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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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Learning First, Technology Second: Enhancing Missionary Training Through Technology

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Learning First, Technology Second: Enhancing Missionary Training through Technology

This article will present an example of how one missions organization, EFCA ReachGlobal, is utilizing technology in the preparation and on-going training of its missionary staff. A stated goal of ReachGlobal is to permit technology to serve but not define these training processes. Since this article is an exposition of a real-life example of the use of technology in the service of missions rather than a summation of research, references to supporting literature are kept to a minimum.

Background and Guiding Principles of Learning

EFCA ReachGlobal is the international missions arm of the Evangelical Free Church of America. Some identifying characteristics of ReachGlobal are its northern European background, a strong stance for the authority and centrality of Scripture, a firm commitment to evangelism and church planting, and a long history of involvement in what are now known as holistic ministries (e.g., hospitals and schools). It sent out its first missionary in 1887 and for many years drew its missionaries mainly from churches whose members were predominantly immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. In recent years both the EFCA and its missionaries have become more diverse. ReachGlobal currently has over four hundred missionary staff serving in more than thirty nations. A new generation of leaders has emerged over the past decade. The top leadership has issued a set of guiding principles for ReachGlobal which are aimed at pursuing and promoting best practices for cross-cultural ministry.

Mark Morgenstern, co-author of this article, is one of these newer leaders. Mark leads a team which does training for current missionary staff and preparation of missionary candidates. He came to this role not from an education background, but from field missionary service. He

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and his family lived and served in Russia and Ukraine for thirteen years, working mainly in the areas of leadership development and church planting. The team which Mark now leads, EFCA EQUIP, does include some members with training in education as well as some who have taught in formal academic settings.

One of the guiding principles of ReachGlobal is that it is a learning organization (Senge, 2006). EQUIP's main role is to serve as an advocate and catalyst within ReachGlobal to help it develop as a learning organization. EQUIP has written a position paper summarizing its understanding of what it means to be a learning organization. It is available at http://equip.efca.org/file.php/1/Towards_a_learning_organization.pdf

One of EQUIP's roles as a discrete department dedicated to better learning is to address the change in the makeup of new missionary candidates. In the past a typical candidate would be a seminary graduate in his late twenties or early thirties. Now many who join ReachGlobal have little or no formal theological and missiological education whatsoever. Some of these are younger individuals who are heading into holistic ministry work. They come into the mission with training and skills appropriate for such development work but without seminary. Others are second-career people who enter in with extensive lay ministry experience but again, they are rarely seminary graduates. Fewer of our field staff now seek ordination within the EFCA, a rigorous process that compels the ordinand to grapple with theological issues in some depth. In part this reflects a strategic decision to move ReachGlobal personnel away from assuming pastoral roles on the field. However, some pastors do come to serve as missionaries with ReachGlobal, sometimes with a decade or two of ministry experience. They do have seminary training, but very little, if any of that education was focused on cross-cultural issues.

Part of EQUIP's role is to help fill this educational gap by supplying abbreviated yet focused training for missions work. As the EQUIP team contemplated how to do this, they intentionally cast their net widely for more effective adult learning as expressed in several key principles: learning that is just in time, pragmatic, collaborative, active yet allowing for reflection, and led by facilitators.

Just in time learning is learning that is delivered as close as possible to when it is needed (Hall, 2001; Riel, 1998). This is in contrast to just in case learning, which at the time the student engages with the material, there is no real-life setting in which she or he can apply it. One example of how this principle has been implemented is in the pre-field training which EQUIP provides for our new candidates. In the past, candidate training took place once a year, soon after acceptance into the mission. It included orientation to policies and procedures of the organization, training in fundraising, and examination of issues arising from living and working cross-culturally. In 2006 a decision was taken to separate the orientation and fundraising training from the preparation for cross-cultural ministry and life. Now a separate department, ENGAGE, handles the orientation and the fundraising training as well as the extensive initial evaluation of potential candidates and coaching through the support raising process. Both the orientation to the organization and fundraising training are delivered soon after the candidate is accepted. In the case of orientation to policies and procedures, the training actually takes place within a day or two of acceptance. While providing orientation in a just-in-time manner, this design allows the pre-field training to focus entirely on how to live and minister in another culture. Furthermore, the pre-field training is offered twice a year. Only those candidates who will be deployed within the next six months are invited to this training which is consequently delivered much closer to the moment of use.

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Pragmatic learning is learning that, from the viewpoint of the learner, has fairly obvious application to real-life situations. This is not a dismissal of more theoretical learning, in fact, much of the learning which EQUIP provides draws deeply from theorists in ministry and missiology. Yet it is widely accepted that adults for the most part want learning which they can immediately perceive as valuable and useful.

Collaboration within the learning community is another principle which EQUIP seeks to apply to learning for ReachGlobal staff. This is expressed by the use of team-teaching where possible and learning in small groups and teams. A significant portion of time in the EQUIP pre-field training is given over to healthy team dynamics, part of which is learning to learn together as a team.

Active learning combined with opportunities for reflection is yet another principle which EQUIP applies. There are many ways this principle can be utilized. On the reflection side, one way is a time EQUIP has built in to the pre-field live training event when candidates are placed in small groups at the end of each day to reflect on what they have learned that day. On the active side, a way EQUIP applies this is to create exercises, projects and field trips which give the learner an opportunity to do something with the content just learned.

EQUIP strives to use facilitation more than lecture. This principle allows EQUIP to concretely express the value of respect for the adult learners. Nearly every candidate comes into ReachGlobal with some ministry experience. EQUIP builds on that by providing carefully selected relevant content on a given topic, followed by individual reflection and then by group interaction. This process is led by a facilitator who may or may not be an actual expert on the topic at hand. This guide from the side model allows the learners to actively participate in their

own learning and provides openings for peer-to-peer learning (Collison, Elbaum, Haaavind, & Tinker, 2000, pp. 7-12).

Using Technology Wisely

In order to move towards applying these principles of adult education in the context of preparing missionary candidates and providing ongoing training for missionary staff who are distributed across the world, EQUIP utilizes a variety of technology. In considering what pieces of technology to use and how to use them, EQUIP attempts to keep in mind that technology should serve rather than drive adult learning (Postman, 2005).

One example is how EQUIP uses the open-source software platform known as Moodle (Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment). Moodle was designed for institutions of formal education to offer online classes. The platform delivers to learners activities and forums in which the participant can interact in an asynchronous manner with instructors and fellow learners (see the Moodle site address in the reference list below). EQUIP has adapted this tool for use in missionary learning in three specific ways: online facilitated courses, CZones, and knowledge banks.

Online facilitated courses which EQUIP offers to ReachGlobal staff worldwide for their ongoing professional development are an application of Moodle which is most similar to how Moodle is used by most organizations, especially institutions of higher learning. The major difference between a university's application of Moodle and how EQUIP uses the platform lies in the fact that EQUIP's courses are much more abbreviated, and are graded on a pass/fail basis. Where a typical online course for a university might run for an entire semester and require one or two research papers and hundreds of pages of assigned reading, most EQUIP courses run for five weeks and are designed to be completed in four or five hours per week. Thus, many EQUIP

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courses can cover about the same amount of material as would be presented in a weekend seminar (See figure 1).

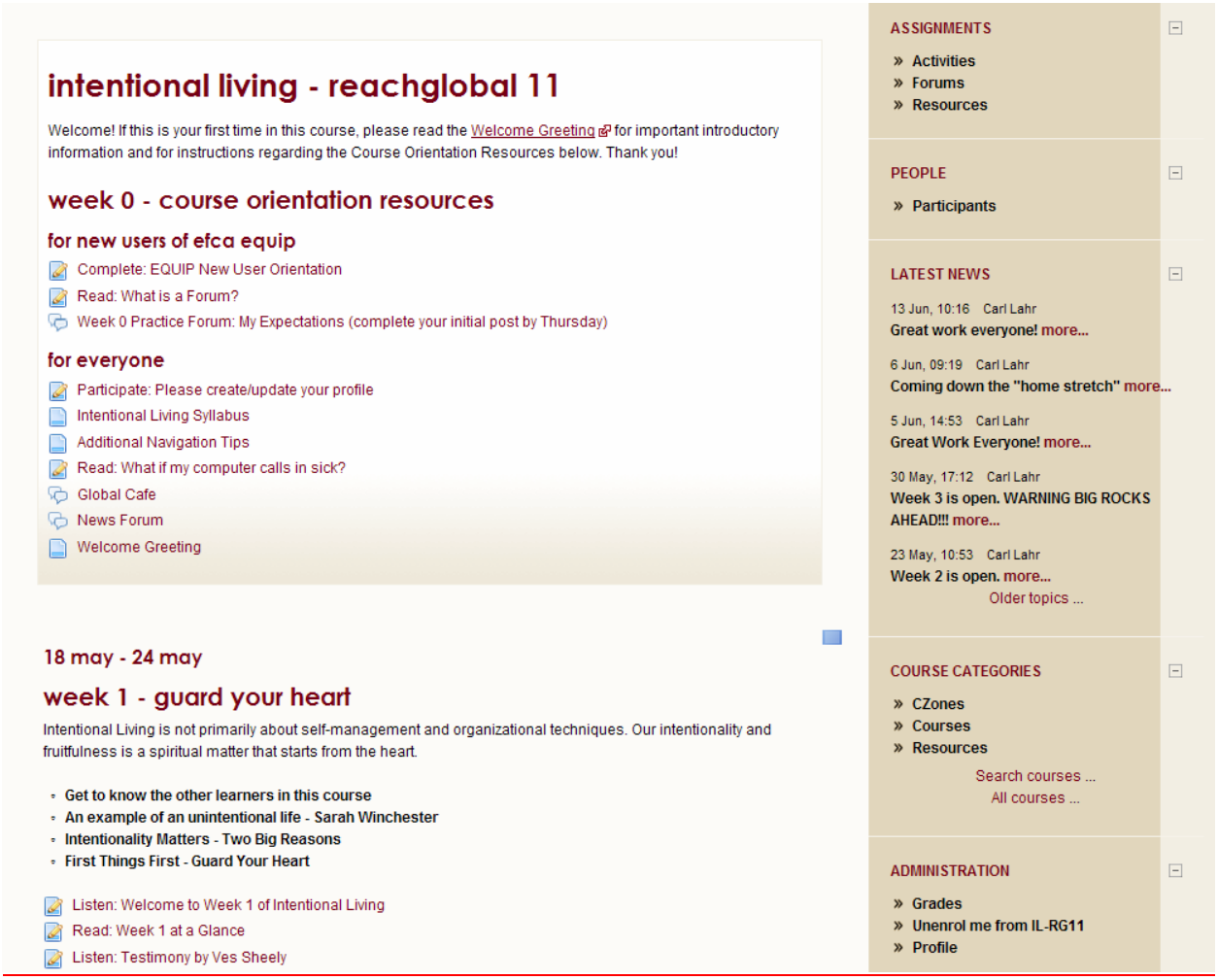

Figure 1: *Intentional Living Online Facilitated Collaborative course* is a 5 week learning module that teaches missionaries and those in ministry essential skills of self management and strategic planning from a Christian perspective by highlighting four themes: Guard Your Heart, Minister from Your Strengths, Figure out Your Big Rocks, and Connect the Compass to the Clock.

There are, of course, tradeoffs when employing online courses. The loss of the face-to-face interaction in a live seminar or classroom between the learners and the instructor and among

the learners themselves is the greatest of these. Yet a live classroom is limited in availability to those able to physically attend. Online platforms of learning can provide an experience similar in some respects to a classroom for individuals who are widely scattered physically and who may never have the opportunity to meet together. Such online courses also have the advantage of delivering learning to participants in the context of real life. In other words, learners do not need to depart from their normal everyday context. Since these courses are spread out over four or five weeks, there is opportunity to assign projects or activities, such as an interview, an observation exercise or conducting a presentation. The participants then complete these assignments in the course of their ongoing ministry.

Built in to the design of EQUIP courses is a distinction between the course creator and the course facilitator. Course content, in the form of written text, video and audio files, quizzes, forums, graphics, links to outside resources and other types of material, is judiciously chosen or created specifically for the course by the course creator who has some expertise on the topic. Sometimes two or more experts work together on designing a course. EQUIP pairs the course creator(s) with an instructional design consultant who monitors how the content will work in an online, adult-learning environment. EQUIP designs courses so that they are not dependent upon the constant presence of a subject matter expert. In other words, the content is adapted or created to stand on its own within the context of the course. Of course EQUIP readily acknowledges that its courses in no way approach the depth of a live course taught by a professor. On the other hand, by utilizing technology as it does, EQUIP is able to bring an introductory level of learning to people who would not typically find themselves sitting in a university or seminary classroom.

Once a course has gone through its initial user testing, the course creator(s) need not continue to facilitate the course. And so, many of EQUIP's facilitators need not be experts on

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the topic of the course. This frees EQUIP from being limited in its facilitator cadre to only those who are subject matter experts. The role of the facilitator becomes more like that of a teaching assistant in a small class or lab rather than that of the professor lecturing to dozens or hundreds of students. The facilitator will have learned the concepts and skills from previously having taken the course and by having begun to put the course material into practice in her or his own life and ministry. However, facilitators for EQUIP courses need not and often do not have the deep expertise of a professor. Furthermore, EQUIP actively seeks to recruit facilitators from both within and outside of ReachGlobal. This expands the pool of potential facilitators even further.

Many of EQUIP's online courses are made available to those outside of EFCA ReachGlobal. Mark recently facilitated a session of *Introduction to teaching online*, a course designed to train new course creators. Among the learners enrolled were members of four different mission agencies (See figure 2). Missionaries from several agencies have taken a course created and facilitated by Ernest Manges, *Ministering in a Roman Catholic context*. A number of EQUIP's courses have similar enrollment histories.

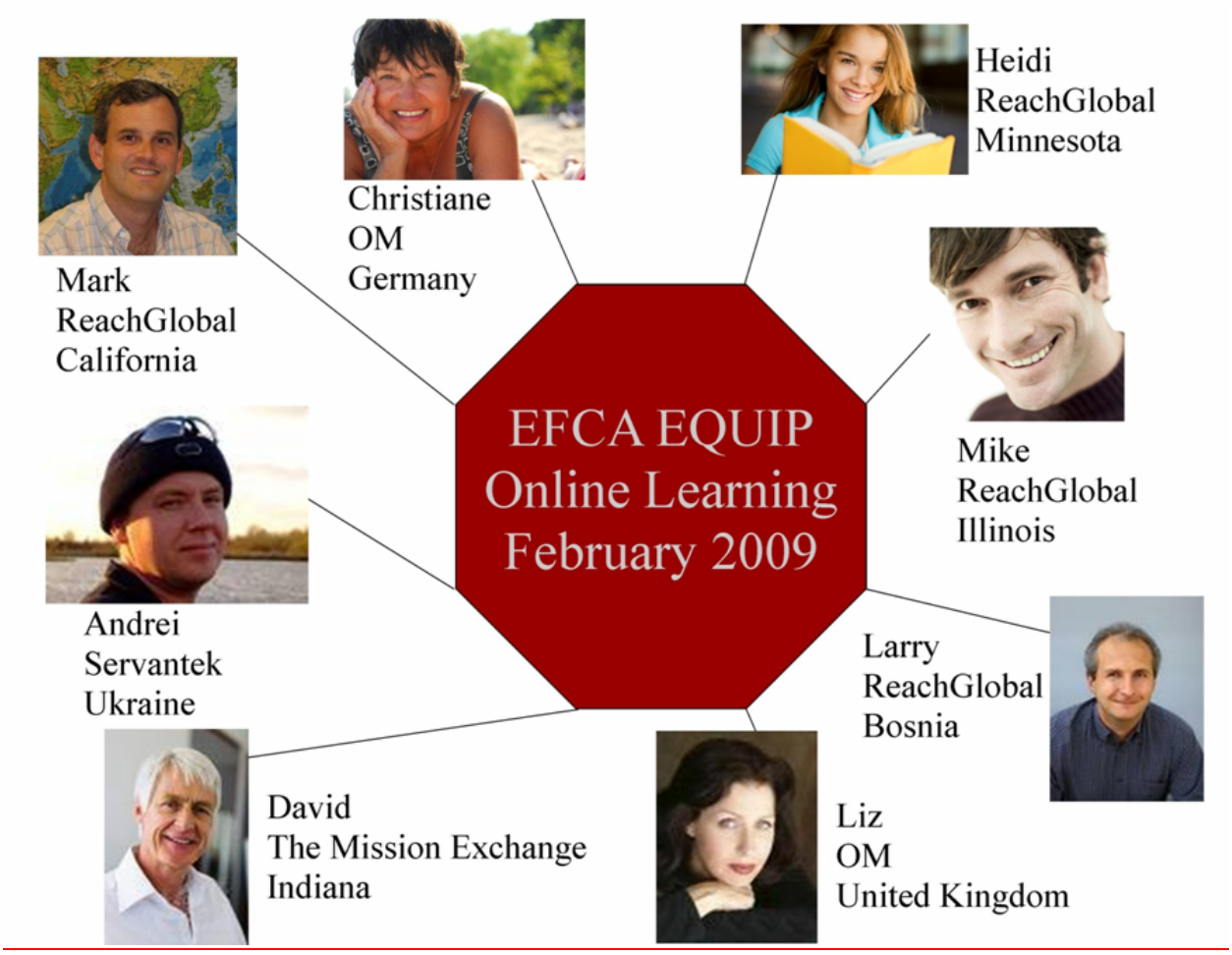

Figure 2: This graphic representation of participants in a recent session of the *Introduction to Teaching Online* course illustrates how online learning forms a learning community which brings together people from diverse backgrounds, different agencies and widely-separated locations. Note: these photos do not depict the real participants.

The second way EQUIP has adapted Moodle to fit its needs in a way congruent with its stated values of adult learning is a tool called collaboration zones, or CZones for short. This may well be an innovation in the use of Moodle among missions organizations. There are at least two different kinds of CZones. The first is an online space for members of a team or task force to share information such as documents, schedules and conversations. The second use of CZones is

to facilitate the interchange and communication within communities of practice (Coakes & Clarke, 2006). In a missions context this is especially useful in bringing together missionary staff who have similar assignments but who are separated geographically. EQUIP views the facilitation of communities of practice as an important learning function. This affirms EQUIP's belief that significant learning can take place in formal, informal and nonformal contexts.

It is not only missionaries who use EQUIP's CZones. The *Congo consortium CZone* was constructed for EFCA churches across the USA who are actively partnering with ReachGlobal's work in Congo (See figure 3). These churches use this online space to share prayer requests, photos, schedules of short-term teams, and many other types of information. There are times when representatives from these churches meet face-to-face, but the CZone allows them to raise the level of their collaboration, resulting in an enrichment of learning from one another how to better support and partner with the Congo-based ministries.

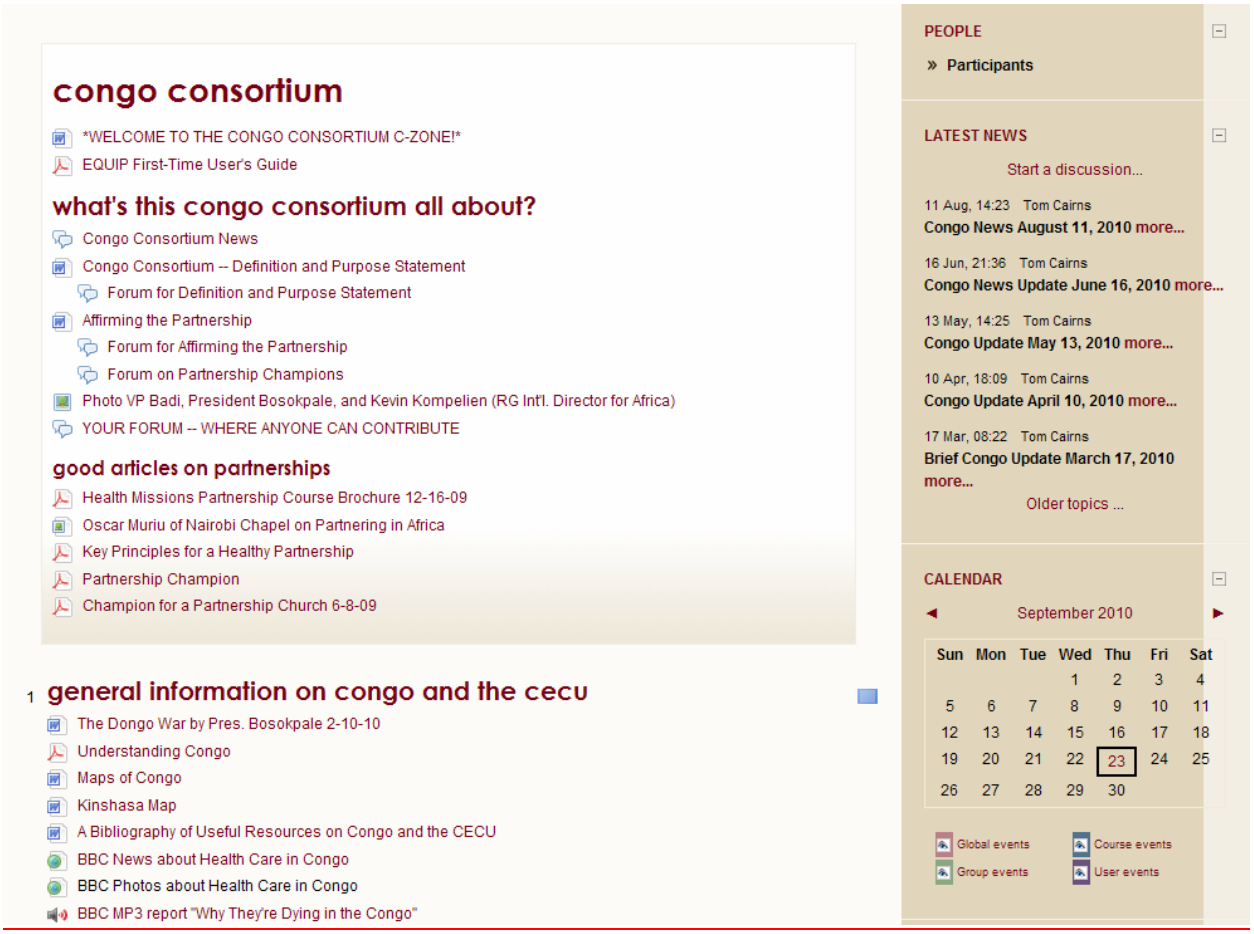

Figure 3: The *Congo Consortium Online Czone* is a place for churches and individuals involved in partnering ministries in Congo to connect with each other for mutual learning, encouragement and resource sharing.

EQUIP's third adaptation of the Moodle platform is in the creation of several knowledge banks. These are repositories of documents, links, audio and video files and other resources. This provides just-in-time learning for a missionary who is faced with a sudden need for information on a given topic such as coping with culture shock, addressing conflict on a team or choosing the best education option for a child. Many of these knowledge banks were created by ReachGlobal's member care department, ENHANCE. Two examples created by ENHANCE are

the *Healthy Team Toolbox* (See figure 4) which is a collection of resources for teams and the *Family Life Resources* section which brings together useful material on living as a family in a cross-cultural context. Another department is assembling resources on church planting.

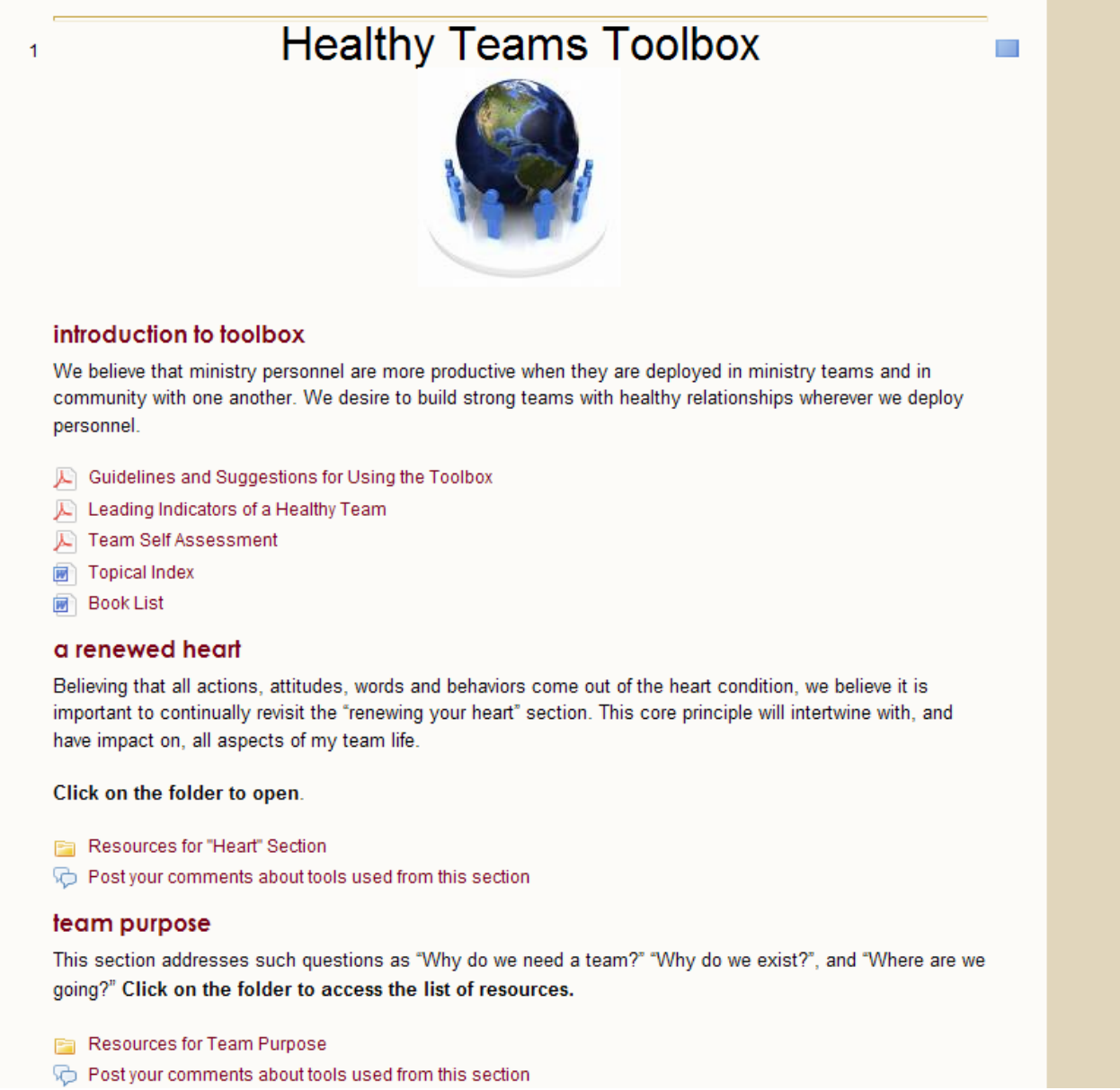

Figure 4: The *ReachGlobal Healthy Teams Toolbox* online knowledge bank is one example of EFCA EQUIP using Moodle as a platform for promotion of non-formal just in time learning.

These knowledge banks are created by staff with some expertise in the given topic who either compose or collect resources which they have vetted. This provides ReachGlobal missionaries with a trusted place to go for learning rather than depending upon the results of their own internet searches. In addition, some of these knowledge banks allow for missionary staff to interact in forums with their peers they encounter in the bank or with the knowledge matter expert who assembled the collection. In this way EQUIP serves as a knowledge broker, bringing together those who need to know with those who do know (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, pp. 25-30).

Blended Learning

The use of technology has also opened up another approach for EQUIP to serve its adult learners in blending online and live learning. This method combines distance and face-to-face learning and is known as "blended learning" (Graham, 2005). One example of this is the pre-field training which EQUIP operates for all ReachGlobal missionary candidates who will be serving for more than a year. Accepted candidates who will be departing for their ministry assignments in the next five or six months are enrolled in a series of online courses followed by an eight-day live training event. This entire process is known as *Prefield Training*, or PT for short. It is divided into *PT Online*, which consists of four sequential online courses, each requiring between twelve and sixteen hours of work from the candidate. These four online modules are usually taken over a four to six-month period. Upon completion of these four courses and when the candidate is close to departure for the field she or he is then invited to the next *PT Live*. One significant criterion for admittance into *PT Live* is that the candidate has raised most of the financial support required for the ministry assignment. The intention is that the candidate will take *PT Live* as close as possible to departure for the field.

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PT addresses topics deemed essential for successful life and ministry in another culture. Among the topics are segments on spiritual warfare, healthy team dynamics, effective communications, addressing poverty, the balance between compassion and proclamation ministries, evangelism, being coached, crisis management, discipleship, introductory missiology, and culture shock. Each topic is covered both in the online and live sessions. In the online courses a typical assignment might be to watch a video on culture shock coping methods or reading a chapter from a book like Paul Hiebert's *Transforming Worldviews*. Nearly every online assignment contains an interactive element, usually accomplished by posting to a forum and responding to posts by one's fellow learners.

The facilitators for these topics are selected not just from within EQUIP but also from other departments in ReachGlobal, such as our member care department, ENHANCE. PT has also engaged facilitators from other agencies and is seeking to expand these partnerships. The facilitator for the online segments on a given topic will then also lead the face-to-face session at *PT Live*. Because much of the content was delivered online, the live sessions are freed up to be very interactive. The live sessions focus more on application of the material and less on introduction of new content. A number of the live sessions are team-taught, thus modeling the principle of collaborative learning.

This PT cycle runs twice a year, culminating in two annual *PT Live* sessions (April and October) in the Minneapolis area, near the ReachGlobal National Office. The first *PT Live* was held in April 2008. Six cohorts of missionary candidates totaling eighty-seven adults have completed PT and are now serving in twenty-three nations. Children above the age of four are required to attend *PT Live*. This is due to EQUIP's belief that the success and longevity of missionary families serving on the field is directly related to an adequate preparation of all

members of the family. While at this point EQUIP does not provide concomitant online segments for these children, there are tracks at *PT Live* for both elementary and teen-aged children. Thirty-six children have participated in *PT Live*.

This blended approach to the preparation of missionary candidates was created because EQUIP felt the previous model was not as effective as desired. Before PT the method used was an annual two or three week intensive training course which some have likened to drinking from a fire hose. Almost all of the time was devoted to delivery of new content, much of it in the lecture format. Since this candidate training was only offered once a year, and usually candidates took it soon after they were accepted, it was not unusual for a missionary to arrive on the field a year or more after candidate school, by which time most of the content had slipped away from active memory.

Another setting where EQUIP employs blended learning is for our divisional conferences, which usually take place once every two years. These conferences bring together all ReachGlobal staff serving in a specific area of the world. There are five such conferences: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East/North Africa. EQUIP serves those who lead seminars and workshops at these conferences by helping them construct advance assignments which often are placed onto the Moodle platform. Each staff member who signs up for that conference session is then able to take in readings and other content beforehand, thus allowing for the live session at the conference to become more interactive and application-oriented. By using EQUIP's online services a learner can also post to a forum issues or questions that he or she wishes to see addressed by the instructor. The instructor can then refine and adapt to meet the pressing felt learning needs of the participants. Some learning communities have formed out of those who have attended the same conference workshop and

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who continue to post in forums afterwards or who elect to create a CZone to further discussion beyond the confines of a conference.

Conclusion

"We resource for maximum ministry" and "we empower personnel" are two of the guiding principles of EFCA ReachGlobal. EQUIP has helped the organization towards realizing these in part by a judicious use of technology used in the service of better adult learning. By taking a widely used software platform, Moodle, and adapting it to fit the specific learning requirements of ReachGlobal, EQUIP is taking available technology and making it serve the needs of the larger organization. The key criterion for EQUIP in using any technology is whether it will serve to produce better learning.

Another stated value of ReachGlobal is "we are a learning organization." This along with other values such as "we are partnership driven," and "we practice entrepreneurial thinking" encourages EQUIP to look beyond its own team for best practices and best content to use in training missionary staff. One application of these principles is a firm conviction in EQUIP that it does not have all the answers and it actively seeks cooperation and partnership with others involved in the missionary task. EQUIP is extending a wide invitation to missions agencies, churches and other ministries to come and work together with them for the glory of God.

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