

## A WORKING DEFINITION OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY EXTENSION

### I. INTRODUCTION

People who are new to the extension concept continue to ask, What is theological education by extension? Those who are involved in the extension movement are constantly rethinking the bases and the nature of their programs. This paper is an expression of that process of definition, intended especially for group discussion by seminary faculties, in theological consultations, and at extension workshops.

At a recent ASIT consultation in Chile it became evident that there is no simple, exact definition of theological education by extension or even a clear distinction between extension and residence programs in Latin America today. There are now many varied adaptations of extension; residence and extension have been combined in several different ways; many residence programs have broken out of the traditional stereotypes. All across the board there is a growing sensitivity to the concerns of contextualization and an increasing openness to new alternatives.

It is useful to look at theological education by extension as a movement and a vision rather than a specific technique or system. From the beginning one of the dangers has been that extension might become a fixed formula, another confining tradition to replace or complement the residential pattern that had dominated for so long. Definitions are often limiting; their function is normally to enclose and exclude. Our intention here is to develop a working definition of extension that will be challenging and liberating rather than polarizing and confining.

### II. THE PURPOSE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY EXTENSION

Throughout the brief history of the extension movement there has been a common, overriding purpose: to extend the resources of theological education to the functioning and developing leaders of the congregations. Within this general goal many different reasons have been set forth, and these arguments merit more discussion than is possible here. But whatever the specific reasons for each extension program, the shared vision has been *to encourage and enable local leaders to develop their gifts and ministries without leaving their homes, jobs, communities, and local congregations.*

A. This purpose has been expressed *pragmatically and numerically.* We must take our training programs to the local church leaders because they cannot come to our seminaries and institutes. Or, we can reach many more students, and we are more likely to get the leaders, if we go to the congregations. This argument is very important, especially when it is linked to the other arguments that follow, but it can give the impression that extension is a stop-gap, second-rate approach to theological education.

B. Others have struggled to assert the legitimacy or even the superiority of extension as *an alternative system of theological education.* Using widely

accepted arguments from educational specialists, they affirm that real learning must integrate theory and practice creatively, that teachers and students must relate to each other as persons and as complementary equals, that learning takes place in all of life and is often more effective outside of our academic institutions. These insights do not in themselves make extension programs effective, but they do suggest that the extension approach has tremendous potential because these insights can be applied far more naturally in extension than traditional programs.

C. One of the basic concerns of extension advocates has been *the nature of the ministry*. The Western pattern of theological education has projected a professional model of the ministry, which encourages the non-trained to take a very secondary role. In Latin America this tendency is aggravated by the dominant Roman Catholic tradition, which still maintains a great divorce between clergy and laity. And throughout the Third World education, including theological education, plays an increasing role in the formation of elite classes. Extension can reverse these trends because it opens the door to theological education and the ministry to all, not just high-level candidates for the professional clergy.

D. There is a similar *ideological argument* for extension. Throughout the world we find hierarchical social and economic structures of power and privilege, based on race, wealth, class, technology, and education. In our churches this situation is repeated and exacerbated through traditional patterns of theological education, ordination, and the unique authority of the clergy--among Roman Catholics, Protestants, independent churches, and Pentecostals. Most members of most denominations are overwhelmingly proletarian, but their clergy-dominated power structures are usually identified with the ruling classes. If extension opens the door to theological education to the natural leaders of all our congregations, then the ministry should begin to reflect the concerns and serve the needs of the masses.

E. The extension movement now stretches across many ecclesiastical and ideological positions, and it includes many different concerns, but it shares a common vision for *the renewal of the ministry of the whole church for mission*. Its purpose is not primarily bound up with theological institutions as such or even with the church as an end in itself but rather with the mobilization of the church for mission in the world. To the extent that this vision prevails, the concepts and patterns of the extension movement must themselves fall under constant criticism and be subject to change. We have barely begun to reach and incorporate the leaders of all our local congregations in theological education...for ministry...in the church's mission.

### III. VARIOUS DIMENSIONS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY EXTENSION

In working out the purpose of theological education by extension several different dimensions should be kept in mind. The most obvious is geographical, but this is not the only dimension nor the most important. Each extension program should analyze and respond to the leadership needs of its churches in

all of the following dimensions. Our purpose is to extend our resources for theological education in all these ways.

A. *Geographically*. Obviously if we intend to reach the leaders of all our congregations without extracting them from their local situations, we have to decentralize our training programs. Extension centers must be located within reasonable travel time of all the congregations.

B. *Chronologically*. Not only must extension centers be located close to the students; extension meetings or classes must be scheduled at times when they can attend. Most of them hold jobs or are housewives or attend school. Some are church workers and pastors and are especially busy on weekends. Rural people are often self-employed and can meet during weekdays; city people are more likely to meet in the evenings.

C. *Culturally*. Often an extension program is expected to serve urban and rural churches, and the students may represent several different sub-cultures. The course materials may be the same, but the center meetings must adapt the content to the needs, customs, language, and thought patterns of each group. The teachers must fit into each local environment and encourage full discussion by the students so that their studies will be integrated into their understanding and applied in their ministry effectively.

D. *Academically*. Ideally, extension programs should offer theological courses at all the academic levels represented in the churches they serve. This often means that higher as well as lower levels must be added to that which has traditionally been the norm. Two problems emerge at once: How to provide materials and personnel for such a wide range and how to avoid pretense and prejudice between students and graduates of the different levels. An essential principle of the extension philosophy has been the functional parity of different academic levels; students at all levels must be given equal recognition for ministry. Course materials can be adjusted or produced separately for the different levels. As the purpose of renewal and mission becomes clear to the students, they should become proud of their diversity and committed to a common ministry.

E. *Socially*. As a corollary to the previous points, extension reaches people of all different social classes and economic levels. It is important to note, however, that extension programs are not normally the means of social or economic advancement. On the contrary these programs serve people who have already made their place in life through a non-religious profession, who support themselves while they study theology, and who are not expecting to find a better paid job in the professional ministry. Extension programs are thus able to train theologically professional people who rarely enter a traditional seminary and also to avoid the support problem of graduates from high level theological seminaries, especially in Third World countries, where pastors' salaries at this level are almost non-existent.

F. *Ecclesiastically*. Traditionally, theological institutions have accepted only candidates for "fulltime" ministries, primarily because of their high cost and limited space, and only such candidates could afford to attend those institutions. In extension this all changes; elders and deacons

and ordinary members can "enter" just as easily as ministerial candidates. Some extension programs have been set up primarily or exclusively for church workers, pastors, and candidates; others are described as lay training. If our purpose is to broaden the concept of ministry and renew the ministry of the whole church, however, it is important to encourage non-clergy to participate alongside the clergy.

G. *Numerically, ideologically, and theologically.* Using the same resources, extension programs readily train far more students than traditional institutions. And they include a far wider spread of the churches' leadership: older as well as young people, women as well as men, non-clergy as well as candidates for the ministry and church workers, people from all academic levels, sub-cultures, and social-economic groups. This is not merely a quantitative concern but ideological and theological also. The ministry should involve the whole body of Christ and serve all sectors of human society. Theological education by extension facilitates the formation of ministry of the people, by the people, and for the people.

#### IV. THREE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY EXTENSION

Although there is no magic formula for theological education by extension, every program should include and integrate these 3 elements: self-study materials for individual study, practical work in the congregations, and regular class encounters or seminars. All 3 of these elements are essential to the effectiveness of extension as a learning system, especially as they relate to each other.

A. *Self-study materials* are essential for extension students because they must get the basic content of their courses on their own. Extension classes are normally held just once a week or even less frequently and the limited time available (one to 3 hours) cannot be squandered passing out information. Extension professors have gone to great pains to prepare and place in the hands of their students not only textbooks but also workbooks that will guide them effectively through the important points toward their objectives. On the one hand recent educational technology has been helpful in defining objectives, identifying student capabilities, setting up learning sequences, and evaluating these materials. On the other hand there is an increasing awareness of the significance of non-printed and non-formal educational processes, especially among people whose reading ability is limited. The search for more effective self-study materials and procedures continues.

B. In many places extension has been successful primarily because the students are so involved in *practical work* in their own congregations. This was not planned so much as assumed, because the students are the leaders, often the functioning pastors of their churches. Much more thought needs to be given, however, to the effective use of practical work in the formation of extension students and in the development of extension curricula. Although extension students naturally raise pertinent questions and make direct application of their courses as they study, some extension programs make very poor use of this invaluable relationship between theory and practice.

C. The third essential ingredient in extension learning systems is the *regular encounters or seminars* at each extension center. One important function of the center meetings is to provide fellowship and inspiration for the extension students and professors. Another is to provide motivation and clarification and confirmation of their studies. Another is to integrate through discussion the course content and the practical problems and work in the congregations. This expression and exchange of ideas and experiences is itself an important addition to the students' formation which cannot be reduced to the printed page nor left to the student on his own. The center meetings are really the heart of the program; the effectiveness of the other 2 elements, self-study materials and practical work, is to a great extent determined by what goes on in the brief but vital meetings of students and professors at each center. Most extension programs have found that the optimum frequency for center meetings is once a week, which allows for working students to cover a reasonable amount of study material and also provides them with a regular stimulus for daily study on top of all their other responsibilities. Needless to say it is essential that extension students maintain a steady discipline of home study in order to be able to participate meaningfully in the center meetings and to progress effectively toward their learning objectives.

#### V. EXTENSION AND OTHER TYPES OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In defining theological education by extension it can be helpful to compare and distinguish several other types. Although residential seminaries and Bible institutes have become the norm or standard of full theological training, other systems of leadership training continue to be used widely in the Third World: correspondence courses, brief institutes, and evening classes. The following contrasts only bring out the broad differences and are not meant to be prejudicial. In widely different situations each type may at times be the only or the best way to do theological education. In the future we shall probably see more combining and exchange between these and other forms.

A. *Residential programs* generally take their students from their normal, diverse contexts and provide intensive, long-term studies at some central location. The training itself is usually the primary concern of the students for 2, 3 or more years, and most of them are young, single men preparing for fulltime church work. *Extension programs* do not take their students away from their communities, congregations, jobs, and families. The training is fitted into their life-style and added to all their other responsibilities and may take 5 to 15 years to complete. The students normally work fulltime at some secular job or in their congregations, and many of them are older, mature leaders. They may or may not be candidates for ordination as pastors, fulltime or otherwise.

B. *Correspondence courses* are usually offered to all kinds of people, pastors and workers as well as ordinary members and even non-members, sometimes in great numbers. They do not take the students out of their normal settings, nor do they provide any personal contact other than the printed page, or in some cases cassettes. Therefore there is little opportunity to clarify, adapt, expand, or debate the course content for individual or group understanding. Often, but not always, these courses are very elementary, and the level of drop-outs is usually very high. *Extension programs* usually

depend heavily upon printed materials, but they also provide regular personal contact between each group of students and their professors. This allows for greater depth and adaptation of the courses, provides motivation and clarification for the students, facilitates integration of theory and practice, and adds the vital interpersonal dimension to the learning experience.

C. *Brief institutes* vary greatly as to length, content, and methodology. They bring students together at some central location, but they do not normally cut them off from their families, jobs, communities, and congregations. They may be theoretical or practical or both, but they usually do not provide for or sustain on-going study or application of what is learned. They may reach a wide selection of local church leaders, but they usually do not give them sufficient training or accreditation to become recognized as pastors. *Extension programs* bring together their students at local centers regularly and provide daily home-study materials to assure on-going study throughout most or all of the year. Many of these programs offer full ministerial training, and those who are candidates may be ordained as pastors upon graduation.

D. *Night Bible schools* are prevalent in many countries, especially in urban areas, and reach large numbers of students, many of whom are older, married, and employed, and some of whom are the leaders of their congregations. Classes are held 2 to 5 evenings a week, for 2 or 3 hours. Because so much of the students' limited free time is spent getting to and attending classes, little time is left for independent study. The students usually listen to the professors' lectures, take notes, and memorize them for examination purposes. *Extension programs* provide the basic course content in the form of self-study materials. The weekly class sessions are not intended to pass out information but to discuss the concerns and problems of the students as they work through these materials and try to relate them to their own lives and ministry.

## VI. SOME EXAMPLES OR MODELS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY EXTENSION

No doubt there are many, different possible adaptations and combinations of theological education by extension. At the ASIT consultation in Chile the group that worked on a definition of extension suggested several different models and recommended certain guidelines to evaluate these models. Perhaps future consultations and workshops will carry forward this task. There is much to be learned from the great diversity of extension programs that are already operating. Following are samples selected from among at least 250 extension programs in 60 countries around the world, most of which were initiated during the past 5 to 10 years.

A. The most commented extension program is the Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala, which is based at a central campus with a core faculty, administration, and publishing operation all committed to extension work. The fulltime faculty members, some of whom do not live at the seminary, visit all the centers once a week for 2 to 3-hour sessions, and larger 2 or 3-day gatherings are held at the central campus 2 or 3 times per year. This type of extension is not uncommon, but few institutions have been willing to phase out their residential programs in favor of extension. Many extension programs serve areas 2 to 10 times larger and with poorer highways.

B. Many seminaries and Bible institutes have added extension programs to their regular residencial programs. In Colombia, for example, the United Biblical Seminary at Medellín, the Christian and Missionary Alliance Institute at Armenia, and the Caribbean Bible Center at Sincelejo have parallel programs of residence and extension. In some places extension serves a lower academic level; in others it reaches above and below the residence program. Often it means additional burdens for the same staff and additional strain on limited budgets. For these and other reasons it may become the second-best training program.

C. Extension and residence have been combined in several different ways. The Evangelical United Seminary in Mexico, for example, offers basic ministerial training by extension at the secondary level; outstanding students are encouraged to take advanced training on campus at the university level. Other extension programs find that their students become interested in further studies and go on to residencial schools. Some have pointed out that the extension program may well give new life to the residencial institutions, increasing the number of applicants and attracting more mature and more committed students. There is a danger, however, that this relationship reinforce the idea that extension is only a step toward further, more accredited training.

D. Some extension programs have had to adapt the Guatemala model to serve vast geographical areas. The Eduardo Lane Bible Institute, for example, covers 120,000 square miles in Central Brazil. The central staff is unable to visit the extension centers weekly even with the help of small planes, so pastors and other qualified people tutor local groups, and faculty members supervise them through monthly visits and by correspondence.

E. The George Allan Theological Seminary in Bolivia also serves an enormous region and has further complications with cultural, linguistic, and geographic differences. The work is divided into districts, and staff teams have developed in several places which participate in the preparation of materials as well as the teaching in the centers.

F. The Peruvian Evangelical Church has for some time had a number of Bible institutes with long or short-term residence programs in different parts of the country. Now the national Christian education committee hopes to utilize these bases to build up their incipient extension program throughout the presbyteries with the help of a national coordinator.

G. The TAFTEE program in India has been able to build up local, largely voluntary extension faculties for their 25 widely separated centers, each with a locally named dean or coordinator. Another promising development is the use of upper level extension students to teach lower level extension classes as part of their required work. If each of the present 350 university-level students were to teach 10 more, they could begin to meet the vast needs for training in the thousands of local congregations.

H. The Conservative Baptist extension program in Northern Honduras emphasizes the significance of teaching or discipleship in the formation of their students. Each student is required to teach at least one other student from

the very beginning and to train him to teach others. This chain effect is focussed on the formation of new congregations, which is the chief task of every student.

I. The Apostolic Church of Mexico is launching a series of extension programs under its department of education and a national extension coordinator. These programs are planned to meet specific needs, such as the formation of Sunday school teachers and deacons, the continuing education of pastors, and the preparation of candidates for the ministry. They even plan to train extension teachers through an extension program, which is of course only logical.

J. The Latin American Biblical Seminary of Costa Rica is one of the largest, most influential, and most competent theological institutions in Latin America, and it has become involved in the extension movement in several creative ways. An extension committee of faculty and advanced students provides advice, materials, training, and supervision for extension programs in Costa Rica. A specialization in theological education by extension is offered for regular degree-level students. And a new program, now in its experimental stage, will enable individuals and groups scattered throughout Latin America to design and carry out high-level theological studies pertinent to their interests and needs, based in their local situations, utilizing local resources, with the advice and accreditation of the Latin American Biblical Seminary.

K. The South African Council of Churches' Department of Theological Education is now planning a vast extension program that will bring together the resources of many of the major denominations and offer fully recognized ministerial training for local leaders throughout the country. Participating churches will contribute funds and personnel, some of whom will give fulltime to teaching and the preparation of self-instructional materials. At first 3 academic levels will be offered, and centers will be set up in 10 major cities. The program will cost an estimated \$50,000 for the national office plus \$50,000 for course preparation and \$2000 for each center during the first year. Once initiated (in 1977) the program will probably expand rapidly to 25 or more centers, and many of these centers will probably have to reach out into the rural areas and form sub-centers. It will be interesting to see the effect of such a massive thrust in theological education by extension upon largely traditional churches in a tense, racist society.

## VII. CONCLUSION

We have considered the purpose of theological education by extension, including several reasons or arguments for extension, various dimensions of theological education by extension, 3 essential elements in extension as an educational system, a broad comparison of extension and other types of theological education, and some examples or models of theological education by extension. Each of these topics calls for considerable discussion in theoretical and in practical terms. These notes are presented not as a set formula but as a working definition of theological education by extension. Each church and institution should work through the issues and possibilities



suggested here in terms of its available resources and objectives or needs.

This paper may be used by faculties, consultations, and workshops in several different ways. Participants may be given copies for individual study and then come together for discussion section by section. Or each section could be presented orally and then discussed in groups. Questions for discussion over each section can be prepared ahead of time or the groups themselves can identify the issues and questions to be discussed. Many issues and practical questions arise readily from the material presented. Every effort should be made to focus directly on the needs and possibilities of the churches and programs represented. If some of the participants are already working in extension programs, their experiences, problems, and insights should be useful.

Any study of the extension concept and movement should include critical evaluation. It is not enough to ask what is the purpose of theological education by extension; we must also ask whether this purpose is being fulfilled. It is not enough to look at the different dimensions and elements in extension; we must also ask ourselves to what extent we are responding to these dimensions and providing for the effective integration of these elements. It is not enough to review the many possibilities of theological education by extension; we must ask whether our vision is in fact being incarnated in effective training, in the renewal of the ministry, in the mobilization of the whole church for mission.

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