

# Bible college - yes or no?

FAQs and FSOs about mission training

People who genuinely and enthusiastically wish to serve God in mission opportunities at home and overseas often have significant reservations about the need or value of Bible/mission preparation. Their FAQs (frequently asked questions) are perhaps more accurately FSOs (frequently stated objections) - persuasive reasons for not going to Bible college.

## **FSO 1: I haven't got the time for mission training; I just want to get on with the job**

The prospect of spending several weeks or even a year or two (or even three) preparing for service overseas often puts people off. In their God-given enthusiasm, anything which stands between them and getting on with the task is seen as an obstacle.

This was how I felt when, as a graduating university student, I was champing to be off to Congo. I well remember the words of a wise and experienced mission practitioner as I asked his advice about the minimum mission training necessary: 'Don't rush your preparation. If you prepare thoroughly, many more doors will open to you for effective service'.

In subsequent years, I came to realize the wisdom of his advice. Of course, there is little sense in investing years of preparation if you are only going out for a month or two, but if you're anticipating a longer period of service, it's wise not to skimp on preparation. For those going short-term, some Bible colleges and mission agencies, such as SIM, offer very short courses. The longer the period of service, the more thorough the preparation should be.

## **FSO 2: It's too expensive!**

Air fares, vaccinations, accommodation, suitable clothing and equipment, living costs... It all adds up. The prospect of paying for Bible college as well seems just too much!

This is true, but if mission is right for you, then it is also right to trust God to provide what is needed. After all, you will need to rely on him when you're 'out there' - wouldn't it be good to learn to do that here and now?

There may be many people in your home church and among your friends who would be delighted to stand with you in prayer and contributing to the cost. One of the thrilling things in my years involved in mission training was to observe students' trust in God growing as they exercised faith in his power to provide.

## **FSO 3: Forget the theory; I'm going to learn on the job.**

This is a serious objection, because it is true that while some learn by listening and reflecting, others prefer to learn by participating. These people may well argue that the months spent in preparing could be better spent in doing.

**But consider:** What would we think of an aspiring doctor who declared 'I just want to get on with treating people who are in desperate need; I don't want to waste precious time learning and preparing!' Activities and endeavours which need special skills and knowledge need understanding and preparation if they are to be undertaken effectively.

The one who goes overseas, or into a culturally and religiously different context from their own, without adequate insight is likely to make serious blunders. In mission training such skills can start to be developed, and possible

misunderstandings and mistakes can be anticipated in a safe and secure environment. One couple serving in Africa, explain:

We had been ministering happily in Tanzania for 4 years before receiving any formal Bible school training. Our 2 years of biblical and intercultural studies was a mandatory requirement of our mission in order to return to Tanzania as longer-term mission personnel.

Initially, we saw it as an unwelcome and expensive distraction to what we were already doing. In retrospect, it was a defining time for us in terms of shaping our future ministry... As we reflected on our previous 4 years in Africa we were able to gain valuable perspective on mistakes made and lessons learned.

In what was both an academic and practical training environment, there was time and space to dig deep biblically and learn skills practically (car maintenance, dentistry and hairdressing among them!) Probably the most valuable learning experience was about contextualizing the gospel - for us this continues to be at the forefront of our minds, as we grapple with the nuts and bolts of cross-cultural mission.

Another mission worker credits her Bible college training with providing unexpected opportunities to develop leadership skills:

Students were encouraged to assume leadership roles...excellent training for mission work, where one is often expected to 'know how it's done'.

**FSO 4: My work is going to be practical; I don't want to get tangled up in all this theology! I'll leave the preaching and evangelism to the specialists.**

Well, it is true that we all have particular gifts that God has given us. Nevertheless, that said, we all share the privilege and responsibility of sharing the gospel with others. Our effectiveness in doing so can be enhanced by a clear grasp of the 'whole counsel' of God's Word.

Of course, nothing can substitute for the Holy Spirit's work in us and in other people, but the clearer our understanding, the clearer and more persuasive will be our sharing of that Word with others. At Bible college we can immerse ourselves in the overarching story of the Bible, making connections between the Old and New Testaments, coming to understand the distinct but related doctrines of Scripture, and developing ways of explaining them to others in a jargon-free way. Some mission personnel see the value of 'topping up' their biblical understanding and invest further time during their home assignment.

**As one missionary worker put it:**

*Missionary service is an enriching experience, but it is vital that the message proclaimed remains clear, and so to 'fine tune' my biblical understanding I spent 3 months on a refresher course at college in between changing countries and ministries.*

**FSO 5: I've travelled quite a bit. I should be fine in cross-cultural ministry.**

The Christian worker arriving in their destination overseas may well be in for a shock. There can never be an adequate preparation other than actually living in the country (as opposed to merely visiting), but prior training in a multi-cultural Bible college will go some way, not least in relating to others.

**As one mission-training leader says:**

*Relationships are the key area for missionaries. Relationships with fellow team members, with national counterparts and with the local community. The cross-cultural aspect of these relationships is often the greatest challenge. Committing time to a period of mission preparation, living in a cross-cultural community, provides an opportunity to understand cross-cultural relationships - and to put this understanding into practice at the start. The result is greater effectiveness and harmony later on.*

In the student body there may be 20 to 30 different nationalities represented, and around one lunch table students from four or five different countries. Right there and then we will begin to adapt cross-culturally, adjusting to different accents, different views, a different sense of humour. We will develop (hopefully) a sensitivity, respect and openness that are absolutely essential for any sort of cross-cultural ministry.

There is time and opportunity during training for critical self-awareness; students are helped to challenge their own assumptions and prejudices, and their convictions can be strengthened. They can learn about the worldviews of people who do not share Christian perspectives, grapple with their typical objections to Christianity, and develop ways to respond sensitively and persuasively. One couple look back on their time at Bible college and write:

Being part of an international community and with lecturers with mission experience made us aware of the challenges we would face out in the field. We also learned to be critical in the right sense, to look at things differently, to ask questions, to evaluate, and to ask, 'Is there a better way to do this?' We feel that evaluation and critical thinking are often lacking on the field, and we need to do more of it.

Communicating Christ cross-culturally is surely one of the most challenging, but also rewarding tasks. It may be tempting to rush into it as quickly as possible. However, because it is such an important enterprise, it deserves the very best preparation possible.

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