

Back to College

A look at graduates and missionary training colleges

Martin Goldsmith

Wide-open doors of opportunity; tremendous scope for a ministry of influence, for evangelism and Bible teaching; abounding needs — here is the challenge of missionary service overseas for the graduate. Yet so many graduates and students feel that missionary work is irrelevant to the thinking modern Christian. This is tragic. The swirling movements of today's history; urbanization plus modern education; mass media; growing overseas churches in desperate need of training and teaching — all these cry out for the thinking graduate. We must face the spiritual and intellectual challenge of a changing world which is looking for new answers to new situations.

The modern graduate may fear involvement in old-fashioned missions. It is probably true that some missions may not have kept up with changing history (that is, of course, equally true of some British churches and student groups). This presents us with a threefold choice: 1. avoid the missions altogether (logically we should then also avoid all churches and Christian Unions!); 2. get involved in some less up-to-date mission and try to change it from within; 3. work with a mission with whose character we are in sympathy. We cannot ignore these alternatives.

The graduate may also fear the usually required training at a Bible or missionary training college. He has probably already held a responsible job for which he was well qualified and in which he was respected. Now at a later age he is back to college. He starts again on new subjects and he starts again at the beginning. This is not easy; but it may prove invaluable training

for service overseas where he will naturally be faced with study of new language and culture, new teaching and preaching methodologies, new religious concepts. Unfortunately the L-plates will have to be put on sooner or later — or is this 'unfortunate'? The graduate, of all people, ought to be the most open to new approaches. If he is unwilling to be flexible, he is unlikely to be of much value in leadership of the Christian church either overseas or in Britain. Many missionary training colleges have adapted their college life and curriculum to suit the needs of older and more experienced students, some of whom may be married. Seminars, discussions and personal tuition help to shape the course to the needs of the individual.

What type of training does the graduate need at a missionary training college?

His primary need is a deeper and more intimate knowledge of God and the Scriptures. The average graduate has been largely occupied with other studies and his knowledge of the Bible, theology, worship and church history may be inadequate. The application of the Scriptures to people of different backgrounds can be an exciting revelation. The prospective missionary needs training in the understanding of other religions, philosophies and cultures; in missionary strategy and policies; in world situations and movements; in current missionary thinking and theology. All of us can easily slip into traditional patterns of work overseas with little to guide us to a discerning review of our work and strategy. We should be given some guide-lines during training as,

once we are deeply involved in a ministry, we may have little time or opportunity for extensive wider reading or study. The student will benefit from the maximum possible discussion and thought before he is put into the missionary situation. Some graduates may also be relatively new Christians and all of us need the spiritual deepening which should be an integral part of missionary training. Depending on the work and situation to which we go, we may also require practical training in basic medicine, car maintenance, agriculture, *etc.* Many too will have had little experience of living and working in close quarters with people of other social, educational and denominational backgrounds. This may prove to be an unpleasant but necessary shock, perhaps also revealing unknown areas of pride.

In John 4: 35 Jesus says, 'Do you not say, "There are yet four months, then comes the harvest"?' Jesus does not have any such procrastinating attitude to the task of reaping the ripe harvests. With His emphasis on the word 'you' He underlines the fallacy of such a casual approach from people who are His disciples. The harvest overseas is in the 1970's 'already white unto harvest'. We must not allow any fears or prejudices to prevent us gathering in the harvest with urgency; we must see to it that we get the best possible training for the task, even if its difficulties frighten or humble us. Within us by His Spirit lives the Jesus whose 'food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work' (Jn. 4: 34). We too, therefore, are to have this burning passion to do and to complete the will of God. What is the will of God? The salvation and the sanctification of men (Jn. 3: 16; 1 Thes. 4: 3).

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