

## EXTEND THE SEMINARIES!

When a person finds himself up a tree, he may discover that it is helpful, if not absolutely necessary, to go out on a limb in order to get his bearings. Once out on a limb he gains a new perspective, and a whole horizon of possibilities opens up before him.

The purpose of these paragraphs is to suggest some new possibilities through decentralized theological education. The seminaries are already in turmoil, and radical changes are now taking place. So this may be a good time to break even further with tradition and extend the structure of theological education in order to find new ways in which the seminaries can serve the churches and enable the churches better to serve the world.

### CURRENT TRENDS

First, let's take a look at what is happening in the seminaries. For example, the classical idea that a seminary is a tightly knit, spiritual community where the students' lives are nourished through daily worship and a pervading sense of their common calling is certainly not true on many (if any) of our campuses today. Rather, there is a strong cry for relevance to and involvement in the pressing problems of our society. This tendency seems to gain support from what educators have long advocated--that learning be related to life--and from what theological educators have constantly come up against--the fact that most seminary students have almost no previous experience in the church or in the world. Many seminaries provide "involvement" through student action organizations, field work, special courses and lectures, and internship programs, but there is an unavoidable artificiality in all of these because seminary students, like the clergy they are to become, aren't really part of the fabric of society.

Seminary curricula are changing radically. The traditional, well-structured curriculum, which was intended to "cover the ground," is rapidly being demolished, and required courses are at a bare minimum or non-existent. Students are generally free to pursue their interests, and many are planning on going into specialized ministries. Only the comprehensive examinations remain to guard the academic integrity of the institution, and in some places even they are on the way out.

Lectures, long the sacred cow of seminary teaching, are finally being replaced by seminars, individual research, and guided study programs, and the number of class hours has dropped markedly. Even so, some would argue that programmed materials and sophisticated audio-visuials are quite capable of replacing and bettering present classroom experiences.

A matter of mounting concern right now is the financial crisis which the seminaries are facing. At a recent meeting of the Council on Theological Education of the United Presbyterian Church the Executive Secretary stated flatly that all our seminaries are bankrupt and have no evident prospect of meeting rapidly rising costs. He also pointed out that the seminaries have not

yet begun to fulfill their role in such areas as the theological education of the layman and the continuing education of the clergy.

One of the great problems of the church for centuries has been the great divorce between clergy and laity, which is maintained by our system of theological education. Although this is an old problem, it gains new urgency as the church seeks increasingly to understand and carry out its mission in relation to the complex social, economic, and political issues of our time. It should be quite evident that the layman is the one who can and should minister and lead the church in its ministry in response to these issues. But we continue to invest virtually all of our resources for theological education in young men who "go to seminary" and "into the ministry." The layman is deprived of theological accreditation, has little sense of vocation, becomes a dormant member of a church, and sits back passively or resentfully while the man in the pulpit tells him now he should live and how the church should serve in the world. The clergyman, on the other hand, experiences increasing frustration, alienation from the members of the church (especially when pressing social issues), and a general inability to move the church in mission.

This is not simply a matter of mobilizing the layman. It is also a question of leadership. Technical studies (and common sense) indicate that the present system of theological training and ordination is ineffectual in the selection and development of leaders. On the one hand the seminaries are set up for men and women who are young, just out of college, and who have had almost no chance to prove themselves in the world or even to develop their gifts in the church. Upon graduation from seminary they come into the life of the church as teaching elders, chairmen of sessions, and permanent members of presbytery. On the other hand those men and women who do prove themselves in the world and gain experience and earn positions of leadership in the organizations of the church find it almost impossible to go to seminary and must always sit under the tutelage of the former group.

Continuing education for ministers may seem like a small matter compared to the whole problem of the theological education of laymen, but it is vitally important, and it is presently a matter of considerable discussion. Different models are being suggested and ambitious programs are now being set up. Although the seminaries, which are the logical vehicles for continuing education of the clergy, are participating in these developments, it looks as if their contributions will be very limited because they are so tied down with existing programs and financial burdens.

#### A New Approach

This picture of some of the trends and problems currently affecting the seminaries may seem rather disjointed and pessimistic; certainly it is neither comprehensive nor profound. But these problems and tendencies, coupled with new educational theory and techniques, seem to this observer to point to some very significant and exciting new possibilities when looked at from a different vantage point. And it is his hope that the seminaries, far from being tied to present programs or curtailed by economic difficulties, might increase their contribution to the life and mission of the church several times over.

The vantage point suggested here is decentralization or extension. This concept, without going into detail, might be described as follows. The seminary would continue to be the primary institution of theological education, defining objectives, setting academic standards, appointing faculty, and providing basic curricular materials. Accreditation for degrees would be based entirely on comprehensive examinations and papers, and bibliographical guides would set out clearly the areas of basic knowledge and competence necessary to pass these requirements. More specific course outlines, programmed texts, and other materials could be prepared.

The program itself would operate through a network of regional centers more or less closely tied to the institution. Class sessions at the regional centers would be held weekly or bi-weekly, and the schedule would be made to fit the students' needs. These weekly or bi-weekly meetings would take the form of seminars, centering on understanding and application rather than information; the latter would be left to guided reading and programmed materials. The staff for each regional center would be made up of professors from the central institution, professors from other seminaries and other institutions, pastors, etc., depending on local circumstances. Course offerings would probably be very limited and vary in each center each year. Students would be free to take any number of courses according to established prerequisites, available staff and materials, and their own time and ability, and they would apply for the comprehensive examinations according to measured achievement.

Certain advantages of decentralization come into view immediately, particularly with reference to the trends and problems listed above. The spiritual fellowship and nurture of students would be left to the local church, as they should, and the student would find his studies genuinely relevant because he himself would not withdraw from the world in order to enter theological training. The academic integrity of this program could be maintained on a par with traditional programs by applying the same or similar comprehensive examinations, and the teaching-learning methods would have to be updated to compensate for limited class time. The economics of this program would be very different from present seminary budgeting. Each regional center, for example, could be entirely self-supporting if a reasonable enrollment were maintained, current tuition rates applied, and faculty members paid on a parttime basis. Once the principle of self-support were attached, the program could be expanded indefinitely. A decentralized seminary would, of course, be ideally suited for the theological education of laymen and the continuing education of ministers because it would adjust its program to their schedules and needs without taking them away from the world and the church and their means of support. This structure would allow for a more natural development of leadership in the church and perhaps go a long way toward bridging the gap between clergy and layman.

#### Possible Programs

Up to this point the idea of decentralization probably seems to the reader to be altogether too vague and unrealistic. Although there is not space enough here to present a full outline of how such programs would function, some general directives may be helpful. Any existing seminary could with a relatively small investment of money and personnel try out the extension concept by experimenting with one or more of these programs. The following are presented in the order in which a seminary could most easily extend its existing program.

1. Continuing Education of Ministers. Increasing numbers of pastors are given two weeks per year for continuing education. Rather than use up this time in a one-shot dosage, e.g. at a summer institute of theology, they can arrange to spread it out over a period of 12 to 14 weeks, during which they will carry one or more courses through a nearby regional center, using just one full day (or two half days) per week both to attend weekly seminars and to work through the required study material. Since study should be part of a pastor's ongoing routine, the churches may encourage their pastors by expanding this arrangement to 20 or 24 weeks, or a pastor may take the extra days from his vacation allowance. This would provide the equivalent of two terms of study per year, one or two two-hour courses each term, a total of four or eight hours of credit toward a degree. The objective is not to see how many pastors can earn degrees or how fast they can earn them but to provide a structure of serious, on-going theological study within the life of the churches. Therefore it is indifferent if it takes a man two years or six to earn an S.T.M., six years or eighteen to earn an S.T.D.

To start off, a seminary may offer one or two courses at one or more points within a 50-mile radius of its campus. If these courses prove to be popular and the financing is sound, the faculty, in consultation with a large number of ministers, can then lay out a long term plan for an S.T.M. (and later an S.T.D.) specifically tailored--in content, method, and schedule--for men in the parish ministry. As the demand arises for regional centers further from the seminary, the professors may have to limit their attendance to once a month and depend on local personnel as preceptors for the intervening sessions. Many presbyteries have capable men who could become parttime adjunct professors of the seminary, and eventually outstanding men who earn their degrees by extension may well prove to be the most effective professors in the program. Therefore regular, direct contact with the resident faculty of the seminary is not absolutely necessary; regional centers can be set up almost anywhere. One seminary, or several cooperating seminaries, may in this way contemplate the possibility of enrolling hundreds and even thousands of pastors in graduate study, i.e. continuing education with all the discipline and structure and incentive and accreditation of an advanced degree program, yet within their means and focused upon their needs as parish ministers.

It is interesting to note that Pittsburgh Seminary already has a number of regional centers for continuing education, although this program does not carry credit and has not yet been structured with any curricular plan. San Francisco Seminary, on the other hand, offers a definite plan of studies, credit, and an S.T.D. degree, but it does not provide any structure of regular contact for the student during the seven years it covers, except for three six-week summer sessions on the campus. Experience seems to indicate that men in the parish, even more than B.D. students or graduate research students, need the discipline of a degree program and the stimulus of regular contact to keep up the kind of serious study which should be maintained in continuing education.

2. Seminary Internships. Once regional centers are established, they can serve more than one purpose. A very simple and yet significant amplification of this program may well provide the answers for the two major drawbacks of existing seminary internships and open the way for a greatly expanded internship program. The first difficulty of existing internships is lack of effective supervision, and the second is the fact that they add to the total number of years for the B.D.

If seminary interns were related to regional centers, they could both receive supervision and earn academic credits by attending weekly seminars and carrying on a full study program. Both their theological studies and the internship experience would be heightened, and they would not be held back in reaching the B.D. It is conceivable that many of their courses at the regional center would be the same ones offered for pastors in the continuing education program, and the weekly seminars would be enriched by this egalitarian participation of seminarians and pastors. If a majority of the students at a seminary chose this option, it might have the effect of cutting the on-campus B.D. program to two years, rather than lengthening it to four years.

3. Theological Education of Laymen. Another purpose for the regional centers can be, of course, to put the seminary within reach of the layman. This can be done in a number of ways. Perhaps the most effective way would be to set up seminars with stiff reading requirements and academic credit and thus select relatively small groups of serious minded men. Some of these courses might be open to ministers and interns, providing a healthy exchange of viewpoints and making double use of the professors' time.

The theological education of laymen through these regional centers can fulfill several purposes. It may go a long way toward the realization that the ministry belongs to the whole church, not to a professional class. It should help bring to the fore the kind of world-experienced and world-oriented leadership which the church needs today to understand its mission, and it should help create the unity and the dynamics among the members which will further the mission of the church. It will demonstrate to the layman the importance of his own particular vocation and it will encourage him to pursue his vocation with divine zeal and theological insight. It should provide a new wealth of leadership in the life of local congregations.

Some of the purposes of theological training for laymen might be stated in this way. Rather than close rural parishes for purely economic reasons (i.e. when they can't afford to pay a professional clergyman), let the laymen fill those vacancies. Rather than encourage the worker-priest idea for the industrial mission and other specialized ministries, let the laymen become priests to their own kind. Rather than give token participation to laymen in the worship of the church one Sunday out of the year, give them full participation throughout the year. Rather than move toward increasingly large church memberships and multiple professional staffs, or at the same time, let the laymen form and lead the life of the church in groups of meaningful size related to their professions, residential communities, and interests. Rather than limit the church's participation in the social revolution to a small circle of radical clergymen, who often scandalize rather than lead the church, let the laymen, who have in their hands the means of shaping business and government and community life, enter into and influence the social revolution constructively.

4. Ministerial Training for Mid-Career and Post Career. If it is possible to extend theological education to laymen through a decentralized program, then the possibility should be considered of providing a full preparation for ordination, i.e. a B.D. program. We have already spoken of the need for a more natural development of leadership, and we have suggested that men who prove themselves in the world and gain experience as laymen and gradually become leaders in the church should be given more encouragement, theological accreditation, and parti-

pation in the ministry.

Several obvious factors should be considered here. There are men in many different professions whose faith and sense of call leads them to consider going into the professional ministry. Some of these men, generally men who have been successful and who have families and other responsibilities, give up their means of support, attend seminary for three years, and become pastors. Many more find the obstacles too great. But why should these men have to pay such a price to "go to seminary"? How many could be reached if the seminary went to them? Certainly the experience and perspective of these men can be invaluable in the professional ministry, and the cost of training these men in a traditional program must take into account the total salary loss during the period of study at a seminary.

Also to be considered is the fact that increasing numbers of dedicated church members are facing the challenge of what to do in retirement. As the retirement period expands to fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years--with lower age limits and longer life expectancy--the possibility arises of a second career in the ministry. A small or large number of laymen could be encouraged to enter theological training, beginning at any point during their first career, with this end in mind, adding new dimensions of service to their lives and new gifts of ministry to the church and the world. It is interesting to note that some Episcopal seminaries have set up full theological programs for men in other professions who want to enter the professional ministry.

5. Theological Training for University Students. It is easy to see how a decentralized program of theological education could be adapted to the university situation. Apparently recent church-sponsored programs on college and university campuses have failed to gain the respect and interest of the students. Perhaps the structure and discipline of an academic program, sponsored by a seminary or a group of seminaries, would fill the need for a serious presentation of the Christian faith, dialogue with the other disciplines, and theological training both for students and faculty.

The program could operate like the other programs mentioned above, i.e. a regional center with weekly seminars, guided readings, and even credit. Some of the courses would probably be geared to the university; others would be the same basic theological courses now offered at seminaries; all would reflect the interests and ferment of the university situation. If credit were given, in order to provide discipline and structure, this might carry recognition within some departments of the university and/or B.D. work at the seminary.

One of the major trends affecting the seminaries not mentioned above is the move toward clusters of theological institutions around major universities or complexes of universities. In these areas, at least, the personnel would not be hard to find for this kind of program. Theological study should not be limited to post-graduate ministerial candidates as it has largely been in the past.

6. Minority Group Leadership. Of great importance and concern right now is the theological training of leadership in minority group churches in this country. Here again the perspective of decentralization opens up intriguing possibilities.

One analysis of the problem goes like this--taking the black minority as an example. The proportion of blacks who go to colleges is relatively small; only very few of those who graduate consider going to seminary; and among those who do obtain a theological degree even fewer are really prepared for service in black communities or are really willing to serve where the need is greatest. On the other hand these same communities, particularly the churches, have produced outstanding natural leadership, and these men are quite capable of serious theological study within the context of their family-work-church responsibilities. We have mentioned previously the need for the selection and natural development of leadership in the churches. This principle is particularly important in minority group churches.

Could not the seminaries set up regional centers especially for theological training among minority groups? Perhaps it would be necessary to find extra faculty members with direct experience in these subcultures, and the plan of studies would certainly have to be adapted to their needs. Entrance requirements might be changed, and, if advisable, different degrees offered. It seems as if a far greater number of men and women could be reached; they would more probably be the real leaders in their churches and communities; and the overall investment would be far less than the cost of getting these same people out of their communities, through college and seminary, and back again.

#### Conclusion

The big question underlying this whole discussion is, What is the purpose of the seminaries? The assumption here has been that the seminaries exist in order to help the churches carry out their mission in the world. Inasmuch as the seminaries accept this premise, they must be ready to evaluate and change their traditional structures and programs to meet the challenges of the day. It is quite possible that seminary structures and programs may at times fail to fulfill their role or may even hinder the church's mission in the world. It is the hope of this writer that the seminaries, which are now going through unprecedented changes in this country, will discover new, flexible, dynamic ways to extend their role and greatly further the church's mission in the world.

This paper has attempted to set down one perspective which seems to open up significant possibilities for new developments in theological education. Decentralization is not a new idea in ministerial training or lay leadership development, nor is it without many parallels in other fields. But a systematic attempt to decentralize or extend our seminaries has not yet been made. Six different types of extension programs have been suggested above, all of them dealing with vital concerns in the mission of the church today. At the present moment there is no plan to carry out or even to test any of these proposals. Whether in these terms or in other ways altogether different the challenge before us is: Extend the Seminaries!

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