

Do I have to go to Bible College?

It depends on a lot of factors. It depends on your age, experience, the length of time you're going for, and what you're planning on doing. For some people it may not be appropriate, for others it's vital.

Bible Colleges are, by and large, a tremendous resource. Many mission organisations insist on Bible College for most of their recruits, because for them it represents part of the recruiting process. Successful completion of a diploma or BA tells them that you have the capacity to raise your funding when you're not working, to apply yourself academically (which you're going to have to do if you need to learn a foreign language), have already inculcated some godly habits, know how to handle the Bible, and have probably studied missiology or cross-cultural issues. And a personal reference from a reputable college lecturer ticks a very big box on your application form.

But is that really all it's about? Apparently there's a real tangible benefit. Missions partners who've completed Bible College are 50% more likely to continue in long-term service than those who haven't. And those who've attended a college with a real missions focus, as opposed to the odd lecture on it, are a further 50% less likely to drop out than those who didn't. So it's not wasting two years of your life – it's making your ministry 75% more likely to last. That's a huge payback for the investment.

Nevertheless, it's a huge cost. That puts a lot of people off. It's funding that could be supporting them while you're abroad. Not to mention the extra cost of paying house rent while you're not working. And while your friends may be willing to support your overseas ministry, are they really going to pay for you to have a good time at college? They wouldn't pay for you to go and be a university student, would they? In fact, it's a good way to stretch your faith and trust God for your finances. It's a rehearsal. If you can't do it here, what makes you think you're going to be able to do it abroad?

It's also worth remembering that some courses can be done on a part-time basis, so that you can continue to work while you're studying, which may be hard, but does give you another option. Or studying in another country, where it might be cheaper. Many people study in the country they intend to serve, so that they have a head start with the language and with church connections. Or attend a college which may be subsidised by their denomination.

Some people, say those who have taken early retirement, or those who have already spent a lot of time in Christian ministry, might just as well get on with going. We need to be realistic about what you're going to get out of the experience. But even if you don't do a full BA or MA, it's worthwhile doing a course in the theology of missions, or learning about cross-cultural issues. That's work you're going to have to do anyway, and it's better to learn it from experts than to do it by trial and error in the field.

Finally, there are also courses which specifically prepare you for going, and involve an element of retreat, or discussion with experienced missions partners. And in the process, you learn a lot of practical things, get to meet some interesting people, and prepare yourself in a methodical way.

Syzygy recommends that everyone going abroad to serve should seriously consider Bible College in some form. On reflection, you may decide not to, but don't assume you don't need to.