

Theological Education by Extension Network

Building the Kingdom Building the People

TEEnet OCCASIONAL PAPERS No. 1 (May 2025)

We are pleased to publish in our Occasional Papers series an essay that Sammy Davies wrote in 2010. The paper was originally submitted as part of an LTh (Licence in Theology) course at Union School of Theology in Wales/UK. Union School of Theology offers multiple flexible study pathways, so Sammy was able to study while at the same time being fully involved in church ministry. He first came across TEE as a “concept” in one of the study modules. TEE’s learning approach resonated with him due to his own ongoing ministry in rural Wales and the lack of access to theological training there. Sammy’s life experience of theological study while at the same time being involved in ministry in his home church is what sets his reflection apart from others who study full-time residentially after leaving ministry and homes to recollect to study. This experience taught him that studying and applying of learning should best go hand-in-hand.

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TEE (Theological Education by Extension)

Sammy Davies

Outline and evaluate Theological Education by Extension as an appropriate model of training for church leaders in the Global South.

The Problem

Throughout the world there is a desperate need for the Church to be fulfilling the *Great Commission* of Matthew 28:19. The preaching and teaching of the Gospel, which supposes the establishing of churches and training of new leaders, requires theology to be passed on to successive generations.¹ Theological Education by Extension has arisen out of the need for a suitable form of theologically educating men and women for ministry outside of traditional western cultures.

Historically the West has relied almost entirely on the seminary style approach of training for ministry. That is a three year, university level, residential training programme where potential pastors are removed from

¹ Sam Westman Burton, *Disciple Mentoring: Theological Education by Extension* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2000), xiii-xiv.

their church and community contexts and educated through intensive lectures and seminars in the school. Chief on the agenda of this style of educating is realizing an academically high level of knowledge and preserving an already 'complete' theology.

With the increased mission activity of the nineteenth century and the rapid expansion of the church in the global south during the twentieth century, it quickly became clear that simply transposing this popularised method of training future church leaders would not work for a number of reasons. Conn notes that as early as 1938 in the Tambaram meeting of the International Missionary Council, theological education was viewed as the weak link in the chain of Christian mission.²

As time and thought were invested in exploring the issues surrounding theological education in new contexts, several problem areas were quickly identified.

Firstly, it was noted that the traditional, residential method was seemingly incapable of producing enough leaders, swiftly enough, to cope with the rapid growth that was happening in the church. The foremost example of this came from the Presbyterian movement in Guatemala. The results of a survey of its highly regarded seminary revealed that in the previous twenty five years of the institution, a mere ten men were trained and actively serving in the denomination, and this all in the context of two hundred growing churches.³

Secondly, the western approach often left churches without sufficient suitable leaders. During the three years or so that identified leaders were being taught in seminary the key individuals in the church were not present. The result of which was a severely stunted church, devoid of any real leadership. Instead those who had been overlooked for theological education were forced into positions of leadership they were not trained or gifted for.

Thirdly, the high level of academia achieved at the seminaries was causing a significant proportion of potential pastors to be tempted away from the ministry by high paying secular jobs. Such temptations made choosing to return to their poorer, often rural communities, almost impossible in comparison to getting a well paid job in the city or with big companies.⁴

Fourthly, it was discovered to be a very expensive way of training church leaders and pastors due to the financial requirements associated with the maintenance of large facilities and numerous teachers. Additionally, the cost per student was increased as the students were unable to support themselves by working during their studies as the time commitment precluded this.

Fifthly, the seminaries were accused of imposing western modes of thinking and expressing theology on different cultures rather than allowing theology to be expressed in a culturally appropriate way. The consequence of which was a church which was unable to appropriately apply the theology they were being taught to the problems and issues that they faced.

Sixthly, the residential nature and qualification gaining aspect made the pastorate a professional position in the eyes of the churches and communities, going against the biblical notion of the priesthood of all believers. There was an elitism caused by residential style training.

² Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word & Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984), 263.

³ Justice C. Anderson, "Theological Education by Extension," *EDWM* 944.

⁴ George Patterson, "The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches," *Perspectives* 633.

While this list is not exhaustive, it does illustrate that something was needed to be done. In 1963, through the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala, the Theological Education by Extension movement was proposed as a suitable solution.⁵

If Theological Education by Extension is to be viewed as appropriate for these non-western cultures found in the global south, it would need to be suited to the poorer cultures it would be used in.

What is Theological Education by Extension?

Theological Education by Extension seeks to educate the potential church leaders while they go about their ministry rather than removing them from their communities and hoping that they'd go back. In other words the entire ethos is training people *in* the ministry rather than training people *for* the ministry.

Conn describes the movement as, "challenging the traditional method in several areas – the nature of the ministry, the nature of the mission, and the nature of the church."⁶

Instead of students coming to where the knowledge, expertise and training are (i.e. confined to a seminary campus) the knowledge and training are taken to where the people are. Instead of requiring attendance at lectures 5 days a week there is set work to be done over a prescribed period of time which the student can complete in their own home and discuss in a weekly, fortnightly, or monthly seminar with travelling tutors and fellow students.

The learning which takes place has three key factors, i) self study materials so that students can study in their own homes rather than having to attend a specific centre or institution, ii) ongoing experience in their own communities/congregations and iii) regular meetings with tutors and fellow students to promote fellowship and appropriate learning.⁷

The 'extension' in the education can be thought of in several key areas. Primarily it is a geographical extension, where the education is brought to the student. Secondly the extension can be said to take place chronologically. Dead lines, length of modules etc. are constructed *after* consultation with the student. Culturally the education is 'extended' as materials are presented with language, customs and ways of thinking of the student in mind. Finally the education is extended academically as the level at which the student learns is not predetermined but appropriate to the student.⁸

An often employed illustration for Theological Education by Extension is the four-part railway model. The model includes the three key factors suggested by Kinsler with one important addition to describe the ideal extension education scenario.

⁵ Douglas. L Rutt, "Some Caveats for Theological Education by Extension," n.p. [cited April 2010]. Online: <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/ruttsomecaveatsfortheologicaleducation.pdf>.

⁶ Conn, *Eternal Word*, 266-267.

⁷ Ross F. Kinsler, *The Extension Movement in Theological Education: A Call to the Renewal of the Ministry* (revised; Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 34-35.

⁸ Anderson, "TEE," 944.

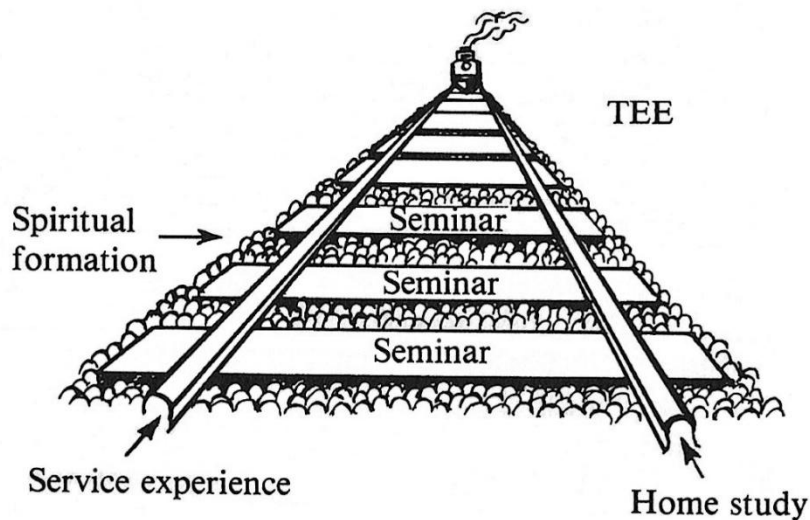


Figure 1 – Railway Model⁹

The railway model has 4 essential features, mirroring Theological Education by Extension. The two rails represent the two learning inputs, 1) the right hand rail is the information being learnt through studying and working through their prescribed reading etc. and 2) the left hand rail is experience they are gaining from being practically involved in ministry situations. 3) The railway sleepers are the seminar times which are used for the two rails to interact. The idea is that these two rails are constantly informing one another. That is either the practical experience informing the formal learning or the formal learning informing their practical ministry. 4) The fourth and final piece of the picture is the ground in which the track is laid, in Theological Education by Extension this is the spiritual formation and growth of the student. This final element is considered a vital component of Theological Education by Extension as a student who is not growing spiritually will be unsuitable to lead a church.

Advocates of Theological Education by Extension claim that its form is more like the educational model that Jesus used during his ministry than the typically western seminary approach. In *Discipline Mentoring* Sam Burton identifies six ways in which Jesus taught his disciples which he clearly feels are mirrored in Theological Education by Extension. i) Teaching by example, that is practicing what he preached. ii) Teaching in real life situations, that is using the circumstances they found themselves in as tools for educating. iii) Teaching from the known about the unknown, that is understanding at what level the disciples were already at and building upon that foundation. iv) Teaching in a highly personalised way, that is teaching the lessons which are specific to the needs of the people. v) Teaching by constant assessment, that is always ensuring that the disciples had understood what was being taught. vi) Teaching by delegating important tasks, that is allowing a degree of responsibility.¹⁰

Additionally Burton summarises Paul's example as theology taught as a means rather than an end. Theological Education by Extension is an attempt to encapsulate this philosophy as the goal of qualifications is replaced with actual discipleship.

⁹ Ross F. Kinsler, ed., *Ministry by the People: Theological Education by Extension* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983.), 106.

¹⁰ Burton, *Disciple Mentoring*, 2-3.

How it addresses the problems

Theological Education by Extension addresses each of the issues initially raised against the traditionally western system being used in a global southern context in the following ways:

Firstly, it provides a means for a higher number of leaders to be trained at any one time. As Theological Education by Extension requires less time with tutors, each tutor can then have more students. It also allows for people who were not in a position to pursue the formal education of seminary to begin learning. Where as in the past only a small percentage of potential leaders were in a position to be trained, this percentage is increased by Theological Education by Extension.

The literature supporting Theological Education by Extension is rife with statistics and examples evidencing this, however no better example can be found than in the original context of the Presbyterians in Guatemala as they saw the number of their enrolled students increase from six to fifty.¹¹ Or a further example, given by Lester Hirst in the Argentinean context, where Theological Education by Extension, having been initiated in 1983 with forty students, has now grown to include twenty five churches. By mid 1986, more than five hundred students were enrolled, taught by forty eight tutors.¹²

Secondly, the extension method ensures that the students can remain in their communities and churches while they train. This means that churches, having identified a leader, are not required to spend three years or more without one. Instead the church and community continues to receive the benefits of the leaders remaining a part of the church or community. Additionally the training can be applied as and when it is learnt, rather than lying dormant in the student for three years.

Thirdly, it keeps the student grounded and content in their community. The often appealing opportunities that may materialise for seminary graduates are not able to tempt the student away from their church or community once the training is completed. Thus a higher percentage of persons who are trained actually end up going into the ministry rather than simply taking the education and fleeing to affluence.

Fourthly, as this system needs less staff and fewer buildings, it is cheaper to provide. This means that the local churches are less dependant on the financial input of missionary organisations which is so often the source of finance for seminary style institutions in the global south. Additionally as the student can continue working in their community they themselves need less of a subsidy to conduct their studies.

Fifthly, and possibly most importantly, as the theological knowledge gained is instantly applied to the context the student is in, it minimises the transfer of unnecessary western baggage often associated with residential training. Instead of understanding westernised doctrines, presented in a westernised way, students can understand the purer, more Biblical basics and discern what it means in their culture. In this way Theological Education by Extension aids communities in the global south to have self theologizing cultures.¹³

Sixthly, as the student continues to work during the training it has helped abolish a professional view of the clergy which has in turn aided the churches in the global south to develop a healthier understanding of ministry and the priesthood of all believers.¹⁴

¹¹ Anderson, "TEE," 944.

¹² Lester Hirst, "Making TEE Serve the Needs of the Churches," *EMQ* 22:4 (Oct 1986): 420-424.

¹³ Jim Lo, "Seven Ingredients of Successful TEE Programs," *EMQ* 38:3 (July 2002): 338-341.

¹⁴ Rutt, "Caveats," n.p.

Furthermore Theological Education by Extension benefits churches because it can be structured and implemented to reach more of its leaders than just the pastor. Other positions in church leadership which previously may have been thought unnecessary to receive full seminary training are now able to receive a highly tailored training programme.¹⁵

Moreover it is the ambition of Theological Education by Extension to produce leaders who not only learn, but teach. The expectation permeates all levels of the teaching that the knowledge and experience gained should be handed on. As students are being disciplined they are also discipling.¹⁶

As stated previously, stories of the movement's success are rife.¹⁷ It is to be expected that in any publication which advocates the system the reader will discover tens of examples which 'prove' the effectiveness of Theological Education by Extension. Such a rose tinted view is inevitable. None the less problems persist and issues must be addressed if the world at large is to recognize Theological Education by Extension as a viable partner to residential training. Questions are not just being asked by detractors of the methodology, but its proponents and founders.¹⁸

Outstanding Issues

Firstly, there is the issue of low commitment. As initiating theological training has been made so much easier, a 'give it a go' attitude it also makes it easier to give up. Less required commitment to undertake the study results in the students exhibiting lower levels of commitment to the actual learning.

Secondly, it ideally requires tutors from the culture that is being reached. This presents problems for countries and regions that do not have sufficiently qualified or knowledgeable men or women. In place of native tutors, often missionaries fulfil this role and perpetuate the western bias that Theological Education by Extension is said to circumvent.¹⁹

Thirdly, the learning environment means that it is easier for students to miss work that they would otherwise have been required to complete in the more formal setting of a seminary. This means that the training can be severally protracted.²⁰

Fourthly, while the lack of qualification can be seen in a positive light it can also be seen as a severe drawback. As Theological Education by Extension is often considered as inferior to the seminary/degree qualification, it is looked down upon when a comparison is made.

Fifthly, students can feel isolated in their studies. Unlike the seminary where students are in community, often large distances separate students from other students and tutors.²¹

¹⁵ Hirst, "Serve the Needs," 420-424.

¹⁶ Hirst, "Serve the Needs," 420-424.

¹⁷ For example see Kinsler, *Ministry by the People*, Kinsler, *The Extension Movement in Theological Education*, Burton, *Disciple Mentoring*.

¹⁸ Kinsler, *The Extension Movement in Theological Education*, 207-212.

¹⁹ William J. Kornfield, "The Challenge to Make Extension Education Culturally Relevant," *EMQ* 12:1 (Jan 1976): 13-22.

²⁰ Kornfield, "Culturally Relevant," 13-22.

²¹ Kornfield, "Culturally Relevant," 13-22.

Sixthly, and related to the last, is the travelling costs for the tutors, a cost that isn't incurred in the residential seminary establishments. This cost must still be met by someone could leave Theological Education by Extension programs as dependent on foreign money as the seminary.

Seventhly, the Church has been entrusted with the task of faithfully handing on the Gospel to successive generations. This is something seminary does well because it teaches the whole gamut of the Scriptures. But the ad-hoc nature of Theological Education by Extension is vulnerable to certain areas being missed or error creeping in.²² Furthermore, allowing Pastors and such to serve at a lower level of theological capability could be seen as a downgrading of the importance of right doctrine.

Finally, as the education can be varied to a large degree, it must be made certain that the foundation of spiritual development is not neglected. This is a major issue for all methods of theological education, but is particularly poignant for Theological Education by Extension as students are left to their own devices. While necessary skills can be taught, spiritual maturity also needs to be nurtured.²³

Conclusion

It is hardly surprising to find that a system of education, born out of a perceived need, would for the most part meet that need. So it is with Theological Education by Extension that many, if not all, of the issues related with seminary education are addressed. As a result Theological Education by Extension should only be viewed as a positive step in training church leaders in the global south.

Whether or not Theological Education by Extension is the final word in the development of suitable education in the global south is another matter. Several issues still remain, however none of these are as vital as those which prompted TEE's existence in the first instance. The adaptability of Theological Education by Extension makes it an ideal candidate for addressing these new issues in ways which the more rigid seminary scenario could not.

Ultimately the education provided, regardless of method, is only as good as the people providing and taking part in it want it to be. Unless the right teachers are teaching the right pupils the result will be failure. Likewise if the right teachers are teaching the right pupils, even the wrong method will bear some fruit. Theological Education by Extension should not be considered a substitute for traditional, residential training but, rather aptly, as an extension of it, an extension which takes theological training to people and places that would otherwise remain unreached. Traditional seminary will remain in some contexts as the best option for training church leaders while in others, this role of producing and nurturing leaders in churches will no doubt be best met by an extension model.²⁴

²² Rutt, "Caveats," n.p.

²³ Rutt, "Caveats," n.p.

²⁴ Anderson, "TEE," 382.

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