

“What is wrong with the preparation of Christian workers in colleges and is theological education by extension a better alternative?”

This essay will seek to address the above question by looking firstly at problems which arise from Institutional Theological Education and then at various alternative approaches to Theological Education with emphasis on Theological Education by Extension (TEE). It is my aim to ultimately conclude whether or not TEE is a satisfactory alternative to the more traditional approach currently offered by many different institutions.

Section 1: Criticisms of Institutional theological education

Perhaps the greatest cause of many of the limitations of Institutional based Theological Education is the fact that in many cases, its approach is based on that of the universities. Theological colleges are often affiliated with universities with the academic qualifications being set out by them. As a result, theology has become like other academic subjects, with little room for practical application or experience. Andrew Kirk describes the outcome of this approach as, “...what you study is decontextualized, it becomes an intellectual trip.”¹ In his article written in response to Starkey’s ‘Ivory Steeples’, Beasley-Murray challenges this concept in his argument that, “Increasingly theological colleges are not seeing themselves first and foremost as academic institutions... colleges are asserting their independence and ensuring that they, and not the university, control the content of their courses.”² In a purely academic approach to theology, it can lose its relevance to the real world resulting in a dry, lifeless discipline. Frames points out that “...even in ‘practical courses’... students are trained as scholars rather than as ministers.”³

As the course content is often purely academic, it does not allow time for reflection of the student’s own personal experiences. This means that the study of theology can be seen as separate from real-life, and perhaps even more dangerously, as an elite discipline. This is describe by Heywood as follows: “Her present and previous experience of the church and Christian faith will count for very little; it may very well be treated as childish and inadequate, leaving her with a vague sense of loss...”⁴ This leads to the conclusion that anything learned by the student on his or her own spiritual journey, is now all irrelevant, with the real truths being disclosed by ‘established experts’. It can raise issues of doubt or insecurity in the mind of the student as to the worth of their own personal

¹ Andrew Kirk in Starkey, Mike, “*Ivory Steeples?*” in Third Way, October 1989, p23

² Beasley-Murray, Paul, “*Liberating Theology*” in Third Way, December 1989, p35

³ Frame, John, M., “*Proposals for a new North American Model*” in Conn & Rowen, Missions and Theological Education, Farmington, Urbanus, 1984, p371

⁴ Heywood, David, “*A new Paradigm for Theological Education?*” in Anvil, Volume 17 No. 1, 1000, p21

relationship with Christ. Nouwen challenged this traditional view in his belief “that the least-used source of formation and information is the experience of the students themselves.”⁵ Rather than disregarding all previous experiences of the students, he sought to draw upon them in an effort to show theology as relevant to current everyday situations.

When a student is inducted into a position of ministry on completion of his or her studies, he or she may also discount the experience of their hearers, in much the same way that their own experiences were overlooked during their education. I.e. they are using the same method of instruction with their congregation as was used with them. This and the believed lack of practical training, will result in the church failing in its responsibility of “going out into the real world with evangelism, social concern and a focus on getting individuals into society. Most colleges seem to assume we’re trying to get people to come into the church, rather than using the apostolic model of going out to where they are.”⁶

Heywood goes on to mention another outcome of this situation being that of pride and “...an attitude of superiority.”⁷ After the initial feelings of insecurity, a theological student may then adopt the attitude of being better than others in their congregation or Christian circles, as they have studied the Scriptures and theological concepts to a greater depth than others. He or she is in essence creating in others the same emotions that they first faced when beginning their studies; that knowledge is of greater importance than personal spiritual experience. This attitude will not only be detrimental in current relationships but also when the student assumes the role of leadership be it in the local congregation or another setting. In his book ‘In the Name of Jesus’, when talking about Christian leadership, he says the following: “The leadership about which Jesus speaks is of a radically different kind from the leadership offered by the world. It is a servant leadership...in which the leader is a vulnerable servant who needs the people as much as they need him or her.”⁸ What appears to be reflected in this method is Nouwen’s acceptance that it is life experiences and not knowledge, which places a person at a higher level to others. This poses a great challenge to traditional theological education which would emphasis the opposite- it is the knowledge of the teacher, in a particular field that qualifies him or her to instruct the class and not their live experiences. A reflection on this concept, should prevent the Christian leader from setting him or her self above those whom they are seeking to minister to.

⁵ Nouwen, H., *Reaching Out*, London, Collins, 1976, p79

⁶ Kirk, A., in Starkey, M., “*Ivory Steeples?*”, p.23

⁷ Heywood, D., “*A new Paradigm for Theological Education?*”, p21

⁸ Nouwen, H., *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, London, DLT, 2004, p44

Due to the critical methods in which theology is taught this can shake up a student's faith. The challenging of one's faith is not all bad, as it can result in a strengthening and a greater understanding of faith and the realisation that contrary to what they may have previously been taught, theology is not a black and white subject- many beliefs or interpretations that have been accepted as contrary to Scripture may actually be seen in a new light, resulting in a greater acceptance of others with slightly different doctrinal beliefs and practices. As Evans acknowledges, "The simple fact is that in so many churches, honest thinking isn't applied to Christian issues and when you start to do that it can be a shock..."⁹ This can lead to difficulties when the student returns to their church. On the other hand, this is where interdenominational colleges have an advantage over those which are denominational. In denominational colleges, "...theology is taken over by particular partial world-views, cultural establishments and doctrinal positions"¹⁰ whereas, as already seen interdenominational colleges enables students to look at different interpretations in a non-biased setting.

It can force the student to think seriously about what they believe and why, enabling them to be better equipped apologists for the Faith. Unfortunately there is also the danger that due to a lack of spiritual encouragement and discipline, a student who enters the course with a strong faith and enthusiasm, can often leave feeling uncertain and may even find themselves rejecting what they once held firmly to. It is in such situations that the importance of pastoral and spiritual care within the institution is of vital importance to the holistic development of the student.

Another serious limitation of this method of training, is that it does not actually produce men and women who are thoroughly equipped for the ministry. As already seen, there is a large emphasis on academic training, but this on its own is an inadequate way of judging a student's suitability to become a pastor. A person who is weak academically may have all the necessary qualities to be a pastor whereas someone who is strong academically may lack the right personality or spiritual commitment required for such a role. Kwesi Dickson commented that "the intellectual bias meant that many suitable candidates without this interest or ability were probably not even offering themselves for selection."¹¹

John Frame states that, "The academic machinery is simply incapable of measuring the things that really matter- obedience to God's Word, perseverance in prayer, self-control, ability to rule without pride, the spiritual power of preaching in the conversion of people and the edification of the church... A person does not become qualified for the ministry simply by writing a number of 'good

⁹ Evans, M., in Starkey, M., "Ivory Steeples?", p.22

¹⁰ Vincent, John, J., "Theological Education in the 80s in Britain", in Ministerial Formation, April 1980, p10

¹¹ Dickson, K., in Starkey, M., "Ivory Steeples?", p.23

papers' and memorising enough material to pass all the exams."¹² It can be argued that just because the above cannot be measured, does not necessarily imply that they are not developed through academic study. The very basis of academic study, knowing more about God and His Grace, should have an affect upon the students' lives and ultimately change us. When this transformation does not occur it is not the fault of talking about God academically but rather the dry way in which it is often presented in academic study.

Here, it appears that Frame is not taking into consideration those Bible Colleges which do have practical placements, whether on a weekly basis or a block placement. Due to the recognition by colleges that pure academic training is not sufficient for future Christian leaders, this important aspect of training is being built into many courses, where students are encouraged to put their theories into practice while learning from others already in their particular field of ministry.

Starkey defines the role of Theological Education "to teach students how to think Christianly and help them work out what the Kingdom of God means in a given context..."¹³ The authors of the ACCM report have set forward as their requirements for a ministerial candidate, "'wisdom or godly habit of life', through which aspects of a candidate's spiritual development, such as prayerfulness, could be integrated with practical skills, such as leadership, all based on a thorough understanding of Christian faith."¹⁴

Section 2: Alternative Delivery Systems

The question, which arises then, is how can the above requirements be met? If the traditional theological institution is not meeting the needs of today's churches, then alternative delivery systems must be searched for. Theological education needs to be moving from an academic approach to that of vocational training where, "...both content and methods are determined not by the internal structure of a particular academic discipline, but by the demands of the role for which the students are being trained."¹⁵ In order for this to be achieved, the method of training adopted, needs to work closely with the local church and other organisations in which its students will be serving.

Craig and Varely have recognised that adults learn best through experiencing, reflecting, conceptualising and action.¹⁶ These four elements are thus necessary in the training and teaching of

¹² Frame, John, M., "Proposals for a new North American Model" in Conn & Rowen, Missions and Theological Education, Farmington, Urbanus, 1984, p377

¹³ Starkey, M., "Ivory Steeples?", p.22

¹⁴ Heywood, David, "A new Paradigm for Theological Education?" in Anvil, Volume 17 No. 1, 1000, p19

¹⁵ Heywood, D., "A new Paradigm for Theological Education?" p20

¹⁶ Craig, Y., and Varley, L., in Heywood, D., "A new Paradigm for Theological Education?" p23

adults in any context as well as for the ministry. We have already seen that other than the area of conceptualising, these elements are often missing in the traditional academic approach to theological education. Instead, Heywood goes on to point out that, “Learning experiences typical of adult education pay attention to each of the phases of the learning cycle, giving participant the opportunity to experience, reflect, draw general conclusions and apply their conclusions to experience in the form of plans for action.”¹⁷ Training which consists of these elements, will no longer appear academic and dry but instead due to the reduction of time spent on lecturing, and the emphasis made on the learner’s own reflection and drawing of conclusions, the course will be more student orientated, appearing more relevant to areas of future ministry.

Kinsler notes that theological education must be contextual.¹⁸ While it continues to be seen as something that is done behind closed doors to a small fraction of society, it will appear foreign and daunting to the majority of the Christian community. Kinsler calls for an approach that does not simply “take place in the geographical locations where people live and work and worship but that it should be made available to working people without requiring them to give up or to withdraw from their ordinary responsibilities.”¹⁹ When a person is able to study without removing themselves from their personal context, this enables them to reflect on how theology is relevant to their current situation concentrating on those aspects that directly affect their day-to-day work. It also greatly increases the pool for potential students, as students are no longer required to come out of their current context but instead theological education can go hand in hand with everyday life and experiences. This approach solves many problems that have arisen out of the more traditional institutional model: spouses often leaving their families to go and study, particularly when he or she was the bread-winner for the family; the financial strains placed upon students and their families; a congregation being left with a leader for a period of time; theology appearing abstract and distant from real-life situations.

Therefore, “theology itself must become the task of the people, using their languages and idioms, based on and expressed in their experience of life and of Jesus Christ in today’s world. It will then deal with the real stuff of life- home and office and commerce and industry and school as well as church- as with the basic human concerns.”²⁰

¹⁷ Heywood, D., “A new Paradigm for Theological Education?” p23

¹⁸ Kinsler, F., Ross, “New Approaches to Leadership Development in North America”, in Ministerial Formation, April 1979, p19

¹⁹ Kinsler, F., R., “New Approaches to Leadership Development in North America”, p19

²⁰ Kinsler, F., R., “New Approaches to Leadership Development in North America”, p20

The next section will look briefly at some systems which have been adopted for theological education in context and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

1. The Discipleship/Apprenticeship Model

These two models are similar in that they concentrate on the student working alongside pioneer Christians who are working and living with the Gospel and with their situation there. The model is very vocational in that the student is learning from his or her leader in the everyday working environment. This is one of the main advantages of this model, in that theology is very contextual. Theology is no longer seen as an expertise but it is now relevant to everyday life, something that can be learned through daily experiences under the guidance of the leader. Through this working together between the student and the teacher, there is almost a dual aspect of support and learning from each other, something which is not found in the academic model, or in other alternative systems. Vincent notes that this simple approach to theology, “has the whole of the New Testament on its side, especially the model of Jesus, the friend of publicans and sinners, and that of Paul becoming all things to all people...Inevitably, we begin to learn a new theology from the New Testament, which deals precisely with such people and situations.”²¹

In the case of this model being worked out by an experienced Pastor and his apprentice there are limitations as “apprenticeship based on observation and imitations emphasizes tradition, which becomes normative and thus tends to reduce the biblical message... Generally speaking, the learner rises no higher than his model and all too often imitates bad patterns as well as good ones if he has no theoretical base upon which to make corrections.”²² This can lead to a somewhat narrower approach to theology as the student may only be exposed to issues which the teacher has a keen interest in, resulting in gaps in the student’s knowledge as well as the danger of accepting practices and methods purely on imitation without a biblical explanation. A more formal approach to theology will result in a sound biblical basis upon which to practice one’s theology.

2. Correspondence Courses

Correspondence courses are used widely to reach those who cannot study in residence programmes. It provides a means for people to undertake structured theological training while still remaining in their own context. This model is particularly useful in developing countries where a pastor wants to gain further training without having to leave his village life. Within Latin America, some radio stations broadcast programmes containing lectures or discussions based on particular

²¹ Vincent, John, J., “*Theological Education in the 80s in Britain*”, in Ministerial Formation, April 1980, p12

²² Mulholland, Kenneth, B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, Grand Rapids, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976, p65

correspondence courses²³, which would be of great benefit to a student in a remote area who has no contact with others taking the same course. It is also of benefit to people who are seeking to learn more about the Scriptures either to deepen their own personal faith or to acquire theological education while continuing with their everyday life.

Even though this method is useful there are considerable drawbacks to the approach. As the student has no contact with his or her teacher other than via assignments received in the post, feedback is very delayed. This means that there is large time gap between the student completing his or her assignment, and receiving constructive feedback, which may affect their performance in the next assignment. Also, instead of the teacher being someone who can be directly approached for extra instruction or guidance, they remain an unknown personality. This results in a problem of irrelevancy for many courses, as the teacher is not familiar with the situation in which the student is studying and working and the particular theological issues that arise within that situation. Another drawback of this model, is the lack of pastoral care experienced by the student, due the absence of the teacher from the situation.²⁴ Instead, the correspondence model has a very strong emphasis on the transfer of academic material only. A lack of interaction between teacher and student and student with student in correspondence courses often results in a lack of motivation and a high dropout rate.

3. Short Term Institutes

These are concentrated courses of leadership training which generally last anywhere from two weeks to three months.²⁵ Due to the irregularity yet the concentrated nature of the course, they are commonly used for the training of rural leadership. This enables the student to receive quality training, relevant to his or her setting without a prolonged period of commitment away from their congregation. In this situation, the congregation would often take on the support of the student's family and where the institute is in close proximity to the student's home, they may be able to return home at weekends to their family and to continue on the leadership position within the local congregation. During the time spent at the institute, the students are not required to attain more information than they can put into practice in their own setting during the rest of the year.

These institutes are usually denominational centred which as already seen can produce a very narrow outlook in the student's doctrinal beliefs. The method also leads to problems for those

²³ Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p55

²⁴ St John's Theological College in Nottingham tried in the past to run a Correspondance course for missionaries. This course failed due to the lack of pastoral care that was received by the students.

²⁵ Here Mulholland, is reflecting on institutes found in Latin America. The length of these courses may vary greatly depending on the geographical location and the nature of the course. Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p58

students who are tent-making pastors relying on another job for financial income, as it may be impossible for him or her to leave their job for a three month period to attend the institute.

4. Evening Bible Schools

“These schools are low level training institutions with emphasis on the mastery of the content of the Bible in the vernacular. Strong emphasis is placed on practical courses, often taught very mechanically.”²⁶ The aim of these schools is to teach theology to those who have secular occupations and are keen either to deepen their Biblical understanding or to see the relevance of it in their personal setting. It has arisen out of the accepted pattern of part-time evening study prevalent in Latin America so students are part of the wider community of those seeking further education. Hopewell describes the atmosphere within these schools as “an electric spirit...an atmosphere that shouts that these are the best hours of the day and that these hours are being used, in God’s sight, to the best possible advantages.”²⁷

These schools do not train students for full-time ministerial positions but are rather aimed at those working and witnessing within their own workplace. This is reflected in its low academic input and the strong emphasis in practical courses.

As has been seen, each of these models have their own limitations as to the effectiveness of their ability in training future leaders of the church. I shall now look at a fifth and final approach, Theological Education by Extension.

Section 3: Theological Education by Extension

Mulholland defines Theological Education by Extension (TEE) as follows: “It is a field based approach which does not interrupt the learner’s productive relationship to society. Instead of the student coming to the seminary, the seminary goes to the student... the basic purpose behind the movement is to reach a currently unreached group with ministerial training and to provide a significantly better form of education for those who are reached.”²⁸ TEE programmes are often created by people working in linkages with local churches, which results in the course being tailored to meet the needs of the students and ultimately the churches. This close link ensures that the students are being trained in a way that will make them most effective to the local church. Within the course, there is the sensitivity to the circumstances of church and community life and to

²⁶ Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p60

²⁷ Hopewell in Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p60

²⁸ Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p66

the current political environment.²⁹ Reflecting on a case study carried out in Honduras with TEE, Mulholland points out a considerable drawback when students from rural areas travel into cities to receive Theological training. The content of their training was such that “the people of Honduras were not asking the questions these men were trained to answer, and the very atmosphere of their training made them incapable of identifying socially with the persons they were being trained to serve.”³⁰ This example shows the importance of taking the seminary to the students and addressing issues that are relevant to the people whom they are serving. Even though the ideal goal of the authors of TEE is to produce a course which is totally contextual in content to the specific people groups, often in practice this is not always the case. Due to financial limitations and the expense of printing, more often the course consists of general teaching rather than being 100% contextual to the specific situation.

The course can loosely be put into 3 compartments: the weekly seminar, self-study materials and periodic central meetings of the student body.³¹

Once a week the students within the area meet together for a seminar, where the students are free to apply biblical training to the situations in which they are involved in outside of the class. The role of the teacher is not so much to lecture but rather, “an interpreter of the learning materials, and the one who affirms each in their learning struggle. The [teacher] also helps to clarify inter-relationships in the lesson material that assist learners in making applications.”³² Development of attitude, values, character and behaviour are of great importance during these weekly seminars and Pomerville “...sees the learning situation provided by the weekly seminar as highly conducive to the kind of well-rounded learning experience that will help the student be and do as well as know.”³³

Therefore, there is more to the weekly seminar than just the acquiring of further theological knowledge. It allows students to encourage and motivate each other maintaining the sense of community. The setting is not only conducive to a well-rounded learning experience but enables a more personal and intimate relationship to develop between the student and the teacher. Through the seminars the teacher can become aware of problems and difficulties which the students are facing as well as their visions for themselves and the community. These result in a more student-centred, pastoral approach to theological education.

²⁹ Hart, Richard, Kenneth, “*Reflections on the Future of Theological Education by Extension*” in Evangelical Review of Theology, Volume 14 No. 1, January 1990 pp 25-31

³⁰ Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p140

³¹ As categorised by Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p67-70

³² Hart, R., K., “*Reflections on the Future of Theological Education by Extension*” p26

³³ Pomerville, P., A., in Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p67

During the seminars, students with a wide range of abilities are placed together. This enables students not only to learn from the teacher but also from each other. Differentiation between the students' academic abilities comes with the self-study materials. These materials allow the students to study further what was discussed in class to an intellectual depth that each individual can cope with. The course load that a student will carry will depend upon the amount of time that is available to them between seminar meetings taking into consideration other restraints which may be placed upon the individual. This means that within the one class, there may be individuals who are working towards an introductory Certificate in Theology alongside those who are working towards a Master of Theology.³⁴ During personal study, students are more likely to have a deeper learning experience than what they would receive during lectures, as they have to work and think for themselves, therefore enforcing the retaining of information. Self-study is therefore necessary to ensure that the required academic standard is being reached due to the flexible approach adopted in classes. It also reinforces the material covered during the seminar ensuring a solid grasp of the concepts at hand.

To preserve the sense of community between all the individual extension seminar groups, there is an emphasis on the coming together of all of the different extension seminars. In some areas this may occur two or three times a year, but where geographical problems arise, often this happens for graduation only. This provides the opportunity for all of the students to realise that they are a part of a larger community, all striving towards the same goal. It enables students to share with each other and to encourage one another, as well as times for corporate worship and teaching.

There can be seen to be a number of similarities and differences between other methods of theological education and TEE.

- Unlike the traditional residential institution which concentrates on preparing generally inexperienced youth for ministry through extensive academic and incidental practical training, TEE seeks “to prepare mature persons in ministry through extensive academic training related to the life which the person lives.”³⁵ As already seen, TEE is more relevant to the specific situations in which the students are ministering, whereas in many cases, institutional training can appear abstract and irrelevant to future ministries.

³⁴ Mulholland is reflecting here on TEE programmes in Latin American in, Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p68

³⁵ Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p70

- We saw the Discipleship/ Apprenticeship model to be very informal relying heavily on imitation. The main emphasis in TEE is that of formal education through courses, assignments, exams and ultimately recognised qualifications.
- One of the major limitations in correspondence training was that of a lack of contact between student and teacher. Even though there is still the aspect of individual learning, there is the necessary contact on a weekly basis not just for academic feedback but also for personal counselling and guidance.
- Evening Bible Schools focus on a lecture system with a limit to the amount of personal assignments. With TEE, daily studying makes the student a life-time learner and increases the student's ability to retain information through the working out of conclusions himself.

One of the advantages of TEE is that it does not remove the student from their setting enabling the student to carry on their daily duties at home and with the congregation. Therefore the student is constantly able to put into practice what is being taught on the course. This shows on a daily basis the relevance of what they are studying. There are tensions in this approach; namely finding the balance between personal study and that of congregational and other studies. Again, TEE has catered for this to an extent in that each student can do as much private study as other commitments allow him.

Section 4: Conclusions

It is fair then, to suggest that TEE is a better alternative to the preparation of Christian workers in colleges? Despite the weaknesses pointed out of traditional theological education, it does have certain advantages over TEE. Mulholland points out that “it provides the time and opportunity for concentrated and intensive study; ready access to professors; more-closely supervised practical work; motivation and facilities for depth study; a large library, audio-visual resources, office equipment; and a breadth of experience through contact with students who come from varied backgrounds.”³⁶

As already pointed out, TEE is effective in training indigenous Christian workers in their context without removing them from their areas of ministry. This prevents a dryness developing within the individual and the danger of the student returning to his or her field with irrelevant concepts to the needs of the people or even arrogance. It provides relevant training of a high standard, sensitive to the needs of the individuals, in spite of a limitation of resources. Due the interaction between teacher, student and community, the course is open to change in order to ensure that it caters to the needs of the student and ultimately the community.

³⁶ Mulholland, K., B., Adventures in Training the Ministry, p204

From a financial viewpoint, TEE is a lot less expensive for the student, as they do not have to find finances to cover travelling expenses and accommodation costs and to arrange provisions for their family at home and at the same time, can continue with his or her job. This is a very real obstacle to many individuals considering theological education particularly those from developing countries.

Also, we have seen that it produces a holistic approach to theological education with academic, practical and spiritual aspects all being catered for, which is often not provided for in a traditional institutional setting.

Perhaps what is needed is not necessarily an either or approach to theological education, but both the institutional approach combined with TEE. By having a main centre from which the TEE programme is run from, it may be possible to combine the positive aspects of both models, producing a highly effective system for the training of Christian leaders. The institution will provide stability to the programme as well as all the necessary resources both in terms of materials and staff, and in turn the extension schools can continue meeting the students where they are at in their own contexts, addressing relevant issues. The feedback from the extension schools will ensure that the content of the courses taught in the institution remains relevant to the needs of the outside community.

If this approach were to be adopted, it would be important to ensure that those students in the extension schools felt an integral part and a sense of equality with the institution through periodic central meetings of the entire student body.

In conclusion, I believe that the traditional institutional approach to theological education has a lot to learn from new approaches to theological education and particularly that of TEE. On the other hand, for many years, it has been the sole training centre for Christian leaders, and therefore its experience should not be disregarded either. Therefore those who are seeking to train men and women for Christian service, should be prepared to learn from each other and to work together to provide the highest standard of training possible.

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