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We are pleased to publish a second essay by Dr Volker Glissmann exploring the role of community in Theological Education by Extension (TEE). Dr Glissmann is currently Executive Director of TEEM in Malawi. This essay was written to meet requirements of the MA in Theological Education programme (LST).

The role of community in Theological Education by Extension (TEE)

1. Introduction

Throughout the formative years (1962-1967) TEE was continually modified and adjusted by its 'founding fathers' Ross Kinsler, James Emery and Ralph Winter until TEE was refined and matched the actual training needs of the Guatemalan church.[1] It is this originally developed TEE which lies at the heart of this inquiry.

In this essay we will, first of all, look at the origin of TEE as community-based form of grassroots theological training. This will be followed by investigating the role of community within the TEE Group Meeting. Finally, we will look at Robert Schreitner's idea of 'community as a theologian' and how his theology might inform the practice of TEE.

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[1] See Peter Wager, Foreword, p. 9 in Gerber 'Discipling'. For more information on the birth and history of the TEE, see Kinsler, 'Theological Education', p. 1-29 ;Mulholland, 'Presbyterian', p. 33-41; 'Equipping All' p. 26-28, or Harrison, 'Forty Years' p. 315-328.

2. The Origin of TEE as a community-based form of grassroots theological training

TEE was founded as a community-based form of grassroots theological training. TEE was initiated as a respond to the challenges that the traditional theological education in the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala in 1963 could not comprehensively and satisfactorily address, namely, phenomenal church growth which resulted in the need to train many more leaders; the lack of funds for training these additional leaders in the residential seminary, the challenge of uprooting rural church leaders to attend the seminary in the towns and the subsequent failure of these previous rural leaders to return to the impoverished countryside after experiencing the comfort of city life; limited choice for selecting leaders for training as many of the mature and experienced leaders lived as subsistence farmers who were needed to support their families and/or simply did not have the school qualification to attend the seminary; the recognition that God called leaders for further training despite their above descript inability to attend the seminary. This is the context in which TEE was developed. TEE moved theological training back to the grassroots community and used it as the training's platform for ministerial training in rural Guatemala.

TEE, as a (new) developing method of theological training was required to base its approach on well-established theological as well as educational methods in order to be credible. TEE is a form of de-centralised theological training that utilises the grassroots church community in order to train leaders for the ministry of the church. TEE is not simply a form of distance learning whereby students receive a packet of learning material and study by themselves. TEE is conceptualised around the central idea that students meet face-to-face in a learning community. Educationally TEE has three elements: 'self study' (cognitive input and an emphasis on reflection); 'field experience' (action) and a 'TEE group meeting' (in which students reflect both on their cognitive learning as well as their experience in the field).[2] In TEE, as well as in Distance Education, the workbook is the teacher. TEE is used in diverse

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[2] These three elements are the key and classical ingredients for TEE. However, within the literature there are variations in the order; 'field experience' is sometimes listed as the second element while at other times as the final element. The naming of the individual elements differs from author to author though in their essences they are conceptionally alike. Nevertheless, the slightly different emphasis in the naming can lead to rather significant differences in the application of a concept. The classical analogy for TEE is the rail-fence (two parallel horizontal lines held together by a vertical pole, see Kinsler, 'Diversified,' p. 27). The vertical pole is traditionally seen as the central pole that holds the whole together. That pole is the TEE Group Meeting, see Kinsler, 'Diversified,' p. 27 and Snook, Developing,' p. 7. An initial reading seems to suggest that self-study and praxis are taken place parallel to each other while in the analogy of the three-legged African pot (see Sales, 'Tripping' p. 117) as well as in written descriptions of TEE the impression is given that the elements follow in a chronological order. In the written description the problem arises due to a bullet point orders and a lack of clarification that the order might be different than it appears through the formatting. Problems in the definition, order and use of the key TEE elements can be seen in the work of Mabuluki. He defines TEE classically with the three elements

academic situations from basic lay training to Master Degrees and so, Kinsler, reminds that beside the three core elements the balance and combination of the individual components are essential in order to serve the situational training need.[3] The vision is that the three elements will be part of an ongoing theological conversation and inform as well as challenge the other two elements. TEE is fundamentally a praxis oriented program which is build upon a reflection-action-reflection pattern.[4] A student initially studies by him/herself (self-study) while at the same time being involved in church/community service (field experience). This is followed by a weekly (which is the ideal period) discussion seminar with a group of fellow students under the guidance of a trained facilitator. The reflections by the individual students are then brought to, challenged, discussed and redefined within the meeting. Out of these three elements an upward spiral of learning should develop.

Over the first years of growth of TEE as a method of theological training further conceptualisation as well as an educational fine-tuning were used in order to develop a comprehensive tool of theological training - TEE. TEE could best be described as blended learning as distance education (Open and Distance Learning (ODL) workbooks) is blended with practise as well as a face-to-face reflective group meeting. Students are expected to be involved in church ministry while at the same time being enrolled as a TEE student. TEE has the potential to conceptually bridge the ministry-application gap as students were learning and immediately applying it to a concrete ministry situation and then reflecting about their practise at the weekly face-to-face TEE Group meeting.[5]

(though the issue of order and co-relation remains) in Mabuluki, 'Diversified' p. 251. Yet the same author highlights a four component definition which also includes Spiritual Formation as the foundation of all the three other components, see Mabuluki, Theological Education for all God's people, p. 833-834. It would be interesting to compare TEE to the three-fold model of theological education (academic, ministry training and spiritual formation). Snook makes the point that spiritual formation is part of the internal factors of TEE, but he is one of the very few that made such a point, see Snook, 'Developing Leaders', p. 8.

[3] Kinsler, 'Diversified', p. 27.

[4] Snook, 'Developing Leaders', p. 7.

[5] Ross Kinsler, who served for thirteen years on the faculty of the Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala, describes it as follows, 'In Guatemala, since our students were local church leaders, heads of families, mostly employed in secular jobs or subsistence farming, scattered over large areas, we could only plan to meet with them once a week or twice a month at locations accessible for them, though some travel for them and more for our faculty was often necessary. Since those meetings could only last for two or three hours, we had to use that time for discussions and debate, not for lectures or monologues. This in turn meant that the students had to be able to get the basic course content (cognitive, affective, practical) on their own in preparation for each group meeting. So we devised basic self-study materials for the relevant "academic" levels and cultural contexts. The third component, in addition to daily individualized study and weekly or bi-monthly group discussion, was on-going, practical testing or application of the substance and issues of the course material in the students' local ecclesial and social contexts.' See Kinsler 'Equipping All,' p. 26-27.

3. The role of community within the TEE Group Meeting[6]

There are three main ideas expressed in the literature about the importance of the community in the TEE Group Meeting, namely, a) general (though undefined) statements of intend or potential of community (called here a Community of Chance as opposed to intent); b) Community through the Discussion Group and c) Community through the Fellowship Group.[7]

Community of Chance. Not much has been written specifically in relation to community within TEE beyond some general statements of intent that the groups will provide: fellowship, inspiration, motivation, clarification, confirmation as well as integrating through discussion course content with practical ministry experience.[8] This is surprising as the learning community takes THE central role in the design of TEE. The TEE group is envisioned as the place where knowledge and experience are integrated through reflection. The ideal community leaves behind the authoritarian patterns of learning (through an authoritative teacher who is the source of all wisdom) and embraces a more communitarian ideal where the group itself 'identify critical questions and work out significant answers.'[9] Kinsler and Emery suggest that in order to achieve the above ideal learning community it is essential to strengthen the role of the facilitator as well as the role of the students. Surprisingly, the role of the learning community itself was not deemed a contributing or developing factor for developing communal reflection. The central flaw in this kind of developing community within TEE is that lack of intentionality. The development of community is therefore left to chance and might happen or might not happen.

Community through the Discussion Group. The central idea of the TEE group is to facilitate the discussion between all students within the group, their weekly reading as well as their field/ministry experience. The vision of TEE is to built an inclusive community of equal learners; equal in

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[6] Throughout this essay I will use the term: 'TEE Group Meeting' to refer what elsewhere is described as seminar, tutorial, discussion group, group discussion seminar. The reason is that the term TEE Group Meeting is the most neutral of the available terms and therefore can be convey to the students the most appropriate description of the TEE meeting. Tutorial group gives the impression of a meeting for supplementary information through a leader, study groups (like the word Bible study Group) implies that you only study there and not come prepared, a discussion group sounds like a purely intellectual meeting. Overall, it is not simply semantics but rather identifying a suitable term that can over time be used to convey the appropriate meaning in the mind of a learner.

[7] The main interest of this essay is the community of students who meet regularly for their TEE group meeting and not the role of the (church) community and its relation to TEE. For a discussion of the role of the church community in TEE, see Kinsler, 'Opting', p. 60.

[8] Kinsler, 'Extension Movement', p. 35.

[9] Kinsler, 'Opting for change,' p. 96-97.

participation and equal in contribution; equal in identifying problems that the church needs to address, equal in suggesting solutions and equal in applying the learning and reflection to their own life, the life of the church and the life of the wider community. The fundamental idea is to create a theologising community that seeks ways to apply theological learning to new and diverse situations. The only concrete attributes that could be identified in the literature in moulding the TEE community are: honest community – honest in admitting weaknesses and failures; community of sympathy and understanding – not harshness or criticism; and an authentic community in which space is given to acknowledge individual needs, concerns and struggles.[10] The only practical advice in achieving all the above is the example of the group leader who exemplifies all these qualities to the group.

Community through the Fellowship Group. The idea of community expressing itself through the Fellowship Group finds the most expressions within the literature. Winter commenting on the original TEE explicitly states that the TEE meeting had been built as 'a highly disciplined, almost overly-ambitious plan for a type of open personal fellowship between the students.'[11] In terms of Christian education the influence of Methodism with the Wesleyan class meeting is an undisputable influence on the TEE group idea.[12] The exact usage of fellowship is within the literature is not always clearly defined, however, it seems fair to assume that what is anticipated is a 'church-like' fellowship, defined by thanks-giving and intercessory prayer for members, scripture reading and a brief devotion. Holland surprisingly lists 'fellowship' before the actual TEE Meeting.[13] This seemingly results in a separation of fellowship and community from the actual learning event. This is possibly again an indication why so little has been said about spiritual fellowship and how also in TEE the spiritual and the academic have not been conceptually satisfactory integrated. This leads to the fragmentation of theological learning and not towards a holistic integration of all elements of theological education, namely, academic, ministry and spiritual formation. It seems peculiar that a method that envisions deep thematic theological engagement through discussion would not strive to cushion the learners through developing a safe and secure learning community first.

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[10] All examples are found only in Holland, 'Teaching Through T.E.E.', p. 35.

[11] Winter, 'Theological Education by Extension,' p. 418.

[12] See Burton, 'Disciple Mentoring,' p. 6-7, Winter, 'Theological Education by Extension,' p. 418, Snook, 'Developing, 'p. 29. For discussion on TEE and discipleship see the articles in Gerber (ed), 'Discipling' or Burton, 'Disciple Mentoring': Similarly, Collinson's excellent inquiry about discipling and the Small Group Movement, Collinson, 'Making Disciples;, p. 219-226. These are examples of the inherit flexibility within TEE as a method where the basic concept of TEE is further used in order to promote church growth and church multiplication.

[13] Holland, 'Teaching through T.E.E.,' p. 32-33. His plan for the seminar meetings is: 1. Fellowship, 2. Opening, 3. Discussion, 4. Closing.

4. The role of community in contemporary theological thinking: here Robert Schreiter[14]

In theological education the concept of community is not simply a buzz word but one of the central elements of theological learning. It is widely acknowledged, that theological learning needs to take place both within a worshipping as well as a learning community. The question remains how best to utilise community within theological education, especially the role of community in theologising. A lot of contemporary theological education is more concerned with the transmission of orthodox (established) theological knowledge rather than empowering students of theology to meaningful engage with contemporary issues and develop a sound response.

The TEE group meeting with its natural emphasis on joint discussion and reflection, rather than banking of learning within students by a teacher, is an ideal theologising community. This is poignantly expressed by Schreiter who elevates the community to the role of a theologian in its own right.[15] He is informed specifically through liberation theologies who 'in particular emphasize the role of the entire believing community in the development of a local theology.'[16] This is specifically significant for theologies in the Majority World where learning and being is understood communal. In the words of the Regiers, "African traditional learning is normally communal."[17] Only the coming together of the community can enable TEE groups to make significant theological reflections based on their own circumstances (contextualisation). Within TEE it is assumed that the community is guided by the 'Professional Theologian' (to use Schreiter's designation) but who joins the learning community in the TEE in the form of the workbook. TEE is well positioned to use the insights of Schreiter in order to challenge the community to theologise and seek a deep and meaningful engagement with their own society. A TEE meeting has great potential as it regularly provides not simple space for contextual theologising but is geared towards challenging the community to apply their cognitive learning to the reality of ministry and subsequently reflect about best practice.

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[14] Schreiter, 'Constructing Local Theologies,' p. 16-18.
[15] Though Schreiter highlight the role and function of the Community as a theologian in their own right, he nevertheless also provides a balance and a source of insights through highlighting the role of the Professional Theologian in guiding the community in arriving at their own informed theological positions.
[16] Schreiter, 'Constructing Local Theologies,' p. 16.
[17] Regier, 'ANTERP,' p. 38.

5. Conclusion

Community plays a central role within TEE, especially in the TEE Group Meeting. Traditionally community was understood in relation to the Discussion Group as well as to the Fellowship Group. The greatest dis-service was done when the use as well as the forming of community was affectively left to chance and not stresses as s forming factor within TEE. The theologically informed community can be a great expression of in-breaking of the reign of God in the way personal interactions are done, encouraged and developed within the learning community. The idea of the honest community – honest in admitting weaknesses and failures; the community of sympathy and understanding a witness to the absence of harshness and unfounded criticism; and the authentic community in which space is provided for all God's people. Such a community also will be a good trainings ground for learning to deal with conflict, disagreement, differences and envy in an appropriate Christian way. The climax of community is the expression of the community as first and foremost theologian of the church community addressing divine truth and applying it to their own local context.

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