THE BIBLE COLLEGE OF NEW ZEALAND AND TRAINING FOR MISSIONARY SERVICE IN A CHANGING WORLD

1. Introduction

Historically the Bible College of New Zealand has played a central role in training missionaries from New Zealand and in encouraging commitment to missions overseas among its graduates and constituency in New Zealand.

The life-time of the College has seen significant changes in the world in which mission takes place. Our understanding cannot be unaffected by shifts from colonialism to independence as the political context of overseas mission nor by the shift in the centre of gravity of Christian faith from the First World to the Third World. Developments in the "Second World" of the former Communist Block of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union raise new opportunities and obligations where ancient forms of Christian faith have survived repression and enter the world community with new freedom.

Alongside political changes have come social, economic and religious developments. The ability of Western countries to fund missionary activity has changed, and the way in which money available is being spent is also shifting. Germany and Sweden are no longer able to bankroll international Christian activity to the extent they have done since the War and American Christianity is facing problems in its home base which reduce the universality of some of their solutions. In the West generally commitment to overseas mission is weak, yet many congregations are looking for direct partnership arrangements, and are prepared to fund people and situations they know personally. In Singapore and Korea Christian commitment and economic clout provide what was once a more characteristically Western combination of spiritual energy and confidence.

Theologically many, though not all, in the Evangelical/Charismatic tradition have rediscovered a heritage of social concern and action in association with evangelism. Third World Christians do not in general make some of the distinctions common in the West and politics and ecumenism are no longer always left to liberals, though there are traps for young players. There is co-operation in places with Roman Catholics. Leadership in church and para-church bodies is increasingly international. Issues of power and money in decision-making are being faced by many groups as the importance of
making partnership real is widely accepted. There is room for greater reali-
sation that the receiving end of mission must have a substantial say in who
is sent where and what for. We must invite input from those whom we seek
to serve.

These developments herald a new era. It is exciting but it is also confusing.
The simplicities of old polarities and clear alternatives no longer work. The
effort required in consultation often seems frustrating and not always pro-
ductive. A post-colonial situation has not freed us from game-playing on the
route to more mature partnership. A greater range of choices of legitimate
mission seem to make it harder to decide, though the principles of guidance
need not change. Many are not sure about situations where we have some-
thing to learn, not just something to offer. Turning up the volume on well-
worn themes can hide things which need to be faced. The ability of sophis-
ticated communications to repackage an old message must not go underes-
timated, but if it fails to also address new realities it will be seed sown on
rocky ground. Some facilities of communications are under-utilised and await
better co-ordination. A willingness to document experience in mission and
go to the archives for understanding and inspiration needs to be more
marked, along with a readiness to be self-critical and open to criticism.

2. The Bible College and Mission Training

It is important that we listen to the expectations of churches in New
Zealand and their partners overseas. We need to be open to the comments of
Third World Christians, of Mission Executives and local church leaders on
what we do or do not achieve through the lives of our graduates and the
resources we offer the wider Christian community.

A consultation held in 1992 with Mission Leaders in the Auckland region
highlighted a variety of issues. Those identified included concern for pastoral
spiritual formation, a stance towards learning as well as to contributing, and
the need for cross-cultural sensitivity. In general concerns seemed to be espe-
cially to do with character, Christian maturity, spirituality and relational skills.
It may have been that the perception College has tilted in an Academic
direction led to the welcome assumption that in matters of biblical knowl-
edge, theological framework, church and mission history we are largely doing
what people expect of us. Concern for acquaintance with current mission
strategies was not marked, and it may be assumed that this is well handled
through mission publicity and visiting speakers as much as through formal
teaching.