.Â If I am to become a mathematics teacher, I donâ€™t need a whole degree in education so much as advanced study in mathematics itself, with several courses in teaching method to boot.Â What is needed in missions is not experts in missiology but experts in Old Testament studies, New Testament studies, theology, Church history, and the particular ministerial fields such as evangelism, church planting, Christian education, and so forth.*

I almost agree wholeheartedly with this. My only caveat is that those who are involved in cross-cultural mission of any type do need some background in the subject. Yes, maths teachers need to be experts in maths, but they also need to know how to teach. I may be splitting hairs here, but the point is an important one.

> *Mission studies in the seminary should, in my view, dominate the curriculum, but not at all in regard to its present course offerings.Â It should dominate the curriculum in terms of focusing everyone on why the seminary itself exists: for the sake of fulfilling the mission of the Church until Christ returns.Â ... But what is needed is not more courses in missions but a missional focus in Old Testament, New Testament, theology, Church history, and ministerial studies. For example, I applaud recent interest among some Biblical scholars in missional emphases in Biblical studies, such as I. Howard Marshall, Chris Wright, Eckhard Schnabel, Andreas KÃ¶stenberger, P. T. Oâ€™Brien.*
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> *...Also, seminaries, like mission agencies, need to find a way not to have their mission dominated by the agendas of rich churches that take over the tasks of ministerial training and mission work.Â This will require agencies working more closely with churches and both*

> *working with seminaries so that there is enough trust between them to be constructively critical of one another as well as to work together towards common goals.*
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> *...However, as any missionary will quickly say, â€˜Please do not send students to America to study, and do not even send them to the UK or Europe.â€™Â Why not?Â First, study in the west often means immigration to the west.Â Second, ministry training in the west can credential a person beyond his or her worth without the approval of wise elders in his or her own country. Indeed, ministerial education needs to be contextual: one needs to apply this or that text, this or that theological topic, or this or that discussion to a specific context.Â Of what value is it for a national to learn this for a western context rather than his or her own context?*
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> *...There is ample room for the western seminary to be engaged with churches in foreign missions.Â Indeed, greater seminary involvement would be very helpful in a number of ways, including in the formation of Christian identity and tradition.Â Yet this does not mean getting more students into mission programs, training missionaries with only Masters Degrees in the west, bringing foreign students to study in the west, or offering full programs of study abroad apart from partnering with mission agencies and national educational programs.Â A partnership between seminaries, churches, and mission agencies requires new thinking about costs and funding, a commitment to contextual theological education, and some further thinking about curricular implications for a missional focus of the seminary.Â The strands of seminary, Church, and mission agency could be that much stronger were they braided together in a new vision for mission in our day.*

I also appreciated this quote from Dana Robert which Grams included in his piece:

> *The context of globalization, including advanced communication technologies, has led to a massive democratization or deprofessionalization of mission work.Â Short-term mission projects involving millions of people and millions of dollars, cross-cultural outreach from local congregations, proliferation of â€˜globalâ€™ faith-based organizations (FBOs), and migration have become so extensive that the missionary is being redefined in North America.Â What should be the trajectory for mission studies in an age when globe-trotting amateurs vastly outnumber career missionaries?*

As I said at the outset, please do read the original article and add your comments there, or feel free to comment here if you wish.