

## INGREDIENTS FOR A PEOPLE'S THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY Some Initial Reflections

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Years ago Jim Hopewell, then Director of the Theological Education Fund, wrote an article focused on the question, If seminaries didn't exist, how would we design theological education? He suggested strongly that we probably wouldn't propose anything like our contemporary institutions but rather something along the lines of theological education by extension. This was in fact one of the earliest articles to alert ecumenical circles about the new model called TEE.

The emergence of powerful voices from the margins of church and society in this generation and the substantial new insights and contributions of biblical and theological scholars in tune with those voices compel us to ~~to~~ rethink and rearticulate the task of theological education. The rapid and unprecedented geopolitical shifts of the past three years and the virtual absence of a workable, moral vision of the "new world order" compel us to rethink and rearticulate theology itself. The relentless and accelerating advance of poverty and suffering around the world compel us to rethink and rearticulate ministry. Such new efforts cannot effectively be done by even the most enlightened and well-meaning from positions of privilege and power; they must be undertaken with and among and for the people, el pueblo, minjung.

Recently friends long concerned about alternative approaches to theological education suggested that we think about creating "A People's Theological Seminary." Following are some initial reflections on possible ingredients, issues and methods for such an endeavor.

### FOCUS FOR CURRICULUM

Clearly a People's Theological Seminary should focus on the essential process of hermeneutical circulation as we have experienced that process in the Black, feminist, Latin American, and other liberation movements. The essential ingredients (social analysis, theological analysis, and pastoral analysis) may include systematic theoretical work; they certainly require critical tools; they must be validated through personal experience in the realities with which they are concerned.

**1. Social Analysis.** To really see our local and global world requires us to go beyond phenomenological and functionalist to structural-dialectical analysis. This requires strong ideological suspicion and critical reading of our media, education system, history, and culture from the perspective of the marginalized and excluded ones. It

requires us to find ways to keep in living contact with those who live and suffer and die on the margins.

**2. Theological Analysis.** Similarly, to sharpen our theological and ethical judgement requires a critical rereading of our faith traditions and our own convictions. It requires strong hermeneutical suspicion and rereading of the Bible from the perspective of the poor. To sustain this process requires on-going participation in something akin to a base community.

**3. Pastoral Analysis.** Finally to complete the hermeneutical circle we need not only to critique existing expressions of church and society but also to explore models which are consistent with our social analysis and theological critique, i.e. from the perspective of the marginalized. We need to experience and experiment with new and old alternative models of church, within and/or outside our own church structures. Such models will have to announce and be good news to the poor.

**4. Conclusion.** This on-going hermeneutical circulation might be the core curriculum, the heart of the pedagogical process for a People's Theological Seminary. Some refer to this essential learning as "an epistemological rupture" or losing one's intellectual, theological and spiritual virginity. It can become a permanent, vital dynamo that is constantly fueled by the daily news, daily life experience, Bible study and worship, every personal encounter and community experience. It may not require much if any of the usual schooling ingredients.

#### CRITICAL QUESTIONS

If this proposal is to focus on such elements as just suggested, if the essential learning process is not necessarily tied to schooling, then certain critical questions should be considered. We all know that institutions require enormous quantities of energy and time and money. Even seminaries, which are among the smallest of institutions, develop a complex apparatus that demands the full attention of and often creates enormous tensions among all concerned. The following questions suggest that there might be another way to do the essential and avoid much of the institutional paraphernalia.

**1. Who qualifies to study in such a program?** Instead of schooling levels and requirements, admission could be based on interest and critical consciousness, i.e. willingness or desire to question the ways we have been taught to see the world, read the Bible, and practice our faith. For this purpose higher levels of schooling can be a help or a hindrance: they are closely linked with privilege and power.

The most important requirement might well be ministry among "the least of my brothers and sisters."

**2. Who can teach and administer such a program?** It may be possible and preferable to run this People's Theological Seminary with no tenured or fulltime faculty, no campus, no administrative or salaried staff. There may be a considerable number of retired theologians, active pastors, movement activists, institutional persons and young people who would jump at the chance to create a genuine alternative of this kind with a base among ordinary people and an option for and with the poor.

**3. Would it be accredited?** By opting not to be accredited and not to offer credits or degrees or certificates, this program could avoid all that accreditation implies. It would simply gain credit or credibility with and through the participants. Those accredited institutions and programs that wish to make use of learning experiences provided by the People's Seminary would have to develop the means to evaluate and give credit for them.

**4. How would it relate to the established churches and their theological institutions?** Hopefully there would be a creative tension in which this People's Theological Seminary would neither be absorbed into nor reject the established institutions. It would be recognized as a radical alternative which would be free to critique, complement and even serve them. It would in turn be critiqued by them, by the churches and by the participants themselves.

#### **METHODOLOGY FOR A MOVEMENT**

At first it may seem that not much can be done without an institutional infrastructure. On second thought many possibilities come to mind. Such possibilities can multiply with rapidly advancing information, communication and publication technology. Following are just a few seminal ideas as to how the People's Seminary might work.

**1. A New Mission Order.** The network of people who share this vision could form a kind of mission order with a few basic commitments in terms of time, money, spiritual disciplines, reading and other specific tasks. There could in fact be different levels of involvement as well as different kinds of responsibilities. But the idea of belonging to a community with a vision like this can be very appealing, and it would provide the necessary accompaniment and accountability to sustain commitments for learning and alternative life-style and service for the long haul.

**2. Basic Ecclesial Communities.** The participants would need to participate in regular, small meetings for sharing and reflection. These nuclei would probably not be like Latin

American base communities, because our culture is so different. But precisely because we live so isolated from each other, we need this kind of experience. This is not to detract from regular participation in church but simply to recognize that serious sharing and reflection rarely take place in our churches.

**3. Regular Communication.** Some kind or kinds of regular communication would be needed to provide continual common material for the three dimensions of the hermeneutical circulation. Such material is readily available through publications like *Christianity & Crisis* and *Sojourners*. If existing publications were adopted, a very simple circular mailing could be added to provide specific information about a People's Theological Seminary, its network of resources, contacts for the various nuclei, special events, etc.

**4. Retreats, Demonstrations, Public Events.** It might be necessary to provide opportunities to gather occasionally for renewal, for building wider community, for social witness and for popular education. Here, too, powerful, alternative experiences might be offered: Holy Week at the desert test site in Nevada, all night vigils with the homeless on the streets of Los Angeles or San Francisco, camping in the Sierra, as well as research weekends at a seminary library, seminars with community leaders in Black, Hispanic, and Asian neighborhoods, and prayer retreats with religious communities.

## RESOURCES

One of the first tasks of a People's Theological Seminary and of each group in the network would be to develop a list of potential resources, a list which would never stop growing. Following are some basic comments along this line.

**1. The Participants Themselves.** Obviously the participants themselves, all of whom will be learners and teachers, must be the primary resource. In fact one of the most needed and most important contributions of a new seminary would be to recover for ourselves the right and the responsibility to be the authors of our own learning, the creators of our own theology and the stewards of our own ministries, not in isolation but in community.

**2. God's Two Books.** As many have said, God has given us the Book of Life and the Bible. Both are primary resources for our daily pilgrimage and our life's vocation. If we can only learn to read these two books effectively together, we will be well equipped for the journey. We believe that the Bible holds the key to the full and ultimate understanding of Life, and we see increasingly that Life itself is essential for our understanding of the Bible. So all

participants would have much to learn and much to contribute.

**3. Theology of Liberation, Theology of Life.** The Latin American theologians persist in saying that as long as there is oppression of any kind, the Gospel must be a message of liberation. But since that word has been so vilified and its use has in some places become so dangerous, they now prefer to talk about the Gospel and the theology of life, that fullness of life which is God's shalom, which is for all people. A People's Seminary would want to draw on all theologies that promote this life.

**4. Theater, Art, Music, Literature.** Because our Protestant traditions and our North Atlantic culture have become so cerebral, a People's Theological Seminary would have to go out of its way to recover the visual and sensual dimensions of human experience, communication and celebration. Projects for theater, art, music or literature might require the formation of special teams, or they could be undertaken by existing nuclei with gifts and interest in these areas. Such projects for and with popular communities could become a major component of a Seminary

#### PURPOSE

The central purpose of a People's Theological Seminary should be to create and strengthen critical consciousness for human transformation. To change the structures of injustice, oppression and violence is extremely difficult. To change the structures in our minds is perhaps more difficult. The latter is essential as means to the former.

Experience with experiments in global education suggest that this epistemological rupture, loss of virginity, or awakening of critical consciousness occurs when old ways of seeing reality, reading the Bible, practicing ministry-church become invalid, e.g. when we see the situations of minorities in our cities, hear the stories of refugees from Central America, or try to comprehend the whole history of sexism, racism and class in our culture. It is greatly deepened and reinforced when we discover that the Bible speaks directly, clearly, centrally of poverty, oppression and liberation. And this awakening or conversion becomes a permanent way of seeing and living when we become part of communities whose faith flows out of these realities and revelations.

Our U.S. society and our churches need most urgently the revolutionary changes that such critical consciousness can envision and promote. But it is not enough to set off isolated sparks or even explosions with break-through experiences. It will require an ongoing network of small

but powerful reactors with a critical mass of fissionable or rather fusionable human material.