

POPULAR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
- An Historical Perspective

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Introduction

I have very personal reasons to thank God for this opportunity to return to Guatemala and to heart of the ALIET. If we take the beginning of the extension program of the Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala in 1963 as an historical starting-point in the search for popular theological education, we can say that much has happened during these 23 years. One small indication of the progress of this movement is the fact that I am now working as the director of an extension center of San Francisco Theological Seminary in Southern California. Another indication is that in April last year several of us participated in an international consultation of the World Council of Churches in Mexico on "Theology by the People". The following month I visited the United Kingdom where I saw that the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) is setting up a national theological education by extension program for laity. They already have a program for auxiliary pastors. And the Church of England (Episcopal) has 15 extension programs alongside its 15 residential programs. Another indication is that ASIT, the sister association of theological schools in Southern Latin America, held a consultation last October on "New Alternatives in Theological Education" and reported on 16 extension programs in the Southern Cone that reach about 8000 students. In August I shall visit the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, which has a program with 20,000 participants.

As a beginning I suggest that we think about education not as the accumulation of information and skills but as human transformation, i.e. as change in perspective, attitudes, values and commitments. Theological education means, then, change or human transformation according to God's will or reign, according to biblical criteria under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Popular theological education is concerned, in conclusion, with the transformation of God's people in order to fulfill God's mission in the world.

An Historical Resume

Because I have had neither the time nor the tools to prepare a history of popular theological education, I would like to share what I have at hand, personal experiences, knowing that my perspectives are very limited. As I present these brief reflections, I suggest that others do the same, because present here are persons whose experiences and reflections could form the basis for a history and analysis that would be very useful for God's work in Latin America and beyond.

1964-1968: When we arrived at the Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala in 1964, the extension program was in its second year, struggling to survive and to find its way. It was in those struggles that our education about theological education began. We could see immediately that theological education by extension (TEE) offers significant new possibilities for the church, because it provides essential theological tools and opens doors to ministry to persons

who had previously been excluded by age, level of schooling, family situation, socio-economic position, language, race, sex or occupation. But the process of change took us much further than anyone imagined at the beginning, because it established new relationships between the seminary and the church, teachers and students, theory and context, clergy and laity.

1965-1968: From the early years we were in touch with individuals and institutions in other parts of Latin America that were experiencing serious problems with traditional North Atlantic models of theological education and were looking for new options. We set aside some time for correspondence; we began to share questions, concerns, and plans with colleagues in several places; and we developed a network that expanded rapidly and helped to create the sense of a movement.

1967-1975: The first international TEE workshop took place at Armenia, Colombia in 1967. Later we were involved in workshops in various Latin American countries. The purpose of these activities was to introduce new concepts of theological education and ministry, explore new models, equip the theological educators and church leaders, and train writers of self-instructional materials.

1967-1975: Following the Armenia workshop we attempted to develop a functional organization to coordinate the preparation and distribution of instructional materials that were urgently needed for the growing number of extension programs in Latin America. The Comité Asesor de Textos Autodidácticos was formed in 1968, and the Asociación Latinoamericana de Institutos y Seminarios Teológicos por Extensión (ALISTE) in 1972. These efforts were incorporated into ALIET in 1975.

1969-1975: While our main efforts were directed to the preparation of instructional materials, it was also important to write, gather, and publish documents on the philosophy, methods, and tools of the extension movement. We prepared a manual for extension directors and teachers, and this was incorporated into the first major book on Theological Education by Extension, edited by Ralph Winter, which came out in 1969 and was an important factor in spreading the concept to other regions.

1970-1977: By the year 1970 it was necessary to initiate a quarterly bulletin in order to keep in touch with the growing network of persons interested in TEE. This bulletin gave us a forum for the discussion of many problems, questions, and concepts that arose. It began in 1970 with the name Evangelical Seminary. In 1972 we changed the name to Extension Seminary. The circulation grew to 1000 in Spanish and 2000 in English.

1973-1977: In 1973 I was invited to present a paper on "Extension: An Alternative Model for Theological Education" at the annual meeting-consultation of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches. Subsequently the TEF arranged visits to Asia (1974) and Africa (1975) for consultation and conversations with theological educators and church leaders in collaboration with the regional associations of theological schools. Likewise the Latin American associations had consultations and workshops on TEE during this period.

1974-1977: In order to strengthen the leadership of the movement ALISTE organized a training program for directors of extension programs, based on the

experience of our seminary in Guatemala and designed primarily by James Emery. Three groups of Latin Americans participated in this program plus a group of persons from other regions.

1975-1978: To stimulate further exploration into the significance and the possibilities of the movement we proposed in 1975 the formation of "Centers for Studies in Theological Education and Ministry". It was evident that any extension program could become a base for new reflection and experimentation but that many were adopting simplistic formulas uncritically. In Guatemala we used this concept to organize and complement the various activities that had emerged haphazardly: workshops and consultations, writing and publication, correspondence and consulting. In 1978 I gathered my own writings from this period under the title, The Extension Movement in Theological Education (revised in 1981).

1977-1983: In September 1977 I moved to Geneva to become Assistant Director of the PTE of the WCC, which had just replaced the Theological Education Fund and which broadened its mandate to include the six continents. During this period I was in touch with extension programs in all the regions, and I participated in consultations in Africa, Australia, Europe and North America as well as Latin America. In 1983 I edited a collection of reports on 29 extension programs representing the main regions and ecclesiastical traditions of the world under the title Ministry by the People. I estimated that by that time the movement had a total of 300 to 400 programs with about 100,000 students.

1977-1983: In the context of the World Council of Churches I was able to investigate the wider implications of TEE for the mission of the church. It struck me that our concept of theological education was very similar to the concept of primary health care and the training of local health promoters, which had become the top priority of the Christian Medical Commission and the World Health Organization. Also, our concept was very similar to the emerging consensus about development through peoples' participation. I wrote about parallels in the article "Ministry by the People" in Ministerial Formation (January 1979) and in another article, "Mission by the People," in International Review of Mission (July 1979). In a third article, "Ecumenical Perspectives and Theological Education by Extension", I tried to point out the significance of TEE in relation to the major goals of the ecumenical movement (Ministerial Formation, January 1983).

1983-1986: In June 1983, before leaving the PTE, I wrote a paper, "Theology by the People", to demonstrate that the people of God carry primary responsibility not only for the ministries of the church but also for the theological tasks of our time. This has been chosen as one of the central themes of the PTE, and it was the theme for its first international consultation after the Vancouver Assembly, at Mexico in April 1985.

DIMENSIONS OF THE SEARCH

Following is a brief paradigm of the dimensions of our quest for theological education among the people. For each dimension there still remain valid and relevant questions. The cumulative effect of this analysis is to lead us toward a greater challenge, just as our historical context presents a greater crisis.

The Practical Dimension: Extension programs have been created in part as a response to practical needs. There simply were many congregations without pastors and many pastors without training. TEE offers the possibility of forming leaders and pastors for all the congregations in almost any circumstances.

Have we responded to this need, or are there still congregations without pastors and leaders and pastors with inadequate preparation?

The Anthropological Dimension: From the beginning we realized that our churches represent diverse cultures, that these cultures need autochthonous leaders, and that in many cases it is necessary to train them within their culture in order not to disrupt local customs and to disturb the social dynamics. TEE is capable of responding to this challenge.

Are we responding sensitively to all ethnic groups in order to form effective, indigenous leaders?

The Sociological Dimension: By the same token the churches have, or should have, congregations within all the socio-economic sectors of society, without permitting the prejudices and privileges of the society to be reflected among the leaders. TEE proposes to reach and form leaders and pastors among all social classes without acception, under the Lordship of Christ.

Are we reaching this goal or simply reflecting the dominant social tendencies?

The Economic Dimension: We have observed that one of the obstacles for the development of the congregations is the double dependence that results from the professional system of the ministry. The congregations have to provide good salaries in order to get pastors, and pastors who have graduated from residential seminaries need good salaries in order to subsist. TEE offers a greater possibility of integrity and self-support both for congregations and for pastors, because the training is accessible to all in their own places.

What has been the effect of our TEE programs in this sense?

The Pedagogical Dimension: Whereas the school system is hierarchical and traditional teaching tends to domesticate the students, TEE seeks to break out of both schemes, recognizing that the students are leaders whatever their academic level may be, and treating them as partners in the educational process. To achieve this change the teachers need to come down off of their pedestal, and institutions need to respect the students' maturity.

To what degree are these perspectives being realized in our programs?

The Ideological Dimension: All of the above signify not only a service to the people but a shift toward the self-determination of God's people as the subject as well as the object of theological education and ministry. Some TEE programs have adapted this new ideology; others have not. From the beginning we recognized the danger that TEE might be utilized as a new system of theological paternalism.

What are the intentions and the results of our programs with regard to their ideology?

The Ecclesial Dimension: Taking as its foundation the biblical concept of the body of Christ and the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers, TEE has tried to stimulate the leaders in the congregations to develop their gifts and to take their responsibilities together with the pastors. This in turn should make all the members feel that the ministry belongs to all.

Are we in fact achieving new relationships between pastors, leaders and others as members of one body and partners in ministry?

The Missiological Dimension: One of the goals of TEE has been to equip congregations to fulfill their missions. It is important to reach out to all the leaders, to all the best leaders, and not just to those who want to go to seminary. It is important to equip them for their diverse vocations in the world, not just to be pastors.

What has been the experience of our programs in terms of the number and the quality of the students and in terms of the fulfillment of the church's mission in the world?

The Theological Dimension: By making theological education accessible to the people, we introduce the possibility that the people of God might become the protagonists not only of the ministry but also of theology, which is reflection on the incarnation of God's Word and the irruption of God's Reign in our world. The people of God should of course be the primary agents of theology. But we struggle against a constant tendency to intellectualize theology and take it away from the people.

Are there signs that our congregations are recovering their role as authors of their own theologies?

The Spiritual Dimension: As it opens wide the door to theological education, TEE tries to release the gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit among the people. Each believer grows in the degree to which he/she utilizes his/her gifts and dedicates his/her life to the service of God.

Are the churches that utilize TEE experiencing spiritual renewal in this way?

THE CURRENT CRISIS

Some of us who have come to this consultation and many of our colleagues will say that TEE has been successful. It has been widely accepted and taken its place as an essential part of the work of the churches in Latin America and also in other regions of the world. It has responded in some sense to the concerns that we have just enumerated. But we must recognize what is happening in our current context and ask whether we are being faithful to the mandate of God's Reign in this context.

It is interesting to note that all ten dimensions of our search for popular theological education underline the fact that we live in a hierarchical society. This consultation focuses on the people precisely because our societies and our churches and our institutions place the people, the vast majority, the poor and suffering, at the base of an enormous pyramid, carrying all the weight and receiving the crumbs of those who like us live in the upper socio-economic levels. We now have to ask ourselves whether we are contributing to the transformation of this reality. As Jesus said at the

outset of his ministry, God's Reign brings good news to the poor, healing to the broken hearted, sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed.

As we now live outside of Central America my wife and I enjoy the luxury of investigating, analyzing, and discussing openly what is happening in these beloved countries. To us it seems very clear that the socio-economic pyramid, which to a very significant degree is maintained and protected by the economic, political, and military power of the USA, is the principal cause of the poverty, violence, suffering, and death in Central America. We assume that those who are disciples of Christ and heralds of God's Reign must struggle against these principalities and powers, not with weapons of this world, certainly, but with the whole armor of God.

The 13 years that we lived in Central America served not only to educate us about theological education but also to reeducate us regarding biblical teachings and the real world. Our greatest regret has been to discover that we did practically nothing to prevent the tragedy that has fallen upon Guatemala during the last eight years and that we did relatively little to prepare our church for ministry under these circumstances.

I submit for your consideration in this consultation that one of the primary goals of theological education is to transform the social and ecclesial hierarchies, even as we struggle against sin in our personal lives, according to God's Reign and God's justice. This may require major innovations in our understanding of discipleship, spirituality, evangelization, and theological education in the face of the current crisis.

Now I wear a woven bracelet that represents a Pedro Cente Lares, who disappeared on December 20, 1981, one of the 38,000 disappeared in Guatemala. During the darkest hours of these last years, some of the relatives of the disappeared have joined together, with great fear, with great courage, and at great risk, to witness to the truth and to be a prophetic voice for justice in the search for their loved ones. We know that in Guatemala 14 priests, 50 pastors, more than 500 catechists, and an uncounted number of the faithful have died because of their solidarity with the people and because of their faithfulness to the One who died on the cross. I believe that these heroes and martyrs have something to teach us about popular theological education.

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