

# The Re-Amateurization of Missions

by Ralph D. Winter (Spring, 1996)

One hundred years ago hordes of young people rushed out to the field and did silly, tragic things--and were encouraged by adults back home. That was a massive amateurization of mission.

It is happening again.

In 1896 it was not an isolated syndrome. Whether it was the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Sudan Interior Mission or the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, unnecessary deaths took place.

But physical problems are more easily corrected.

Other mistakes were far more serious, for example, college educated "Student Volunteers" took one look at the level of education of many African pastors and declared them unqualified. They pushed real leaders out of the pulpits. Serious setbacks resulted in most fields. It took twenty, thirty, forty years for the volunteers to relearn much of what earlier missionaries had already discovered. (The volunteers did not read the earlier writings.)

Is "amateurization" always what happens when a new movement to the field takes place? Will 60,000 young Koreans flooding out to the frontiers do more harm than good? Even "short-termers" have their problems. Can a little knowledge be a dangerous thing?

It did happen before. But we are reluctant to admit it. Popular interest in mission is so scarce that we mission professionals are inclined to accept "interest"---warts and all.

The obvious reason to speak out boldly is to reduce the damage. Let's take a quick glance at the nature of the problem today.

Today we have a far greater GAP between the "educated" and the "uneducated." One hundred years ago "a college education" could still mean merely four years of school.

[For example, as late as 1865 you could matriculate directly into the State University of Iowa without any previous schooling provided you could pass a reading and writing test, and could prove you could add and subtract (multiplication was not required). This had been true from colonial times.]

Thomas Jefferson types could get out of college at 17 because William and Mary College normally took kids in at 13 with or without previous schooling

Today we have created giddy elongation of the schooling process stretching it from just three or four years of incarceration to 17 years through college, and in the process forcing old age on mission volunteers, who are told they must study even further.

Some candidates and large churches are skipping the whole process. Today you must either forego college and seminary (plus missiology?) in order to arrive on the field early enough for your mind and mouth to be flexible to really master the field language and culture, or arrive years later with the "proper" education but with a real age handicap.

Understandably, a lot of healthy minded young people are opting for the early plunge if there are agencies willing to take them--agencies like YWAM, OM, or Frontiers, whose candidates are often woefully lacking in the rudiments. However, Wycliff in its Field Surveyors Division, has decided to take people with just two years of college, arranging for field ministry to be combined with highly relevant course work leading to an accredited college degree. Doesn't mission work uniquely require field ministry to be combined somehow with advanced training?

Where are we? One mission leader told me, "There is a great tide of missionary interest and giving, but it is geared to a wide variety of vested interests without a unifying focus. "Missions," it seems, has become any Christian volunteering to be sent anywhere in the world at any expense to do anything for any time period." Is this the reamateurization?

++Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of a new column called "Perspectives" being added to the Occasional Bulletin. This column will be written by EMS national and regional officers and/or leading missiologists on a burning missiological issue.++

### **Responses:**

Once again Ralph Winter has challenged us with a startling reality; the re-amateurization of mission. Winter's implicit challenge to make missiology available to the masses of zealous young people must be seriously undertaken by all of us. Yet in the midst of our response another concern emerges; discipline of the mind. A major issue in the rush of young people addicted to the instantaneous responses of MacWorld (and local churches tired of organizational red tape) is the continuing ethnocentrism which suggests that they actually have something to give! At some point in the discipleship of young Christians must be the introduction of a humble desire for knowing God and the world He loves with a disciplined mind. This is not a call to abandon the heart before rushing out to win the world. It is simply a concern that image is replacing substance in the modern world. It takes time to develop critical thinking and critical thinking to avoid re-amateurization.

Doug McConnell, Wheaton College

Ralph Winter has raised a critical issue in contemporary missions; the role of youth in carrying out the Great Commission. However, some of his assumptions and terminology are open to question. (1) Is it a fair assumption to call the 20,000 young people who went to the field between 1886 and 1936 amateurs? Most of them had as much or more preparation than the missionaries of the "Great Century." (2) Were the results of the Student Volunteer's ministry as negative as Ralph paints them? Some of the great names of missions come from the group of Student Volunteers, and in terms of results almost no century in history has produced the quantitative results of this century.

Winter's concerns are valid, but I would suggest that the issue is more one of commitment than of preparation. Short-termers make some valuable contributions to missions, but a missionary can not really be effective without learning the language and culture of a people. This requires a long-term commitment and ministry. Are we really talking about re-amateurization of missions or a lack of commitment to life-long service?

Harold R. Carpenter, Central Bible College