



Theological Education by Extension¹

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Theological Education by Extension, especially when the words are capitalized, refers to a specific innovation which had a beginning, a surge of popularity, and a significant long-term effect on the way that leadership education for the church is understood. Its origins are traceable to Presbyterian missionary-educators in Guatemala in the period from 1967 to 1970, when the Presbyterian seminary where they were assigned ran short of students. Ralph Winter and Jim Emery, followed somewhat later by Ross Kinsler and other Americans with a zeal for bringing biblically substantial and theologically worthy education to undereducated pastors, came to realize that a key problem was that the residential seminary had rather well served the needs in its immediate surroundings, but it had little prospect for reaching beyond these geographic limits. The problems of travel distance, bivocational responsibilities, cultural variation, and especially the problem of family responsibilities kept the residential model of education out-of-reach for older pastors, widely scattered rural pastors, and mature Christians who were not only serving churches but, at the same time, farming in order to provide for *themselves and their families*.

The first Theological Education by Extension was conducted by missionaries (and soon experienced national church pastors and leaders) who became part of a mobile task force moving on a schedule from location to location in order to bring educational opportunities to the learners.

The residential school approach to theological education is best attuned to younger persons who are in the “schooling years” of their lives, carry minimal financial burdens and few family responsibilities, and live close enough to the seminary or Bible college to be able to return to their homes and communities as necessary. The historical problems with the residential approach to the development of leadership for the church have arisen from the very fact that its presuppositions and procedures are drawn from the academic realm and are often in substantial contrast with the characteristics and needs of the church. Residential theological education is usually assessed in terms of information-retention, skills of intellectual argumentation, specialized narrowness, and in other such matters that are expected of the “schooling.” The characteristics of personality, servant-leadership, compassionate ministry, and spiritual qualities which are commonly identified in the Bible’s references to requirements for leadership in the church (e.g., 1 Timothy 3) are not at the center of attention in ordinary approaches to schooling. Those who quickly adopted the general idea of Theological Education by Extension assumed that placement of the educational process closer to the experiences of ministry and pastoral life would have substantially more appropriate outcomes.

As expected in any locally popular innovation, the rise of TEE was widespread and enthusiastic, but before many years it began to wane. The peak of the *movement* occurred within ten years.

¹ Ted Ward. Theological Education by Extension. In the *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*.

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Nevertheless, its influence persists thirty years and more later. Programs of theological education by extension are widespread. In India, for example, TEE is virtually the dominant mode of pastoral education. But the initial enthusiasm for TEE has generally waned for several distinct reasons.

First, the wisely chosen methodology in TEE called for three resources which were extremely rare. The instructional model called for students to read independently and in small self-led groups from materials carefully designed to provide an informational basis and preparation for weekly seminars (sometimes spaced across more time). This reading-plus-guided-discussion was to replace the time-honored lecturing-plus-note-taking of formal higher education. Herein lay the three problems.

1. Where were these appropriate teaching-learning materials? They had to be developed. Amazing responses by dedicated pastor-teachers and other writers emerged. But the demand was far greater, so all sorts of corners were trimmed to speed things up. A material that proved valuable in Zambia was translated for Brazil. A Peruvian material was lifted across formidable cultural barriers into Mexico, France, and India. What began as a reform movement fell back into the habits of the past. Education that promised to be based upon a more sensitive and relevant application of God's Word quickly degenerated into the old procedure of dumping information from one cultural form of Christianity into a contrasting cultural situation.

2. Even more serious was the lack of skilled discussion leaders. Hardly anyone in the movement counted on the difficulty of breaking the habit of teaching-as-telling. Almost anyone who has spent time in formal education is inclined to line people up and talk down to them for long periods of time, assuming that they either haven't read, haven't reasoned, or haven't understood what they have experienced in life. The TEE instructor-leaders were rarely any different, nor were any resources brought to bear to help retrain them into more effective models of seminar-style teaching.

3. Almost everyone underestimated the consuming power of threatened formal education institutions and their favorite ways of teaching. Some promoters of TEE presumed that the TEE model was inherently weak, and so they asserted that it would become "nearly as good as" the formal education programs. Such boldness not only irritated the older and well-entrenched hard core, but it overlooked the fact that TEE was intentionally different—aimed toward qualities that were based in different values, and not intended to be "as good as," given that its purposes were in some respects fundamentally *different from* formal theological education. The tendency to overpromise and to hide away these fundamental differences also produced another problem. In much of the educationally under-resourced parts of the world, the craving for education was then, and still is, all-consuming, but the *meaning* of education has been shaped by the colonial experience. Thus "education" of any sort has less to do with life-change as world view enlargement and spiritual transformation than with the economic advantages of coin-like degrees from "recognized" institutions and curricula.

The use of extension approaches to theological education, especially continuing education for ministry is, of course, much older than TEE. Especially since the period immediately after World War II, many theological schools have been emphasizing lifelong learning for ministers and educators. Such institutions are the modern rediscoverers of theological education by extension (small *t*, small *ee*). But the significance of TEE lies far deeper. First, it was one of the first instances of an innovation emerging from the missionary sector or the overseas churches finding its way into the patterns of education "back home." Second, the return to the experiential methods of Martin

Luther, John Wesley, the Apostle Paul, Jesus, and others of the early nonformal education traditions stimulated an upsurge of general awareness that not all is as it should be in modern theological education. A slow-but-sure overhaul of the relationships of the academic and ecclesial relationships in the development of leadership is now underway. Third, it has stimulated the emergence of many new institutional and noninstitutional educational programs that reposition education *within* ministry, rather than as a formal rite-of-passage that *prepares for* ministry.

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