

An In-Service Training Idea for Church Planters

by Dave Broucek, Missionary Training & Research Coordinator The Evangelical Alliance Mission (Spring, 1998)

Missiologists are familiar with the concept of praxis as used by liberation theologians. Fewer missiologists know that "praxis" in an educational context refers to the action-reflection cycle. The cycle is an interactive and iterative learning process based on collaboration and dialogue.

A succinct description of this educational method may be found in John W. Willets, Mary E. Boyce, and Carol Ann Franklin's article, "Praxis as a new method in the academy," *Adult learning*, Vol. 6 July/August 1995): 10-11.

According to the article, the key activities of educational praxis are:

1. consciousness - being aware of one's experiences; observing whether or not others have these experiences; being influenced by others' experiences;

2. practice - performing one's skills with emphasis on increasing the skills;

3. reflection on practice - critically assessing the results of one's practice; making decisions about how to change one's practice in order to increase one's effectiveness; deciding what additional information one should seek.

To keep the cycle alive, these activities are followed by a renewal of one's work informed by new and expanded understanding.

Using the Method

For the last three years, the TEAM Training Office has invited church planters on home assignment to come to a six-day think tank based on this educational model. We call the event "What Will It Take?" indicating our hope that participants will discover what it will take to experience a breakthrough in the progress of their churches.

All participants prepare in two ways. They write a case study describing their church planting experience, and they read two books. The books are Jim Cymbala, 1997, *Fresh wind, 'fresh fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan) and Paul Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, 1995, *Incarnational ministry: Planting churches in band, tribal peasant. and urban societies* (Grand Rapids: Baker). The case studies include the following elements: how good people feel about the progress of their church; the model or strategy they are following; their specific activities in evangelizing, nurturing believers, equipping for service, and leading the church to reproduce; and a brief description of the social context and historical development of their church plant.

Every attempt is made to look at church planting, not from a narrow point of view, but from the multiple perspectives of biblical teaching, church growth studies, personal temperament, family issues, spiritual factors, and anthropological and sociological realities.

Participants listen carefully to each case, ask discerning questions, and suggest new ideas. The mission's training coordinator and area directors participate in the discussion by sharing insights, models, and principles based on their reading and their own church planting experience. Twenty short papers drawn from the literature on church planting are distributed throughout the weekend. We view and discuss videos as diverse as New Tribes Mission "Ee-taow" and Willow Creek's

"An Inside Look at a Seeker Service?" Church planting books, tapes, and videos from the mission's resource center are on display. Participants keep notes of insights gained and share them at the end in a session called "Transfer of learning."

How has it worked?

The first think tank in '96 was admittedly experimental, but participants were so enthusiastically positive that the event is now repeated on a yearly basis. Shortcomings have been identified and attempts have been made to try to correct them. For example, some missionaries presented their case studies as teachers--"here's what I've learned that will be helpful to you"--rather than as learners, and some found it hard to keep their case study concise. We've also discovered that without clear diagnostic tools the analysis tends to lose focus. We have reworded the case study instructions to encourage more succinct reporting, and we now start by discussing a sample church planting paradigm before we discuss the first case.

By the time we finish, all of us will have been enriched by the ideas and practices that participants have gleaned. Missionaries find themselves eager to go back to work. Some describe additional learning goals they hope to achieve while on home assignment and on the field. I am especially encouraged whenever missionaries describe these latter goals. They give me hope that the think tank not only surfaces new ideas but also challenges missionaries to make reflective learning - praxis - a lifelong activity.