



Implications for Theological Education in North America: *The Tip of the Iceberg.*¹

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The trend toward extension modes of theological education (or theological education by extension) is not an isolated phenomenon. In many parts of the world—most assuredly including the United States—eager and sometimes feverish searches for alternatives to the established educational procedures are underway. Americans tend to have strong and persistent views about the value of education and about what procedures should be used for “quality” education. These views are rapidly falling into disrepute on the world scene. In Brazil, for example, the incredible expansion of telecommunication resources since 1967 has stimulated a concentrated effort to invent, discover, and adapt educational procedures that are not dependent on school buildings, lecturers, or textbooks. Already there are promising possibilities.

Brazilian leaders describe their country as the first to move into the status of the Global Village (McLuhan) without passing through a stage of print-media dependency. Day after day as I am interacting here with one after another agency of the government of Brazil and the educational leadership of the various states, I keep asking myself, “What are the implications for the mission of the church?” and “What are the implications for the United States?” In reference to the first question, I continue to thank God for the timely occurrence of the “extension seminary” movement. Were it not for this initial thrust into the anachronisms of theological education, the impending drama of world-wide change of education would be largely unintelligible to the leadership of the church. And I refer here not only to the leadership in “national” churches, but also in the United States. Although our American technologies are in many ways basic to the impending and emerging changes, our viewpoints and value systems are not basic—perhaps not even related. People in the developing nations are learning how to accept our hardware without accepting our leadership. Although this state of affairs is incomprehensible from the ethnocentric viewpoint of American development, it is a fact of life and one that missions and missionaries must be helped to accept.

For the church in North America there is yet another message to be drawn from the realities of change in the world around us: we must quickly get about the business of reducing cultural narrowness in the church. I see theological seminaries as the most promising pivot-point for broadening the evangelistic outreach of the church across our own community and national sub-cultural boundaries. If the trained leadership of the church has not been sensitized to the realities of cultural differences, and if pastors, particularly, have not been provided basic skills of cross-cultural communication, it should not surprise us that individual churches will continue to relate to relatively narrow sectors of the society. The body of Christ is insulted by exclusivism along lines of social, cultural and racial distinctives. Are we truly interested in facing up to the status quo? If so, the study of the problem and the training for alternative styles of leadership are responsibilities best assigned to theological seminaries.

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In the interest of stimulating a search for solutions, the following points seem to be promising:

1. Evaluation and re-emphasis of teaching in ecclesiology with special concern for the “accidental” stratification and exclusivism into which congregations so easily fall.
2. Evaluation and updating of the study of homiletics as a concern with the problems of cross-cultural communication.
3. Increased emphasis on interaction between field experiences and classroom studies during pastoral training. (One of the most powerful and valid forces for change in any professional curriculum is the involvement of the didactic realm with the reality realm.)
4. Reexamination of the very idea of being “qualified” as a pastor, to challenge the idea that preparation is a once-for-all experience. Such a reexamination will likely bring seminaries into the business of lifelong continuing education of pastors—the precedents are well established in professional schools in other fields (e.g., medicine, law, education). Why ministerial education should be different in this matter escapes my understanding.

Anxiety has haunted me since my first contacts with the promoters of theological education by extension: such a basic transformation of an institution will fail if it is not based on profound and total curriculum reform. Moving courses off-campus is a generous and expensive idea, and programmed instruction is a promising but costly instructional medium. In short, the bits and pieces of change are nice ideas assuming 1) that funds are unlimited, 2) accountability for cost-effectiveness is beside the point, and 3) taking education to “the people who need it” is an adequate singular objective. I have doubts about all three premises. As overseas experiences with extension approaches are examined for relevance to theological education in North America, some questions about motivation should be raised.

Theological education is changing. It is becoming stylish to change. Now we must challenge the motives for change. Are our motivations for change sound or unsound?

Questions about *total* curriculum development must be raised as a basic part of shifting toward a more adequate form of leadership training for the church. Now as we reflect on the vital but still short history of the trend toward extension, the motivations are becoming clear. Some of the more easily detected motivations for change toward extension are listed below. Ask yourself if any of these are your motives; which of these are sound?

1. Other schools are doing it.
2. We need to try something different.
3. We aren’t now reaching some of the people who most need what we have to offer.
4. Our supporters will be impressed if we are able to teach more people and produce more graduates.
5. In order to better respond to the needs of the church we need to open an extension program.

Just for fun, consider the skeptic’s comments to each of these five rationales. To aid you in independent thought, I scrambled them. Perhaps you will want to try your hand at unscrambling!

But your own past graduates (alumni) may resist! You’ve made them what they are!
Are you sure that *anyone* has such needs?

Through what means have you heard about the needs? (Whose needs are they!)
So what?

Perhaps you should try closing down something rather than opening something new!

Perhaps certain skeptical remarks fit more than one motivation. So be it. As I have written in previously published papers, there are at least four basic arguments in support of extension modes of theological education:

1. *The demographic argument*—relating to people where they are and to the *right* people in terms of those involved in leadership of the church.
2. *The historical argument*—in reflection of the fact that Jesus began with a field-related nonformal education and that the great development moments of the church have been heralded by “people-level” involvements with leadership, e.g., Wesley’s village pastors.
3. *The theological argument*—insisting that the educational institution is the servant of the church, and thus should not dictate to the church or impose its own stamp of approval as a precondition of a person’s being “called” into leadership of a given congregation.
4. *The qualitative educational argument*—in which the quality of education for the pastor is seen as a mix of three contemporary components: 1) cognitive learning, 2) field experiences, and 3) integrative seminars.

I urge you to test your motivation for change toward extension against all four of these arguments.