

RESEARCH TRAINING AS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR SHIFTING PARADIGMS REGARDING MISSIONS AND RESEARCH, **By Peter Vumisa (INSERV, SOUTH AFRICA) Presented at The Fourth International Lausanne Researchers Conference Held in Cyprus (10-14 April 2005)**

1. INTRODUCTION

INSERV is a South African based Christian mission service organisation that serves the mission cause through strategically selected information oriented ministries. As a research organisation Inserv helps churches, mission organisations and others with information, research training, and consultation in strategic planning for effective mission programmes in both short and long term cross-cultural outreaches among the least evangelised people groups in (especially, but not limited to) Southern Africa.

The vision:

“Serving the church through Mission Research.”

Mission:

“Mission empowerment through mission research to the church in advancing the Kingdom of Christ amongst the least reached.”

My role at Inserv is to coordinate research projects and research training. I have been with Inserv almost seven years now after pastoring a church in Zambia for six years.

In this paper I am going to talk about research training as an essential tool for shifting paradigms regarding missions and research in Africa. In Africa (may be some other parts of the world too), missions and research have not been the subjects and practice of the church. Missions in fact has been traditionally regarded as a white man’s job; hence the African church generally becoming a pastoral church. On the other hand the African church never really regarded mission research as a Christian activity important to the cause of missions.

2. BACKGROUND

In his book, DAWN 2000: 7 Million churches to go – a personal story of the DAWN strategy on world evangelisation, Jim Montgomery (talking about the power of information) says, *“My negative experience with the idea of research can be rolled up in one incident. A few years ago a close friend related to me the comment of a key missions committee member of a large church. ‘We have a million dollar budget for missions,’ he boasted, ‘and not one penny for research.’ The man was bragging and insisting that as long as he was on the missions committee, not one penny would be “wasted” on research.”*¹

Unfortunately the attitude of this mission committee member represent the attitude of many other mission committees, churches, mission agencies, missionaries, pastors, church planters and others towards the subject of missions research. People do not usually see the necessity or importance of research. This is so for a number of reasons. Some of the reasons advanced by some of these groups are that:

- (1) it’s a waste of time and money,
- (2) it’s not a spiritual exercise,
- (3) it interferes with the plan and leading of the Holy Spirit, and
- (4) Others simply think that it’s not necessary at all to do research.

¹ Jim Montgomery, “DAWN 2000: 7 Million churches to go” The personal story of DAWN strategy for world evangelisation. High Land Books, British edition 1990:113.

This mind-set is not only in the church leaders in America, but Africa as well. In fact in Africa for many years now, mission has been a white man's job and calling. By and large the African church has been traditionally a pastoral church without a mission vision. However towards the end of the last century, the church caught up with the vision and passion for missions.

As exciting as preaching the Gospel to the least evangelised people groups might be, it still remains a complex and challenging exercise to all cross-cultural preachers and missionaries. Quoting Norman Giesler, David Hesselgrave says, *"The Christian accepts as axiomatic that his task is to communicate Christ to the world. That sounds simple enough, but in fact it is very complex. It is complex at least for three reasons: first there are many views of "Christ"; secondly, there are many ways to "communicate"; and thirdly, there are many worlds to which Christ must be "communicated".*²

It was at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation in 1974 where the contemporary concern for un-reached peoples came into prominence through the country -by-country research efforts of MARC. As a result of that research information, mission agencies were challenged to rethink their strategies and redeploy their workers. As a result young people by the thousands again started hearing the call to cross-cultural missionary service.³

So during the last quarter of the 20th century, the evangelical mission movement became increasingly captivated by the prospect of taking the good news of Christ to all of the world's remaining un-reached areas. Some mission leaders and churches even hoped to accomplish this as early as the year AD 2000. The church in Africa was not to be left behind. As a result some national initiatives were born, and efforts were made to reach that goal. The church in Zimbabwe for example, under the national initiative called Target 2000, in 1990, came up with a 10-year-vision of planting 10,000 churches by the year 2000. Research was one of the tools used to mobilise both manpower and resources.

However we are aware that not all churches and missionary movements see research as an essential tool for their mission activities. As you might be all aware of this fact that it is common practice for many missionary endeavours to begin without sufficient knowledge of what they are doing, and worse still having insufficient knowledge about the target groups. As a result we now have a history which is literally littered with well-intentioned projects that went wrong because they were inappropriate or because they caused outright offence to the target group.

We are all aware that wrong approaches do not lead to positive results; instead they lead to the nullification of the very noble purposes. How then can we acquire such knowledge and understanding so that we can strategically and effectively reach the least evangelised people groups?

There are two ways, perhaps even more of doing it:

1. by empowering people with information,
2. by training them to do research themselves.

It is said that the most effective way of helping people is not to give them fish but to teach them how to catch fish. So the most effective way is by training them so that they do research on their own.

The Institute for Strategic Services (INSERV) was established about 11 years ago with this very purpose of serving the church through mission research (i.e. providing information to

² Perspectives on the World Christian Movement – A reader – Edited by Ralph D. Winter, Steven C. Hawthorne. William Carey Library, 1981: 400.

³ John D. Robb, *"Focus! The power of people group thinking,"* MARC 1989: 2

churches and mission organisations regarding least evangelised people groups, and training the people to do research themselves). That is why its mission is: *“Mission empowerment through mission research support to the church in advancing the kingdom of Christ amongst the least reached.”* Through the research training programme, we seek to provide specific training to people who have no knowledge of doing research. This we do because we are aware that merely doing research ourselves will have little effect in reducing the amount of work in reaching the least reached for Christ. The other reason being that through training many mind-sets will be changed towards mission and research. As former objects of missions, it is time for the church in Africa to become the subject of missions. Through research training the church should be able to do the following when doing missions:

1. Avoid mistakes such as culturally wrong approaches
2. Churches be better prepared by learning from others.
3. Churches becoming aware and make use of the available resources.
4. Churches being more effective in their mission involvement by following locally viable strategies.
5. Through research churches should discover and understand better what God is busy doing among the least evangelised

3. WHY MISSIONS RESEARCH

Let me briefly elaborate on each of the above points. We believe that through applicable research the church can:

1. Avoid mistakes such as culturally wrong approaches

Cultural misunderstanding is sighted by many missiologists and Christian Anthropologists as one of the major causes of failure by Christian workers on the mission field. As already pointed out, history is littered with well-intentioned projects that went wrong because they were inappropriate or caused outright offence to the target group, and thus nullifying their noble purposes. Charles Kraft gives us the best biblical example on cultural misunderstands and wrong approaches with his exposition of Acts 14:8-20 in his book *“Anthropology for Christian Witness.”*⁴

The story is about Paul’s ministry at Lystra. This is an account of an interesting encounter involving misunderstandings of two groups of people due to differences in cultural worldview. Paul and Barnabas who themselves were Jews, ministered in Greek, but did not understand the language of the people at Lystra. Nor did they understand how the locals would understand the healing in Jesus name would be perceived. Paul preached and a man listened and was healed (V.9, 10). The apostles here used a language, which Jesus used to convey God’s love to the people. The Lystras however understood it in a different way. They understood it as “The gods have become like men and have come down to us” (V.11). Since they shouted in their own language, Paul did not understand what they were saying until the Priest of Zeus began to bring out bulls and flowers to make a sacrifice (V.13). At that time Paul and Barnabas sent another message by tearing their clothes and running into the middle of the crowd, shouting, “Why are you doing this? We ourselves are only human beings like you” (vv.14, 15). It appears the locals did not understand them for they kept offering the sacrifice (v. 18). The communication problem was based on cultural differences. The apostles assumed that God as an act of love performed the miracle. The people assumed that it was performed by the gods Zeus and Hermes (V. 12), who had decided to take on human form and to visit them.

⁴ Charles H. Kraft. *Anthropology for Christian Witness*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, USA 1996:51

Kraft concludes by saying that such worldview differences frequently result in serious misunderstandings of messages brought by people from other societies. Then he suggests that in order to minimize such misunderstandings, it is important to learn whatever we can about differences in our basic assumptions and what to do when they cause us difficulties.

In his book *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, Paul Hiebert says, *“Misunderstandings are based on ignorance about another culture. If we understand a new culture better, then we will be able to relate on more levels. This is a problem of knowledge. The solution is to learn and know how the other culture works.”*⁵

Now this is where mission research training comes into play. Research training should help to equip cross-cultural Christian workers to learn and understand another culture better. And secondly it should provide tools for gathering information which will result into a realistic and effective strategy of evangelising the people.

2. People can be better prepared by learning from others

In terms of missions, a lot has been done, and a lot has been written regarding missions. As modern missionaries, we should not re-invent the wheel. But we can learn a lot from the early missionaries. In Africa we can learn from the Western missionaries. Upon their foundation we continue building the kingdom of God. Where mistakes were made, through careful study and evaluation of their work, new and better strategies can be developed. Church history, anthropological studies, research reports and other studies are important for a missions minded church leader to study.

A Swiss Archaeologist in Sudan said that *“If you do not understand the man of the past, you cannot understand the man of today”*⁶ Therefore it is imperative for a church leader in Africa to be equipped with knowledge on how to gather information regarding the work of missions. Not only should he have statistics on how many churches exist, he should also be able to understand the history, the culture, the economy, political, social and spiritual aspect of the target group.

Therefore with research training we seek to empower people with skills which they can use to evaluate what has already been done for the purpose of planning for the most effective way of doing things in future.

3. People can become aware and make use of the available resources

It's amazing to realize that though Africa is a continent characterized by poor leadership, poverty, corruption, civil war, unemployment, diseases, mismanagement, social problems like crime, drugs, immorality, and HIV/AIDS which is on the rise in some African countries, Africa has a lot of riches. But the most common complaint is that we do not have money to do missions.

In his paper “What is wrong with Africa,” Bekele Shanko gives the following amazing facts about African riches:⁷

The country of Nigeria alone has more than 110 trillion standard cubic feet of gas reserve and about 10 trillion cubic feet of oil reserve (Africa Today, special report June 1999, Vol. 5, No.6). The current oil output capacity in Nigeria is 2 million barrels per day,

⁵ Hiebert Paul G. *ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON MISSIOLOGICAL ISSUES* Baker Books: A Division of Baker Books House Co Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516, 1994

⁶ *“Into Africa”* documentary on e.tv – South Africa

⁷ Bekele Sanko. *What is Wrong with Africa?* A paper, Christian Embassy of South Africa and Executive Ministry, October 2000

and it is expected to increase to 5 million barrels per day by 2010 (African Business, May 2000, No. 254). A 1995 World Bank report said that the Niger delta, home of Nigeria's oil wealth, emits about 12 million tonnes of methane every year.(Africa Today, special report, June 1999, Vol. 5, No. 6).

The country of Angola has a proven reserve of oil for 28 years. Current production is about 800,000 barrels per day and is expected to rise to above 1 million barrels per day. From the country of Angola, UNITA have mined diamonds worth over US\$3.7 billion since 1992, and UNITA alone supply up to 20% of the world's diamonds to the global market (African Business, Feb. 1999, Number 240).

More than 80% of the uranium in the American atomic bombs dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 came from the country of Congo. By 1958, Congo was producing 50% of the world's uranium, 75% of the world's cobalt, 70% of the world's industrial diamonds, and it was the world's largest producer of rubber.

Oil revenue in Congo Brazzaville funds fully 80% of the country's national treasury. It is technically the second major producer of oil in Sub-Saharan Africa following Angola (African Business, July/August 2000, No. 256).

Africa has the second greatest landmass on earth. Sudan alone is larger than the whole of Western Europe; the DRC is larger than the entire European member states combined. But total income of the 48 African countries is little more than that of Belgium.

Africa has enormous untapped potential and hidden growth reserves, but currently only 1% of the total world economic output and 2% of the world trade comes from Africa. It is estimated that to just maintain the current level of poverty, African economies have to grow by 5% per annum (African Business, July/August 2000, No. 256).

Africa is losing 20,000 skilled professionals every year because of economic hardships, instability, the poor handling of human resources, and inability to create an environment, which African professionals will not want to leave the continent (African Business, June 2000, No. 255). In addition to this Africa is the world's most indebted and aid-dependent region with 17% of its GDP flowing out in debt repayments. The whole continent has fewer paved roads than the country of Poland alone (African Business, July/August 2000, No. 256). Africa as a whole is poorer than it was 40 years ago (New Africa, July/August 2000, No. 387).

With all these riches and resources, Africa is still incredibly underrepresented in cross-cultural missions. There has never been a significant cross-cultural effort numerically among African Evangelical churches. Though perhaps there have been numerous outstanding individual missionaries, the numerical depth has never been great. Therefore there is a great need to change the mindset of Christian leaders regarding missions and also to train the Evangelicals /in order to equip them with skills for mobilising local resources. If Africa is losing 20, 000 skilled professionals every year because of economic hardships, this clearly shows that Africa has both human and financial resources. Churches must be trained to handle well human resources and also to learn to create and environment which African professionals will not want to leave the continent.

4. People can become more effective in mission involvement by following locally viable strategies

Some people use what Edward Dayton and David Fraser⁸ call “*standard strategies*” in their outreach programmes. Standard strategies are usually assumed universally applicable. Their advocates use them in all parts of the world with only cosmetic modifications. The problem with this approach is that the people who use the standard strategies assume that all people everywhere are the same. Cultural and social differences are not thought to play important role in what they are doing.

Now Dayton and Fraser define strategy as “*An overall approach, plan, or way of describing how we will go about reaching our goal or solving our problem.*”⁹

The Chambers School Dictionary defines it as “*the art of guiding,*” “*forming or carrying out a plan.*”¹⁰

In his book, *Focus, the power of people group thinking* (a practical manual for planning effective strategies to reach the un-reached), John Robb explains that originally, the word comes from a Greek term meaning “*generalship,*” that is the science and art of military command exercised to meet an enemy in a combat. To sum up the military idea of the word we could say it is the careful plan necessary to fight a war in order to attain the ultimate goal of victory. Generally, strategy is a way to reach an objective. Strategy looks for a possible “means and methods” and various “operations” that will best accomplish an objective. It looks for time and place when things will be different from what they are now.¹¹

Having said all these, then we realise that there can be no strategy or strategising when there is no information. How careful can one be in strategising for a place he does not know? A careful plan necessary to fight a war in order to attain the ultimate goal of victory can only be achieved with proper information available. For example census information is used by governments to plan for social and economic development. Without such information the government will have no proper picture of the nation and whatever decisions are made in that regard will all be based on guess work. And you know where that can lead!

Since the research tool is this important in our quest for reaching the least evangelised, then people must be equipped through training to use information for planning effectively locally viable strategies.

5. Churches will discover and understand better what God is busy doing among the least evangelised

Since there are still many people who are still locked out from the Gospel, it is very important for the church to first of all look for the key that can unlock the people’s hearts to the Gospels. However we need to realise too that God is already silently busy working among these people. Within the process of looking for the key that can unlock their hearts to the Gospel, we need also to find out where in the salvation process the people are. Like Paul with the Greeks at Athens in Acts 17 where the people were busy seeking for the unknown God, churches too should be trained to find out where the least evangelised stand. Are they antagonistic, indifferent, seeking for the truth or are they believers already?

⁸ Edward R. Dayton and David A. Fraser. *Planning Strategies for World Evangelisation*, Rev. Ed. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1990: 13

⁹ *Ibid* p.13

¹⁰ Chambers School Dictionary, New Ed. 1984

¹¹ John D. Robb. “*Focus! The power of people group thinking.*” MARC 1989: 37

3. CONCLUSION

The church in Africa has been for a long time a pastoral church with no vision for global missions. Though some pastors want to grow their churches into merger churches, but that is all they can think of – inward growth. They do not think of growing the church outward so that the whole church can carry the whole gospel to the whole world. This will take some consented efforts on the part of theologians to convince the church to develop a global vision.

On the other hand there is no question about the importance of Missiological research. However the church in Africa still need to be convinced on the need for objective research to be done before an effective strategy can be formulated.

Since many theological schools do not have Missiological Research as part of their curriculum we have discovered that research training is an important and effective method of convincing the church regarding missions and research. It is also an effective too for training the people to do their own research before a church can be planted.

Let me end with these words of Jim Reapsome, editor of MARC Newsletter (June 1998:#98-2) when he wrote:

“Jesus said the Holy Spirit will guide us in all truth and I believe that includes the results of our Missiological research. Prayer and pure, objective research – carried out by missionaries well versed in the current state of knowledge – will be powerful tools used by God in this 21st Century.”