

THE TWO HUNDRED YEAR GOAL OF OVERSEAS COUNCIL

By Rev Stuart Brooking, Executive Director, Overseas Council Australia

On a recent trip I had the pleasure of visiting both Oxford and Princeton in the same week. I am sure I had some work to do that week, but my daughters had assigned me the task of purchasing a T-shirt or sweater, one from Oxford and one from Princeton. So, between activities, I found myself in stores imagining their sizes and colour preferences. As it turned out, I achieved the goal, straying neither to the disappointment of too small, nor the embarrassment of too big. As for colour, I fluked that too. But, as I fulfilled my absent-father duties, I reflected on the greatness of the institutions I stood amongst. The sweater I bought in Oxford had the date 1249 on it. Historians of Oxford will point to beginnings going back one hundred and fifty years before that! The first residential college was founded over seven hundred and fifty years ago. Princeton is a relative newcomer, being a university from only 1896, but it too has a history of clergy education that began in the middle of the Seventeenth Century!

It seemed to me that the two things needed in establishing the great traditions of academic institutions are time and money. (Of course, Overseas Council is committed to something more profound than just academic institutions, but more of that later.) When I consider the colleges that OCA supports, the majority of them are twenty to forty years old. By definition all of them are in places where the church is weak, or at least where it is poor, so the colleges have few resources. Could any of them ever be great international learning institutions? Well not tomorrow. But that is why we need to think in terms of two hundred years time. If the Lord tarries, and if things go well, what might they look like in that time?

WHY WESTERN CHRISTIANS SHOULD SUPPORT DEVELOPING WORLD BIBLE COLLEGES

There is no college I know in the world, including in the West, that supports itself merely from the fees of its students. They all get help from denominations, or from earlier government or private endowments which provided them with a foundation, or from the support of churches and individuals. The problem is that in the developing countries the wealth base is not there because the church is either too small, or too poor, or both.

Overseas Council stands in the gap because of the church's smallness and poverty by exciting donors in the West to contribute to the colleges of the Developing nations. There are many advantages of this strategic support for leaders in their training years. While the training phase is relatively expensive everywhere, the ministry costs of the nationals once they have been trained is commensurate with the local salaries. Local churches can bear the burden of their local leadership, but not necessarily the training costs.

By comparison with the strategy of funding Western missionaries, funding nationals to train in their own environment is far more cost effective. Depending on the country five to thirty nationals can be trained for the cost of one Western missionary. Furthermore they know the culture and language and they stay ministering for thirty or forty years after college.

As a strategy for helping build the church in a strategic way, support of theological education in developing countries is an excellent investment for the kingdom.



ARE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGES REALLY THE RIGHT MODEL?

This question is common enough and worth asking.

Some people in the West are critical of theological education which is too academic and not related enough to real ministry. When I see what is happening in the West, I agree with the criticism.

The stand out feature of theological education in the Developing world is the commitment the colleges have to students doing practical ministry while they study. When I was in college it was books first and ministry a distant second. In the colleges I now visit in Asia and Africa (and elsewhere) there is a far more sensible coherence in the program between the two elements of training. In my opinion it is the most noticeable difference between the West and the rest. Furthermore the ministry practice in the West is by and large focussed on maintenance of existing ministries. The focus of Asia and Africa is on growth ministries where students are actively part of church planting teams. What is true of the students is also true of the faculty. Few lecturers in the West have a role beyond being an occasional preacher, whereas in country after country elsewhere it is standard for lecturers to be church planters and pastors.

The other reason the theological college model is questioned has to do with the academic level of training. We hear so many stories of church planters, in India for example, who have little training and yet begin a new church every year or so. If this great work of evangelism proceeds without diplomas and degrees why support colleges which seem unnecessarily academic?

In response I would say that it is not a case of 'either/or' but 'both/and'. The great leaders of grass roots mission movements typically have good training even to masters and doctoral levels. That is part of the reason why they can be so competent in their ministries. They have reflected on the Scriptures and ministry in a structured way over an extended period of years. Furthermore the quality of Christian preaching and evangelism by the grass roots evangelist can only really be assured by good teachers who mentor the person over years. This is what a good theological college is actually doing. It fills hearts as well as heads, and equips the hands at the same time.

The danger of syncretism (blending of the faith) is always present if leaders are not well trained. It is easy to take for granted a whole system of healthy churches and decades or more of stable Bible teaching, such as we often enjoy in the West. However where such foundations do not exist then energetic evangelists can plant weeds of disaster amongst the new churches. Indeed much of the problems Lal Senanayake shared about on Christian corruption in chapter three are because of poorly trained leaders. It is just not realistic to think that new converts can be led consistently well by evangelists who have only a few months of on the job training. New churches need biblically competent leadership to ensure maturity.

WHY NOT USE THE GREAT COLLEGES OF THE WEST WHICH HAVE SO MUCH TO OFFER?

The granting of scholarships to the brightest students of the developing world has, except for a few notable exceptions, been a disaster for the sending churches. Overseas Council is critical of the whole system which merely encourages a church 'brain drain' paralleling what we see in the secular world. The return rate to the home country typically is less than half and when the student does return their learning is from such a different context that it takes years to readjust, or after a time they merely return to the West. The best are chosen, offered an opportunity, and few return to their home church. It may assist the individual to have a more comfortable life and perhaps an ethnic congregation in the city that they go to in the US or UK, but it is a systematic pillaging of a church which is desperate for leaders and least able to afford losing them.

A notable exception to this lack of return problem is the work of Langham Partnership, founded by the great evangelical leader, John Stott. Langham puts a premium on scholars returning to their home countries to be of genuine benefit there. Needless to say Langham Partnership shares many of the same



values as Overseas Council. Interestingly they now recognise the value of colleges outside the US and UK and sponsor some students to study not in the West, but in the better colleges of Asia, Africa and elsewhere.

The ministry of Overseas Council is even more focussed changing the whole system. We seek to build on the capacity of colleges that already exist in the Developing World. Our strategy is to choose the best evangelical colleges in each country and without dominating them, support the college to fulfil its dreams for growth. This is done through scholarships for new students coming into the college, through supporting building programs, libraries and computers, but also through training senior faculty and Board members in how to fulfil their roles more effectively. Our vision is to completely transform the capacity of the church in every country of the world so that it can train its leaders. With over one hundred of the best colleges currently supported in over sixty countries, our prayer is to grow even further in fulfilling this vision.

TWO HUNDRED YEARS INTO THE FUTURE

Two hundred years is a long way away. When I mentioned the title of this article to my daughter she said “you’ve got to make allowances for rampant technology”. I think she had visions of how education might take place in the Twenty Third Century with thoughts of connecting a brain up to a microchip or pouring book contents from a sachet for easy ‘consumption’.

I have not got a clue of what the technology will look like in two hundred years.

That is OK because my role here is not to be a ‘futurist’ predicting the innovations in technology that a college might need two hundred years hence. Rather I want to reflect as a Christian leader theologically on the world and the church. That requires the application of Biblical principles to our world and what it ought to be. Let me make an attempt.

The apostle Paul used a great phrase when he considered the disparity of wealth in congregations he knew: “our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.” (2 Cor 8:13). That seems to me to be a perennial concept to guide Christian reflection and action. The questions are, what might equality look like in the church in two hundred years time? (reflection) Then, how might we work in the present to make that view of equality likely to be achieved? (action)

I have chosen two hundred years, because fifty or one hundred is too short. When I look around the world, in my opinion, the inequity is too great for even an optimist like me to hope there ‘might be equality’ in so short a time. However, in two hundred years great institutions can be built. (They can lose their way too, but this is a good vision of the future I am imagining not a nightmare.) Now is the time to consider what great thing could exist far off in the future. This will give us clarity and confidence about the directions we are setting now. It also allows us permission not to expect everything to be right, right now. A college in its first or second generation of leadership will always look ‘unformed’ compared to those which have worked through several major changes, grown and established healthy patterns of operating.

The first thing to be considered for our vision to form properly is to go to the end user of theological education. I do not mean the student, but rather the question ‘what does the church need?’ That is our starting point. Let us be goal focussed and construct a strategy from that point, rather than being perpetrators of existing systems. In this way, the vision of OCA will remain constant, but it will be open to a whole range of different ways of arriving at the vision.

In brief, what the church needs is leaders. Leaders who are biblically formed, pastorally competent, and mission oriented. It needs them in every country in the world, and it needs more and more of them. With fresh supplies of such leaders the mission of the church can progress and the societies in which those churches exist can have the blessings and benefits of robust godly churches which are salt and light to their communities. This is good for the people and



glorifying to the Lord.

At a practical level, such leaders need to be trained in their own context so they are learning in a relevant way for that context. Next to the problem of leaders not returning to their home countries, this is the strongest argument against training people in Western colleges. In the West they learn in a context which is largely removed, perhaps even irrelevant for their future ministries. The most obvious example is the way people think through their ethical commitments. In the West, one key issue is that of affluence and how to live as a responsible Christian with wealth. In the Developing countries, the issue is about poverty and how to be content and to combat the factors which cause poverty.

So putting it positively, leaders need to be trained in a place which will genuinely equip them for the work they will undertake in the future. Now there is an argument to be made for people gaining wider experience by studying elsewhere, but my concern is that one argument gets a disproportionate weighting, without acknowledging what actually happens 'on the ground' when people study in the West. As a general rule, OC only supports faculty members to do higher theological education in their region rather than in the West.

The conclusion of this argument is that there needs to be many excellent colleges throughout the Developing world so leaders have the options they need for their studies. What is exciting to realise is that for such a small investment financially, so much has already been achieved throughout the world. This 'good start' is part of what gives me hope that the two hundred year goal can be achieved.

WHAT IT WILL LOOK LIKE IN TWO HUNDRED YEARS

I imagine world class places of training in every region of the world. I do not mean that there will be Western colleges in every region, but that the local flavours will interact with the international ones. So, each region will have colleges which express their differences in the way they train, the courses they teach, and the emphases they have. The great resources of libraries, lecturers, and campuses will not be bunched up in half a dozen countries as we see now, but that there will be a multiplicity of options, even for the highest level of leadership training. So much so, that it will be just as common for a student from the United States to choose to study in India or Kenya as it is for an Indian or Kenyan to study in the United States.

Now that will be the test of Paul's idea of 'equality'. In two hundred years the choice of where to study will be more influenced by the future ministry of the person in one region or other, or because of a specialised interest, than by the necessity to 'go to the West to get the best'.

At the moment, I fear, this thought is just so foreign to most Westerners. In the course of my travels in Australia I have had a few conversations with people in theological training who discuss with me the idea of serving as missionaries. Naturally I discuss the topic from my perspective. I encourage them to contribute to the major areas of need, such as in theological education. I give a few salutary stories about the folly of most Westerners doing grass roots evangelism (in all but a few countries) because locals are so much better equipped to do that. I challenge them to justify why the church in Australia should spend \$50,000 - \$100,000 a year supporting them to learn a foreign language and then slowly begin ministry when, for the same amount of money, OCA can sponsor twenty or thirty students in Asia who already know the language and culture and will work effectively for decades. I point out that I am not against Western missionary involvement but it is good to challenge some assumptions before one responds to 'the call'.

It is at this point that I make the conversation stopping suggestion. It goes like this:

"Why don't you do your masters degree in Asia or Africa so you are learning in the context in which you'll be working?"

It is at this point that an incomprehensible stare comes over the face of the young man or woman who aspires to teach theology in Asia or Africa.

This pattern of conversation illustrates a number of things. First, Western bias can lead to a lack of understanding of the need to localise learning. Secondly, that



there is little awareness of the value of the colleges that already exist in the Developing world. Thirdly, that in two hundred years it will be entirely different.

Students in the Developing world will not hanker after the opportunities of the West because they will know the value of what they already have in their region. Western students will seek out training experiences outside the West, not fearing that the only credibility is if one's degree comes from the West.

Western colleges will not 'poach' the best lecturers to bolster their prestige by having an 'international focus'. There will be a mix of countries represented on the faculties of colleges all round the world, but this will not have the Western/local divide which most currently have. Colleges in Asia will see the value of having lecturers from South America. Those in Eastern Europe will want faculty members from Africa. This will happen because the enormous value that comes from cross fertilisation of faculty will drive the system, rather than the dominance of one small group over all the rest.

What these changes will signify is that there is an equitable distribution of wealth in resources for training God's leaders. One church will not suffer while another has an abundance. All will know the provision of our generous God.

All it takes is time and money!

TRANSFORMING WHOLE CULTURES

The vision of Overseas Council is to provide the church with the leadership it needs in every part of the world. Strategically we focus therefore on the training institutions which are the closest to the task - the theological colleges. Some people will notice that there is more that needs to be done. For the church to truly transform cultures there are other spheres of leadership needed as well.

The teaching role of the church involves assisting every Christian to think through and work through the issues of their work, family and society. Ultimately what is needed to achieve this is an engagement with the whole culture at the academic level. Who will teach economists to think Christianly about their work? Who will teach military leaders, or school teachers, or parliamentarians?

In two hundred years time there will be a flourishing of Christian Universities. These will not be sectarian, whereby the Christians form a ghetto in opposition to their society, but places where they engage in the public conversation of the society in which they live. It will not surprise you to hear that the development of Christian Universities is one of the small but growing trends in education in the Developing world.

Overseas Council chooses not to be involved in the enterprise of Christian Universities, not because it is muddle headed or unnecessary. Rather it is not strategically the place of greatest need for the church. In two hundred years time however the blessing of God will flow so that these great institutions of Christian application will be funded by Overseas Council also. You will be pleased to know that the constitution of OCA already has scope for such a development!

In two hundred years time things will be very different. The church will be getting the steady flow of leaders who love Christ, are competent in ministry which is based on the Bible. This goal is a long way off, but it does give a sense of where things are headed, under God's good guidance.

With the time and the money, it will happen. Praise God.

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