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EQUIPPING GOD'S PEOPLE FOR MISSION

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In recent decades the churches have increasingly affirmed that theological education is central to their life and witness. It is assumed that theological education, in whatever ways it is conceived and practiced, is necessary for the training of those who in turn are called to mobilize and equip the people of God for ministry and mission. Though theologies and structures of ministry vary widely between and within the various ecclesiastical traditions and cultural contexts, there is a significant move from what might be called "ministry to the people" and "ministry for the people" to "ministry with the people" and "ministry by the people".

In 1972 the Theological Education Fund enumerated several types of alternative theological education; study centres, lay training centres, centres for urban mission and training, theological education by extension, various decentralized programmes, clinical pastoral education, community-based theological learning, cell groups for study and mutual care and team ministry, theological reflection in liberation movements, and ad hoc educational events (workshops, conferences, short courses, etc.). While many elements and insights from these alternatives have now been integrated into the ongoing work of residential theological

schools, our focus here is on the remarkable expansion and escalation of theological education by extension (TEE), which not only complements residential training but offers an alternative way of approaching the whole range of theological education tasks.

Theological education by extension is for a growing number of people both a vision and a movement, a philosophy of theological education and an instrument for change, a new conceptualization and a new methodology of ministerial formation. The purpose of this issue is to gather together reports on the experiences of major extension programmes in order to enable IRM[1] readers, many of whom are engaged in mission activity, in church leadership or theological education, to examine for themselves the educational and theological components of these programmes, to explore the early results and to foresee possibilities for effective use of this approach in meeting needs in their churches and societies. It is altogether evident that the whole people of God are called, by the Gospel and by the massive human needs that surround us, to enter fully into Jesus' ministry. Theological education by extension is one way to respond to the challenge to equip God's people for mission.

BASIC SHIFTS IN THE CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

The significance and potential of theological education by extension lie not primarily in the movement itself but in the spiritual and social dynamics to which it relates. Our first consideration will therefore be a brief resume of important developments in the Christian movement that provide perspectives from which the present experience and future potential of TEE should be viewed.

THE WORLD CHURCH

Years ago, William Temple spoke eloquently of "the great new fact of our time" the fact that by the early decades of this century Christian churches had been firmly planted in all corners of the globe. The striking fact of the last two decades of the twentieth century is that the whole base of the Christian movement is shifting from North to South, i.e., from the so-called First World and Second World to the Third World. In sheer numbers, there will be more Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America than in Europe and North America by the year

[1] [[This article was also published in the *International Review of Mission* (IRM), Volume71, Issue 282 (1982), p. 133-144.]]

2000. In terms of active, meaningful participation, a large majority are already Third World Christians. In terms of missionary engagement in active evangelism and discipleship, in the struggle for human rights and liberation, in bringing Good News to the poor it is especially in the Third World that we see signs of hope and the movement of God's Spirit today.

The second shift, which accompanies the first, is from hierarchies and institutions to the basic, grassroots church of the people. This is most notable among the Pentecostal churches of Latin America, whose dynamic life and witness have been generated almost without formal theological education; among the African independent churches, which have incorporated African tradition values and leadership patterns; and among indigenous churches in other Third World regions. Historic Protestant churches in these regions have experienced dynamic growth partly through their theologically trained leaders, but probably far more through the leadership of untrained, local leaders and the witness of ordinary members who have taken full responsibility for the ministries of their congregations. Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church has been facing an enormous shortage of priests in much of the Third World, and it is experiencing an unprecedented flourishing of basic ecclesial communities, small local groups that meet for biblical reflection, share common concerns, and work together to build a more human society.

These two shifts in the world church suggest that theological educators and church authorities may need to reevaluate their assumptions and redirect their efforts. The institutions and structures that have evolved in Europe and North America can no longer presume to hold the keys to theological understanding, prophetic insight, or spiritual vitality. Genuine spiritual, prophetic, and theological life emerges from the basic church as "ordinary" Christians engage in their daily vocation. The task of theological education is to release, not bypass or supplant, that source of life and power. Theological education by extension affords a unique opportunity to recognize and strengthen local congregations and their leaders as the primary agents of mission, unity, and renewal.

MISSION PRIORITIES

The old debate about evangelism and social action has perhaps been necessary; it has served to focus attention on two dimensions of sin and salvation. But it has always been in danger of polarization and distortion; these are inseparable aspects of the same reality. Today there is a

growing recognition among Christians of all kind that the human predicament and the Gospel must be understood in a wholistic way. The mission that Jesus himself incarnated is the mission of God's redemptive kingdom, which transforms human life in all its relationships. This is becoming increasingly clear to rural Christians in Africa as they discuss the causes of underdevelopment, to urban Christians in Asia who are engaged in struggles for human rights, to Christians involved in popular liberation movements in Latin America, and to Christians in North America and Europe who are challenging the unjust structures of political and economic power that continue to exploit the world's human and material resources. The message we proclaim and live by must be prophetic and pastoral, social and personal, global and local.

Another important development is the growing commitment to "a church of the poor". It is now becoming evident in a new way that the kingdom of God must not only be proclaimed as Good News to the poor but that his Church must be a church of the poor. From the first century until now the poor have always responded to the Gospel, but the churches' structures and leadership patterns have usually reflected the elitism of their societies. A recent survey of the lay representatives in the Church of England's General Synod indicated that only one per cent are from the working classes while the clergy are all highly educated. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America there is an increasing tendency for Christians leaders to move up the schooling ladder into successive levels of social and economic privilege. One of the most serious and difficult questions we all face is how to be a church that not only serves the poor but remains a church of the poor.

Both of these mission priorities have fundamental implications for theological education, and theological education by extension is peculiarly equipped to take up these challenges. As long as theological education is preoccupied with the full-time training of a few candidates for ordained ministry, it is destined to be narrow and elitist. In contrast, the growing extension networks are able to include all kinds of people, whether they hope to be ordained or not, whatever may be their social, ethnic, racial, and educational background. More specifically, it is now possible to develop effective resources for theological reflection and education among the poor themselves.

UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In spite of the vast resources that governments, churches, and other agencies have invested in programmes for development during the last twenty years the plight of the poor around the world is becoming more and more desperate. Much of the blame for this failure is placed on the top-down or trickle-down approach. The process of development has generally been tied to the dominant patterns of modernization and economic growth which retain initiative, know-how, and decision-making in the hands of a few. The poor remain powerless and continue to be exploited and marginalized. The primary lesson from this tragic experience is that the poor must be the primary agents of their own development.

One sector of human need that is now being faced through a remarkable new approach is health care. No field of service has become more specialized and expensive and thus inaccessible to the majority of the world's population. As scientific medicine was exported to the Third World, it discredited and even outlawed the traditional remedies and practitioners that were available to all and replaced them, with professional physician, drugs and hospitals which only the rich could afford. As alternatives were considered, it became evident that scientific medicine is in any case all equipped to meet the basic health needs of the poor – or even of the rich. The only effective road to health is for local communities to identify their own needs and take responsibility for meeting those needs – through sanitation and clean water supply, agricultural development and improved nutrition, land reform and community organization, and community-based, public health care programmes. The empirically trained village health promotor who lives among his or her peers at their level may in fact be a more effective agent for health and development than the typical M. D.

The churches need to learn these same lessons concerning their own development, particularly with regard to theological education. In the past it was assumed that the churches' "health" and "development" depended upon professional clergy trained at the highest academic levels possible. It is now evident that the vast majority of congregations in Africa, Asia and Latin America will not be able to hire seminary graduates for a long time to come. Moreover, dependence upon professional clergy, particularly as it has developed in western Christianity, alienates the people from their own ministries and from their own spiritual health. Theological education by extension encourages and enables all kind of congregations

– poor and rich, western and non–western – to develop their own ministries from among their own members. It may also become a channel for the transformation of those ministries to embrace the concerns of the kingdom, wholistic evangelism, and community health.

THE FOCUS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

When the Theological Education Fund came to a close in July 1977, Dr. Shoki Coe summarized the TEF's twenty years' work in the regions of the Third World as a progressive search for quality, authenticity, and creativity. The first step was to build strong institutions for academic excellence, largely following the assumptions and patterns of Europe and North America. The second was to examine critically the relevance of these institutions for the various socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts of the Third World. The third was to encourage new methods and approaches that would respond more flexibly, more widely, and more effectively to the ecumenical demands and global needs of our time.

It was also in July 1977 that the Programme of Theological Education (PTE) was created to carry on the work of the TEF within a wider, six-continent perspective. The PTE chose to focus its mandate upon "ministerial formation", which was interpreted in the broadest sense to include all the people of God and in the particular sense to be concerned with "enabling the enablers". By choosing this focus the PTE affirmed clearly that theological education is not an end in itself, that is not simply and academic or professional enterprise, that it is not even bound to institutions. Ministerial formation is a concerned with personal growth and maturity as it is with theological knowledge, with spiritual gifts and commitment for service as well as pastoral skills. These qualities and aspects of leadership can perhaps best be identified and fostered within the practice of ministry in congregations and communities. They are as important for ministry in Europe and North America as they are in other regions.

The principal model for ministerial formation is Jesus himself, who continues to call his followers into his ministry and mission, and the classic text is Mark 10: 42-45, which speaks of service and self-giving. One of the enigmas we face is that theological education, along with all other kinds of education, leads to privilege and power, whereas ministerial formation is fundamentally concerned with servanthood.

One again it appears that theological education by extension is a significant alternative response to the spiritual and social dynamics at work in the churches and in the world. By placing the academic as well as the practical aspects of training in the normal context of life and ministry, it may be possible to integrate them more effectively in relation to real human problems. By taking theological education to those who are already serving in their congregations, supporting themselves and their families, and making their contribution in society, it may be able to avoid the professionalization and elitization of the ministry. The challenge to the extension movement, which is the mandate of all theological education, is to motivate, equip, and enable the people of God to develop their gifts and give their lives in meaningful service for others.

MAJOR QUESTIONS, ISSUES, NEEDS

Many questions about alternative theological education have emerged in recent years. This section gathers major issues and needs into four areas which must be dealt with by all who are concerned about the renewal of the church for ministry and mission.

Theological education by extension is a new movement, which explains in part both its vitality and its shortcomings. But the tremendous growth noted in the following article suggests that it has come of age and that these shortcomings can no longer be overlooked. TEE must submit to the same rigorous critique that has been applied to other forms of theological education. Furthermore, insofar as theological education by extension is, as we have suggested, in a favourable position vis-a-vis the social and spiritual dynamics at work in the churches and in the world, it must fall under greater condemnation if it does not carry out faithfully its mandate.

MINISTERIAL FORMATION

We must ask, first, for more adequate definition or conceptualization of TEE as an alternative form of ministerial formation. What are the essential ingredients or processes whereby men and women are motivated and equipped for witness and service? How does TEE incorporate or provide these ingredients? Many of the reports that have been published simply record the numbers and levels of students and describe the mechanics of these programmes without any analysis of the various dimensions of the learning process. It seems as if some TEE

programmes are engaged only in the simplification, packaging, and diffusion of elementary theological knowledge and pastoral skills.

Secondly, we must question the educational philosophy underlying these extension programmes. There has been considerable talk of conscientization and contextualization but little demonstration of what these concepts mean in practice. Many extension programmes appear to combine the worst of traditional schooling (memorization of a predetermined body of information) with new programming techniques. Extension students are generally more capable of meaningful participation in the learning process because of their maturity and involvement in congregations and communities, but some TEE programmes may in fact be manipulative and domesticating, imposing irrelevant information, legalistic doctrinal formulae, and narrow pastoral stereotypes.

Third, we must consider the methods, materials, and personnel that are being utilized. There is talk of action and reflection, of materials that pose open questions for discussion, and of teachers who are tutors and co-learners; but what takes place in the thousands of extension groups that are now meeting weekly or bi-weekly? Are the students in fact the subjects rather that the objects or receptacles of TEE; do the extension tutors actually go through the necessary "pedagogical conversion" in order to become co-learners; is real communication and critical analysis taking place?

Who are the students? How are they selected? What is their motivation? These questions are as important as the goals and content of any programme. Some extension promotors seem to be excited simply by the growing numbers of students, but others have noted the danger that this phenomenon may simply reflect the widespread social pressure for certification. In some cases TEE is perceived as a back door into the ordained ministry, a cheap way to provide or do obtain theological studies.

These points indicate that there is a very basic need for guidelines and procedures for evaluation. It may be that traditional criteria are not appropriate for alternative programmes; in that case new approaches to evaluation must be adopted. Some extension programmes are in fact preparing students to take established examinations for certificates of various kinds; other have developed their own systems but tend to focus exclusively on cognitive learning.

TEE is merely an instrument, like other approaches to theological education, and it can be used to pursue very diverse goals. The content and purpose of these programmes should be determined by raising further questions about ministry, the church, and mission.

MINISTRY

It is certainly true that TEE is now reaching grassroots leaders and in many cases is qualifying them for ordination, but it is still not clear how this affects the structures, style, and dynamics of ministry. Do the newly ordained pastors easily assume the prerogatives and perquisites of other seminary graduates, or are they reshaping the ministry to make it less hierarchical and more community-based, less professional and more indigenous?

TEE brings new possibilities not only for training indigenous pastors but also for the theological education of the "laity" for Christian vocation in society. How is this task perceived and pursued? Are these lay leaders simply becoming clergy assistants or clergy substitutes oriented primarily to the churches' inward focus, or are they discovering meaningful ways to minister within the social structures, to challenge those structures prophetically, and to turn the church's vision outward?

Ultimately, the effectiveness of all programmes of theological education must be evaluated in terms of the graduates' ability to motivate and equip their congregations for witness and service. Are the new extension graduates, those who become pastors and those who minister in other ways, motivating and equipping others for their ministries? Are they building up a sense of and commitment to ministering communities that value and support the various gifts and talents among all the members?

THE CHURCH

Probably most extension programmes have been initiated in order to meet evident needs of established churches. As theological education and the ministry engage more and more people at the local, congregational level, it becomes possible not only to fill gaps but to explore new visions or even, as some Latin Americans are saying, to recreate the church. As extension teachers and students begin to permeate their churches, they must ask themselves whether their task is to carry on existing patterns of church life or to transforms them, to shore up the

old structures of leadership and ministry or to change them, to promote the accepted understanding of the churches' life and mission or to challenge it.

Since extension students are fully involved in their local communities, are employed and hold responsible positions in society, and share all the vicissitudes of their fellow citizens, they are ideally situated to develop new understanding of the Gospel, of the church, and of theology in terms of human realities and human transformation. Is this in fact happening, or are they simply falling back into the age-old traps of theoretical theology, institutionalized religion, and pious jargon? Are they grappling seriously with both the living, biblical text and the living contemporary context so that students and teachers are challenged to reinterpret their own daily, ecclesial, and theological vocation?

Because extension students do not leave their local contexts, the question is often raised whether they therefore remain provincial and parochial in outlook. Do they perpetuate the prejudices and narrowness of their own people, or do they gain new perspectives and attitudes that enable them to lead their people into an ecumenical global understanding of reality and of the church? Do they take up for themselves and encourage among their congregations' new paths of discipleship and life style, new approaches to witness and service?

The involvement of many local leaders in critical theological reflection, in rethinking the nature and mission of the church, and in relevant discipleship should in turn generate new spiritual dynamics in their congregations. As more and more members participate in this process, the vitality of their ministry should be felt not only in their congregations but also in their homes and in their communities.

MISSION

If genuine progress is being made in the ways suggested above, then theological education by extension should be a significant instrument for mobilizing the people of God for mission in the perspective of the kingdom. But we must ask whether in fact these programmes enable the participants to perceive and pursue the mission of the church in terms of the whole range of human needs, to which they bring a wealth of experience, perspectives, talents, and gifts. This challenge is for challenge is for those who are at the bottom on society and for those who

are at the top, for those who live in Europe and North America and for those who live in Third World countries.

Civilization has change enormously since the first century, especially in our own generation; the human predicament has become tremendously complex; recent developments in geo-politics, the economic crises, science and technology, and militarism have seemingly got totally beyond solution. Yet Christians cannot abandon hope nor renounce their responsibility as agents of peace, reconciliation, justice, and human development. In this context theological education cannot be confined to the preparation of clergy, nor can it be considered a minor avocation for lay people. It must challenge the churches' total human and spiritual resources to face the tragic needs all around us, to struggle against every form of evil, to work for a more human society, and to give our lives for the salvation of many. Is TEE doing this?

Ultimately, we face an ideological problem – not in terms of particular political ideologies but in terms of commitment to people and to human development. In the past Christians have been naive about social structures, and even persons with the best intentions have inadvertently supported interests alien to the people they serve. Therefore, it is essential to include social-historical analysis as an essential component of theological education. We must ask what is the ideological content, commitment, and effect of theological education by extension? Do TEE students engage in critical social and theological analysis of their own churches, communities, and societies? Are they concerned about and involved in the struggle for human rights locally and globally? Are they challenging sexism, racism, economic exploitation, superstition, and corruption where they live and work? Are their local congregations becoming healing communities and signs of liberation?

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The reports that follow in this issue provide some of the flesh and blood of the extension movement as it is now developing in all the regions, among most of the church families, in many different cultural contexts. These stories are tentative responses to the questions raised here. They suggest that the extension movement will indeed pursue the major challenges set forth at the beginning of this article concerning basic shifts in the world church, mission priorities, understanding of human development, and ministerial formation. They are signs of

hope as they mobilize their various constituencies for ministry and mission by the people of God.

Any assessment of the significance of theological education by extension must weigh these initial efforts, most of them less than ten years old, over against the Gospel mandates and global realities, and also project the goals and experience of these programmes into the future. The examples that follow suggest that existing extension programmes have much to learn from one another, that they are embarking on paths that will lead to deeper understanding and commitment, and that the process of change – for them and for their churches – has barely begun.

It is difficult to imagine what the extension movement will look like even ten years from now. In some regions TEE will probably become the means for training the majority of the churches' actual and potential leadership. In terms of the pre-ministerial preparation of ordinands, extension will increasingly complement full-time training schemes, and in terms of continuing education of clergy and theological formation of the laity, extension will continue to expand rapidly to fill age-old needs and to explore new possibilities. Priorities for future development vary from one region to another, but expansion and new initiatives can be expected at many different levels in order to serve specific, diverse constituencies.

In many places a quiet revolution is occurring as simple structural changes open up new relationships between institutions and churches, teachers and students, theory and experience, theology and context. These new relationships will generate progressive change in the shape and content of curricula and in the models for teaching and learning. They will increasingly bring new perspectives to all fields of theological studies, ministerial practice, and mission endeavour.

The long-term impact of these changes is still largely a matter of conjecture, but the potential of the extension movement for change and renewal must be considered. Writing from the perspective of evangelical pietism in a situation where many of the extension students are victims of extreme poverty and inhuman oppression, a Guatemalan teacher affirms her faith in "a just and powerful God who is ready to execute the promise of liberation". In Nigeria, a new centre provides resources, models, and training not only for pastors and evangelists, but also for professionals and peasant farmers, not only for church growth but also for rural

development, urban renewal, community health, and basic social change. An enormous network of centres spreading across North America and into other regions affirms that lay people must be equipped for serious theological reflection because they must play the decisive role in understanding and pursuing the kingdom of God in a world less and less conscious of the Gospel of Jesus.

The Pentecostals of Latin America, who have written an extraordinary chapter of contemporary church history through their tremendous evangelistic zeal and vibrant worship life, are gaining access to essential tools for biblical reflection, theological expression and social analysis. Similarly, the African Independent churches, whose leadership is formed empirically and charismatically, are hungry for training opportunities in tune with their cultural and spiritual dynamics. North American seminaries have during the past decade created a whole new concept of continuing education of clergy that is based on the practice of ministry in parishes and communities.

The report from Botswana indicates that new insights are coming forth that no one had foreseen; extraordinary leadership is emerging in remote places; "a slow but very significant revolution is in the making". The introduction of extension training has not only reversed the gloomy prognosis for Native American church leadership; it has introduced theological reflection on traditional beliefs and Indian rights among Native communities across the USA and Canada. A seminary in Costa Rica affirms that "the experience of poverty, dependence, and exploitation that prevails in Latin America imposes on theological institutions a new agenda and a new way of doing theology".

An ecumenical team provides orientation, materials, and training for pastoral agents who work among the vast number of basic communities in Brazil as they read the Bible from the perspective of the life issues of the people, relate their hopes to the promises of the Gospel, and engage in concrete joint action with the wider human community. A medical missionary couple in India are training local pastors and congregational leaders for wholistic ministry; they have proposed a comprehensive strategy for the mobilization of the world's health resources in their book. Here's How: Health Education by Extension; the largest TEE scheme in India has added a course on community health. One of the principal goals of the large extension

programmes in the Philippines is to prepare local church workers and pastors "for leadership in the ministry of liberation, justice, and development in the context of Philippines society".

As reported in these pages, theological education by extension refers specifically to programmes of ministerial formation that combine organized individual studies, involvement in some form of ongoing ministry and regular seminar meeting with peers and tutors. To say that theological education by extension has come of age is not only to recognize the rapid growth and acceptance it has experienced in recent years but also to place upon it heavy responsibilities for the years to come. These responsibilities must be defined in terms not only of the church but of the kingdom of God. The challenge of the extension movement is to take up the mission that Jesus pursued and that the world of the 1980s requires – to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12).

NEWS NEWS

Workshop for Mayan Theological Writers

The Guatemalan Center for the Study of Theological Education and Ministry held this Workshop at the Maya Quiché Presbyterian Bible Institute, from the 26 to the 30 of September, 1983, with the cooperation of Rev. Paul Bergsma, from the Reformed Church of Costa Rica. This workshop was held particularly for indigenous leaders who work in their communities and with their own people.

Regional Workshops for Pastor

The Guatemalan Center also helped to hold these Regional Workshops for all the Pastors of the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala, in collaboration with the National Presbyterian Church and CELEP (Latin American Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies), from October 17 to November 22, 1983. These workshops were held by Dr. John Stam a member of CELEP, from Costa Rica.