

## Training people for mission in Europe today

Author: Richard Tiplady, British Director, European Christian Mission.

This paper isn't meant to be definitive regarding training for every type of mission work in every different European context, but to act as a "starter for ten" (which is of course a very UK-specific reference, but, hey, that's why we have Google).

So what kind of people make good missionaries in Europe, and what kind of training can help to prepare them?

### 1. European religions and spirituality

It's a mistake to assume that the historic versions of Christianity found in Europe (Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and the many flavours of Protestantism) are monolithic. Spanish Catholicism is different to that practiced in Poland, and that is different again to the German version. Of course there are similarities, but the religion as it is actually practised takes on very local flavours (a bit like the French concept of *terroir*<sup>1</sup> with wine). Throw in a secular overlay, and a dash of non-Western religious influence, and missionaries need to understand how Europeans practise their faith, not just what the guidebooks say.

The intertwining of cultural ideas and practices with Christianity is central to European identity, more so that anywhere else in the world. After all, we have had nearly 2000 years to mix the two up and confuse which is really which. And since Christianity only exists in cultural forms, that's no great surprise. But missionaries need to have a very clear understanding of the way that their own Christian faith has been shaped by their cultural background, as well as a broader understanding of the theoretical Christianity / culture issue. The legacy of historic Christian input in Europe still pervades, so much so that German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently spoke of human rights, religious freedom and justice as "basic Christian values" that were essential foundations for Germany's future. Of course, she wasn't necessarily doing so out a commitment to biblical values, and the statement may have had as much to do with contemporary anxiety about multiculturalism and the need for social cohesion in Europe, but it's striking to note to where she looked for these core values.

As Grace Davie notes, Europe is an "exceptional case" when it comes to the relationship between Christianity and secularisation. Understanding secularisation theory, and its recent questioners, is very important in order to really understand the place of faith and belief in the European mind. I'm not sure where apologetics as we have practised it in recent decades now sits. Secularisation isn't dead, nor is secular materialism, but there are not that many real atheists left in Europe. If ideology isn't dead, it's a bit sick (and it might benefit from a visit to a helpful euthanasia clinic in Switzerland). Understanding the postmodern mindset isn't going to do any harm, but let's remember that most people are not postmodern by conviction, but more because the social and cultural context of Europe encourages ways of behaving and thinking that could be characterised as postmodern. To misquote Karl Rahner, maybe many Europeans are "anonymous postmoderns"?

This intertwining of Christianity and culture in Europe, albeit with a fairly thorough secularisation at the public level, means that evangelical Christian missionaries in particular need to operate with one eye on the undeniable (if not very helpful) heritage of Christendom,

---

<sup>1</sup> Terrain

another on our secular, post-Christian and postmodern culture, and a third (!) on the need to contextualise the gospel in new ways, to overcome the successful inoculation of the European mind and spirit against the real thing by weakened forms of Christian faith.

## **2. Learning the culture**

Europe has a long and rich history, much of which those of us who live here don't know or have forgotten. This can be an even greater challenge for those from outside Europe who come to serve and minister here. A notable number of churches planted by Latin Americans in Spain are made up primarily or exclusively of Latin American immigrants themselves. Now, sure, they need to gospel too, but in what way is this helping to reach Spanish or Portuguese people with the gospel? Is it not in fact simply confirming to the "natives" that this evangelical Christianity is for foreigners, not for us?

I hope I don't come across as too critical when I note that those coming from outside Europe do not always seem to feel a particular need to get to grips with European cultures. Of course, it was Westerners who invented cultural imperialism when it comes to mission (or maybe it was the Roman church in the Middle Ages, I don't know?). But we're dealing with the plank in our own eye. And while our fellow-Christians in the global South are sometimes rightly critical of Europeans going to their countries and not being culturally sensitive, they sometimes now do the same thing to us. The Empire is truly striking back. *Plus ça change...*

An interesting idea was thrown up during discussions at Redcliffe College on this topic. It reflects Redcliffe's own sense of purpose and mission, but that's OK ☺. It was noted that maybe part of the role of missionary training is to help students to understand that they are not there primarily to improve their Bible knowledge, but to become more self-aware. It was noted that, almost without exception, students at Redcliffe talk about being at a 'Bible college'. This reflects the idea that the key requirement for being a missionary is Bible knowledge, and that there is less understanding of the need to be self- and culturally- aware. So maybe the role of missionary training includes, as a priority, the ability to understand culture in a wide sense, giving them a framework in which they can analyse themselves and their future contexts of ministry. Or, given that many new missionaries are criticised by older colleagues for their lack of biblical knowledge, is this actually still very important, especially for those working in church-planting or pastoral situations? I think this debate could run for a while, but it's worth starting.

## **3. Personal characteristics for successful mission in Europe**

Outright persecution of Christians of any flavour is fairly rare in Europe (though not completely unknown). What evangelical Christians face in many European countries, especially those with Catholic or Orthodox histories, is a kind of low-grade social marginalisation. Evangelicals are not viewed quite so frequently as a cult or a sect as we used to be, but we're still a bit odd, and not always welcomed with open arms.

I'm not sure how this can be trained into people, but missionaries in Europe need a degree of personal tenacity and perseverance to be able to have an impact. They need to be fairly secure in their personal faith and in the calling they have. Some members of ECM speak with pride of their status as "plodders", a term we might usually use in a pejorative tone. But progress or a sense of making a difference in some parts of Europe can come very slowly, so missionaries need to be able to find encouragement in small things, and keep going anyway.

Somewhat paradoxically, we also need people who are creative and innovative, and who are willing and able to try new forms of mission. Europe is not a blank canvas when it comes to mission, but sometimes it's worth pretending that it is, and experimenting with new forms of emerging church, for example, just to see what might happen.

#### **4. And my final point .....**

What is distinctive for Europe? People need the ability to question current mission practices in Europe. People need to have the tools to understand their own culture, but also to critique European "Christian" and post-Christian cultures. And part of the role of training is to show students where to go if they need more knowledge and insight, because they will not be able to learn it all in a year or two or three.

Can a college train people for this kind of mission? Partnership is a perennial issue for mission agencies, and maybe also for Missionary Training Colleges. Creative partnerships in training, where students are sent for a while (maybe a year) to experience the situation they may encounter later, could be very productive. I can foresee the kind of situation where a student studies for a year or two, then serves with an agency for a year or more, returning later to finish their course, being very effective in terms of training. It would mean mission agencies and colleges getting their act together to ensure that the learning on an assignment of that duration is well-planned and well-managed, but it might pay dividends in the long term.

---

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the Encounters website ([www.redcliffe.org/mission](http://www.redcliffe.org/mission)). Alternatively, you may prefer to email your response to [mission@redcliffe.org](mailto:mission@redcliffe.org), in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the Encounters discussion board.