



The Significance of the Extension Seminary¹

Ted Ward and Sam Rowen²

Especially within the realm of evangelical missions, many eyes are turned toward an intriguing phenomenon: the extension seminary or, “Theological Education by Extension” (TEE). Rarely has such a basic alteration of institutional modes moved so rapidly, hopscotching its way around the world. Where this “movement” (if an educational development can be called a “movement”) exists, enrollments in theological education have multiplied and educational experiences have taken on a fresh relevancy to the needs of the church of Jesus Christ.

As we examine some of the sources and consequences of the extension seminary idea, the focus is on the unfolding insights of behavioral science and their immediate consequences in changes in the scholarly and academic communities in relation to the church of Jesus Christ. The church is both human and divine in terms of function and power. Nevertheless, a behavioral viewpoint leads to the contention that although Christ is the head, the church is subject to human fallibility and weakness? Two trends in contemporary education have great import for the educational ministries of the church:

1. First is the continuing shift away from campus-based education toward field-based education.
2. Second, a growing sense of disillusionment is emerging over the failures of institutional forms of education to deliver on their promises.

These two trends underlie the phenomenon of the “extension seminary.”

We shall examine these trends as well as the theoretical and operational consequences of the contemporary reform of theological education. TEE has allowed us to take a fresh look at our training programs by offering an alternate strategy to solving some of the perplexing bottlenecks in theological education.

In the rapid transmission of new movements or new ideas, misconceptions also multiply. One popular misconception is that TEE is a noble attempt to make the best of a bad situation. Images are conjured up that things are getting worse and worse and, in desperation, we must do something to alter the declining effectiveness in the production of trained leaders.

As those engaged in TEE began to give progress reports, a polarization arose as to which was the superior method of training—residential or by extension. These discussions often proved unfruitful and a true assessment of theological training became more difficult. TEE, in its proper perspective, can be seen as part of a worldwide trend to fashion better procedures of professional training. By definition, professional training is specialized training which prepares an individual for a high-level, client-oriented service. The training of a pastor is *professional* training in this sense because specialized training is needed to prepare a leader to serve people. The trend in professional training is to include field-based experiences as an integral part of the curriculum and to design opportunities to integrate newly-acquired knowledge with these experiences.

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² At the time of publication, Ted Ward was professor at the Institute for International Studies at Michigan State University and Sam Rowen was on the staff of Missionary Internship, Farmington, MI.

TEE is not an attempt to make the best of a bad situation. It is part of a worldwide trend based upon substantial research on how people learn. The early advocates and participants in extension programs did not always see the relationships between the extension designs and good learning theory. But the fact that the extension theological education concept respects the necessary conditions for effective learning has attracted the attention of many professional educators—including some not directly involved in theological education.

Some see extension theological training as an attempt to relate to masses of untrained leaders. The conservative estimate of 60,000 functional pastors in Latin America without theological training is indeed sobering. Several would argue for immediate access to training (therefore, extension education), while others argue that the greatest need is for high *quality* leadership development for the emerging churches. All too easily fixed positions have emerged: extension education is the answer to the quantitative aspect, and residential education is the answer to the qualitative aspect.

The issue cannot be resolved in a simple quantitative/qualitative scheme. A sober assessment of the accomplishments of our present institutions, in spite of many positive contributions, reveals that they have not produced the quality of leadership that we desire. In contrast, simply changing to an extension program is not a guaranteed solution. It may merely redirect the inadequacies of the present program, thus giving a new name to old processes. Designing a sound professional (theological) training is broader than an institutional management question? The prior questions are more likely to be, What constitutes a valid theological education in Manila, or Tokyo, or rural Nigeria? What does the student need to learn to know, to do, to be? How can learning experiences be structured which will achieve these goals?

Certain psychological foundations undergird effective learning. Some are well known; others have had little attention given to them in the curriculum design of theological education. Students seem to learn more effectively when they proceed from the known to the unknown; when they are required to use the new information thus promptly receiving confirmation or correction of the new learning; when they perceive the value of the newly acquired information. Perceived value is just another way of saying that the information is relevant—and seen to be relevant—to demands of the real-life situations of learners. Further, professional learning is enhanced when students learn in relation to the actual experiential context in which the knowledge must be applied. There, the opportunity for perceiving the value of new information is experientially available.

The modes of education manifested in the extension seminary are not new. For example, a key factor in John Wesley's ministry was his teaching of village pastors. His approach was in startling contrast to the traditions of formal education. Instead of an admissions office, he had a horse; he used no classrooms, only the countryside and cottage kitchens; his students had no dormitories, instead the teacher slept in their lofts. Was there ever before such a teacher whose preference for nonformal education stood out in stark contrast to the established systems of his day? Indeed there was! And that great teacher—for indeed Jesus was recognized and acknowledged in his own day as a great teacher—set many precedents for excellent ways and means of developing leadership for the church. But in their eagerness to do the work of Christ more efficiently, those who are called by his name have eagerly embraced and adopted the educational models of the secular institutions.

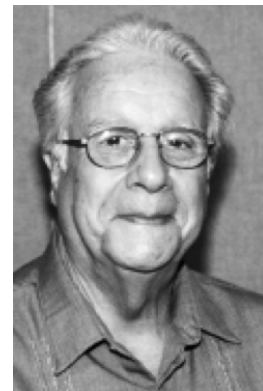
Just why leaders of the church over the centuries have made so little effort to understand and appreciate the teaching techniques and environments used by Jesus will likely remain one of the great mysteries. Wesley caught a glimpse of the essence; the Presbyterians in Guatemala in the mid-1960s caught another. But I believe they caught their glimpses in reference to the *need to reach more people* with theological education. The other basic meaning of Jesus' nonformal approach is its potentiality for *education of high quality* and worth. There are four valid arguments for the development of a field-based approach to theological education:

1. The *historical* argument derives from the nature of the training ministry of Jesus Christ and from the recurrences of his procedures as exemplified in the practices of Martin Luther and John Wesley, for example.
2. *Demographical*: In most societies of the world, it is impossible for all but the rich or the highly subsidized and dependent to leave from their work, their families, and their communal roles in order to go off to school. Thus, those who avail themselves of campus-based education tend not to be of the same sort as those who pastor churches. In fact, the major reason that the costs of operating theological educational establishments tends to be so very high (in light of their very small output) is not because there are only few people to train, but because those who most need the training are not able to get to the institution. There are three demographic factors that must be worked into the formula for cost-effective pastoral education:
 - a) Geographic, in the sense of where the pastors are versus where the theological school is located.
 - b) Economic, in the sense of support for the pastor-in-training.
 - c) Sociological, in the matter of what sort of person, how much of what sort of previous education and experience, and what sort of cultural background a person must have in order to fit into the life of the school. With reference to this latter, it has been noted that one of the most conspicuous consequences of shifting to an extension approach is that the average age of students is much older. The residential model caters to younger and less “attached” adults. The extension approach accommodates those whose family and/or community ties cannot be broken or suspended.

3. The *theological* argument for the extension approach speaks not only to *who does* undertake a training program, but who *should* enter the program. If the purpose of theological education is to assist the church through the training of pastors, that is one thing, but if the purpose is to train leaders for the church—that they might *become* pastors—that is quite different. The extension approach appeals primarily to those who see the *church*, in its congregations and assemblies, as having the prerogative of identifying and calling those who will serve as pastors. Their view of the seminary does not include the authority of an



institution to qualify or disqualify someone as a pastor on educational grounds. (It is tempting to belabor this point in relation to seminaries and other professional schools. A medical school, for example, as a servant of society imposes and maintains professional standards; on the other hand, a theological seminary is a servant of the church and is responsible to the Lordship of Christ over the church. Thus, the



design of an effective and efficient screening and training program for medical practitioners may or may not be acceptable as a design for the training of pastors.) The extension approach to theological education is focused primarily on those who are, in fact, serving the church. Extension programs are much more in the business of serving those who *are* called by the church rather than those who *claim* to be called or those who *hope* to be called once they “make the grade.” Thus, there is a theological validity—and specifically, a Biblical precedent—for returning the responsibility of identifying, recruiting, and employing the pastor to the hands of the church in assembly.

4. The *pedagogical* argument should be consistent with the theological and institutional natures of the church and the Scriptural model of the pastor. Note that among the fields of professional education that have seen dramatic qualitative improvement recently, theological education

typically is not the front-runner. Indeed, no other field of professional training behaves quite so much as if all discoveries have already been made. There is a sort of wry humor in the fact that the extension seminary idea—largely an overseas response to serious needs—is, in fact, the threshold to substantial improvements in the quality of pastoral education. The effects may even someday spill back to the United States, who knows?

The trend toward extension modes in theological education is not an isolated phenomenon. Two significant trends in educational development underlie what is happening in pastoral education overseas:

Trend 1: Emphasis on Clinical Field Experience

The trend toward a clinical and field-based emphasis in the education of professional workers can be traced to Abraham Flexner's study of medical education conducted with the support of the Carnegie Foundation. This study of the education of physicians, undertaken in 1908, revealed the incredible fact that, in most medical schools in the United States at that time, it was possible to gain the M.D. degree without so much as medically touching a live, warm, human body. The Flexner report caused a shockwave resulting in closure of almost half of the medical schools and pushed the rest rapidly forward into increased use of clinical experiences as a regular part of the curriculum, not just as an add-on or a thing to do over summer vacation. Since 1971, virtually every program for the training of professional workers involves clinical field experience.

Trend 2: Emphasis on Continuing Education

Professional training is a life-long endeavor. It is no longer assumed that once formal schooling is completed a person is fully trained. Every professional field recognizes the need of its practitioners to keep abreast of recent developments. The accelerative thrust of new knowledge and procedures will soon render practitioners functionally illiterate if they do not keep in touch with at least the basic developments in the field. Attendance at seminars, workshops, and evening courses has become an occupational requirement. Theological education has not been the exception. Many theological schools hold continuing education workshops and institutes (including the addition of full-time staff specifically assigned to this task) not simply to capitalize on a fad, but to help meet the continuing educational needs of the parish minister. However, most denominations (and clergy) admit the serious limitations of their continuing education programs.

A few years ago, the U.S. Office of Education contracted a study of current trends in educational curricula for the training of professionals to Michigan State University.

In this time of increasingly varied and creative approaches to the preparation of competent professionals, the need exists for a common set of guidelines to stimulate and direct development projects without imposing limitations of an anachronistic sort. An observable trend in training for the professions (whether in medicine, engineering, architecture, theology, or teaching) provides such a common base. Current curriculum developments reflect three characteristics:

1. Increasing use of field experiences.
2. More variety in approach to cognitive learning.
3. Greater articulation between field experiences and cognitive learning through seminars, symposia, and other forms of "sharing" experiences.

These three characteristics are illustrated through a metaphor. The diagram of a two-rail fence provides a useful picture of the three major functions of a curriculum for the education of a professional. The fence has three parts: an upper rail, a lower rail, and fence posts. Each part is labeled in the following manner: the upper rail represents the cognitive input, the lower rail represents field experiences, and the fence posts represent the seminars. The seminars are the linkages between cognitive experience and field experience.

The design for constructing a two-rail fence may be usefully applied to the design of a curriculum: Of what material is the top rail to be constructed? How substantial should it be? How far above the ground? Of what materials will the lower rail be constructed? How substantial? How will it compare with the upper rail, in terms of separation and parallelism? What will be the nature of the supporting posts? What is the optimum spacing for tying the structure together in a supported, articulated, and coordinated whole? In a fence, there are two sets of variables that determine the desirable characteristics:

1. The use or *function* of the fence, and the balance of the components. With reference to the former, a fence is effective if it performs a designated function over a stipulated period of time. A decorative fence does not need to be strong enough to contain cattle, but a cattle fence may or may not also need to be decorative. The fence's function and expected durability in relationship to its cost are important considerations.
2. With reference to the second set of variables, *balance*, the proposition here is that a fence's components, like the links of a chain, need to be selected or designed for balanced strength. The "weakest link" principle pertains; a fence is not made better by increasing the size of the upper rail (unless, of course, that had been the weakest link); conversely, to decrease the substance of the posts weakens the entire system.

More illustrations can be seen in the way the two sets of variables, function and balance, relate to each other. For a start, consider the matter of spacing between the posts: for a decorative function, the spacing can be longer than for a fence that must restrain livestock. Spacing of the rails is also dependent on function—rails must be closer to each other and closer to the ground for sheep than for horses.

The Upper Rail: Cognitive Input

Although the ability to recall information (facts and figures) isn't all there is to education, its importance must not be discounted. "Cognitive input" refers to the learning of informational knowledge. Cognitive input is basic to competence and excellence. What is cognitive (knowable as information) ranges from simple concrete facts through to abstract concepts and problem-solving strategies. Cognitive input, in a sense, concerns the "things to be learned" but it would be more useful to think of cognitive input as *the information that can be learned by reading, hearing, or looking*. Cognitive input is provided through a wide variety of instructional modes: through textbooks, assigned reading, lectures, recording, films, and so on. "New media" of instruction are sometimes employed so that the cognitive input can be more effective or learned more efficiently.

Unfortunately, it is often the cognitive input component that suffers from learner motivation and from rapid obsolescence of the content. A curriculum that over-emphasizes cognitive input is likely to be characterized by high drop-out rates (premature withdrawal) and by frequent complaints about irrelevancy.

The Lower Rail: Field Experiences

Recognition of field experiences as part of the curriculum of education for the professions is clearly a trend. For years internships, apprenticeships, and similar field experiences were suspect as being inferior substitutes for truly scholarly learning. Some said that learning that could not be committed to the form of print should not be recognized as educationally valid. Today, many of the problems in the professions are so new that textbook answers are not available. Books alone cannot provide all that is needed for a timely and substantial curriculum. Getting experience "where the action is" seems to be one useful answer for the demand that education be relevant.

Early in this century, clinical experience was recognized as a necessary part of medical education. The Carnegie Foundation's support of Flexner's study of medical education in the United States played an important part in this development. First, clinical experience was recognized as an

essential part of modern medical education. It then followed that field experience became a valid aspect of the curriculum in virtually every professional field.

Field experiences are not all the same. For example, the degree and kind of supervision varies from one program to another. But the essential ingredient remains the same: exposure to the environment and “life problems” of the practitioner *during* the period of formal educational experience.

Recognition of the validity of field experiences has also had a remarkable impact on the concept of in-service education (sometimes called “continuing education,” to denote its life-long characteristic.) The older and simpler practice of transplanting the campus-oriented course to some remote point lock, stock, and barrel (syllabus, text, and professor)—is disappointing. The modern extension and continuing education operations capitalize on the fact that in-service professionals are engaged in experiences, day by day, that constitute a rich source of material for valuable learning. Experiences of the practitioner’s world thus become the sources of further knowledge, the motivation to learn, and the basis for evaluation, reconsideration, and planning. When extension education makes effective use of the field experiences that confront the in-service practitioner, it is a worthy competitor to the more formal and classical forms of graduate education. A problem-centered approach to extension teaching is certainly a great improvement over the “transplanted course” approach.

The Fence Posts: Seminars

If students are to make a solid connection between the cognitive input and field experiences, they need someone to talk to—preferably someone who is learning along with them. Something exciting happens when learners get together to put into words how new information relates to their doing an effective job. If left to chance or individual initiative, new information may never result in appropriate changes in professional practice; or worse yet, it will result in incorrect applications to practice. Misunderstandings in the cognitive realm can result in disasters in the realm of practice. The seminar, as an opportunity for reflecting, evaluating, and hypothesizing, can reduce the gaps and the misapplications, resulting in more potent and responsible transfers from “theory” to “practice,” and back again to better theory.

“Seminar” is a word carelessly used to mean whatever its user wants it to mean. But until we find a better word, “seminar” will have to suffice to indicate the less structured experiences that lead to integration of cognitive input and field experiences through sharing and discussion. The hallmarks of a good seminar are the occasions and stimulations to reflect upon and evaluate learnings from both the cognitive input and from the field experiences, with a premium on relating the two. The objectives of a seminar can usually be expressed in terms of applying principles and concepts to problem-solving tasks.

Educators in the past have idealized Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other as a model of the pedagogical relationship. This model seems incomplete in light of the research on the value of peer interactions during a learning experience. A more useful model, at least for the education of professionals, may be the two-rail fence—two lines of parallel linear flow, supported and integrated by spaced interactive seminars—a model of the relationships among the three major aspects of a curriculum for educating professionals.

