

A Bi-Level Called Ministry in our World Mission Churches: An Evaluation of the Use of Full Time Evangelists

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“A bi-level called ministry in our world mission churches” which makes use of “evangelists” to serve congregations on a “full time” basis is a development peculiar to our Central African field. A modified use of this pattern of the ministry has been followed in Colombia. To this writer’s knowledge these are the only places in our WELS world mission fields which train men to serve as “evangelists” on an institutional basis and make use of them for full time service.

Each world mission field has its own peculiar needs according to which its worker training program will be structured. Each field will naturally want to judge for itself whether or not the programs as carried out in these fields offer any suggestions for its own use or adaptation. Since conditions in the world are never static, even the Central African field will want to reevaluate its own situation as to whether or not a system which was inaugurated 18 years ago still covers the needs of the present day. The Colombian field will also want to assess whether or not a program still very much in the process of development is the right way to go.

In order to assist in such evaluations this paper will:

- I. trace the development of this program;
- II. consider its present day use;
- III. evaluate what has been done so far with a view toward the future.

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FULL TIME EVANGELIST PROGRAM

When the missionaries in Central Africa considered the need for developing a worker training program several decades ago, they realized that it could not be started according to a traditional US - WELS pattern. Here in the US we begin with the cradle. The Christian home, the Christian Day School, the Sunday School, the area and synodical preparatory schools and colleges all point step for step toward the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, where the finishing touches for preparation of a full time ministry are carried out.

A world mission field is more analogous in this respect to the situation in the early Christian church as presented in the Book of Acts, in Timothy and in Titus. We would even say that it compares with the state of affairs as the Lord Jesus found them. The Lord chose mature men to carry on his work. Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in each church (of Asia Minor) and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust” (Ac 14: 23). To the elders in Ephesus, a place where Paul had spent three years, Paul declared: “Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Ac 20: 28). To Timothy the same apostle wrote: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim 2:2). He also outlined to Timothy and Titus the qualities which deacons and overseers in the church were to possess (I Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9).

This is not to say that Christ or Paul or Timothy worked precisely according to the same rules and conditions that we follow in Central Africa today. But they did have to begin their training programs with mature men, adult converts if you will, rather than through an organized, established system which progresses step for step from early childhood on. At the same time they had to guard against placing men in charge of congregations who were “recent converts” (1 Tim 3: 5), against being “hasty in the laying on of hands” for purposes of ordination. As we relate these circumstances to situations such as found in a new field like Central Africa it is apparent that some kind of pre-theological training is indicated before we can expect our adult ministerial trainees to cope with a more advanced kind of study such as is offered in a seminary.

It was with this in mind that the Bible Institute was considered as an intermediary step, to be pursued before committing ourselves and the students to a seminary program where the graduates would be regarded as candidates for a fully independent ministry. Bible Institute graduates, in other words, would qualify only for a limited call. They would serve under the supervision of missionaries or national pastors. They would not be expected to write their own sermons or prepare their own catechetical lessons. They would serve, so to speak, as the eyes, the ears, and the mouthpiece of a pastor in a local area, doing the work of visiting, witnessing, preaching and catechizing. It was a time when the missionaries could not possibly serve on a regular basis all the places which offered promising opportunities for the spread of the gospel. For want of a better name the Bible Institute graduates were called “evangelists.”

The Bible Institute from the very beginning, of course, was never envisioned as a complete program for theological training. The evangelist was not thought of as a finished product. Both rather played important roles in the development of a national church. They helped to supply a need for making use of national workers in the growth of a promising mission field. At the same time they provided a step for testing nationals before accepting them into a seminary training program.

One of the greatest problems facing a mission in its development of a worker training program is to find the right men to be trained. Before starting our Bible Institute a survey was made of practically every existing worker training institution in all of Central Africa, whether Baptist, Reformed, Evangelical, inter-denominational, or even Anglican and Roman Catholic. If there was any one word of advice on which all were agreed it was the absolute necessity of a thorough screening program for applicants. “Beware of school-leavers on the prowl for further education or for a job,” we were warned. “Be sure to enlist mature men, preferably married men,” we were told. “By all means build into your training program every possible way of testing applicants as well as those being trained,” we were cautioned.

We tried to follow this advice. Applicants were required to give evidence of prior voluntary service to the church. Preference was shown to married students, with provisions for housing them and their families at added cost to the school. Various features were incorporated into the Bible Institute’s two year course intended, as we say, “to separate the men from the boys.” A work program was devised whereby students were responsible for the development and maintenance of all school property. Students were required to serve outlying congregations on weekends without remuneration. In return the student received basic rations and housing during his two years of residence. Those successfully completing this course of study were considered to be qualified to serve as evangelists in the LCCA.

The curriculum of the two-year course was simplicity itself. Basic Bible study, doctrine, church history and confessions accompanied practical training in how to preach, teach, witness and conduct a church service. As far as we know the same basic subjects have been followed through the years and texts have been worked out for all courses.

It should perhaps be mentioned that most Protestant church bodies have extended their Bible Institute program to a course of three or four years, considering this to be sufficient for the training of their national pastors. We may be inclined to ask why we don’t do the same. Why trouble the “natives,” as we say, with sophisticated theological study? Why insist on such an extended training and testing program which is costly and which postpones the day when the national church can have independent pastors of its own?

This presentation has no intention of passing judgment on programs found to be workable under conditions which apply to other countries with different cultural and economic circumstances. It rather relates in the first instance to conditions as they confront us in Central Africa, not as we would like to see them but as they really are, saturated with every possible shade and stripe of that which goes by the name of religion. The prestige of the Watchtower Society is stronger in Zambia than in Wisconsin; so is that of the Salvation Army and the Seventh Day Adventists. All mainline Christian bodies with the exception of the Lutheran Church were already established long before we ever came to Central Africa. The same thing applies in many other places throughout the world. Lutheranism has been comparatively unknown in most fields where we started. Add to this a century-old background of African traditional religion, a strong Muslim influence which came even before Christianity, independent church sects springing up everywhere like mushrooms, political programs

which propagandize Marxism, “Humanism” and “Scientific Socialism,” and you have a veritable welter of ideologies threatening to engulf a ministry which has not been thoroughly equipped and tested in every possible way.

And so—to return to our main topic—the product of our own Bible Institute training in Central Africa is the evangelist. He is not “graduated” as a finished product. He is expected to work under pastoral supervision. It is hoped that his service to the church will not only extend the arm of the supervising missionary or pastor, but that his evangelist training can lead to a more intensive theological training period in a seminary.

The Bible Institute programs in both Central Africa as well as in Colombia are very similar. Both have almost identical curricula. The one, in fact, was patterned after the other. It is at this point, however, that each program takes a somewhat different turn as far as the use of evangelists is concerned, a matter to which we shall give further attention in the next part of this presentation.

II. THE PRESENT-DAY USE OF EVANGELISTS -- (PRO and CON)

Central Africa

In Central Africa, as mentioned before, Bible Institute graduates are assigned to work under the supervision of a missionary or a national pastor. This is carried out through an Assignment Committee duly constituted by the LCCA. The assignment is usually carried out in response to a formal request from an established congregation or group of congregations who have also agreed to support their worker according to their ability. An assignment can also be made to a new area in need of development through the LCCA’s Mission Board.

The evangelist’s call is a call to the ministry of the Word. It is extended without limit as to the length of service. It is limited in scope, however, as compared with the call into the pastoral ministry. The diploma of vocation reads in part: “You will be serving under the direct supervision of such pastor (or pastors) as may be appointed by the Superintendent of the LCCA.”

The first responsibility for the pastoral ministry in the congregations served, in other words, remains with the supervising pastor (missionary). He visits the congregations under his care as often as possible, examines candidates for baptism or confirmation, administers the sacraments, meets with the congregation to decide on important issues, arranges study sessions with the evangelist for the carrying out of preaching-teaching duties, and consults with the evangelist on all matters relating to the work. The closeness with which pastor and evangelist can carry on their work jointly depends greatly, of course, upon how many congregations the supervising pastor is required to serve as well as how closely he resides to his field of labor. Sometimes because of such factors much more responsibility falls on the shoulders of the evangelist than one might wish. The fact remains, however, that without the service of evangelists who have had some good basic training it would be difficult indeed to serve these more remote places at all. Simply to rely on untrained lay-workers for this kind of service has not always proved to be a very satisfactory alternative.

Although the congregations in Central Africa are expected to pledge a certain amount toward the support of their evangelists, by far the major portion of their support is still borne by the mission as subsidy. The use of evangelists, as mentioned previously, arose out of a need to serve a promising mission field ripe for expansion and at a time when the national church was still very much in the process of development. As the national church has grown in maturity, concerted efforts have been made by the mission to get the congregations to take on more of the support of the workers. These efforts have invariably met with resistance. One missionary has expressed the problem this way: “As long as we (expatriates) are here to pay the bills and have previously committed ourselves to doing so, an indigenous support program will never get off the ground unless the system itself is changed. This is and will be true no matter how ‘mature’ our congregations are, or become. They have grown up with this system and have accustomed themselves to it.” This statement expresses a reality to which anyone serving in a world mission field for any length of time must pretty well agree, whether he likes it or not.

On the other hand to effect a radical change in the Central African system carries definite risks with it. Among these is that of being unable to serve adequately congregations to which the church is already committed, as well as that of reaching out to new areas which are not only in need of the gospel but which are ripe for expansion. Another missionary puts it this way: "I supervise seven places. Of these five are served by evangelists and in two places I work together with laymen. Without the evangelists it would be impossible to serve these places the way they should be served. The evangelist is really the day-to-day ministerial agent in his place of service. He preaches, teaches, visits and evangelizes. He keeps me informed of problems. He is my 'cultural' translator, calling attention to matters which I might think to be small but which he recognizes as big in the African context. We speak the same theological language. With the doctrinal grounding he has received at the Bible Institute he can preach a good law/gospel sermon. He understands me when I express some doctrinal or practical concern about the work, often recalling something learned at the Bible Institute. There is simply no comparison in theological understanding between the best lay-worker and the average evangelist, the evangelist coming out as superior in every way."

In a number of areas full-time evangelists have also provided needed continuity to the work in Central Africa. There are congregations which have been served by one and the same evangelist for a decade or more. During this same period of time the congregation may have had as many as four or five different supervising missionaries. Whether or not it is a good thing for an evangelist to become more or less entrenched in one place is debatable. On the other hand because of all too frequent changes in expatriate mission personnel it is the evangelist who has been called upon to hold together places which as a result of this emergency would have been all but abandoned.

This is not to say that working with full-time evangelists in Central Africa hasn't had its problems. Sometimes there has been a tendency to rely on them too much, particularly in remote areas. Then, too, evangelists have been found to be spending their time more with farming or other extraneous activities than with congregational work. Evangelists insufficiently gifted to be recommended for further seminary training have more or less resigned themselves to a second-class status, losing all incentives to being busy with any kind of ongoing study program.

For we dare not forget that in its complete concept the status of an evangelist is that of a person undergoing a further training and testing period to see whether or not he has the qualities to be trained for the full-time pastoral ministry. That is one of the chief purposes of this intermediate stage. When an evangelist gets to feel, however, that his status is going to be a permanent one with little or no opportunity for advancement, it is understandable that he will get to feel himself to be in a sort of limbo. So why not simply draw his paycheck, do the minimum required, and get out of the mission whatever he can as long as he can!

And so we see that in Central Africa the evangelist program has had its advantages as well as its disadvantages. On the plus side of the picture it has:

1. added considerably to the mission outreach of the church;
2. provided a means of assisting the missionary or pastor in serving congregations in a more stable and dependable way than by relying on a lay ministry;
3. given continuity to the work in areas which have experienced a frequent change in mission personnel;
4. served as an added step in a process of determining which men are best suited for admission into a seminary program.

On the negative side we have the following:

1. an increase in mission subsidy which the national church takes more and more for granted;
2. a method of support which encourages the national church to continue to rely indefinitely upon outside sources for help;
3. a second-class type of ministry for those who foresee little chance of being recommended for further seminary training.

Colombia

From the time of its inception our WELS mission in Colombia has staunchly resisted dependence upon a support program for national workers. Aware of the problems with subsidy programs as experienced in other world mission fields, their worker training program was set up to avoid this kind of situation. Those who enrolled in the Bible Institute were expected to agree to support themselves fully while studying at the institution as well as during their time of service as evangelists.

This system has failed, we were informed, primarily because of the uncertain economic situation in Colombia. Even part-time jobs have been difficult to find for students wishing to work toward their support. As a result a program was introduced whereby a student receives a “scholarship” toward his support following his first year of study, which continues on through his time of ministerial training. This time includes two years of study at a Bible Institute, two years of service as evangelist, and four years of study in a Seminary (the use of a vicar program has not as yet been determined).

The two year time of service as evangelist is intended to prove whether or not a student is seminary material. What happens if he fails to meet this test has still not been decided upon, Missioner Larry Schlomer explains. “We lean toward ending his scholarship after the two years are up and asking him to serve part-time and support himself, difficult as this may seem to be,” he adds.

According to the Colombia plan each student is assigned a pastoral supervisor during his entire time of training. Since the church has no national pastors as yet, the role of supervisor is at present restricted to missionaries.

In actual practice it would appear that the program in Colombia is quite similar to that in Central Africa. In Colombia the support program is labeled “Scholarship;” in Central Africa it is called “Subsidy.” The big difference, of course, is the two year limitation placed upon the length of service for an evangelist. Missioner Schlomer states that this part of the program is still “just theory” and that the question of extending the length of service and its conditions may be reconsidered when the church is confronted with an actual case. There is still a strong resolve in Colombia, however, to request as little “additional subsidy” as possible.

Although the program in Colombia has so far seemed to have been workable it is not without its problems. Missioner Schlomer lists these as follows:

1. Supervising pastors are finding it difficult to find enough time for giving proper attention to the work of the evangelists. Other necessary duties are constantly making demands which seem to take priority.
2. There are still not enough prepared materials for the evangelists to use in their various practical phases of the work. No such Spanish materials are available other than what the missionaries themselves can produce.
3. The final problem has to do with money. “We could probably put to very good use another three or four full-time evangelists,” Missioner Schlomer writes. “But even if they were available,” he continues, “that would mean a substantial increase in our subsidy requests. At present there is no way the national church could pick up this additional cost.”

Subsidy versus use of full-time evangelists. That again seems to be part of the dilemma. We hope to examine more closely this as well as other related questions in the final part of this presentation.

III. AN EVALUATION OF THE CONTINUED USE OF FULL TIME EVANGELISTS WITH A VIEW TOWARD THE FUTURE

In evaluating the use of full time evangelists we do not want to forget the important role which this program has played in the development of the LCCA. It offered the mission a way—perhaps the only effective

way at the time—of involving nationals in a worker training program. It gave nationals a real part in the mission outreach toward a field ripe for the gospel. It afforded them a rallying point, a sense of identity with the ministry of the church with a real participation in its work. It extended the arm of the missionaries into new areas, giving them national coworkers who had received basic training to be able to preach and teach according to sound scriptural principles. It opened opportunities to the missionaries for becoming better acquainted with the language and the customs of the people, providing cultural insights so necessary for a proper understanding of the work. It gave the developing church body a means of testing national workers to see which men would be best qualified for the training of an independent ministry in a seminary program. Together with this venture the LCCA began a time of church growth hitherto not experienced in our WELS world mission undertakings.

One might ask whether all this might not just as well have been done through the development of a lay “tent-maker” ministry, thus avoiding involvement in subsidies. From the standpoint of time involved in training a capable lay ministry without a Bible Institute program this is very doubtful. The opportunities for reaching out aggressively were there then, at that particular time.

The question of subsidy is often raised in this connection as though it were the greatest of all evils. Unquestionably its use involves dangers. On the other hand one wonders how it can be entirely avoided in a situation where missionaries come out of the comparatively wealthy atmosphere of the USA into the poverty-ridden conditions of Third World countries. One also questions that it should be avoided at all costs when trying to promote the spread of the gospel in places where it is still so sorely needed. When a field is in the first stages of development it can become a question as to whether missionaries should do all the congregational work, including preaching and teaching, or whether nationals should be subsidized in order to be able to collaborate in this important activity. Even at later stages in mission development the cost of subsidy programs can be blown out of proportion, as though its very use is a major factor in overall world mission budgets. It may be of interest to note that the entire present salary subsidy figure in Central Africa -- which includes the support of 6 African pastors, 38 evangelists, and 1 vicar—amounts to \$34,963.00. This is less than what the budget calls for to support one missionary in that same field!

The matter of subsidy, however, ought not be the prime consideration of this presentation. It has been raised again simply because the question invariably arises whenever the subject of the use of full time evangelists is considered. The primary concern of the Church of Jesus Christ must always be the preaching of the gospel. Perhaps in its initial stages a mission may find that its cause is best served through the use of full time evangelists. But surely the goal of building a strong national church is the training of a pastoral ministry which can serve independently. A bi-level ministry is perhaps just a passing phase, a stage in the development of a church as it strives to attain full maturity. Should one not anticipate such a time? How can further steps be taken toward achieving it? Has the LCCA arrived at a time in its development when the use of full time evangelists has become a luxury? Can the LCCA look forward to the time already now when it will have enough national pastors and pastor candidates who together with lay workers can satisfy its ministerial needs? In short, has the LCCA reached a point where it feels it ought to phase out its use of full time evangelists?

If that is true—and this can only be determined on the basis of a searching self-evaluation on the field involving all parties concerned—then a number of steps would seem to be advisable:

1. Phase out the use of full time evangelists on a gradual basis, reducing the amount of subsidy they would receive according to a graduated scale.
2. Continue to use the Bible Institute for pre-seminary training, but inform all applicants that their time of service as subsidized evangelists will be limited to two years, during which time it will be determined whether or not they can be recommended for further seminary training. (This suggestion borrows from the program as envisioned in Colombia.)
3. Raise the admission standards for the regular Bible Institute course of study, accepting only such students for this course who could be expected to meet the academic requirements of seminary study later on.

4. In addition to the regular course of study at the Bible Institute offer courses for the training of lay workers (TEE, Short Courses, etc.). It is evident that some form of auxiliary ministry in the LCCA, particularly as the present evangelist program is phased out.
5. Continue to train the congregations in Christian stewardship so that they can take on greater responsibilities for the support of their workers.

A self-study based upon a consideration of the above points could serve the church well no matter which way the eventual decision would go. The national church would certainly have to be involved in such a self-study, since the focus of attention would be directed primarily toward the use of national workers.

But national workers would not be the only ones involved in an evaluation. Missionaries, too, would want to ask themselves some searching questions, such as: "Have we been sufficiently involved with our nationals in carrying out the work of the ministry in the LCCA on a real partnership basis?... Have we perhaps relied too much on the local evangelist to carry on his day-to-day work with only haphazard support and supervision on our part?... Has our institutional teaching set-up led to a situation whereby we busy ourselves too much with the institution rather than getting out and also beating the bushes and scouring the byways ourselves?..." There can be no question but that the phasing out of an evangelist program would require, to begin with at least, a greater involvement on the part of missionaries in personal service to congregations. Relying on the use of laymen rather than on subsidized evangelists to carry on and extend the work would also require more personal and direct supervision on the part of the missionaries, accompanied by an ongoing study program to upgrade the quality of work on the part of the participating laymen. One might well therefore add the question: "Do we have the necessary materials to carry on a more intensive lay-worker program, either through TEE or by means of Short Courses at the Bible Institute?"

These are some of the questions which an assessment with a view toward inaugurating changes in the evangelist program would need to face. Only the men on the field could supply the answers, both those pertaining to the situation in the field as well as those concerning their own part in carrying out whatever would be decided. There are really no pat answers; there are no simple solutions. We do the best we can according to our God-given wisdom and strength in the circumstances, always trusting that the Lord can do great things through us, and often in spite of our weaknesses. After all, it is his gospel that is the power unto salvation to everyone who believes it.

We hope that this presentation has given an accurate picture of the development and the use of a bi-level called ministry in our world mission churches, both in its positive and negative aspects, and that it has offered some helpful suggestions concerning how this program can be evaluated as to its future use.