

Theological Education by Extension

by E.H. Wendland

Less than ten years ago theological education by extension (TEE) was the chief topic of conversation in missionary circles. One enthusiastic supporter called it “the most exciting thing to hit the mission circuit since the indigenous church policy.” “It comes on the mission scene like a breath of fresh air,” commented the venerable Donald A. McGavran, Dean of Fuller’s School of World Mission at the time. Ralph D. Winter, originally one of its leading proponents and presently Director of the U. S. Center for World Mission, referred to it as “a new way of developing leadership that may literally save the church.” Dr. Milton Baker of the Conservative Baptist Mission Society called it “the most significant development in theological education in the twentieth century.” Mission periodicals contained numerous lead articles on the subject and mission seminars frequently included it as the chief topic on the agenda.

Much of this early enthusiasm has diminished. One must search these days for leading articles on the subject. Instead of being the chief topic at seminars it usually is found buried in some back page report. This change is understandable. Missionaries are inclined at times to be enthusiasts. They experience so many new situations and also so many disappointments that when something which appears to be good comes along there is a tendency to overreact. We do not mean to say by all this that TEE is dead. It is rather experiencing a time of testing and more sober evaluation. After nearly two decades of trial, and sometimes tribulation, many churches and mission agencies are gaining a clearer picture of just how TEE is going to fit into their program.

History and Development

TEE had its beginning in the *Seminario Evangelico Presbiteriano* about 18 years ago in Guatemala, Central America. After 80 years of work in that country the Presbyterian Church was experiencing difficulties in training a national church leadership. The rural Indians looked to experienced elders in the community for leadership in their congregations. Young graduates fresh from the church’s institutional center of training often failed to gain the respect of the people, who were also reluctant to support them as full-time pastors at the salary level expected. This had the result that many seminary graduates simply left the ministry, while local leaders with little theological training continued to conduct the work of the Christian ministry in the congregation.

James Emery and Ralph Winter, who were serving at the Guatemala Seminary at this time, began their extension program concept by trying to find a way to provide theological training for these congregational leaders. The theological training program, in other words, was brought to the religious workers rather than to expect or demand that the workers come to a central institution and live in residence there in order to become qualified to preach and teach. “It is the simple goal of enlisting and equipping for ministry precisely those who are suited for it,” Winter declared. F. Ross Kinsler was added to the staff at Guatemala shortly after TEE’s inception and had become one of the movement’s leading apologists.

Out of these modest beginnings the TEE concept developed. Its ideal according to its originators is that the existing seminary should phase out its residence program and rather become the hub of an extension program. The teaching staff may still live at a central place. Here study materials are prepared. Here is also a central library and meeting place. Out from this hub there are as many extension centers as can be operated successfully by the staff. They may be anywhere from 10 to 150 miles from the central hub of operations. The outlying extension centers can be located in any available meeting place, perhaps the home of a church member or under some convenient tree. Here the local lay leaders from a certain area, as well as others interested in theological study, meet with their teachers periodically, preferably once a week. During the week the students remain at their homes and their jobs, using their spare time preparing lessons carefully designed for self-study purposes. The weekly session with the teacher is primarily for discussion, clearing up questions or discussing problems which the students may have encountered in their self-study program.

In its original concept TEE was to have materials to reach out to three levels: the first for those who had received no more than an elementary education; the second for those who had received at least some secondary education; the third for those of college or university level chiefly living in the cities. This goal has never been achieved.

After several years of experimentation the advantages of TEE over traditional residential programs were listed as follows:

1. More mature men and community leaders gained as students;
2. A greater variety in course levels which can be offered;
3. More candidates attracted to the work of the ministry;
4. The transition to a “tent-making” ministry more easily anticipated;
5. Study methods which encourage self-expression rather than passive acceptance;
6. Participants with opportunity to put into practice immediately what they learn; and
7. Above all, the student remains closer to people of his own kind rather than to be uprooted from his cultural environment and forced to remain in an “intellectual ghetto.”

It did not take long before other church organizations which heard about the Guatemalan venture also became very much interested. Most Latin American missions were finding that their Bible institute and seminary programs were not meeting the need for workers. A general survey revealed that of the 150,000 men serving congregations possibly 90 percent lacked theological training. The 60 seminaries and 300 Bible institutes with their 13,000 students could not begin to fill the worker training gap for many years to come. TEE workshops were held in the Latin American sector in which most denominations of evangelical persuasion cooperated. Some Lutherans, Anglicans, and even Roman Catholics participated. A massive program was planned for the production of materials. It was generally agreed that programmed study materials would lend themselves ideally to this kind of project, although they were not to be considered as essential to the program’s implementation.

The word about TEE spread to other continents. Particularly Africa and the Far East also became interested. Extension seminary manuals were produced. Special courses were conducted for those who were interested in inaugurating TEE programs or producing study materials. Ten years after its inception it appeared as though TEE was on its way to fulfilling the dreams of its supporters, which was “to revitalize the church” and become “the most vigorous and creative form for the preparation for the Christian ministry.”

Reactions, Pro and Con

As time progressed various reactions to TEE set in. This was to be expected. From the very beginning the program had its detractors, whose objections grew in intensity with the growth of the program itself. Thereupon followed a counter-reaction, this in the form of a strong defense on the part of TEE proponents.

A strong negative reaction over against TEE took place in its very cradle, the Presbyterian Seminary in Guatemala. This came from national church leaders when steps were taken to close the residential seminary program. National pastors of the mission argued that to dispense with institutional training “detracted from the high views of the ministry” and “undermined the stability of the church.” Obviously these men felt that the concept of the ministry they had been led to follow over a period of 80 years was being threatened, and with it possibly their own status and security.

In other Latin American countries the reaction was less controversial for the simple reason that these countries were reportedly “slower to adopt extension principles.” Many institutions used TEE merely “as an appendage of minor importance—for laymen, for lower levels, or for those who could not get into a residential program.” Their adaptation of the program, in other words, was not what the avant-garde of TEE really wanted.

Follow-up efforts to promote TEE in Africa ran into mixed reactions. Expatriate missionaries were for the most part receptive; national leaders, on the other hand, were wary. Some reportedly regarded the program

as “just another proof of the white man’s discriminatory tactics.” India had a similar experience. The greatest resistance also came from “the established national structures.” In Korea, where indigenous church principles had been introduced successfully many years ago, it was reported that “there are so many traditional seminary students and graduates, it is unlikely that extension ministerial training will gain much support.” In South Africa a survey showed that “the seminaries seem to be content to carry on business as usual.” The above reports, incidentally, are based upon studies made by leaders of the TEE program in their efforts to evaluate the movement’s progress.

One of the chief reasons for the program’s failure to progress as successfully as many had hoped was the lack of progress in producing proper self-study materials. Initial efforts at writing programmed lessons were amateurish in concept and poorly executed. Cooperative undertakings on the part of church alliances resulted in many workshops, but few products. A massive intertext project produced only one approved textbook after ten years of joint effort. As so often happens with committee projects of this kind, it is one thing to get all enthused and to make grandiose plans; it is quite another to find the qualified manpower, the cooperation, and the “blood, sweat and tears” to carry out what needs to be done. Many like to be planners. Few like to be out in the bush and “bear the heat and burden of the day.”

Another discouraging problem encountered generally by TEE programs has been the 40 percent dropout rate of those who enroll. Detractors of the program refer to it as “a school with a large greased back door.” The 1976 Supplement to the World Directory of TEE shows 11,566 students in 99 TEE programs throughout the world, still considerably less than the number of students attending residential Bible institutes and seminaries. Realizing that it would take a TEE student about six years at least to cover the same material offered by a two-year resident Bible institute, and possibly another eight years or more to complete a seminary study program, one seriously wonders how many of those initially enrolled in TEE have actually become seminary graduates.

The advocates of TEE on the other hand become very defensive when they are confronted with arguments which suggest that TEE cannot become a viable substitute for a residential program, or that at best it be adapted as an auxiliary program. F. Ross Kinsler, one of TEE’s staunchest supporters, issues some rather sweeping indictments of the residential seminary program in its traditional concept. The following statements are from his latest book entitled *The Extension Movement in Theological Education*:

Traditional training patterns reinforce the dichotomy between clergy and laity; they debilitate the dynamics of ministry at the congregational level; they make the churches dependent upon highly trained, professional pastors.

History teaches us that the Western academic-professional system of clergy tends to be static, incapable of responding to the needs of the masses, preoccupied with position and privilege at the expense of a dynamic, corporate ministry.

Traditional seminaries and Bible institutes tend to follow the elitist trends of our societies, and they perpetuate the image of education as the accumulation of information.

Traditional education is domesticating; it treats the student as an object, a thing to be shaped or filled, an animal to be trained or punished.

Traditional schools depend almost entirely on the proverbial carrot strung out in front of the student and the perhaps more forceful whip hovering close behind him.

Thus in the opinion of Kinsler and other TEE leaders the traditional way of training for the ministry is theologically, historically, socially and educationally incapable of doing a proper job. They, of course, do not speak of a training *for* the ministry. They view it as a training *of* the ministry, since according to their teaching of “the priesthood of all believers” the ministry already exists, and it is just a matter of developing what is already there.

One has to wonder if Kinsler idealistically imagines that TEE by its mere presence will sweep away all evils encountered in an educational process, such as students who are “preoccupied with position and privilege,” or “the image of education as the accumulation of information,” or “the proverbial carrot strung out

in front of the student and the perhaps more forceful whip hovering close behind.” There are unwelcome pressures in any kind of educational endeavor. The student in residence may think that he suffers too much from the confining rules and regulations of an institutional setup. But the student left in his home environment may often have to ask where he can find just a little more time, peace and quiet to organize a study program which requires an unusual amount of self-discipline. And as far as discipline is concerned, one is not so sure that “the forceful whip” is really such a bad thing.

Some of Kinsler’s statements, of course, point to real dangers. There is that problem of academic aloofness, that elitist trend, that attitude of professionalism which can develop out of any training system lacking in proper motivation. To associate every kind of evil with one system and to give the impression that there is immunity from such evils in another is, however, characteristic of people who shout too loudly because their argument is weak.

One oft-repeated *cliché* of these anti-institutionalists which is especially annoying to someone who has had a happy in-residence training is that the traditional seminary places the student in a sort of ghetto, out of touch with reality. To begin with, this overstates the case. Practically every institutional setup these days insists upon some kind of in-service training as an important part of the student’s learning process. At the same time one would certainly not want to see the student deprived of the opportunity of having been able to give himself over to the quiet hours of contemplation which a residence program offers. All learning isn’t by doing. There also has to be time to ponder. Frequently in Scripture we see the so-called “ghetto-principle” applied. Think of Moses tending sheep for 40 years in Midian, of Elijah arising suddenly on the scene and then being told to hide in the ravine of Kerith, of John the Baptist to whom the word of God came in the desert, or of Paul, who spent time in the solitude of Arabia before returning to Damascus. Many a pastor or missionary will agree that some of his finest moments of action have come as the result of many hours of contemplation in the residential “ghetto” of the seminary or in the confines of a secluded room.

One also has to wonder why these TEE theorists should be so much against what they decry as the “Western academic-professional system” when they themselves are the products of it. Or how they ever expect the nationals someday to be able to devise and manage worker-training programs with all the expertise required without having had the benefit of a thorough academic background. Who, in short, is to carry on once the expatriates leave?

Conclusions

Obviously the answer to TEE’s problems lies somewhere between the extremes of those who oppose TEE as “detrimental to the high views of the ministry” and those who feel it necessary to “dispense with all residential worker-training programs while relying on TEE exclusively.”

TEE does have a place, especially in a worker-training program in a mission field. Our own experience with it so far indicates that its use lies particularly in the following areas:

1. TEE offers excellent opportunities for more intensive Bible study and training of local lay leaders.

A church body cannot support full-time workers for every local congregation in a mission field. It will have to work with a lay-leadership program, that is, with congregational leaders who are willing to serve voluntarily as preachers and teachers in a local situation, working under the supervision of itinerant pastors.

In Africa, for example, much of our work is done in rural areas. Here a number of congregations are organized in a certain district, each of which is separated from the other by only a few miles. Because of transportation difficulties—none of these villagers has an automobile of his own—as well as cultural reasons which have to do with ethnic backgrounds and language differences, it just isn’t feasible to tell these people to come to one central place of worship every week. Together as a parish they are able to support one pastor who can supervise the work. But these lay leaders also need training to carry on their end of it, which consists mostly of preaching and teaching. Here is obviously a place where TEE can be put to good use.

At the last All Africa Lutheran Consultation sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation reports were submitted by the Lutheran Churches in Tanzania as well as in Nigeria showing that they were using the above

system with some success. Our own Lutheran Church of Central Africa, while still in need of better study materials for carrying on a program of this kind, has made use of this method with some effect.

2. TEE offers an effective method not only of assisting local congregational leaders in a self-study program, but also of testing their abilities for the purpose of obtaining the best prospects for continued training for the pastorate.

A sad mistake is made when we compare theological education methods in America with those in some foreign field and argue that both must be precisely the same. The two situations are not at all analogous. In America the “prospect” begins his training in a Christian home. This continues on through elementary, secondary and college years into a seminary. It’s not a matter of “fostering high altars of academic prestige,” as critics of our Western traditions like to maintain, or of “establishing professional privilege in an esoteric religious-academic environment.” It is rather a way of Christian life, making use of all the gifts which a gracious God has showered upon us in order to devote the very best to our training for the holy ministry.

In foreign fields in most cases prospects cannot as yet be trained along such lines. One had to find these prospects among adult Christians. What folly, of course, to take a young school dropout, give him several years of theological training, and expect that he will make a good congregational leader. We rather will want to make use of mature men with proven leadership abilities, men who have gained the respect of their fellow Christians and who have also given evidence that they are able to teach others. It is self-evident that our best prospects for receiving more advanced theological training will come out of this corps of dedicated men. TEE can not only give them a pre-theological training, but it can also help the church determine who should be encouraged to study for the full-time pastorate.

The national church will need such men, men who can stand on their own feet theologically in the midst of all the perversions of Christian truth and the itching ears that are always straining to hear some new thing.

In this respect our Lutheran Church is unique. We are a confessional church. We want our national church leaders to stand squarely on the Scriptures as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God and to be able to defend the Lutheran Confessions, which are a true exposition of the doctrine of this Word. This must be our goal in supporting theological training programs, no matter how far away and remote from the American scene they may be.

Because of limitations brought about by political restrictions it may not always be possible for us to assist a national worker-training program just as we might want it. The only way open to us may be some kind of extension program, such as we are trying to set up in the Cameroon, Nigeria, and other countries. In this day of a devalued dollar and spiraling costs we also need to be concerned about economic pressures, pressures which sometimes make one ask seriously how long any kind of planned program can be managed properly. When “counting the cost,” however, we need to remember that the stability of the churches tomorrow, regardless of where they might be, rests very much upon the kind of leadership which is being trained today.

3. TEE provides an opportunity for offering an ongoing study program for those who have already participated in a theological training program.

This is a vital need in a mission field. A certificate or a diploma in hand is just a beginning. Unfortunately it often becomes the end of all real further theological study. Particularly the national worker in an isolated area needs refresher courses. He also needs to grow in his spiritual knowledge. He is not the recipient of religious periodicals. A theological library doesn’t happen to be close by. He doesn’t have the opportunity for discussion with his peers. How easy to revert to the old ways and superstitions which surround him on every side! All too often this problem has been overlooked, resulting in the unfortunate loss of many a religious worker.

These are a few areas where we can see TEE supplying a need for a ministerial training program in a world mission field today. One hesitates to suggest anything more, or to theorize about further adaptations which could be developed. These can still come. The situation on the world mission scene is never static. For the present, producing materials for the suggested uses and running field tests on them should be enough to challenge the efforts of the workers in any mission field for some time to come.

Recently Stephen Neill, a man who has been active in world mission work for most of this century, was interviewed by the editors of *Christianity Today* concerning the future of world mission agencies. The interview included a request for Dr. Neill's appraisal of TEE's prospects. He replied: "I'm sure it's got to be done, but I think people are a little naïve about it. It's going to be enormously expensive. You've got to produce an immense amount of material. Your missionary must be mobile; he must be able to go around, and that's not easy for a married missionary—although it is quite easy for old-fashioned bachelors like myself."

"An immense amount of material"...missionaries who are "able to go around"...Mission work never did have any shortcuts or quick solutions to its complex problems. It does not have them now. As TEE is further pursued and evaluated, much will depend upon the consecrated efforts of those who produce the materials and who also test them out in the field.

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