

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL CONGREGATIONS

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I have chosen a theme which is often discussed at ecumenical as well as grass root levels. Is theological education relevant to the ministry at the local congregations in our country? Do our theological institutions train only professional theologians and not pastors to serve in our parishes? Are theological institutions the handmaids of churches or the other way? Do our theological colleges effectively equip pastors to serve in the parishes and enable the parishioners to live a meaningful Christian life in the present situation in our country? These are all questions raised by churches.

We all agree that theological education has always been vital to the Church's life and mission. However, we have to admit that today it is in crisis of lacking the focus, direction, infrastructure, financial resources and even teachers and students. How to improve the conditions of our theological colleges and seminaries is a vital issue before all churches, especially the main line and traditional churches.

Church leaders have growing concerns about the current practice of theological education because it is not oriented towards ministry of the churches and they feel that there is no difference between secular professional colleges and our theological colleges. Our theological graduates are ill equipped to face challenges of ministry.

The Beginnings

Let us start with Jesus Christ who was an effective theological teacher during his ministry on earth. The parables were his teaching method. Most of all, he taught through his life style. Main themes of his theological teachings were Kingdom of God and its ethics.

When we come to his disciples, especially Paul, who went all over the world, the contents of the teaching was the life and witness of Jesus Christ and the salvation brought to the whole world through His life, death and resurrection.

In the early Church, the first disciples trained the faithful followers through the word of God and protected them from all heresies. The *Didache*, of the second part of the first century, gives evidence of the charismatic nature of the ministry of (apostles, prophets and teachers, who were propelled by the Holy Spirit).

The Catechetical School of Alexandria is a prime example of formal theological schools. As centuries passed, we see that the Eastern churches and the Roman Catholic Church had their own theological institutions for training priests.

Theological Education in India

Ziegenbalg, the missionary to India established the first Lutheran Seminary in India in 1705. It had only a singular aim, training mission workers. In 1818 William Carey published a prospectus for a college for the instruction of Asiatic Christians and other youth in Eastern literature and European Science. Serampore College Act was passed in 1818. United Theological College in Bangalore was born in 1910 and got affiliated to Serampore in 1919. Serampore was upgraded and Bishop's College was reorganized in 1818. Methodist Church started a theological college in 1922 which was named Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur in 1931.

In 1940 National Christian Council (now National Council of Churches) of India set up a commission to articulate the relationship between theological education and general education. It also emphasized the need of preparing an effective theological curriculum. In 1968 the Board of Theological Education of NCCI and the Senate of Serampore called a meeting of Church leaders and theological seminaries. The affirmation was theological education was the servant of the Church. The Theological colleges were asked to identify and work on pioneering theological trends.

During the time of Dr. M.M. Thomas and team, contextual theologies emerged world over. It was the time of liberation-theologies of several countries with its origin in Latin America. We too developed our Dalit theology, Tribal theology, subaltern theologies and feminist theology.

The Great Divide

In 1975, the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC) was formed which later became a consortium of theological colleges in India. It was a great

achievement to the theological education in India. However, the autonomy of BTESSC caused the drifting away of theological education from the churches *in* India. Theological education was no more the servant of the Church in India. This had far reaching consequences to both the Church in India and Theological colleges. The participation of churches in the decision making of theological education started diminishing. Theological teachers did not have much experience in the ministry of the Church. Theological education became mere professionalism. Churches also lost interest in recruiting worthy students from their own community. So Theological colleges have plenty of "independent students" with no obligation to any church. I do not have to further explain as to how theological education lost its focus on ministry of the local congregations.

However, all is not lost. Theological educators and churches have become aware of this unhealthy situation. Ardent efforts are taking place to bring these two closer through dialogue and mutual cooperation. I hope and pray that Bethel Bible College, Guntur will become an active participant in this process.

Some Recommendations for Seminaries and Churches to Enhance Ministry Formation in Training

In the light of the above explanation, I would recommend the following practical steps to bridge the divide between theological education and the Church so that churches will develop greater interest in the concerns of theological education and theological education will modify its training process to suit the needs of the local congregations.

The local is the only real thing! Whatever does not happen locally does not happen at all!

So ministry to the local congregation is the first priority of theological education.

- Student and teacher recruitment for theological training should be done in full partnership with the churches. Students as well as teachers with full commitment to the ministry of the church need to be recruited.
- It is understood that Seminary is a Bible college also giving priority to deep study of the Bible. At the same, time Seminary has to respond to all relevant issues of the world. National and international concerns like ecological issues, gender justice, economic justice, just- peace, and disability issues must become integral part of theological curriculum.

- During the period of completing a course, students need to be sent to practical training for a period of at least six months in parishes/institutions/ communities and their work has to be assessed.
- Seminary teachers should be people who are intimately involved in the ministries of local churches in some capacity. If possible they should be seconded from the church and they should return to the church after a period of teaching to become refreshed and relevant before they return to teach again.
- Seminary should not become another" mission compound". Seminarians should live as part of the community in which they live. Seminaries should never be seen as a safety and comfort zones. Seminarians need to interact with people at all levels belonging to different as part of the community in which they live. Seminaries should never be seen as a safety and comfort zones. Seminarians need to interact with people at all levels belonging to different faiths and ideologies. The Church is in the world. So Seminary should equip the students to live in the world and equip others to live in the world.

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