

**THE MISSION TRAINING CENTER AT THE ASSOCIATED MENNONITE
BIBLICAL SEMINARIES: Seminaries and Sending Agencies Together Training for
Cross-Cultural Mission**

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Early Discussions

Formal discussion of missionary training at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries began with a meeting of the Goshen Biblical Seminary and the Mennonite Biblical Seminary faculties with administrators of the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (Elkhart) and the Board of Missions of the General Conference Mennonite Church (Newton) in Elkhart on March 1, 1961. The agenda listed four questions.

- 1) Should there be a school of missions? A department of missions? Or merely a recommended curriculum for mission study?
- 2) What specific courses should be offered?
- 3) What pre-seminary study should be recommended?
- 4) What continuing relationship should there be between the sending agencies and the seminaries?

According to the minutes of this meeting, it was decided that the core of missionary training should be the same as that for ministries in North America, but that basic special courses for missionaries should be provided. It was also decided that there was no need for a separate missions department. In addition it was also noted that the seminaries and all faculty members "are committed to the cause of missions," and that the seminaries would work closely with the sending agencies in planning a mission curriculum. The minutes then go on to list a suggested missions course of study.

In the following years, a number of studies were made on training for cross-cultural mission, focusing primarily on the Mennonite colleges. Atlee Beechy wrote to graduates of Mennonite colleges who were then serving in overseas assignments asking, "What is the role of the Mennonite college in preparing persons for effective participation in world mission? World mission is defined as the total outreach of the church in the contemporary world." Atlee then presented a paper on "The Role of the Mennonite College in Education for World Mission" to a conference on Mennonite Educational and Cultural Problems at Harrisonburg, Virginia, in June, 1963.

In October, 1965, Ross T. Bender, dean of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, prepared a memorandum to the seminaries' joint administrative committee which described all of the studies which had been done among the Mennonite colleges and seminaries up to that point. The studies included extensive questionnaires which had been

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sent to missionaries working around the world. Ross then goes on to state,

My own position would be that the field of specialization offered by our seminaries should be limited to that area for which we are best equipped, the spiritual and theological preparation of the missionary which makes him an effective witness to the gospel by word and life. . . . In light of this, it would follow that the missions curriculum should not be a separate and distinct one at all points for the qualifications of the overseas missionary are for the most part essential for pastors at home, or for that matter for all persons engaged in world mission at home or abroad. All need to be 'detribalized,' to learn 'cultural flexibility,' to learn how to get along in difficult interpersonal situations, to gain skill in communicating, to develop deep convictions and spiritual warmth, to become 'mature in Christ.'

Ross then recommends seminary courses in cultural and missionary anthropology. He concludes with the observation that the seminaries need to find a person trained in anthropology and linguistics who has carried an overseas assignment.

Ross suggests that it might be possible to appoint a professor of missions for a five-to eight-year term, after which that person might return to his/her overseas assignment and be replaced by another person with a similar background.

My Own Background and Preparation

I graduated from Bluffton College with a bachelor's degree in sociology in 1950, and in 1951 enrolled in Mennonite Biblical Seminary (then associated with Bethany Biblical Seminary) in Chicago, to prepare for mission service in Japan. I took the courses that were then offered in missions and graduated with a BD in 1954. At the end of that summer, Alice Ruth and I, with our six-month old son, sailed for Japan under appointment by the Board of Missions of the General Conference Mennonite Church.

Our first two years in Japan were spent in language school in Kobe. We then moved to Miyazaki in southern Japan to work at evangelism among high school and university students.

As we worked at sharing good news with young people, I increasingly felt that I needed to know more about Japan, its people, its culture, and its society. With that in mind, we decided that I would spend our first North American furlough after five years in Japan, in study about Japan. Since the University of Michigan was rated number one in Japanese study, and since in addition Ann Arbor was relatively close to our children's grandparents, I spent the 1959-1960 academic year in study there in the Center for Japanese Studies, receiving their master's degree in Japanese Studies in 1960.

We returned to Miyazaki in the summer of 1960 for an expanded program of student evangelism, again with university and high school students, and also began to lay the foundation for a new Mennonite congregation near Miyazaki University.

As we continued working in Miyazaki, I began to feel that I needed to do something more to help me understand the settings out of which these young people were coming. In my study at Michigan I had been introduced to cultural anthropology and I was coming to see that more work in that discipline could give me what I needed for understanding where these young people were coming from, that this kind of understanding could make me a better missionary, better able to share the good news in ways that people in Japan could hear it as good news for themselves.

With that in mind I asked the Commission on Overseas Mission for additional time for study when our current term in Japan would end in 1965. Permission received, I then applied to the University of Michigan for admission to their doctoral program in cultural anthropology. I had no particular interest in a doctoral degree, but it seemed to be the only way of financing my study, including a year of research in a small rural village in the part of Japan where we had been working. Non-degree programs are not usually considered for scholarships, fellowships, and other kinds of financial aid. My application was accepted and we were fully funded for those four years (1965-1969) by a scholarship and a very liberal fellowship for three years from the National Institutes of Health.

My research was on how a rural Japanese community makes and has made community decisions. For this we as a family spent a full year doing field research in the small rural community of Takachiho in the northwest corner of Miyazaki Prefecture. This study was extremely helpful, and it did help us in our continuing work in evangelism.

While we were living on campus in Ann Arbor, we participated actively in the Ann Arbor Mennonite Church. We were quite surprised at one of the church gatherings when J. D. Graber of the Elkhart mission board and Ross T. Bender, dean of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, said that they would like a word with us. I soon discovered that they were looking for a Mennonite with mission experience and a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology to teach missions and train people for mission at the seminaries. They were assuming that since I was working on a degree, I must be interested in teaching, something that had never entered my mind. My study had been planned for mission work in Japan and for nothing else. I thought I had made my intentions very clear, but Ross persisted and after much prayer and with the encouragement of the Commission on Overseas Mission under which we were serving, I agreed to prepare "A Proposal for Training for Overseas Mission in the Mennonite Church." I prepared this for a consultation held on March 29, 1969.

The Initial Proposal

The proposal itself was relatively simple. It committed the seminaries and the sending agencies of the church to the development of a program of training for cross-cultural mission, a program administered and financed jointly by the seminaries and the sending agencies.

The proposal was for an *Overseas* Mission Training Center to indicate that it was

to train missionaries to share the good news outside their own native cultural settings where they felt at home, and to train them to work in a setting in which they themselves were ignorant foreigners who had no cultural or social power or authority. In other words, the "Overseas" in Overseas Mission Training Center was meant to indicate that this was to be training to share good news following the example of Jesus who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . ." (Phil.2:7), ministering from the bottom of the social ladder.

The proposal also stated that the director of the center would be a member of the faculty of the seminaries and a staff person of the sending agencies. Admission to the program would come through a sending agency, and the candidate's course of study would be worked out taking into account both the candidate's background and her/his mission assignment. This would be decided in consultation among the candidate, the director of the center, the sending agency, and a coordinating committee at the seminaries. The training program could include both work at the seminaries and study at other places. The entire program was intended for people preparing for a mission career, although training for shorter periods of service was not ruled out. The proposal included a list of possible courses.

The discussion of the proposal noted that there is always tension between adequate preparation for the task (four years of undergraduate study, three years of seminary, two years of language study) and the pressure of wanting to get into the work to which one feels called. It was suggested that some of this study could be done later as continuing education. The discussion also emphasized that the sending agencies need to have full ownership of the program and must not be seen as merely advisors.

The basic proposal was approved in 1969. I was appointed as director with the understanding that because of our commitment to mission in Japan immediately following our time in Michigan, we would serve in Japan from 1969 until 1972. I did come to Elkhart to teach in the spring semester of 1971, but the OMTC did not really begin until July of 1972 when our family moved to Elkhart. In February and March of 1972 I also traveled to Indonesia and India, visiting Mennonite churches and counseling with church leaders and missionaries. We talked extensively about current missionary roles and about preparation for mission.

The Center's First Fifteen Years - 1972-1987

The initial proposal for a training center went through many consultations and revisions before a final "Basis of Understanding" was adopted on September 22, 1972. Most of this revising went on under the careful supervision of Dean Ross T. Bender. Ross was leader in this process, particularly in discussion and negotiation with the faculty, some of whom had an understanding of education and training for mission and ministry which was rather different from my own. Ross gave me a great deal of encouragement and without his leadership there very likely would not have been a mission training center.

I would like to quote from this Basis of Understanding, apologizing at the same

time for its many masculine pronouns. In 1972 we still understood, mistakenly, that masculine pronouns were "inclusive."

The concept of an Overseas Mission Training Center differs from the traditional 'school of missions' in a number of respects. The program is an integral part of the seminary program and is at the same time a joint enterprise of the seminary and the several sending agencies who participate in its operation and support. The director has a joint appointment to the seminary faculty and to the staff of each of the sending agencies. Candidates are admitted upon recommendation of the sending agency in consultation with the director at the point when a specific field assignment has been determined. A program of studies is specifically tailored in each instance appropriate to the background of the candidate and the nature of his assignment. He may take courses toward an AMBS degree, if qualified, but will also study in other schools and universities where the seminary's resources do not meet his needs.

Purpose and Program

The purpose of the Center is to provide for the training of workers to be sent overseas by the participating agencies. Students will be admitted to the program of the Center at various stages of commitment and preparation. Normally the specific assignment (field and task) will have been determined at least tentatively so that intelligent counseling and curriculum planning can be carried on. Some candidates may not have completed their undergraduate program; some will be seminary students whose interest in overseas assignment has been awakened during their regular seminary studies; some will be seminary graduates with several years of experience in congregational ministry; others will be missionaries on furlough. Since the needs and backgrounds of these persons vary widely, as well as the nature of their overseas assignment, great skill in planning an appropriate program of studies will be required. Primary emphasis will be placed upon preparation for a specific assignment rather than on meeting the requirements for a degree. However, the candidate may receive the Master of Divinity degree if qualified and an appropriate program of studies is completed.

Participating Agencies

The Center is being inaugurated initially by the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries and the Mennonite Board of Missions of the Mennonite Church (Elkhart, Indiana) and the Commission on Overseas Mission of the General Conference Mennonite Church (Newton, Kansas). Provision is made for the participation of additional sending agencies who desire to associate with the Center. . . .

Director. . .

The director will be responsible to: (a) admit candidates upon recommendation of the sending agency; (b) plan a program of studies in consultation with the student on campus and in other centers in North America or on location in the candidate's field of service; (c) counsel with the personnel secretary of the sending agency on the proposed plan of study and on the student's growth and development; (d) keep informed about the various specialized training resources on this continent and around the world and especially in those areas where the sending agencies have a special interest; (e) keep informed through trips abroad and correspondence about the changing needs, patterns and relationships in the fields where the church is at work; (f) keep informed about the policies and needs of the sending agencies.

The director will be available for consultations on training to the staff of each participating agency and insofar as he is able to non-member agencies as well. He will teach appropriate courses in training for overseas work as a member of the seminary faculty. These courses will be open to all seminary students, not only to those who have been admitted to candidacy in the Center. He will plan special courses, lectures, institutes, seminars, etc. for the sending agencies and for the seminary community. He will bring

missionaries, staff persons, and others related to overseas work to the AMBS campus in order that the entire seminary community may be informed of contemporary thinking and programs in the overseas mission of the church.

Relations Between Participating Agencies and the Director

The director will work in close coordination with the staff of the sending agencies, sharing with them what is being done at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries and what training facilities are available off-campus and soliciting their guidance in all phases of the Center program. The director will make regular reports on the progress of the training of persons in the program.

The staff of the participating agencies will share with the director files on each trainee referred to the Center, details of what is being done on each field, what is being planned, and what the role of the overseas worker is seen to be in each case. The director will work closely with the AMBS administration and faculty in planning the courses which he will teach as a member of that faculty. The Center may request the administration and faculty to provide courses specifically designed for training overseas workers to be taught by other faculty members.

The Overseas Mission Training Center actually began then in September, 1972, and the first years went very, very well. The first year there were eighteen people preparing for cross-cultural mission service, eleven with agency assignments and thus formally enrolled in the OMTC, and seven preparing for overseas work but not yet formally appointed. Later discussions emphasized that seminary students who were interested should be encouraged to participate fully in OMTC activities even though they were not yet appointed by a sending agency.

A very important plus for missionary preparation on the Elkhart campus was the Mennonite Mission Study Fellowship under the leadership of Wilbert Shenk of the Mennonite Board of Missions in Elkhart, and C. J. Dyck of the Institute of Mennonite Studies. These sessions, almost annually and usually lasting several days, discussed important mission issues in considerable depth. In addition, Wilbert particularly, had close relationships with mission scholars around the world and was able to bring in world-renowned mission leaders and educators. These sessions were very helpful in bringing important mission issues to the attention of the entire seminary community.

As OMTC director, in addition to teaching and counseling on campus, I also had many opportunities to participate in the activities of the sending agencies. I attended the meetings of the Overseas Committee of the Mennonite Board of Missions and the meetings of the Commission on Overseas Mission. I participated in study retreats for furloughing missionaries under both agencies, usually making presentations. There were a great many such opportunities to work off campus at missionary training. In the 1974 director's report the following were listed.

Participation in the MCC Overseas Orientation 18-19 July

Participation as a member of the Commission on Overseas Mission delegation to India 21 August - 20 September

Attendance at the regular meetings of the Overseas Committee, Mennonite Board of Missions, and of the Commission on Overseas Mission

Attendance at the regular meetings of COMBS - MCC (I served as interim executive

secretary of COMBS the following year.)

Attendance at the IVCF Urbana Convention.

Mennonite Mission Study Fellowship 6-8 March.

Leadership of the COM Missionary Retreat 25-28 April - major program planning.

Consultation with the MCC Peace Section Washington Office planning for January seminar on international power and the missionary.

Mennonite Board of Missions Overseas Seminar leading sessions on "The gospel and culture" 19-27 June.

In addition there were a variety of professional meetings for missiologists and professors of missions.

The October 1974 OMTC annual report noted a marked increase in the number of people preparing for service overseas and a correspondingly much higher enrollment in classes dealing with missionary and cross-cultural concerns. In addition, 1974 saw the beginning of the Mission Colloquium, a weekly luncheon meeting discussing mission issues. In some years enrollment in the colloquium was well over thirty.

In January, 1975, the OMTC, together with the MCC Peace Section Washington Office, sponsored a Washington Seminar on International Power and the Overseas Church Worker. This was repeated in January, 1977. Both seminars were well attended and evaluations were very positive.

By January, 1976, I was beginning to make plans for transferring the leadership of the OMTC to someone else so that we could return to Japan in the summer of 1978. From the beginning of our consideration of training for mission, I had felt very strongly that missionary training needs to be done by people with recent mission experience. As one teaches about mission, mission itself gradually becomes more and more theoretical, and what it really feels like, what it is really like to be in cross-cultural mission, is gradually lost. As I taught at Elkhart, I found this gradually happening to me. When I had first agreed to come to Elkhart, I had told Dean Ross Bender that six years was the absolute maximum time for, then we needed to get back to Japan and be cross-cultural missionaries in Japan once again.

My initial suggestion had been that AMBS look for two people to direct the OMTC so that directors could alternate at four- to six-year intervals between working in Elkhart and working as missionaries in another part of the world.

In May, 1977, the OMTC Coordinating Committee agreed to invite Roelf Kuitse, a Mennonite from the Netherlands, to serve from 1978 to 1982. Roelf had served as a missionary in Indonesia and in Nigeria and came with a great deal of experience at working among followers of Islam.

In the summer of 1977, the first five years of the Overseas Mission Training Center were reviewed by the director, the sending agencies, and the seminaries. Overall the reports were quite positive. The number of participants in the Center program was judged to be about the maximum that could be accommodated. Missionaries who had studied in the

center program were surveyed and their reports indicated a high level of satisfaction with the training that they had received.

The one negative factor in the overall evaluation was the feeling from the seminaries that the OMTTC had not had much influence on the seminary community itself beyond the students who were directly enrolled.

In the summer of 1978, we returned to Japan for a four-year term in church planting and Roelf Kuitse became the director of the Overseas Mission Training Center.

By 1980 the situation with regard to missionary training and the Center's relationship to the sending agencies had begun to change a bit. Roelf Kuitse noted in his report that in the previous two years, only two students (both appointed by the Commission on Overseas Mission) had prepared for mission service through the OMTTC. In his report he listed three possible factors.

1) More people with pastoral experience had been sent out and since these were people who had already received a seminary education, they felt less need for further training.

2) Younger people in the North American churches were no longer interested in spending their lives in missionary service and were only interested in shorter-term service for which they felt a short-term orientation was adequate.

3) Budgetary problems in the sending agencies had greatly reduced their recruiting of new missionaries.

Returning to Elkhart and the Overseas Mission Training Center in 1982 after four years in Japan working at beginning a new Mennonite congregation, I noted in my director's report that fall that "our feelings that recent non-superficial involvement in mission for anyone involved in preparing people for mission is very important have been strongly reinforced. I have come back feeling that I have, once again, something to contribute to missionary preparation. I have also learned that being engaged in preparing people for mission is itself excellent preparation for mission. These past four years in church planting have been our best experience in Japan so far."

At the October 26, 1982, Coordinating Committee meeting the name of the center was officially changed to Mission Training Center. Two issues were involved. Some felt that using the term "overseas" gave the impression that mission was basically from the West to the rest of the world. Secondly, there was interest in involving people who were training for evangelism and church planting in North America, and conversations were soon begun with the denominational agencies concerned with "home" missions. The Commission on Home Ministries (GC) and the Home Ministries Division of the Mennonite Board of Missions (MC) were invited, after preliminary conversations, to meet with the MTC Coordinating Committee during the year 1984.

Conversations continued and the Mission Training Center sponsored a Friendship Evangelism Seminar with Don Yoder on the Elkhart Campus in March, 1986. It was,

however, decided that the home missions agencies would not be a formal part of MTC. However, at about this same time, the seminaries did appoint Gary Martin to teach in the field of evangelism and church planting.

In November, 1983, responsibility for the Mennonite Mission Study Fellowship was transferred from the Institute of Mennonite Studies to the Mission Training Center. At the same time conversations were begun with Andrew Walls about the possibility of his coming to Elkhart for a series of lectures in 1984.

Also in 1984, I noted that at that time there were well over one hundred missionaries serving with either the Mennonite Board of Missions or the Commission on Overseas Mission who had received training in the Mission Training Center.

In 1985 the Mission Training Center Coordinating Committee agreed to have the Center take the initiative in bringing to the seminary campus a scholar from outside the West to teach on campus for one semester. This was to happen on a regular basis, perhaps every other year.

Evaluating the First Fifteen Years

My own relationship with the Mission Training Center ended in the summer of 1987 when we left to spend our last eight years before retirement in mission in Japan. I noted in my final report that the original plan in which the Commission on Overseas Mission, the Mennonite Board of Missions and the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries had together committed themselves to training for mission through the Mission Training Center had worked very, very well. I reported that the questionnaire which I had sent to well over one hundred people who had studied in the Mission Training Center at AMBS and were then serving in mission indicated almost unanimous appreciation for the training which they had received as it was being tested in their mission assignments. I also noted that through the total work of the Mission Training Center I knew personally almost everyone working under COM and MBM, a wonderful privilege and a heavy responsibility.

That school year closed with the Jacob Loewen lectures for the Mennonite Mission Study Fellowship which were exceptionally well attended, and with the Mission Colloquium having its highest enrollment ever. I left Elkhart feeling very, very positive about the Mission Training Center and about the future of mission in our denominations.

In retrospect, the Mission Training Center went so well because the two seminaries and the two sending agencies worked together wholeheartedly, without reservation, in the training of women and men for the sharing of God's good news across the street and around the world.