

SOME PRACTICAL MISSIONARY FIELD WORK METHODS

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OBJECTIVES

In these talks we have tried both explicitly and implicitly to set as our goal "transforming cultures with the Spirit" (cf. Kraft 1981). In the first talk we saw that Rahner's concept of "World Church" depends on the acceptance of other cultures as valid starting points for faith and real sources of revelation. In talk two on methodology in forming the World Church, we said that our first objective as agents of change is to enter the adopted cultures to the extent that we can feel the interaction between primary symbols and their social reality. We examined the case of the Anuf[as an example of what may happen when the real needs of the people are not taken into account in the "conversion process." We concluded that there could be no real inculturated conversion to the Gospel without taking these real needs into consideration. Today's missionaries must begin to deal with these needs.

So far these talks have been mostly theoretical with very little given as practical guidelines in our task of "transforming cultures with the Spirit." I would therefore like to end this series by suggesting some practical techniques in the participant-observer mode of field work which can help us deepen our insight into our people, then to suggest some helpful guidelines in building the multi-cultural Kingdom of God.

THE PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER METHOD

Since the time of Malinowski who moved from his armchair in a darkened study to a grass hut in the Trobriand Islands, anthropologists have been discovering what makes people tick by living among them and observing them in action. The participant-observer method means that the anthropologist lives among the people themselves and participates intimately in their culture--at least as far as he is capable, as much as they will permit and in so far as it is compatible with the maintenance of mental and physical health and his scientific task.

Entering into another's culture is a relative matter and in some ways it is an ideal which can never completely achieved--not even by those who are born into it. What is important for our purposes here is that the participant-observer opts for the insider's point of view (emic) as opposed to that of his/her own culture. An anthropologist or missionary taking the insider's approach can never be totally "inside" another culture,

just as he or she can never claim total "objectivity" in the task of scientifically interpreting what he has experienced in the culture. But it is not necessary to be wholly inside or wholly objective. Good investigators, whether they be anthropologists or missionaries, can come to see and make sense of the world from the insider's (the emic) perspective and can make this knowledge available to others. The depth of the insider's insight and the extent to which the rendering of this knowledge is concise, reasonable and useful will, to a large extent, be determined by whether the insider's observations are tight, controlled and accurate or unsystematic, disorganized and sloppy.

It is possible to be a casual observer for years and not see what is really going on from an insider's perspective. I have heard missionaries comment that "the longer I'm in the country the less I really know about the people." But we should not be discouraged. Whether we recognize it or not, missionaries do know a lot about their people--they are vast storehouses of information, but too often it is unassimilated or inaccurately interpreted. Too often, this information remains unclassified and dormant. Too often it is gathered unsystematically, it is not reflected upon and is not applied. I have also heard missionaries say of anthropologists who have come to study their people, "I am amazed to see how much they have learned about these people, in this short time! How did they do it?" The implication is that it took the missionary much longer to come to that insight. But it is not so mysterious after all. There is a critical and uncritical way to observe. What are the characteristics of the more systematic, critical way? Tom Brewster (Brewster, *LAMP*, 1981, p. 130) describes a simple four-step procedure for cross-cultural discovery that can easily be implemented by missionaries in the field:

1. Make observations
2. Make assumptions about your observation
3. Attempt to validate your assumptions
4. Classify and apply your new information.

OBSERVATION

Make observations of what is going on in homes, schools, businesses, the farm, factories, police station, clubs, churches, recreational facilities and hospitals. Observe everything with all your senses. The observant person notices the texture of a fabric, the sounds of men at work, the smells of a market, the methods of construction, and the use of colours. If you

have been in the country longer and have already observed your surroundings extensively, deepen your understanding by opening all your senses to specific events, or specific types of behavior for certain times or situations e.g., eating, courtship, relaxation. Observe not only material things but also the behavior of the people, their attitudes and the way they mark their relationships with other persons and things. If you concentrate, you will see much more. It is recommended that you write your observations on a page or index card (one observation per card) that is divided into four columns. Your observations could include statements like this:

Observations:

- Women wear long dresses in public
- Their clothing is neat and colorful
- There are many buses
- The buses are usually full

ASSUMPTIONS

The next step is to jump to one or more tentative conclusions concerning the meaning of your observations. Of course, many times the assumptions you make will be in error. You should make hypotheses anyway and write your assumptions in the column beside the observation. Try to answer these questions: What does this mean to them? Why do they do this? What does this show about their culture?

Assumptions:

- High value is placed on modesty
- Value is also placed on personal appearance
- Buses go almost everywhere
- People can go where they need to by bus
- Bus travel is inexpensive

VALIDATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Are your assumptions accurate or have you perceived things incorrectly? You should expect many or even most of your assumptions to be incorrect. One way to validate your assumptions is to get more observations and see if these substantiate your original assumptions. Often you can validate assumptions by experimenting or participating in activities with people. Some, validations might be made through library research. Of course, inaccurate assumptions should be discarded for more valid ones. The most likely means of validation is through interviews with people. Talk regularly with a special informant or helper and others about your assumptions.

Validation:

- Talked with many people
- Most women don't own many dresses but try to keep them neat and clean
- Multiple observations
- Talked with helper's sister
- Got a bus route map

OBSERVATIONS	ASSUMPTIONS	VALIDATIONS	CLASSIFICATIONS
Women wear long dresses in public	The people place a high value on modesty	Make multiple observations; talk with my helper's sister about it.	I will not wear short trousers in public.
Women's clothing is neat and colorful.	The people probably value outward appearances.	More observation Talked with many people; Most women don't own many dresses but they keep them neat and clean.	I will take care to always keep my clothes neat and clean.
There are many buses.	Buses probably go everywhere.	Got a bus route; saw extensive routing.	
Buses are always full.	People can go wherever they need to by bus.	I caught a bus and found I could get all over town.	
	Bus travel is inexpensive.	I experienced that I could ride the bus for less than car insurance.	Use the bus, preferential option for the poor.

Experimented and found I could get all over town by bus

Saw that routes are extensive

Buses are indeed cheap: I could ride the bus every day for less than car insurance

You might find it handy to keep four index card boxes; one for each of the four stages: Observations, Assumptions, Validations, Applications. When you've made assumptions about your observations, or made validations of a specific assumption you can move the card to the respective box. These "hard" rather than sloppy observational techniques can put you on the right track in understanding behavior and can bring to light long-held misconceptions and explain miscommunications.

CLASSIFICATION

At this point we should note that each of the observations you make can be classified into one or more of roughly nine categories.

1. The kinship system
2. The educational system
3. The economic system
4. The political system
5. The religious system
6. The recreational system
7. The association system
8. The health system
9. The transportation and communication systems

Kinship:

The family provides a means for adding new members to the society. It also provides an environment for the training and socialization of children. The kinship system relates to all aspects of the family or extended family including elements such as descent, family authority, area of residence, inheritance, moral values and marriage. It also regulates the attitudes and responsibilities of the members in crisis situations, funerals, etc.

Education:

All societies provide the means of transmitting cultural knowledge to younger members. This prepares the individual to live and function within the society in an acceptable way and to do so with some degree of independence. Elements of the educational system include schools, teachers, family members, books and other materials. Education is closely related to communication and kinship.

Economic:

Each society has a means of acquiring and distributing goods and services which sustain the lives of its members. Many roles and institutions are in operation to meet these demands. They include the population of working people, the different type of enterprises, means of payment or exchange, and ecology.

Political:

All societies have a means of regulating their internal power relations and their relations with others. This regulation provides protection for the whole group. The political system controls the competition for power within the society. Elements of the political system include public services and utilities, government institutions such as courts, police and legislative bodies.

Religions:

Every culture is built around basic beliefs and values which provide an understanding of man's existence and his place in the universe. These beliefs are often manifested in the form of rituals and organization.

Recreational:

All societies provide a means for recreation and relaxation. This includes games, dancing, singing, sports, storytelling, artistic expression, drinking, parties and pastimes.

Associational:

In every culture, people who have similar interests tend to group themselves together. These associations may be for recreation, politics, economics, religious reasons or other. For what purpose are groups formed in your area? How many people belong to the different groups? Do they use symbols or slogans to identify themselves?

Health:

All societies are concerned about survival of their members. Elements of the health system include nutrition, mother and child care, control of diseases, hospitals, medical personnel, and beliefs about health and its relation to medicine or to the spirit world.

Transportation and Communication:

Every culture provides a means for people and goods to get from one place to another and for information to be disseminated throughout the community. This includes postal service, a bus system, roads, telephones, mass media and language.

Each observation can be classified under one or more of these categories. For example, an observation in the area of communication such as: "Ghanaians in villages tend to perceive three-dimensional pictures in flat two-dimensional perspectives" has obvious implications for education too. Given our array of groupings it would seem that the most convenient filling method would be to have nine sections--one for each cultural category--in each of your four boxes.

APPLICATION

All of this classification and analysis is not an end in itself. It is rather to help us change to more appropriate behavior

in achieving our ends. Ask yourself, "What does this mean to me?" Questions like this can turn your assumptions into information that will aid you as you develop a strategy for effective action within the culture. It is therefore necessary to add one more section to each card: "application".

MOVING TOWARD CHRISTIAN ACTION

In category marked "application" we will want to put the advisable appropriate way in which we think we should change our behavior to fit their understanding or their pathways. If I see that moral values are respected by modest clothing I will probably need to avoid wearing jeans or shorts, etc. in public. If I validate that theirs is an "exo-skeletal" society, imposing moral constraints from the outside rather than from inside the individual's own conscience, as in Western endo-skeletal systems, then I may have to wrap up any possession before carrying it in public so as not to arouse envy. The actions we take may vary and when they are dependent on faulty assumptions they will be faulty. But even actions that fail to communicate our aims will raise comment which will direct us further alone. One thing is for sure, that progress demands action--trial and error.

It is perhaps on the more basic level of cultural transformation itself that we will have greater difficulties, for this implies more confrontation than adaptation. We can begin here by observing discrepancies and flaws in the culture as a whole--inconsistencies between the way they think of themselves and the way they actually are. All societies are to some extent irrational and inharmonious situationally, contextually, neurotically, bureaucratically, culturally--though people tend to have a stereotyped picture of themselves that blinds them to these discrepancies. This is their "folklore" as opposed to "story" in the sense of the term used by Slater (1978). In applying the Gospel message to a people's "story" we should not be misled by the "folklore" element, although we should be attracted to it. For it is precisely where the imbalance is most solely felt that God and missionary have the greatest opportunities for entering and healing. Jacob Loewen says that different cultures facing the Gospel for the first time will find different facets of it more meaningful than others. He recounts the story of a missionary statesman who once asked Bakht Singh, a famous Protestant evangelist in India, what dimension of the Gospel he found most useful in witnessing to his own people (Stott 1981:120-121).

Do you preach to them about the love of God? No, he said, the Indian mind is so polluted that if you talk to them about love they think mainly of sex. Well, the missionary said, do you talk to them about the wrath and judgment of God? No. They are used to that he replied. All the gods are mad anyway. It makes no

difference to them if there is one more who is angry. About what do you talk to them? Do you preach on the crucified Christ, the missionary guessed. No. They would think of him as a poor martyr who helplessly died. Then what is your emphasis? Eternal life? Not so, he said, if you talk about eternal life the Indian thinks of transmigration. He wants to get away from it. What then is your message?

Listen to his answer:

I have never yet failed to get hearing if I talk to them about the forgiveness of this and peace and the rest. That's the product that sells well. Soon they ask me how they can get it and then I can lead them to the Savior who alone can meet their deepest longings. (George W. Peters "Is the Missions Homesteading or Moving?" in *Menonite Brethren Herald*, Ap.15, 1977).

Perhaps the simplest guidelines for members of one culture entering into another for the purpose of authentically applying the Gospel are the four outlined by Donald Jacob's (Stott 1981:165-166). We can ask these four questions of ourselves:

1. To whom am I bringing the Gospel? Do not limit God's revelation. Allow God to speak differently to different peoples at different times, but above all let the word reach opinion leaders. These may not be the formal leaders--the preservers or implementers. They are the people that others go to for advice over a difficult problem. It is the "who" that leads to the "what". When we know our people we will know what to say to them. But understanding who a people truly are must take into consideration what they can become. If our efforts at understanding our people's culture are to bear fruit they must take shape against a vision of God's revelation for them. A specific eschatological vision of perfection exists for them. This is to be the substance of their new Christ-inspired "story". This story is already present in their "folklore" but only in a dimmed way due to the disfiguring chisel marks of those "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). The text from the New Jerusalem Bible: "who keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness" is better. Our efforts at getting to know them are not just a preparation, they are already very much a part of the application necessary. To know them is to know their deepest cultural yearnings. This is the place waiting to be filled by the Spirit.

2. What person brings the Gospel? Each of us has his or her own cultural background, his or her own history, character traits, gifts and weaknesses. God uses all for his own ends in his own way. We take it on faith that the hand of God is invisibly present moving us and those to whom

we are sent, on a collision course with the Kingdom. Our application of the Gospel involves knowing oneself.

3. What is the time of the power encounter? At certain moments in a cultural history the intensity of a problem focuses the attention of everyone either on it or on its dire effects. At such time the church must act through its advocates of change in a concentrated and powerful way. I believe that in Christianized Africa the presence of so many Pentecostal and "Healing" churches is an indication of a problem that is overwhelmingly ripe for our attention. Seven out of every ten converts to Christianity in Africa are to Independent churches. Could not our missionaries exchange ideas and trust with the leaders of these churches? And if possible help them where they are weak theologically or biblically or where they fall prey to syncretistic practices. Homer Barnett (1953: 378 ff) theorizes that three factors govern the acceptance of new ideas:

1. Where new ideas satisfy a want better than existing means.
2. Where they connect in part with the previous life experience of the people.
3. Where pervasive dissatisfaction has already gripped a portion of the people. The occasion for power encounters should take these factors into consideration.

4. What is the place of encounter? Where are the real needs? How can we turn the real needs of cultures into points of contact with the Lord of creation and at the same time into an inherent point of attack on all that is not conformity with the Kingdom in all its fullness? There can be no ready-made answer to this question. But it will become clearer, I think, when the first part of it is answered, i.e. where is the actual point of encounter or attack? Again, we discover their needs by systematic observation--especially observation of anomalies, which I will explain shortly. However, there are two crude guidelines which I would suggest as this point; concentrate on less changes at a deeper level and use the Old Testament more.

The missionary should seek to bring about a minimal number of changes in their world view rather than a larger number of peripheral changes (see also Kraft 1977:290). Aim at the central symbols. Peripheral changes run risk of encouraging "cultural conversion" rather than "conversion to Christ," i.e., all peripheral issues which are given central significance as a mark of faith must be critically examined and changed in our church structures. In Ghana this might mean changing pastoral policies regarding what is demanded before admitting a convert to Baptism or to the sacraments by first dealing with core concepts such as a people's understanding of and commitment to God. More peripheral matters such as polygamy, divorce, infanticide

etc. will be dealt with in due time with a minimum of trauma under God's leadership and the inspiration of his Spirit. It should be remembered that the Old Testament is Gospel too. If solving culture-encrusted problems is central to the Gospel, and these four papers have been an effort to show how it is, then for Africans the Gospel message of the Old Testament has more direct bearing on their lives than that of the New Testament. "The influence of the Old Testament in African countries," say Packer, "was so strong (during Colonial times) that the arrival of the Old Testament translations of Sacred Scripture again and again split the existing church." "Rebelling against what they viewed as the Western wrapper in which the missionaries has given them God's message, many African believers started separatist movements boldly proclaiming: "The African Gospel--the Old Testament--has finally arrived; the missionaries have kept our Gospel hidden and have preached only theirs" (Scott 1981:120). In addition to the above questions then, we might well ask ourselves, "how much do we see the lessons of the Old Testament as applying to the needs and longings of our people?"

DETECTING CULTURAL BLIND SPOTS

Perhaps even more important than a systematic filing system, especially for those of us who are already veterans in the cross-cultural situation, who know the language and have a deep knowledge of the life and cognitive orientation of the people, is the need to develop the habit of noticing and recording anomalies--things that don't happen as one would expect or which call attention to an alternative way of doing something or behaving. Ask yourself why it is so. By doing this we can attack old and crusty assumptions and validations and come closer to clearly seeing and understanding their perspective. Often times we can be content that we have understood the significance of a pattern of--behavior or an "action-chain" (see Hall: *Beyond Culture*) and we automatically filter our every perception that does not align itself with our pet theory or model. Thus a cultural "blind spot," is formed and there is no way around it except by paying close attention to the anomalies--these are the real keys to culture.

Apart from the card catalogues and boxes I would advise missionaries to keep a diary or journal just for recording cultural observations in a more random style. In doing so we should beware of calling our judgments and assumptions "observations," however. Such a journal can be a tremendous source of enlightenment. What is not understood at the time may be linked to a whole set of deeper unperceived relationships later on. Finding one's way through a culture has been described as a blind man's groping his way in the dark (Hall: *Beyond Culture*). He discovers things precisely by bumping into them. No bumps; no progress. What is discovered are the hidden pathways of culture taken for granted by the other. These

are the standard responses to situations of life--sickness, disputes, confrontations (e.g., Husband catches wife in adultery), courtship, arranging a business transaction, etc. But our bumps in the dark or observations of the anomalies, as it were, tell us more about ourselves than about them.

Although it sounds contradictory, we know very little about our own culture. We take it for granted and it is therefore hidden from us. Ask someone how he behaves in a given situation. He won't be able to tell you. But if you try to act it out he can say that it is all wrong. Our culture has programmed us how to make gestures, use our voices and facial expression; it has formed our conceptions and given us specific ways to use time, space and materials. All of this is learned and then made habitual or unlearned reflectively. It becomes innate and anyone who doesn't do it or say it, as is expected, is judged different and usually inferior. Bumping in the dark tells us where our "innate" presuppositions lie. Shared cognitive maps are not reflected on but are taken for granted. We assume that only the other's cultural map needs adjustment. But, while we can only know the other's map in a derivative way and incompletely, we can come to clarify our own presuppositions considerably and gradually come to see where they need adjustments. Then by gaining a better understanding of our own culture, theirs takes on greater meaning. Therefore "finding our people" tends to involve and depend upon "finding ourselves," and finding ourselves leads to understanding them more clearly. It is a reflexive process of continual readjustment.

IMPATIENCE

Earlier we alluded to a counter-productive tendency among some missionaries. It can be camouflaged in such descriptions of our missionary progress as "the hundred year plan." When constantly confronted by difficult cross-cultural situations sometimes resulting in misunderstandings and miscommunication, it is very easy for realism to give way to fatalism or nihilism, especially the attitude that nothing can really be done about a problem so why bother. Without succumbing to this tendency, missionaries should realize that the full assimilation of even one change must take time--anthropologists recognize the need for at least one generation between major cultural changes. People need time to reformulate their lives.

WHOSE NEEDS ARE MET?

Another pitfall to our progress in cross-cultural understanding and gospel sharing is over the question of fulfilling needs. Too often the subjective quality of success depends on whose needs we are fulfilling. The effort is successful if "my needs" are met. It is true that for most of us Westerners achievements need to be visible and

quantifiable. The results that you produce are expected to be measurable. But talk with the people you are working with about their lives. What do they want out of life? What is the purpose of life as they see it? What are their needs?

FACTORS OUT OF OUR CONTROL

Finally, it is important for us to realize that if our true goals is to influence the acceptance of a radical world view change, success in this venture cannot depend on our efforts alone--no matter how gargantuan. We are indebted to Kraft for a list of some of the most important factors influencing the acceptance or rejection of world view change (1981: 167).

1. The basic premises of the source and receptor's world views.
2. The attitude of the receptor toward their own culture.
3. The attitude of the receptor toward the source culture.
4. The openness of the receptor to new ideas
5. The pace of present change (rapid change begets more change)
6. If there is a tradition of "borrowing" in the receptor society
7. The morale of the receptor people (proud or demoralized)
8. The extent to which receptor people are self-sufficient
9. The sense of security of the receptor (more threatened the less receptive)
10. The relative prestige of the advocate
11. The flexibility of the receptor culture
12. The applicability of the suggestion to a felt need
13. The extent to which the new idea can be built on the foundation of the old

With these factors in mind we can be gentle with ourselves and at the same time more realistic in our expectations. Nothing can replace our whole-hearted response to the promptings of the Spirit, which is where it all begins.