

## **Kingsmead 1969-77: Preparing for Mission Overseas**

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Men and women preparing at Selly Oak for missionary work in other parts of the world in the 1970s were trained within an international community. The Selly Oak colleges together had about 600 students living in nine colleges: about 100 of them preparing to serve overseas, a few missionaries on furlough, about 400 young people at Westhill training to be teachers or youth workers, about forty leaders of overseas churches doing courses in Christian Education, Church Management, Mission, some thirty men and women training to care for children in need and thirty trade unionists doing courses in further education.

Some of the colleges were sponsored by churches or missionary societies: Kingsmead (Methodist); St Andrews Hall (Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregationalist); Crowther Hall and College of the Ascension (Church of England); Overdale (UK theological college for the Churches of Christ); Woodbrooke (Society of Friends).

Westhill was a Free Church College training teachers and youth workers; Fircroft was run by an independent Trust with a strong trade union emphasis.

Practically all the formal training of missionaries was done centrally.

Kingsmead College was where most of the Methodist students lived. In my time there were three members of staff: besides myself Barbara Tasker, who had been a missionary in North India, and Bill Watty followed by Bruce Swapp, both of them ministers from the Caribbean.

In Kingsmead there were about 53 students altogether:

around ten ministers and lay people training to go as missionaries, who stayed for three or six months;

six church leaders from overseas, ministers mostly but some lay people – from Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South India, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and from different churches, not just Methodist; a few men and women from Continental missionary societies – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, preparing for work in Eng-speaking countries;

five or six men and women doing the Child Care course (some Christians, some not);

five overseas social workers (probation officers, family welfare officers);

every term two or three missionaries on furlough and from time to time a lecturer from an overseas country who was in Selly Oak on one of the annual scholarships;

six or eight senior students from overseas countries doing post-graduate courses at Birmingham University

Often in the college we had up to 26 different nationalities -perhaps 2/3 would be committed Christians of different denominations, the rest from other faiths or none. We tried to deliberately shape the life of the college so that every member felt they belonged as much as anyone else. We did not see ourselves as a missionary college with a few spare places, but an open community in which every person had a full place, whether Methodist or Lutheran, Hindu or Buddhist, Muslim or atheist, agnostic or humanist. We had prayers in the college early morning and before the evening meal. Prayers could be taken by anyone, in whatever way they felt it right. Any one of the students could be elected to be the college secretary.

Some students were married with their wife and children. There was one crèche for all the colleges where young children were cared for during lecture periods. Older children went to the local school. Both father and mother could share fully in the courses that were available. All ate in a common dining room. There was also a central common room with easy chairs and a TV room, a games room, the laundry where students did their own washing, etc.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE COMMUNITY

I have deliberately spent time on the community making up Selly Oak Colleges and Kingsmead, because over and over again students preparing to go overseas as missionaries said they learned as much from living in the community as they did from lectures and seminars and working in groups.

There were seminars and lecture courses on the areas to which the people were going, on Biblical subjects – Old and New Testament – on world problems, on the economics and politics of developing countries, on other faiths (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Primal Religion) and how Christians can engage in dialogue with people of other faiths, on African literature and what it says about African culture and attitudes to the church, as well as car maintenance and book-keeping, first aid, the care of health in the tropics, etc.

But the central part of the preparation was in groups, in which people learned for themselves, tried to understand themselves better, tried to learn to communicate with people whose culture and outlook was different from their own. Much of this was centred in study of the Bible. Though I cannot point to a place where it was explicitly spelt out, it seemed to me that the period at Kingsmead was intended to help people going to serve overseas to be *spiritually tough*, to be *adaptable*, to be *sensitive* and to be *receptive*.

## SPIRITUALLY TOUGH

In earlier days missionaries had to be physically tough. They had to face malaria, cholera, blackwater fever and so on there were still some physical difficulties to be faced, but the real strains were now mental and spiritual.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s several leading overseas Christians were saying that missionaries were not wanted. John Mbiti told me that local Christians were relying too much on the missionaries and the presence of missionaries was preventing the church becoming mature. Some missionaries were said to be ‘tourist missionaries’, only concerned with seeing the tourist sights in the country. In the past missionaries had seen their work as for life, but now some governments were saying that missionary visas would not be renewed when missionaries went on furlough. I talked with missionaries about what this would mean – especially for lay people, such as teachers or accountants – and whether it would be easy for them to find jobs when they came back to the UK. I was told about corruption and inefficiency in the life of overseas countries, and even in the church – and missionaries said it was dangerous and wrong for them to try to do anything about it.

The overseas church leaders who were struggling with pastoral care of the churches, with staffing schools, colleges, hospitals and clinics, were still asking for missionaries. They were desperately keen to have them; they said it would be very difficult indeed to manage without missionaries, but some of them were resenting the fact that they did need the help that missionaries gave. Some prominent overseas Christians who were not struggling with the day-to-day problems of the institutions, who were in university posts, or secretaries of Councils of Churches, for example, spoke out very forcefully: Missionaries go home. One missionary said that the tensions made him feel he was living on the edge of a precipice. There was no way off the edge; they had to find security on the edge.

In that situation missionaries had to be spiritually tough. They had to be clear about their message and their vocation. They might believe that God was at work in the nationalism that was producing the tension, but they could not always understand why people were so critical against the church and particularly against missionaries. They could only carry on if they had a strong, sure relationship with Christ; they had to be spiritually tough, without being inflexible.

#### ADAPTABLE

Perhaps it has always been the case that missionaries went into training expecting to go and serve in one part of the world, only to be told just before their training ended that they were going somewhere else. A family from Finland came to Kingsmead expecting to go to Ethiopia, and spent a great deal of time studying the situation there – the geography, climate, church life, educational facilities for their children - only to be told near the end of their training that they were going to Rhodesia. An Irish family thought they were going to India, and then were re-designated to go to the Solomon Islands. Some came and spent several months training only to be told at the end that there was no place for them to go. We came to feel that the only thing missionaries in the 1970's could be sure about was that their situation would change radically every year.

In Rhodesia, for example, ministers were often moved about. Stationing was decided each year by Synod meeting in January. We could not be sure until the last day of Synod where we would be stationed for the year. If our station was different from where we had been the previous year we had to be on the move two weeks after the end of Synod; children had to be settled in new schools, we had to adapt to different kinds of work. My first three months were in the city of Bulawayo with a small church with a white congregation, and I spent a lot of time taking RE lessons with white children in local schools. We then moved to a big rural circuit – 100 miles long and 50 miles wide with twelve African churches, six African day schools, services for Europeans in two small towns; I was often away from home for ten days or so at a time, 100 miles from a garage travelling on bush tracks and from time to time getting stuck in deep sand or hindered by flooded rivers. I then spent two years in the theological college, one of those years being the only member of staff and trying to run four courses at the same time. I finally ended up as principal of a training institution with 700 resident pupils, where there were four departments: a primary boarding school, a small hospital training twelve nurses, and departments for training teachers and agricultural demonstrators. For two years we were without a bursar and I had to keep all the institution's accounts – two years whilst we were putting up several new buildings,

there was no one to supervise that work and it was left to the principal; I was also chaplain to the institution and taught RE.

The only thing you could be sure of in all the time I was in what is now Zimbabwe is that next year things would be different – and many missionaries had that kind of experience. Sometimes missionaries would get deeply involved in a piece of work which seemed tremendously important – important for the kingdom of God – only to have to give it up before the work was finished and go and work somewhere else. In earlier times missionaries had to be pioneers, full of confidence and courage and determination to do the work they saw God was calling them to do; in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – and now, I guess, even more so – they had to be prepared to work in a team. There was very little place for the individualist. And in all the strains and tensions missionaries had to keep their sense of humour and enjoy being themselves. At Selly Oak we tried to help students to cultivate the flexibility they would need so they could hold fast to Christ and for the rest be totally uncommitted.

## SENSITIVE

Missionaries could only communicate the gospel if they built up a personal relationship with those with whom they were working. The language, culture, way of life were very different from that of the missionary himself/herself and a relationship could only be built up if missionaries were able to understand those with whom they were working, be open to them, sensitive to the things they were important to them, sensitive to the things that hurt as well as to the kind of help they needed.

They needed to be able to speak the language of the people with whom they were working, which usually involved hard slog and could be frustrating if they were moved from one language area to another. (After 3½ years in Rhodesia I had just got to preaching in Sindebele when I was moved to the other end of the country where the language was Shona.) We were not able to teach languages at Selly Oak in the 1970s but we had to impress on people that it was important to try to learn the language when they arrived.

But becoming sensitive involved a lot more than learning the language. It involved, for example, being willing to give people time; in Kenya a government minister lost his seat in an election because he was too busy to listen to all who wanted to see him. I came across a church minister who was ineffective because he always arrived at his churches 20 minutes before the service was due to start and went home immediately after he had shaken hands with everyone after the service. People wanted him to visit them in their homes, spend time getting to know them, and if possible eat their food and sleep in their village.

As missionaries became more sensitive to other people, they also became more aware of themselves, their own limitations and needs – and were able to become more receptive to what they could receive from those they were trying to help.

## RECEPTIVE

Real communication can only take place in a two-way relationship. And there is a great deal that people going out as missionaries can learn from people in other parts of the world. I gained new insights into the importance of personal relationships, a vision of the way people in a community can help each other, a realisation that great suffering can sometimes be endured when one trusts in God. Missionaries with the right spirit can be enriched at the deepest levels of their personalities.

Behind all that we tried to do at Kingsmead in the 1970s therefore was the aim to help people to become more tough spiritually, to be more flexible, sensitive and receptive. Besides the courses on the life and peoples of other countries, lectures on the Bible, Christian theology and mission, lectures on other faiths, sessions on the economics and politics of other parts of the world, courses on practical subjects like first aid, book-keeping, car maintenance, students were encouraged to develop their own personal devotional life – they needed this if they were to develop the qualities I have been speaking about.

A great deal of the formation was done through working together in groups. The first group which helped to shape people was the **COMMUNITY OF THE COLLEGE**

People from fifteen different countries, seven different Christian denominations, three or four Muslims, a Hindu, a Buddhist and several people of no faith, we did many things together. We had meals together at tables for six and people were encouraged to sit at different tables on different days so that a real interchange took place. We played games together: table tennis, volley ball, draughts and chess. We shared domestic work together: all helped on a rota basis with the washing up. We organised our community life together: a chairperson was elected each term and he/she chaired the weekly common room meetings. There were groups to arrange social evenings, to plan worship, to decide about arrangements for locking up, etc.

Because the students were adults and some of them had run their own households before coming to Kingsmead, we felt it would be wrong to have a list of rules and regulations. We tried to plan everything together, and together make any decisions which might be necessary. There were tensions – tensions between people from different parts of the world, between families and single people, between those who were deeply committed and those not so. We got to know each other very well - people can pretend to be polite when they only meet occasionally, but living together at close quarters for six months, in all the stresses that a mixed community produces, strips off many of the masks that people wear. We had to get used to each other's strange customs and strange ways. Through the life of the college people could begin to become more flexible and more sensitive to others.

Students doing the missionary preparation course also worked together in groups on **DIFFERENT ISSUES**.

A series of lectures for example raised questions relating to mission - What is mission? Is it

simply preaching the gospel? Does it also mean feeding the hungry and caring for the sick? Should Christians care for the sick mainly in order to persuade them to become Christians? How can people in newly-developing countries be helped to relate their Christian faith to their daily work? How much of what we regard as Christianity is really only Western culture? Is God revealed in Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism? Is there anything we can learn from these other faiths?

As the issues were raised and groups made up of people from different parts of the world and of different church traditions faced them in the light of particular Bible passages, they began to clarify their own beliefs, sort out their own theologies and learn to communicate better with others. Ministers had to learn to talk about theology in ways that made sense to nurses and agriculturalists, and to listen carefully to what were not-very-well expressed ideas of people without specialist training, while secretaries challenged teachers to put their ideas in down-to-earth terms.

Some of the input was given by lecturers from Africa, Asia or the Caribbean and students felt something of the militant nationalism that was blowing across those parts of the world. The challenges of communism and secularism were also dealt with. All these living issues were presented in as forceful a way as possible and then discussed. It all helped students to grow.

Some students also worked together in what were called TASK GROUPS

These were groups of eight to twelve students who worked alongside the social services in the city trying to help people in need. One term one group worked at the Birmingham Settlement with Meals on Wheels, trying to discover why people asked to have meals on wheels – was it just because of the food or was it because they wanted to be able to rely on someone coming to see them two or three days each week? – sometimes, for example, the food was not eaten but the people still wanted to have Meals on Wheels.

Visiting old people gave them opportunities to help and raised important questions. One group redecorated the flat for the couple they visited. Another group discovered an elderly man and woman living together unmarried; they seemed to be living in absolute squalor but they were very happy. Some of the group said: we must give the flat a thorough spring clean and get the couple to the registry office to be married (this was the 1970s remember!) while others said this might give the couple such a shock that their whole life would be upset – and even their relationship might be threatened. In this situation there was focussed for the group some of the basic questions that would arise overseas: in helping people ought we to try to get them to change their ways of life and become like us? – and if we do that would we be doing more harm than good?

As the people in the Task Groups faced these questions, and discussed together the questions that developed in their work – how do you help people without developing in yourself an attitude of superiority? – so the students were stretched, challenged, and moulded by each other. They began to become tougher, more flexible, and more sensitive to the way other people feel.

## CONCLUSION

We did not claim to be able to turn out fully-trained missionaries. Anyone wanting to be a missionary in the 1970s had to be ready to carry on being trained for the rest of their lives. But we did try to give people insights into what missionary training could be about, tried to help them to realise some of the things they needed to learn, tried to help them to see some of the danger areas and where they themselves needed to be changed.

We aimed to provide an accepting and understanding community in which such change could begin, in the hope that after a period at Selly Oak they would be ready to go and continue their training through serving in the right spirit the people to whom they would go.

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