

## The Changing Role of Missionaries in a Flat World

From all Nations? Addressing de challenges and opportunities of missionaries sent from everywhere to everyone.

by Ágatha Cristian P. Heap

Faculdade Teológica Nazarena  
Centro de Formação Missionária  
Brazil - 2006

*He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*  
Luke 24:46-49

Missions bring with them a sense of urgency. The whole world needs to be reached by the gospel and transformed by the Lord. The Bible tells us that *the Lamb has purchased with blood men from every tribe and language and people and nation* (Rev. 5:9). Latin America, Brazil in particular, has sensed that urgency. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, hundreds of Brazilian missionaries were sent. There was a great excitement and hope. Brazil has even been called the new breeding ground of missionaries for the whole world. However, in 1995 statistics were shared that 3 in every 4 Brazilian missionaries that were sent returned home prematurely.<sup>1</sup> Something was wrong!

My conclusion with Jesus' command for the people to wait in Jerusalem in order to receive power from on high, combined with the sad statistics of premature return of missionaries, especially from Brazil, is that, even though the cause is urgent, preparation is unavoidable to attain success. After spending three years walking with Jesus daily, Jesus himself knew that his disciples were not ready to go to all the world and share the good news yet. They still needed to complete their *training program*. They had to be patient and wait for this power that was going to come from on high in order to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Data shared at the second Missionary Congress of COMIBAM International (an Ibero-American Missionary Cooperation) in Acapulco, Mexico.

witnesses of it to the whole world. Good training requires patience, spiritual development and has to involve the whole being, but in the long run it saves time, because more missionaries stay on the field for the time they committed, the Christian message is preached more accurately and the results are good and eternal fruits.

Even though one of the main points of this paper is that training is crucial for the success of Christian missions, it cannot be seen as an isolated item. It requires vision, support, investment and value from the church in general as well as a clear understanding of what people are being trained to do – an understanding of what it means to be a missionary. Therefore, in this paper, I will discuss the challenges and opportunities involving support, training and the missionary task from a Brazilian perspective within a global context.

## **Support**

Jesus has challenged us to love one another (John 13:34-35) and to carry each other's burden (Galatians 6:2). As members of one Body, we all belong to the same family and the responsibility of caring for this Body is of all of its members. Support is the starting point of any missionary endeavor and it needs to come from local pastors, local churches, individual brothers and sisters in Christ, and from mission agencies in general.

Local pastors should be trained to develop a local program for potential missionaries. Once I heard a group of mission mobilizers from a protestant denomination say that, as they promoted missions and challenged the church to get involved with it, their main goal was to reach the 10/40 window of the *church*; that meant to reach the “unreached pastors” who did not have a missionary vision. It was a comical comment, but a very sad and realistic one. The local pastor is the first source of missions and missionary support. That support can be expressed in sharing with the church one's call to missions, praying with the potential missionary, investing in his/her training, sending

him/her to the field and accompanying the development of the missionary's ministry in every step of the way – until his/her retirement.

In this sequence of support that guides the potential missionary from his/her call to the field, one of the first problems faced in Latin America is the lack of people interested in investing in training. Pastors, churches and individuals might feel inclined to support those already on the field or with a date of arrival on the field already set (especially if the missionary goes to a very poor place), but not much money is sent for those in schools. It is important to show pastors that the time in training costs less than the missionary in the field and this investment will be reflected in the good performance of the missionary once he/she arrives on the field.

Immediately following pastoral support comes the role of the local church. The church has to be committed to missions. That should be the first training place both for pastors (who will – or should – pastor the missionaries) as well as for potential missionaries. In Brazil, churches put the responsibility of caring for the missionary in every area on the mission agency or on the mission department. The tendency is to find a sense of “task completed” in churches that have sent missionaries with its mission department or mission agencies, but very little follow up or communication is established by these churches with the missionaries on duty. Recently, some Brazilian missionaries that were ministering in East Timor were at risk due to the country's political instability. The missionaries got in touch with their agency in Brazil and over the phone shootings could be heard. It was a serious situation. Sadly, one of the sending churches showed indifference to the situation, took no action and left to the agency the responsibility of resolving the matter alone. Fortunately, the missionaries were able to evacuate the zone of risk and they are in a country close by getting ready to return to East Timor. This is one example of the lack of involvement and lack of a sense of responsibility of some Latin churches that are already sending missionaries. Another problem that occurs repeatedly is that

sometimes, without prior notice, the financial support of the missionary is abruptly terminated. Cases like these create a cycle of distrust and lack of commitment from all parts. Some potential missionaries are insecure about the support they will receive from the church and that can hinder their own commitment to doing missions.

Thinking about who is sending missionaries to the world, Kelly O'Donnell divides the "sending countries" in to two categories: the veterans (includes countries like the United Kingdom, the USA and Australia) and the new ones (includes countries like Brazil, Korea and Nigeria). The number one cause of premature return of missionaries from these new sending countries is "lack of financial support", followed by "lack of vocation" which is a result of poor training or its complete absence.<sup>2</sup> Those problems are not even mentioned on the list of causes of return of missionaries from veterans countries.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, as we think about sending missionaries from there new sending countries, we must focus on strengthening there two weak areas.

Considering the importance of supporting missionaries, O'Donnell suggests an investment in the understanding and practice of care in five spheres: the care of the Master (God taking care of the missionary and the missionary caring for God); personal and mutual care (expressing the value of the community), the care of the senders (involving all the stages of the practice of missions – from recruitment to retirement; the value of commitments), the role of the specialists (from all areas of life; the role of counselors, etc.) and the role of care groups (sharing the importance of connections and networking).<sup>4</sup>

The huge number of premature return of Latin missionaries, especially Brazilians, in the 1990's could have been a result of an over-confidence combined with lack of experience that did not value pastoral care of missionaries. In that decade, some Latin

---

<sup>2</sup> O'Donnell, Kelly, org. Cuidado Integral do Missionário. Londrina: Descoberta Editora, 2004, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> In this case, retirement, family issues and health problems would be the main causes of return.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

mission agencies lost up to 40% of its personnel. Many of those did not only leave the field, but also Christianity, never returning to church once they were back in their home country/town.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, Latin America has provided little care and scarce resources in the support of missions and missionaries. In order to create opportunities of improvement in these areas, Christopher Shaw makes some suggestions that I consider worthy of consideration. First of all, he says the church needs to invest in the formation of teams of pastoral care that will help with team building, conflict and stress management, marriage strengthening, education of children, family life, etc. One team could provide assistance to different groups in different places. Secondly, he says that it is important to create awareness and consciousness in the local churches. It is important to inform the churches about stresses, challenges and difficulties of the missionary as well as the fulfillment of being on the field. Then, pastoral care for missionaries could be part of a training program (the pastors sending missionaries would also have to undergo a training program, to understand the biblical bases of missions and the steps to prepare, send and support missionaries). Finally, resources should be shared among missionaries, denominations and organizations. Shaw states that “the success of the missionary task has never been dependent on the abundance of resources, but in the wise and intelligent use of what is available.”<sup>6</sup> It is wise and necessary to create a network of global and mutual cooperation with counselors, pastors, church leaders, missionary teachers and missionaries. In order to accomplish that, the endorsement of key leaders is essential for it to succeed. Of course the process of implementing these suggestions is not simple, but as a global Christian community aiming to contribute to the growth and development of the Kingdom of God, it is attainable.

---

<sup>5</sup> Shaw, Christopher. “Despertando o Cuidado Pastoral nas Missões Latino Americanas,” O’Donnell, *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

## Training

As it has already been noted in this paper, missionary training is one of the key aspects of a successful cross-cultural ministry. Sending pastors, church leaders, church members, missions teachers and, of course, potential missionaries should receive training. However, there is a lack of investment in this aspect of the missionary career. The church wants missionaries on the field. It seems like what it takes to get them there is not as valued as it should be. In this section, I will give a short overview of some of the training characteristics of each group mentioned above, but will place my focus on the training of potential missionaries as the goal of this discussion.

The training of sending pastors, church leaders, and church members should include a good introduction to Biblical Bases of Missions for them to understand the importance of missions to God, the importance of spiritual and emotional support such as prayer and communication with the missionary, as well as financial responsibilities and levels of commitments.

The training of mission teachers should give special attention to the disciplines that are expected to be developed in the students (such as church commitment, devotional practices and holy life), some academic formation, personal experience in the mission field, constant update on what missionaries are experiencing in their areas of action and continuous learning of pertinent mission themes.

Finally, the training of potential missionaries should emphasize, but not be limited to, the following two areas: 1) character formation; 2) development of cross-cultural abilities. The rest of this section is focused on ways that these goals can be reached.

An efficient training program has to embrace the teaching of personal disciplines (such as prayer, meditation, fasting, personal Bible studies, service and spiritual warfare – this last one is particularly relevant for Latin Americans, Africans and Asians). William

Taylor in the first chapter of a book he edited concerning the internationalization of missionary training emphasizes that it is crucial that missionaries be more committed to holiness than happiness and these personal disciplines contribute to that commitment.<sup>7</sup>

There is a mission school in Brazil that has a prayer center - a whole building used only for prayer. In their main room there is a huge world map and an open area with some pillows that people can use to kneel on and pray. Also, there are several small rooms for individual / private prayer with a couple of books full of missionary information and prayer requests. This center is open eighteen hours every day and is a great incentive to missionary prayer and intercession.<sup>8</sup>

A great portion of people involved in missionary training in Latin America and Asia defend that a good program has to take place in a communal way of living in order to deal with relationships, servanthood, flexibility and humility. Also, teachers have to be models and mentors. It is very important that students and teachers develop a relationship outside of the classroom for a non-formal learning of values, interests and attitudes. Full time professors, living on campus (or at least spending a lot of time on campus with the students) provide example, supervision and support to their students.

Jesus showed that it was more important for him that his disciples spent time with him than that they would do anything for him. Jesus himself first developed a loving and caring community with his disciples before he sent them to the world, as David and Joyce Huggett defend in their article about Jesus and pastoral care.<sup>9</sup> Jesus valued mutual support (he sent two by two) and this vision has to be taught/learned in the training period of the missionaries.

A large part of mission schools in Brazil have valued the assistance of Psychologists in their training program. Many mission students come from broken families

---

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, William David, ed. Capacitando a Força Missionária Internacional. Minas Gerais: Editora Ultimato, 1993, Chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> This center is located on Missão Antioquia Campus – Araçariçuama, São Paulo, Brazil.

<sup>9</sup> Huggett, David & Joyce. "Jesus Cristo: o Coração do Cuidado Pastoral," O'Donnell, *Op. Cit.*, Chapter 9.

and with some unresolved matters in their lives. The idea is to have the Psychologist administer tests and do a series of assessments involving personal interviews, a variety of activities and assignments to be accomplished to help the student to get to know him/her better and to identify areas that need to be improved, types of personality, strengths and weakness of each person. In my personal experience, this has been the most important time for the mission students in their training period. I have heard several of them say how much they got to know themselves after this assessment period, how many things finally made sense to them and how useful those discoveries were for their lives and ministry.

On another subject, Titus Loong, who works at an Asian Institute of Cross Cultural Training, wrote about the training of missionaries in Asia. There, Loong affirms that most missiologists do not get very involved in missions, and for that reason, he suspects that academic knowledge in excess might not be good for missions.<sup>10</sup> He talks about how, in Asia, they centralize their program on the student, even though that is a little “counter-cultural” in that region. In fact, there is a great agreement worldwide about this being the essence of missionary preparation – the spiritual formation and character of the potential missionary.

In the same book, David Taiwoong Lee defends the idea that if the receiving field has a strong leadership, the missionaries could go even without much training, because the *veterans* could help them in the beginning as a training period.<sup>11</sup> However, I still consider that the training pre-field is safer because it can detect potential problems and issues that could come up in the field before the missionary gets there, and, as it was said before, the training period back “home” is cheaper and less traumatic than being in the actual cross-cultural area of ministry.

---

<sup>10</sup> Loong, Titus. “Treinando Missionários da Ásia: O Instituto Asiático de Treinamento Transcultural” in Taylor, *Op. cit.*, Chapter 5, pg. 76.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, David Taiwoong. “Rumo a um Modelo Coreano de Treinamento Missionário” in Taylor, *Op. Cit.*, Chapter 6.

There is a huge discussion among people involved in missionary training both in Brazil, other countries in Latin America and worldwide regarding how much Theology (the study of) should be required of missionaries in formation. I agree with those that defend that there must be some Theological Formation. That is essential to give the missionary tools to identify whether something is simply a cultural reality or a biblical mandate. A good knowledge of Theology might help the missionary avoid the development of Christian syncretism or nominalism in the field.

To go a little more in depth on the issue of training, Márcia Tostes, a reference in Brazil of someone who is concerned about and invests in missionary care, defends the idea that the training has to reproduce real situations and has to involve simulations of interrogations, conflicts and farewells, among other things. The idea would be to provide the students with an opportunity to face some of those stressful and torturing situations that may happen when they are on the field in a “controlled environment” (their school of missions).<sup>12</sup>

Also, the training should involve the whole family. In Korea, they developed a program for missionary wives (of course it implies that the missionary call was specifically for the husband, so they are providing courses for the wives as “companions” but not missionaries themselves).<sup>13</sup> Being the whole family involved in ministry or not, the reality of it is that when a family goes to the field, *all* of its member are on the field. Tostes shared statistics of 2002 showing that 79% of Brazilian missionaries are married and a great percentage of them have kids. Therefore, the whole family needs to undergo a type of training in order to be able to cope with the stress and changes that a cross-cultural living will impose on them.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning the actual formal curriculum of classes and content, most missionary

---

<sup>12</sup> Tostes, Márcia. “Preparando para Perseverar nas Missões Brasileiras,” O’Donnell, *Op. cit.*, Chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, *Op. Cit.*, Chapter 6.

<sup>14</sup> Tostes, *Op. cit.*, Chapter 22.

training centers in Latin America offer classes of Cultural Anthropology, Contextualization, Biblical Bases of Missions, Linguistics, Counseling, Phenomenology of Religion, Missionary Strategies, History of Missions, Church Planting, Spiritual Warfare, Life and Character of the Missionary, among other subjects that may include the development of a network of sponsors or even mechanic and agricultural courses.

The challenges in training missionaries and the church as a whole are great, but with a little bit of interest and goodwill, the church can develop a good training program that will be profitable to all of its constituents. What needs to be done is clear and there is a vast material to assist in the development of a program. No excuses for not investing in this area should be accepted. Missionary training is indispensable and has to be perpetual.

### **The Missionary Task**

A variety of books concerning globalization and the future of missions has shown how Christianity is literally going south. And the more it goes south, the more Southern missionaries arise. One of the main advantages of having missionaries from the Southern hemisphere is that they do not carry the cultural imperialistic images that missionaries from the Northern hemisphere might bear even without wanting to transmit that bias. A potential problem with missionaries from rich countries is that, for the receiving country, these “rich” outsiders represent their government; they convey a political image. Whenever a missionary arrives in a new country, he/she is first seen by local people as a representative of his/her home country, and only after a while people will (if they will) see him/her as a missionary. Therefore, it is important to realize that there is more identification and acceptance of missionaries from poor countries going to the poor. Taking that into consideration, we now turn to the final point. What, then, is the role of

missionaries in a flat world? Should they be sent from all nations? Yes! Should they go to all nations? Yes! But, how? And what are they expected to do?

Before we go any further, it is important to define the concept of what it means to *be* a missionary. Paul G. Hiebert defined missionary as “everyone who communicates the gospel in a cross-cultural environment.”<sup>15</sup> The key words here are *communication* and *cross-cultural environment*. The missionary has to be *communicating* the gospel and he/she has to *cross a boundary* – cultural, geographical or linguistic. Hiebert goes further to say that “human relationships are the center of the missionary task”<sup>16</sup> and that “to be a missionary means to be involved with people in many different contexts.”<sup>17</sup>

Considering the definition above, people involved in administration, accountancy and other “office” duties necessary for the preservation and organization of a denomination or agency should not be considered missionaries. They are Christian workers or volunteers involved in the maintenance of the church or agency as an institution and their role is very important. However, the missionary task must be centered in the outreach of people, caring for their salvation and being in a holistic manner. Whenever possible, clerical functions should be delegated to local workers. World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization, uses this principle of investing more in local personnel in order to avoid paternalism, to give more authority and independence to people, to reduce costs and to develop partnerships with local communities and leaderships, as stated by John Fawcett.<sup>18</sup> That seems to be a very wise strategy and philosophy.

Fawcett also calls our attention to the fact that, up until today, the tendency in world missions has been to develop structures that will fit the missionaries’ needs. That is expensive and not very practical. He says that, “the ability to transport huge items such as

---

<sup>15</sup> Hiebert, Paul G. *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*. São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1999, pg. 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 257.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 263.

<sup>18</sup> Fawcett, John. “Cuidado e Apoio aos Obreiros Locais e Ministérios Humanitários Cristãos,” O’Donnell, *Op. cit.*, Chapter 11.

refrigerators, TVs, furniture, cars and, in some cases, even complete houses all over the world in 'support' of the expatriates workers emphasizes the myth that cross-cultural adjustment is above all based in the access of material resources."<sup>19</sup> This could even create certain tension between local people and the missionaries.

Before aiming to perform any task, the missionary has to be a learner. He/she has to have a sincere interest in the culture and lives he/she intends to minister to. The missionary has to have native neighbors and not live "protected" or "confined" in a compound. The missionary has to avoid the image of a "colonizer", "boss" or even a "policeman". Hiebert points out that the specific idea of a missionary as someone who served abroad emerged during the *Era of Conquests* along with the images of colonial administrators. Thus, it is very important that the missionary develops his/her life among the people to be accepted as a brother / sister because that is how the Christian family will be truly formed.<sup>20</sup> Personal relationships are the key to the missionary task.

In addition to the understanding of what it means to *be* a missionary, it is important that the missionaries know *who they are in missions*. In Brazil, there is a pressure from different levels of the church to know *where* a person was called *to* once he/she manifests a missionary call. That stimulates people to look for a country or people in the world to "fall in love with" and then direct all of the efforts to get to that country or people. The problem is that, many times, the potential missionaries do not spend much time thinking about *what* they can do in that specific place when he/she gets there. It limits the scope of action and causes more frustration when the doors to that specific place, to reach that specific people, are not opened.

Nowadays, it is increasingly important that missionaries have professional skills that will be used on the field to draw them nearer to local people, help with their support

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 205.

<sup>20</sup> Hiebert, *Op. cit.*, pg. 283.

and give them more options and mobility in case of political instabilities, in the country that will force them to move out of the field.

In conclusion, either in a round or in a flat world, today or two thousand years ago, the missionary task is a call to feed the hungry, to provide water for the thirsty, to show hospitality to the stranger, to clothe the naked, to look after the sick, to visit those in prison, to preach the good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve (bestowing on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair). Then, they will be called *oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor*.<sup>21</sup>

May the Lord help us accomplish this task. Amen!

## **Bibliography**

- Hiebert, Paul G. O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas. São Paulo: Edições Vida Nova, 1999.
- Jenkins, Philip. The New Christendom. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Nasser, Antonio C. A Igreja Apaixonada por Missões. São Paulo: Abba Press, 1995.
- O'Donnell, Kelly, org. Cuidado Integral do Missionário. Londrina: Descoberta Editora, 2004.
- Sine, Tom. O Lado Oculto da Globalização. São Paulo: Mundo Cristão, 2001.
- Taylor, William David, ed. Capacitando a Força Missionária Internacional. Minas Gerais: Editora Ultimato, 1993.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ideas taken from Matthew 25 and Isaiah 61.