



Nonformal Education and the Church¹

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He faced a tough training program. Though his full-time students seemed eager to learn, they were barely literate, and showed very little academic promise. Several were backward villagers, one was a civil service misfit; and a few were in the fishing business.

In his foresight he could fear for that day, three years ahead, when one of his better students would abandon him at a crucial moment; another would trade in everything he had learned for the first solid cash offer to come along; another would remain so unconvinced of the basic content of the course that he would defy the pressure of his fellow learners in order to hold onto his self-image as a skeptic.

These unlikely learners had to be made ready to stand alone as the front-runners of a whole new culture. He knew he had a really difficult training task and only three years to accomplish the objectives. (Better show up for class at eight o'clock fellows!)

But this teacher didn't build a classroom building or a dormitory. He didn't line up the chairs into rows; he didn't pull his students away into three years of cloistered intellectualism. Instead he headed for the countryside; he held seminars by the lake and in the mountains; they ate together, talked together endlessly, visited the cities, put their new learning into action in villages! He carried on detailed debriefing of their field experiences. He lectured; he made the lecturers more meaningful through subsequent issue-oriented seminar sessions.

His teaching materials weren't elaborate, but he did know how to relate to the students' experiences. He used many illustrations, and always the illustrations were drawn from life as it was lived in that land and at that time.

He didn't "*grade on the curve*"—he attempted to bring each of his students up to a mastery of the learning. Of course, he was rather emotional, and was given to almost embarrassing outbursts of positive reinforcement when a learner showed some keen insight. And his scolding bordered on harshness, especially when competitive behavior of his students threatened the quality of their learning experiences. Those who knew him best were aware of the depth of his emotion. They said that he was known to cry privately when he couldn't get through to people.

In retrospect, we might wonder about this teacher's competency. One of his students ended up a suicide; and it was apparent that the teacher had characteristics that many people would consider flaws. For one thing, he was excessively objectives-oriented; he couldn't be diverted from his stated objectives—whether you agreed with those objectives or not. For example, he passed up several opportunities to give the corrupt political system a slap, and he seemed to be more concerned with long-term societal change than with meeting the contemporary financial needs of the impoverished.

¹ Ted Ward and Lois McKinney. *Nonformal Education and the Church*, 1973. An adaptation of this unpublished paper appears in the Document Archives as Ted Ward and Lois McKinney. Master. *The Other Side*. Vol. 10 (5) September-October, 1974: 8-10. The magazine ceased publication in 2005.

(In fairness, we might note that he and his students were never unresponsive to those who came to them with physical needs. But the methods they used were so unorthodox as to seem “*other-worldly*”.)

But these are details. Although the teacher’s primary objectives were accomplished in such a way that his long-range objectives still affect human life these many centuries later, the hand of history writes one severe indictment: not many generations after those three years of intensive nonformal teaching, those who called themselves by his name began to construct elaborate educational institutions. Somehow these well-intentioned latter-day followers lost sight of the fact that the master teacher had avoided the Greek-style approach to education—widely known and well regarded in his day.

His concept of curriculum, classes, and teaching leaned toward the functional and away from the classical. Though he conformed to some of the key expectations about what a teacher should be and do (they recognized him as Rabbi or “*teacher*”), and though his relationship with his learners was that of Master to Disciple, he needed some of social-distance artifacts of the formal school. He needed no lectern; his course outlines were in his head. He could convert any place and time into an instructional experience; he socialized freely with his students and even insisted on taking them along on his dinner invitations. He liked to talk about issues and problems over dinner. He showed a jolly temperament and occasionally used barbed humor to soften an otherwise harsh observation—and he rejected formal status. When great crowds came to him, he responded to their interests and needs with no regard to formal schedules or even to the protocol of the day. When he was interrupted, he dealt graciously with the unruly, even when the ceiling was torn away over his head. He paid no heed to sarcastic remarks about his hometown. He was content with the designations as a small-town boy and son of a carpenter.

His first students carried on discussions and lectures in the market places, in the established temples and synagogues, (though their own religious centers were apparently in homes). They did not depart significantly from the models of nonformal education that he had established. And they brought such vigor and enthusiasm to their dialogues that the powers behind the formal establishments of government, education and religion were seriously threatened—to the point of retaliation.

Since then, there has developed a long history of schools and schooling in his name. Indeed, the established church, through its centuries of favor at court in the western world—from Constantine’s Rome through the expansion of the British Empire, has employed the dominant modes of educational operation with more regard for “*doing as the Romans do*” than for doing as the master teacher had done.

The current wave of interest in nonformal education has already affected the church. The failure of established institutions to meet human problems promptly and adequately (degeneration of urban communities, cross-cultural and cross-racial conflicts, economic enslavement, to name a few), has caused people inside and outside the church to seek alternatives. Agitation for new modes of social organization is growing. Whether or not schooling is guilty of all the evils and shortcomings attributed to it is debatable. Certainly there are profound and responsible criticisms to be raised in the North American situation. Ernest Melby bitterly summarized the collapse of faith in education:

For more than a decade American education has been passing through a traumatic experience. The trauma comes not only from our seeming inability to educate the disadvantaged, or to so educate that desired social changes come about. Perhaps the most painful characteristic of the recent years has been

the continual demolition of our most cherished beliefs so that now with a sickening feeling we see that they were myths.

We have argued for knowledge as a power for good only to find that often all it produced was apathy or at worst anti-social behavior. Compulsory schooling, rooted in Jeffersonian thinking, has been held to be the foundation of democracy, but now we know that being forced to go to school has damaged thousands of children. For a century, the melting pot theory has been held out to our people, but now we know that the melting pot is a myth. We led millions to believe that the schoolhouse door was an open sesame to the middle class. Now we know that it is the middle class that is the open sesame to success in school. We have held out a promise to the American people that if only they gave us their money in larger amounts we would reduce crime, improve government and further world peace. The people have given us money in prodigious amounts but crime is rapidly increasing, violence grows and world peace is as elusive as ever.²

On the Latin American scene, there are essentially different criticisms; somewhat overlapping those in North America.³ Much of the continued economic sluggishness of Latin America has been attributed to a schooling procedure that perpetuates elitism. These and other criticisms can be raised concerning schooling in Africa and Asia by colonialists whose inability to respect (and inadequacy to relate to) the cultural realities of societies seemed to increase with experience.⁴

Interest in nonformal education is not new. From time to time throughout the history of the church, the simple elegance of the master teacher's nonformal modes has recurred. Sound ideas don't stay hidden forever! Among those who re-discovered the fine art of nonformal education was John Wesley. Wesley's ways and means have come under intensive reexamination recently by those who are attempting to understand the contemporary phenomenon of the extension seminary.⁵ Wesley was concerned about the laity and village pastors who were unable to avail themselves of the educational resources vested in the campus-based theological seminaries. His solution was a traveling library: himself and a horse. Once more the master teacher's procedures for discipleship came alive and the church benefitted.

Today there is an intriguing recurrence of the mode of pastoral and apostolic training that Jesus Christ and John Wesley knew so well. History will be written to note that the re-discovery in the twentieth century did not occur in the North American citadels of learning. This time it was not the Methodists but the Presbyterians, and it was in Central America. The first recognized location was in Guatemala where traditional theological education was in trouble: existing institutions were training only a handful of prospective pastors; the operation was costing far too much in both money and personnel; it was failing to reach the proven leaders of the congregations—usually family men with home and job responsibilities, and often not educationally qualified for seminary training. Many of the young people later proved to be either dropouts, or ineffective ministers. The “ivory tower” nature of their campus-

² Ernest Melby, Community Education: A Program in and for Social Action, *The Community School and Its Administration*, Vol. IX (12) Aug. 1971, p.1. (Nott Institute for Community Improvement, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan).

³ See Ivan Illich, *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970). Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy for the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970).

⁴ Richard L. Hovey, *Cognitive Styles in African Cultures: The Global Articulated Dimension*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1971.

⁵ See Ralph D. Winter (ed.), *Theological Education by Extension* (South Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1969).

based training tended to separate them from the world of responsible church leadership. By the time they had finished their training, re-assimilation into their own culture was problematic. They had become professionals who expected high salaries. Churches could seldom support them. They were *young* men, attempting leadership roles in societies where age and experience are venerated. The recognized older leaders, who *should* have been trained, were staying at home.

The need to make educational opportunities available to large numbers of untrained pastors drove the church and the mission educators to return to the proverbial horseback. The traditional seminary, *where students come to learn*, has been transformed into an extension seminary in which *professors go out to teach*; or extension centers have been developed in which twentieth century circuit-riding teachers meet weekly with small groups of students. Between these weekly sessions, students study at home with the help of workbooks and self-instructional materials. The academic work becomes more closely related to on-the-job experiences within their own congregations and communities. Students meet at regular intervals in larger groups at regional centers. Annually, they attend a special conference and graduation ceremonies at the headquarters. The benefits of this sort of educational approach have become apparent—not only to the mission and church educators in Guatemala, but to many around the world.

Jim Hopewell of the Theological Education Fund, London, summarized the Guatemala experiences this way:

1. Older men established in a profession are given an opportunity to study theology. These men are already tested as leaders in their communities.
2. Their method of study forces them to rely upon reading and self expression. Passive acceptance of lectures is minimized.
3. The variety of centers permits instruction at different levels—post sixth grade in some instances, university-level courses in the capital city.
4. Transition to a tent-making ministry is natural, indeed anticipated. Types of vocational crises that afflict full-time seminary students in other countries are largely avoided.
5. Pastors utilize courses as an effective type of continuing education.
6. Costs are surprisingly low. Because they all work either in churches or secular tasks, or both, students can pay for their courses and require no subsidy for living expenses.
7. Enrollments have increased more than tenfold.⁶

The successes in Guatemala have encouraged mission educators in Latin America, Africa, and Asia to initiate similar extension programs. Most are still in an embryonic state of development. Many shortcomings can be traced to the preoccupation with increasing the quantity of educational output. This concern for quantity occasionally eclipses the potential improvement of *quality* made possible by a field-based approach. Nevertheless, the rapidly expanding use of extension approaches to augment and sometimes to replace ivory tower education of church leaders constitutes an exciting illustration of nonformal education in action.

Theological education by extension 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

⁶ James Hopewell, The Presbyterian Seminary: An Outsider's View, in Ralph D. Winter (ed.), *Theological Education by Extension*. pp. 102-103.

training which prepared an individual for a high-level, client-oriented service. The training of the pastor is professional training in this sense because specialized training is needed to equip 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.

Thus there is a point of similarity between improving training of professional workers through a field-based curriculum and nonformal education in general. Both are concerned with the integration of new knowledge and the applied uses of that knowledge in daily experience. It may be that the newly focused attention on nonformal education derives from a newly recognized respectability of experience-centered learning.

In our self-congratulated role of educational consultants to the world, we now are seen as pushers of nonformal education. Did we invent nonformal education? Indeed, is nonformal education anything new? The criticism that we hear of American involvement in overseas *nonformal* education is much like the recurrent criticism of our overseas work in *formal* education. The attack sounds like this: western-style education is a device that *we* impose on the rest of the world—on the assumption that because it is good for *us*, it is good for *them*. Now that the western world is becoming somewhat disillusioned with the failure of schooling to deliver on all its promises, it is discovering nonformal education and proposing it to the world as an alternative. But this criticism is naive; it suggests that our motive is to *promote* nonformal education; whereas our motive is much more to encourage examination of nonformal alternatives to schooling, with the thought that they can be effective as educational devices to achieve the goals that are perceived to be valuable within the society.

But if we assume that nonformal education is a creation of the western world, we are indeed vulnerable to valid criticism. What we are now calling “nonformal education” is everywhere in the world already. We need to become more alert and aware; we need to seek out and learn from exemplary programs of nonformal education in other nations; and indeed there *are* examples of nonformal education indigenous and long-standing in virtually every culture.

Nonformal education is nothing new—except perhaps the name! People within any country can be helped to recognize the historical persistence of nonformal education and to see its relevancy to the achievement of goals defined and maintained within the society. Historically, nonformal education has been less a tool of outside influence than formal education has been! In fact, it would seem relatively difficult for outside forces to convert nonformal education to serve purposes contrary to those accepted within the society or culture.

The church itself illustrates the capability of culture to assimilate infusions that utilize nonformal modes. Although nearly always founded through the efforts of foreign missions and societies, church assemblies in different regions have evolved unique cultural expressions of Christianity. In many countries they have become nationalized; for practical purposes, they may be considered “indigenous”. These assemblies began as creatures of nonformal education; their major modes of outreach continue to be more nonformal than formal; the objectives they fulfill are a blend of the values of Christianity and the needs of the culture.

Thus the church and its many local assemblies are already bases of nonformal education; in general, they are rather well integrated into the culture. Philip Coombs has said, “The churches have better resources and are in a better position for instituting nonformal education than the big aid agencies.

Among their advantages: they have the power of voluntary groups and of dedicated individuals; they do not have to go through the Ministry of Education or other bureaucratic lines.”⁷

Much of the ministry and function of the church is and has been dependent on educational procedures. The training of pastors is at the heart of the church’s educational operation. Pastors, in turn, and lay teachers play educational leadership roles within their congregations. Pastors teach through many different *modes*. Their teaching activities take many forms: they lecture to large groups from the pulpit; they guide small groups in discussions; they interact with individuals on a one-to-one basis in informal meetings. Especially in the developing countries, the *content* of the pastor’s teaching is also exceedingly varied. To the traditional spiritual tasks of church education are added concerns for literacy education, health education, agricultural education, and the like. Such general and basic education emphases are reminiscent of the early days of the English Sunday schools when children off the street were taught the three R’s along with the Bible.

In addition to the education of the pastor and the educational activities which are carried on *within* the congregation by pastors and lay teachers, there is yet another educational aspect of the church: educational ministries on behalf of the church, as it reaches out in loving concern for the needs of the community, the nation, and the world. Examples can be drawn from our nation (especially in its earlier years) and from the world at large: the church has been the founder of agencies such as medical teaching centers, teacher training colleges, and universities.

But what about nonformal education? In reference to the training of pastors, the training of lay leadership, religious education and education for effective living throughout the congregation, there may be important changes ahead. As the church looks into the potential of nonformal education, it may regain flexibility and effectiveness.

Nonformal education has particular relevance for the mission of the church today. The church in congregation and in mission is at a moment of potential re-orientation to its earliest stance of localized involvement with the masses. The ideal focus for the development of nonformal education in the church can come about through the seeking of contemporary meaning of social involvement as represented in the deacons. The original deacons, the seven men in Acts 6, were assigned to meet a pressing welfare need within the Christian community. The church must be involved with the processes of change in society. It is part of the responsibility of the church to affect society for good. Revealed truth is the basis; and involvement in the spiritual and physical needs of humanity is the consequence. The church must identify *who* needs help and *where*; and then take the trouble to help them define their own needs. Continuously the church must examine itself to determine how it can best relate to the needs that are identified.

Here are two practical questions related to the church’s role in education in developing countries:

1. *Should mission societies and churches sell their stake in overseas schools to the highest bidder?* This is a very blunt question, but it is unavoidable. I think that the answer is “no”, in most cases. But we probably ought to retard or suspend capital investment for a time until we can sort out what it is that really needs to be done. Selling everything and starting over in something else can be a kind of polarization

⁷ Philip Coombs in consultation with Derwood Baker, 1971.

that has little value in dealing with social issues. Instead, educational missions can be enlarged in scope to embrace and develop nonformal education as well as formal.

2. *Should missionary personnel engaged in educational services be reassigned?* I believe that the answer to this question is “yes”, to the extent that it is possible. Increased emphasis on training and employment of national personnel is needed. Expatriates can continue in the roles of training national teachers and administrators—but on fixed departure timetables so that they are destined to get out of their roles by a specific time. A timetable serves the useful function of making people take seriously the contention that the missionaries don’t expect to be there forever. This works both ways—it encourages the nationals and it also reminds missionaries that their place and role may be elsewhere, three or four years from now.

Following are some suggestions for the church: the first recommendation is that we *put furloughed missionaries into graduate schools* in greater numbers and encourage them to take courses, seminars, and independent studies in urban development and rural development. Some of the schools of agriculture have much to offer those who want to learn how to work in human resource development. Also, programs in community development are offered in schools of sociology and international studies, collaborating with schools of communication and education. We should encourage some to enter programs in cross-cultural communication. American and European missionaries could learn new skills and understandings that would affect their work and relationships when they return to their foreign assignment. They would be more “training minded” and more skilled in the processes of actually transferring responsibilities to national persons.

The second recommendation is that we take advantage of this moment of incentive to *seek out ways of working creatively with the leadership* of the national church and the local assemblies in order *to design and explore new approaches* and relate them to secular resources in a combined effort to influence human development.

A third recommendation is that *churches define their audiences with precision and care*. Often, both conservative and liberal mission groups have tried to “reach the world” with various ill-defined messages. Social and spiritual needs were defined so broadly that it became impossible to develop practical guidelines for implementing the programs. “The world” can never be reached; specific, homogeneous target populations who live in the world *can* be. Diffused efforts are doomed to failure before they start. Focused efforts as exemplified by some of the programs of community evangelism, agricultural development and health training can be successful.

The fourth recommendation is that mission leadership stop and look around. The old academic tradition is not all that we have to offer. *We must find ways to promulgate a more humane and more vital education at home and abroad*. Even in our own country we use nonformal educational structures far more than we may be aware. As professional people, we know that our certificates and diplomas won’t keep us current; we know the value of nonformal continuing education! So to begin, what is the conceptual context in which the church today relates to nonformal education?

1. Nonformal education is not new.
2. Nonformal education adjusts and adapts itself to the learners rather than requiring the learner to adjust to the education system.
3. Almost anything that can be taught can be taught in a nonformal mode.
4. Some of the most important teaching the church has done and is doing is through nonformal education.
5. The church *is* involved in nonformal education.