

Title - Alternatives to institutional theological education: a proposal for grass root theological education

Author - Emmanuel Ekpunobi

Date – December 2005

Word count - 5039

BACKGROUND

Separate discussions with twenty-five Bishops who are the proprietors of St. Paul's reveal the diversity of their expectations about the seminary. Listening carefully to these Bishops, one could paint pictures of their expectations of what the clergy, i.e. our products, should look like. They expect the seminary to produce these 'ideal' clergy who will function in their dioceses. Here is a broad grouping of the Bishops' expectations. "We want clergy who are:

- Evangelical. Who can go to the remote villages with the Gospel and declare it boldly. Not like your graduates who want to be posted to urban areas only.
- Prayer warriors. Who know how to pray and things happen. Clergy who have spiritual powers. Not like your graduates who are only good in high sounding theological jargons.
- Good conductors of service. Clergy who follow the rubrics of the order of service yet relate the service to the needs of the congregation. Not like your graduates who do not know the people and do not care to pray on issues of relevance to the members of the congregation.
- Mobilizers of people. Who can raise money for the church. No like your graduates who come as office workers and expect their pay at the end of the month, whether they work or not.
- Understanding. Who speak the local language, or dialect, understand the people, live in difficult terrain, topography, with the members of the congregation. Not like your graduates who cannot make a sentence in their mother tongue without adding English words. They live like foreigners among their own people.
- Models of good behavior. Who themselves respect their elders and lead by example. Not like your graduates who challenge authority and have independent minds. They take decisions without consulting the elders.
- Content. They should not desire material things, like vehicles, big parsonage etc. Not like your graduates who specify the type of cars they want on graduation.
- Professional. They must be skilled in one trade or the other so that the Church will not have to maintain them.
- Traditionally orthodox. They should know the identity of the Anglican Church and should never deviate from it in word or action, especially during worship.
- Good teachers. They must know the basics of Christianity and be prepared to teach both the old and the young."

These expectations may be different but the students sit in the same class, attend the same worship services and are exposed to identical learning experiences. Is our current model of seminary education fulfilling, satisfying the needs of the Church? What are the alternative models of theological education that can meet these needs?

Nicholas Holovaty interviewed 34 Russian Protestant mission leaders and pastors in the Fall of 1999 to evaluate the effectiveness of five Bible schools and seminaries in Moscow. He found that Russian Protestant leaders had specific vision of the ideal institution of theological education. They thought of the needs of the church in terms of two basic categories: the practical and the theoretical, "know-how" and "know-what." Virtually all those interviewed agree that both are indispensable in Russia today.

Those surveyed agree that the ideal would be to educate every single mission worker before he or she went to the field. But that is not possible as hundreds are already in active ministry and many cannot leave their work for any prolonged length of time. Consequently, the ideal school would have a residential program, evening classes for

Christian workers in the area, and an extension program for those too involved to leave their place of ministry.¹

The situation in Russia is similar to that in Nigeria, as in many other parts of the world. This paper seeks to point out the main weaknesses of institutional theological education and identify effective ways meaningful theological education can be made available for a greater number of people.

SOME LIMITATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Several scholars have reflected on the limitations of formal theological education. Robert Banks² highlights a number of the limitations, which will be summarised as follows:

1. Methodology of instruction does not provide for reflection. “Its pressurised approach had left too little time to think through and evaluate some of the views our teachers had expressed...” (page 2)
2. It excludes thoughtful lay people.
3. It is too orientated to pastoral ministry.
4. It is focused on cognitive learning at the expense of personal development and practical experience.
5. In spite of different geographical locations, seminaries are similar in many ways. All of them recruit formally qualified staff; use critical methodologies; value academic accreditation; train for pastoral ministry as a profession and adopt secular models of education. “Over the years, in fact, most Bible and missionary colleges have progressively become more academic in character” (page 8).
6. There is a widening gap between the seminaries and the church.
7. It is questionable whether seminaries provide their graduates with the kind of knowledge and expertise they need to fulfil their ministry responsibility.
8. Unfortunately, developing nations have bought the western model of seminary education hook, nail and sinker.

Richard Mouw³ opined that some evangelicals are not fully convinced that anyone really needs to engage in the formal study of theology. This is primarily because “study in seminary has often had the effect of dampening spiritual ardour” (page 286). Generally though, evangelicals tend to distrust the intellect. This has often led to unreflective pragmatism.

This emphasis on ‘getting the job done’ or ‘getting out there and reaching the world with the gospel’ has obviously been linked to some important evangelical strength. But the evangelical community cannot survive long as a healthy spiritual and evangelistic pressure in the world without thinking very carefully about the theological foundations for what it is doing (page 298).

Emilo Castro observed that the residential model encourages ‘professionalism’ understood as a ‘competitive desire to climb the promotional ladder,’ something, which should not be a part of the Christian community. “Extraction from the cultural milieu of the student makes it difficult for him to return to his former lifestyle. Barriers are raised that make it almost impossible for him to relate to his own people.”⁴

Harvie M. Conn, in addressing the issue of the effects of western presuppositions on two-thirds world training, argued the following:

The equation of learning with schooling, the equation of professionalism with ministry, the equation of teaching missions with western missions, the equation of theorization with

¹ Nicholas Holovaty, “An Ideal Theological Education: The Vision of Moscow’s Protestant Leaders,” <http://website.lineone.net>

² Robert Banks, **Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models**. (Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans) 1999.

³ Richard J. Mouw, “Challenge of Evangelical Theological Education,” in D.G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler Jr. (eds) **Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition**, (Michigan: Baker Books)

⁴ Emilo Castro, in Douglass Butt, “Some Caveats for Theological Education by Extension,” <http://www.clsfw.edu/library> page 3, October 19, 2005.

knowledge and the equation of practice with praxis (interaction between reflection and action, theory and practice), these false assumptions have led to institutionalism, elitism, alienation, abstractionism and pragmatism.⁵

Formal theological education has also been criticised for being unable to provide pastors for the rapidly growing churches in the third world. The poverty prevalent in these 'two third world' makes residential training excessively expensive. The students often adopt western standards, which are at variance with their culture. The methods used in teaching in the seminary were considered inappropriate for adult learners. The content of instruction did not address the contemporary issues that the members of the congregation faced. These limitations have been perceived as "crisis in theological education".⁶ The response to this crisis has been in the nature of one form of theological education by extension or the other.

THE ORIGIN, NATURE AND RAMIFICATIONS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY EXTENSION
 Gary Stephens,⁷ describes distance education as a process of delivering formal instruction when the student and instructor are not in the immediate physical presence of each other. The instruction in these situations is mediated by some means of communication. Common forms of mediation are correspondence, broadcast, tape--audio or video, and computer links. The most common form is correspondence. Distance education is not a recent phenomenon; it "began with the first letter from one person written to give instruction to another, and goes back to such classic examples as Plato's epistles to Dionysius and the letters of the Elder Pliny to the Younger Pliny" (Erdos, 1967, p. 2).⁸ One of the oldest compilations of distance education material is the Bible. The Bible, particularly the New Testament, comprised books written to inform and instruct people with whom the author was unable to have face-to-face interaction. For example, the prison epistles of Paul were written to instruct churches while Paul was a prisoner. The Bible is also an example of separation in time and culture. It has continued to provide instruction during the almost two millennia since it was written. The Bible has been translated into every major language in the world and relates to people in cultures substantially different from those of the writers.

As far back as in 1840 Isaac Pitman offered shorthand by mail to students in England.⁹ In 1856, Charles Toussaint and Gustave Langensheidt initiated language teaching by correspondence in Germany. By 1873 Cambridge University had developed a formal university extension through the establishment of an extramural teaching.¹⁰ It is worthy of note that much of the development and growth of extension studies in England and Europe was in response to "demands from workers and from women"¹¹ who are the masses!

Theological Education by Extension (T.E.E.) began in Guatemala, Central America in 1963 during a time of revival. It made possible the training of large numbers of pastors and lay leaders needed for a rapidly expanding church. From these beginnings it spread rapidly to almost all the continents of the world. In 1982 it was estimated that there were 55,000 students in 360 programs around the world.¹² T.E.E. seeks to "extend" proper Biblical Education to those who find it difficult to spend time away at a Bible school. It requires students to do private home study, practical ministry assignments and be a member of a discussion group. It allows students to stay active in their home Church ministry while they study.

⁵ Harvie M. Conn, in L.J. McKinney, "Evangelical Theological Education: Implementing Our Own Agenda," Paper presented at the ICETE International Consultation for Theological Education, High Wycombe, UK, 20 August 2003. P. 5

⁶ Jorge E. Maldonado, "Theological Education By Extension," in C. Rene Padilla, **New Alternatives in Theological Education**, (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1988) p. 40

⁷ Gary L. Stephens, "Identification of Criteria for Delivery of Theological Education through Distance Education: An International Delphi Study."

⁸ Ibid

⁹ B. Holmberg, **Theory and Practice of Distance Education**. (London: Routledge, 1989) p. 3

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Linda Cannel, "Review of Literature: Distance Education Association of Theological Schools April 1999." <http://www.napce.org/articles/distlm.pdf> October 17, 2005.

¹² Hope Alliance PNG, <http://www.hopealliancepng.org> October 14, 2005

There are many variations of T.E.E. Typically, it has three main parts: Home Study, Practical Assignments and Small group seminars.

Home Study: T.E.E. materials are written in a self-learning style. T.E.E. courses are as short as two study units and as long as ten study units. Students do these study units by themselves at home. Normally one unit of study is covered in one week. Students should be ready to commit themselves to 3-4 hours of homework for each unit of study.

Practical Assignments: There is a project or a practical assignment to be done for each study unit. These help students to put into practice what they are learning. Completion of the project or practical assignment is a course requirement.

Small Group Seminars: Seminars led by a tutor are a key part of T.E.E. They provide the opportunity for T.E.E. students to share together what they have been studying and doing. This helps in the learning process and provides mutual encouragement. Through the T.E.E. seminar, the joy of fellowship is added to the joy of learning.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION BY EXTENSION

Anglican Bishop William Anderson of British Columbia, Canada recently announced the closing of their 17-year old TEE Centre. This came as a shock to many around the world since the Centre had served as a model for other countries. The program has also been featured in books and articles about TEE. Upon hearing the news, TEENET Steering Committee Chairperson, Megan Norgate, emailed the Bishop with concerns. The following is the Bishop's recent reply.

Dear Ms. Norgate; Thank you for your letter of interest in our situation. The brief answer to your question as to whether we can revisit this decision is, unfortunately, no. The issue was not, and is not, the inherent value of the program. It is simply that the diocese does not have the funds to continue supporting it. That it has survived the past few years has been solely because the diocese used reserves to balance our budget, while closing other programs and reducing staff. Those reserves have now been seriously depleted, and there are no other staff to let go. Our diocese, which covers the northern third of British Columbia, functions with only 1 staff person other than myself, in the synod office. Such other functions as we need are done off the corner of parish clergy's desks. We simply do not have any other areas where we can reduce costs. Diocesan Executive had to choose between continuing this program, or eliminating support to a number of parishes that are currently struggling financially to survive. The diocese is also working to meet its obligation to the National Church's Residential School Healing Fund, which is an important obligation in the area of restorative justice. I hope that this helps clarify the reasons for the decision. Again, my thanks for your interest in our situation. +William¹³

Is it actually a problem of lack of finance, as claimed, or disinterest, lack of the vision of the potentials of TEE, or some unexpressed unwillingness to “distribute” theological education? Whatever it is, we should note that the Church leaders are the main problems of TEE. Their views matter a lot. Their opinions about whether TEE should stay or not automatically become law. This means that the viability of TEE in any given area will depend on the attitude of the church leaders in the area. As far as Bishop William was concerned, TEE was not in the mainline area of interest and mission of the church. What they have done so far is to struggle to ‘support’ the programme. They did not see it as being part of their commitment to mission.

TEE should be indigenous to the people. Unfortunately, some texts used are foreign; it turns out to be replicating the residential system, by the content of what is studied. In most cases it is the lecturers in the institutions who ‘produce’ these texts which are mere paraphrase of existing textbooks. Many operators in

¹³ Steering Committee, TEENET, “Diocese of Caledonia TEE Centre Closed,” <http://www.teenet.net> October 20, 2005.

the ‘two thirds’ world complain that they do not have the finances to produce new reading materials that are relevant to the people’s culture.

The seminars may also turn to be the bottlenecks of TEE, because the availability of trained facilitators is what enables or inhibits the effective use of the materials. To add to this, a poor facilitator can detract to a great extent from what an individual gets out of a particular group.¹⁴ The TEE group leader becomes, to some extent, a pastor of the group. They need to be good facilitators. Unfortunately, it can be the extent that they model Christlikeness that the TEE students will do the same. “If the students cannot see in the leader a prayerful dependence on God, as well as sincere brotherly love, they themselves will begin disconnecting theology with practise, or will simply abandon the program.”¹⁵ However this does not account for the high drop out rate in TEE programmes. It is known that a great percentage of the people who enrol in TEE do not complete their courses. This high rate of abrasion could be traced to the living conditions, which are often too crowded to allow individual study and meditation. The social demands of making oneself available to all village functions and the assumption of leadership roles may also contribute to drop out rate.

It has often been charged that theological education by extension does not function at a level so as to make it academically credible. Yet TEE programmes are inversely dependent on the theological colleges because they assess the performance of the students and finally certify that they have been found fit in character and learning to be awarded their ‘diploma’ certificate. “Thus, TEE, as a model of education, is not independent of theological institutions. In addition, there will always be students who want to further their education beyond what TEE can provide. These will proceed to a higher level at a theological college.”¹⁶

Programmed materials were developed so that as the TEE student interacted with the materials he had to do little critical thinking on his own. He merely filled in the blank with the answer that was given in the previous paragraph. If the goal of the theological education by extension program is simply to pass on certain facts, so that the participants can pass a written test or repeat memorised phrases and clichés, real theology will never be taught. The goal of theological education should never be only the passing on of certain facts. Our theological education, whether in extraction or in extension, should aim at helping the students to discover the meaning of a truth and how it can be helpful to him in his situation. In order for that to happen, “the student must be enabled to think critically, plan and act for himself.”¹⁷

A PROPOSAL FOR GRASS ROOT THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The pros and cons of seminary education and the limitations of the popular alternative, which is theological education by extension, should now be our hatchery for the proposal of a praxis model that can function in a typical developing nation, like Nigeria. This grass root model of theological education should be designed in consideration of the limitations of the other models listed above. The proposal should be ‘eclectic’, combining the positives of all the known models. It should be based in the on what is relevant and works in the context of the life of the participants. For want of a better terminology, let us call it, ‘eclectic praxis model of theological education’.

Basic Assumptions of the Eclectic Praxis Model of TEE

The basic assumptions are that:

- All Christians should be theologically educated. This education should run the gamut from specialist training in traditional institutions, seminaries, to the training of laity at the local level. It is the right of every member of congregation to acquire theological education. In our own context where there is high illiteracy level and excessive cult of materialism, one wonders whether the average member of the local congregation will be willing to taken on the additional responsibility of accepting theological education.

¹⁴ David Greeff, “Theological Education By Extension: A Reflection on the Usefulness of Theological Work in Namibia,” A Missiological Paper. St. Andrew’s hall, 2005. <http://www.users.northnet.com.au> October 21, 2005.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Douglas L. Rutt, “Some Caveats for Theological Education by Extension,” <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files> October 19, 2005.

- The provision of theological education is the function of the church. The church should not delegate this function to the seminary. If it is delegated to the seminary, the lecturers may be tempted to see the extension programmes as extensions of their seminary duties.
- Each diocese can generate funds for TEE. They can do this by setting aside, ten percent of their income. The church teaches the virtue of tithing, she should do this in other produce leaders who will reproduce the church in this and the next generation.
- The graduates of seminary education should be engaged to assist with TEE. They should be inducted to the goals, uniqueness and aspirations of TEE. They may function as facilitators after proper orientation. The assumption is that they will value TEE and not see it as a challenge to their 'professional' competence. Many of them enhance their statuses by using jaw-breaking theological jargon to mesmerise the villagers, even in the most unsuitable occasions. They will prefer that the villagers will not know the meaning of these theological terms so that they will remain higher up in the assumed exclusive, exotic knowledge called theology.

The Objectives of the Eclectic Praxis Model of TEE

The main objective of theological education is the spiritual formation of the students. It is this objective that will determine how the course content will be approached, the method of instruction, of construction of reality, of assessment of personal and spiritual formation.

The TEE programme will aim at the formation of the whole person so that Christ may be formed in them and that they may grow in Christlikeness. The learning environment will be so structured that the participants will live by faith and experience God. It is not just learning about faith, but seeing Christian faith in action and being part of that community.

The TEE programme should produce a worshipping community. As Nouwen has pointed out, worship is celebration, a remembering of the past, an affirming of the God-drenched present and an anticipating and living in the dynamic future. To lead such a celebration one must be responsive to the sacramental voice of nature, in touch with the joys and hurts of the people and with their deep need of God. One's own experience of God must be real and edged with an honesty and freshness.¹⁸ The programme will focus on the skills of leading worship so that the worshippers are brought in direct contact with God.

Participants in the programme should be assisted to think reflectively.

In the face of the countless tragedies facing the world today, the Christian commitment to God and his purposes for humanity is vital to being a reflective disciple. Theology is not simply an exercise for academics but the attempt by all Christian people to make sense of all God has given and revealed to us, in other people, in the world, in our place and time, in the Bible and, supremely, in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the attempt to make connections between our daily life and the Christian experience of God, faith and life in the Spirit. It is the attempt to understand why trust in the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier makes a difference, and, in that knowledge, to be willing and eager to share God's love with others¹⁹.

Reflection should be directed at living situations in which the believer or the faith community is involved. Theological education should be all-pervasive in the faith community and not restricted to a field of clergy education. Theological hermeneutics should focus on the situation in which the participants are involved and from there generate explanations, not from texts.

¹⁸ Henri Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (N. Y., Doubleday, 1975), pp. 35-37.

¹⁹ Anglican Consultative Council, "Theological Education for the Anglican Communion Rationale Document and Section Reports." February 2005.

The Content and Methodology of the Eclectic Praxis Model of TEE

Theological education by extension entails the idea of taking the education to where the learner is so that one can study in one's context. It should not be a process of imposing some foreign content and methodology on the learner. Rather it should start from where the learner is. The context is where the learner lives her life. It should not be seen as being a negative force, rather, it is the context in which the Christian battle is fought and victory of resurrected life celebrated. Knowledge that will be useful will be that that help the learner to live victoriously in the society as she prepares to join in the heavenly wedding feast.

The content of instruction should be learner centred in the first instance. The learner should participate in planning, designing and choosing the learning experiences. These are adults who can identify their interests and areas that they feel they need assistance. There could be a brain storming session where the learners identify their expectations and needs. The facilitators may then begin to clothe these needs in meaningful instructional themes. For example, in many communities there are quarrels and disagreements. If the learners indicate that they will like to learn how to live at peace with all people, the Facilitator may build an instructional theme on "living in harmony". This may start with the New Testament injunction to Christians to live at peace with all people. Bible passages will be studied. Examples may be drawn from the Old Testament of people who did not live at peace and the consequence of such. The learners will be guided to reflect on the advantages of living in peace in the community and suggest ways they can, as Christians, live at peace with everyone in the community. This may lead to discussion on ecumenism and ways of fostering ecumenical relationships in the country.

The participants should at all times be encouraged to reflect critically on their experiences. This is a major departure from the traditional schooling model where the teacher stands in front as the source of knowledge and fills the empty brains of the students with pre-selected knowledge. The Facilitators may find it difficult to switch to this methodology of instruction because they were educated with the western model. The learners themselves have, over the years, accepted the authoritative indoctrination as the only known model of instruction. A 'train the trainers' programme will be mounted for the Facilitators who will in turn train the participants on this unique methodology. Time should be spent inducting people into the rationale for the model.

The facilitators should, among other things, develop the skill of working closely with the participants. This is necessary so that the adult learners can feel free to dialogue with the facilitators. The learners should be encouraged to ask questions. They should be taught that no question is childish. Others should not laugh at people who ask questions. The learning environment should be such that clearly permits people to make mistakes without being derided or stigmatised.

A deliberate attempt should be made to uphold the intellectual standard of interaction. The fact that the content starts with the learners' needs and expectations does not mean that it will end there. The curriculum should be designed according to the entering behaviour of the participants. The basic courses should focus on Christian maturity. Such a course could last for two years. The duration may depend on the rate of assimilation of the participants. The next level may be the secondary level. Here the participants discuss in greater detail, some doctrinal issues and practical ways of defending their faith. The content of instruction at the tertiary level will compare favourably with that in theological colleges. We believe that any content can be taught at some intellectually honest way to any group of people.

Physical Facilities Necessary for the Eclectic Praxis Model of TEE

Most parish churches have erected halls. These halls should be used as centres for TEE. The diocese should be divided into eight zones, corresponding with the number of archdeaconries. Each of these zones should be responsible for co-ordinating the centres of instruction. It will be the responsibility of the zonal co-ordinator to supervise the centres, making sure that there are adequate material and human resources.

Some of these church halls have only plastic chairs that are rented to couples for wedding receptions. The zonal co-ordinators should ensure that tables are provided in the halls. The other basic necessity for

instruction is the chalkboard. The church station should take full responsibility for the provision of instructional materials like flip chart, maps, coloured pencils and cardboard sheets.

Learning materials should be provided free for all the participants. Basic texts should be made available in the local language, though people with modest education pretend that they understand printed materials better in English language. This may be true to some extent because Igbo, which is the native language, is excessively tonal and difficult to reduce to writing. The tertiary level may read texts in English but there should be no restriction on the language used in dialogue.

Each centre should be divided into discussion groups. These groups could be along the residential locations of the participants. This means that participants who live in a particular area will be in one group. This will make it easy for a group to have a meeting in one of the member's house at 'odd' but mutually acceptable hour. Such a group in the rural area can spend the evening under a mango tree discussing and reflecting on topics studied at the TEE centre. Specific assignments could be given in order to direct the interactions in the groups. Grouping could also be along professions and work areas. Traders, for instance, spend a lot of time waiting for customers. Five traders in a particular vicinity may decide to gather in a participant's shed in the afternoons when there are few buyers. Instead of their usual jesting at such meetings, they now reflect on TEE topics and find out how Christianity relates to their workplace as traders.

CONCLUSION

Theological education should not be limited to the ordained ministry. There should be a close relationship between the ministry of the ordained and all the baptised Christians who also have their ministry. Theological education should be for all and should be a life long process. It could be presented in primary, secondary and tertiary levels. At whatever level, it should aim at helping the students to apply what they learn to real life situations. There should be a concerted effort at addressing the needs of the people. The seminaries may have to be reorganised to accommodate and experiment with the goals of the eclectic praxis model of theological education by extension. The seminaries still remain relevant and the staffs are at the apex of the organisational framework for the implementation of the model. They have to train the facilitators, supervise the zones and produce the relevant learning materials. They will do all these hands-in-gloves with the church leaders.

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