

**The Challenges of "Non-Seminary" Training**  
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**I. Introduction**

The title that was assigned to me for this session, "The Challenges of Non-Seminary Training," can be taken in two ways. On the one hand, one can look at the challenges and difficulties that are faced by non-traditional programs of theological education. One can critique some of the programs that have been established in terms of how they are administered, how well they prepare the participants for ministry, how credible they are in the eyes of the stakeholders, how efficient and useful they are in meeting the needs of the church, and the difficulties they face along the way? Those are important questions and I will raise some of those issues.

On the other hand, one can see this title in a slightly different light. "The challenges of non-seminary training" can be seen in terms of the question: In what ways do the non-residential seminary training models challenge the assumptions, values and pedagogic methodologies of the traditional, residential seminary model of pastoral formation? In other words, what, if anything, do the non-residential programs of theological education have to teach those of us involved in the more traditional, residential programs? I think we must look at this theme from both perspectives, for while I will readily admit that there are problems, questions and issues to be addressed in the non-traditional training programs I have seen and even been a part of, I am also convinced that the proponents of these alternative programs<sup>1</sup> have raised some important considerations that anyone interested in well-rounded, functional ministerial formation must take into account.

**II. The Theological Education Debate**

In the U.S. there has been a great deal of debate in recent years, especially among mainline Protestants, over the nature, purpose and goals of theological education. This discussion was launched in part by the publication in 1983 of Edward Farley's work, *Theologia*.<sup>2</sup> Farley pointed to the fact that the older conception of theology as *habitus*

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<sup>1</sup> Educators like to speak of three categories when describing educational programs: *Formal*, *informal*, and *non-formal*. *Formal* education refers to organized institutional education recognized by the society in which it exists. It is preparation that takes place in institutions set up to offer programmatic instruction leading to degrees or other recognized closure incentives. *Informal* refers to training that takes place in the context of normal life activities. It does not necessarily mean "unintentional," but rather training revolves around normal situations that arise in life. *Non-formal* education refers to semi-organized preparation that usually takes place outside the jurisdiction of formal training. It refers to organized, non-programmatic, functional training that focuses on skills and knowledge that can be immediately applied to practical ministry (Clinton 131-150). While distance or theological education by extension programs can be quite formal in their approach, generally they would be classified as non-formal, in that usually they intentionally incorporate intensive ministry experiences into the learning processes.

<sup>2</sup> The discussion on the purpose and aim of theological education in America goes back to Kelly's study of theological education in 1924 and Richard Niebuhr's classic study of 1956 (see bibliography). In the last twenty years, however, there has been a profusion of literature on the topic coming from mainline theological circles. For representative examples see also Bassett, *The Aims and Purposes of Evangelical Theological Education*; Browning, Polk and Evison (eds.), *The Education of the Practical Theologian*; Gilpin, "Theological Education as the Formation of Character," *Theological Education*, Supplement 1, 24:5-10; Hough, "The Education of Practical Theologians," *Theological Education* 20:2; Hough and Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education*; Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School*, and *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*; Kelsey

has been lost somewhat. He claims that there is a lack of coherence in theological education due to the fragmentation of curriculum into the various disciplines, each pursuing its specialty quite independently from the others. Theological education has evolved, especially since the time of the implementation of Schleiermacher's ideas at the University of Berlin, so that today, at least among mainline Protestants in the U.S., there is little that holds it together:

The divinity approach is largely replaced with a plurality of "theological sciences" requiring specialist teachers. The shift was not from piety to learning. A learned ministry was never seriously questioned in many of the church traditions. The shift was from one meaning of learning to another, from study which deepens heartfelt knowledge of divine things to scholarly knowledge of relatively discrete theological sciences (10).

The impact of these developments on the ministry, according to Farley, is that "the direction is . . . from office to profession" (11). For confessional Lutheran theological educators with a "high view" of the office of the public ministry, such a move is a concern.

This debate, I believe, has been helpful to traditional seminaries for it has sought to restore what we would consider to be a fundamental goal, perhaps *the* fundamental goal of theological education, which is the formation of a *habitus practicus* shaped by the theology of the cross. It has served to help theological educators reflect upon the place of theology in theological education (Ferris 1996, 101-111), and has caused us to consider the important question of coherence in our seminary programs (Rowen 93-100).

### **III. Concerns Faced by Theological Education in a Variety of Contexts**

I would submit to you, however, that many of these questions raised today in North American seminaries have been under discussion for a long time by missiologists, especially during the past one hundred years. As missionaries in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century went out from western lands to proclaim the gospel, they were faced with the immediate problem of how to train workers to minister to the many congregations that were being organized. The need to prepare local pastors was obvious. It was only natural that early missionaries believed the education of local clergy could best be accomplished by establishing institutions similar to the ones they had attended. Therefore, residential seminaries were set up to duplicate, in as much as possible, the design, methodology, and curriculum of the seminaries in the United States and Europe.

The results, however, in terms of the preparation of an effective national ministry, were sometimes less than satisfactory. Although the academic level of many of these institutions was usually quite high, the graduating students sometimes did not satisfy the ministry needs of the church. In some cases, students became so deculturated after four to five years of life in the residential seminary that they were simply incapable (either psychologically, culturally, or socio-economically), of returning to the context from which they came.<sup>3</sup> Others grew intellectually, but it became apparent that many did not

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and Wheeler, "The ATS Basic Issues Research Project: Thinking about Theological Education," *Theological Education* 30:2; Lewis "The Makings of a Theologian," *Insights* 109; Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study*, and *An Invitation to Theological Study*; and Leith, *Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education*.

<sup>3</sup>I heard this complaint from the laymen of the Lutheran congregations in the north of Brazil. The north of Brazil is quite different culturally than the south, evidencing much more of an African and Native

have a vocation for ministry and used their training to obtain positions in the secular world.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the cost of operating the residential seminaries in areas where the church was still in its formative stages and relatively small was phenomenally high. For example, at one time the budget of the Lutheran Seminary in the Philippines was about \$220,000 annually, yet it was graduating an average of only 1.5 students per year (Fuliga 108).<sup>5</sup>

These were the kinds of issues that gave rise to other models of theological education, what for the purposes of this paper have been called "non-seminary training." Moreover, it was felt that in some cases the candidates for ministry were not always the type of men who would be credible in their home contexts. José Fuliga saw this happening in the Philippines, for example, when he observed that sometimes theological education does not prepare the men most likely to be respected in their communities for ministry, stating that rather "the grave men of the church" and "the natural teachers" are co-opted by "either a foreigner or someone who has come with a foreign education" (105).

The point is that the non-formal, non-traditional models that have been utilized in many parts of the world are not merely the result of a lack of resources or the result of a desire to do theological education more quickly and/or less thoroughly, but in many cases the alternatives were born out of a desire to meet the needs of the church more faithfully, and to prepare apt candidates for ministry in a way more in keeping with the context in which they will serve.

#### **IV. The Rise of Theological Education by Extension**

While there are a variety of non-traditional methodologies through which theological education can be carried out, by far the model that has had the greatest impact is theological education by extension. It was begun when the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala noted difficulties with their residential seminary similar to those mentioned above. Although most of the Presbyterian churches were located in the western highlands, the seminary was located in Guatemala City. Although most of the members of the church were from the Mayan-Quiché people, the student body of their residential seminary was made up mainly of Spanish speaking *Ladinos*, who were little inclined and ill-prepared to go to the impoverished rural areas to live and work among the semi-literate church population.

In 1963 the Presbyterian Church decided to take theological education to where the majority of the church membership was, and the seminary was moved to the small town of San Felipe. It was also recognized that a different teaching methodology would

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American influence than the south, which is much more heavily influenced by Europe. The lay-leadership of the northern regions said they had sent several of their sons south for seminary training, but by the time they completed their program of study, they had little inclination to return to the northern regions, preferring calls to the well-established congregations in the south where what they learned in the seminary would have more ready application than to the largely missional contexts of the north.

<sup>4</sup>The classic texts describing these issues are Herbert Zorn's *Viability in Context: The Theological Seminary in the Third World--Seedbed or Sheltered Garden?*, and James Bergquist and P. Kambam's *The Crisis of Dependency in Third World Ministries*.

<sup>5</sup>The Seminario Augsburgiano of Mexico City, operated jointly by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church from 1964 to 1981, is another example of the problems associated with this type of residential seminary in certain contexts. During its seventeen-year history it graduated twenty students from Central America. Of those twenty students only two are currently serving in Latin America, four are in the United States, two have died, and the others are working in secular occupations.

have to be employed if the new program was going to meet the ministry needs of the church. There was a severe shortage of pastors. In order to reach more students, the extension model was implemented so that the students could participate in theological education, yet remain in their contexts, with their families, and continue their occupations.

Thus the movement called Theological Education by Extension (TEE) was launched. The three founding members of the faculty of the new seminary in Guatemala shared their insights with other Christian missionaries and churches around the world, and the movement spread and grew tremendously.<sup>6</sup> Today there are literally hundreds of TEE programs in use by virtually all denominations.

The design of non-traditional programs is not viewed solely in pragmatic terms. It is not only a matter of doing theological education in a less expensive or academically less rigorous way; rather, there were and are certain pedagogical and theological presuppositions underlying such approaches.

Pedagogically, most non-formal programs of theological education have sought to incorporate the latest insights from the field of adult education, or andragogy. Concepts such as the "action/reflection/action" pattern, and the insights of educators such as Paulo Freire, Robert Carkhuff, Arthur Combs, Malcolm Knowles, and Jean Piaget have been incorporated (Ferris 46-52).

The basic model of extension education is very simple.<sup>7</sup> It usually includes three dimensions: (1) Self-study materials that the student can complete at home; (2) in-ministry activities that the student is expected to carry out; and (3) regular "seminars" at an "extension center" in which the students can reflect both upon what they have learned cognitively and how it applies to their ministry experience.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of non-formal theological education are convinced that the *processes* of theological education are just as important as the content of theological education and that the experiential dimension is essential (Ferris 45). They suggest that such factors have been ignored for too long in many residential seminaries. Most "non-seminary" ministerial training programs emphasize the need to be intimately connected to the church so that theological *formation* can take place in a dynamic of engagement.

This emphasis on the experiential has a theological rationale. Charles Wood, in his book *Vision and Discernment*, expressed the validity of looking at the way the earlier theologians conceptualized theological study. He pointed to Luther, who refused to draw a dichotomy between theory and practice. Luther recognized the experiential dimension in the making of a theologian when he spoke of *tentatio* or *Anfechtung*. He said that only in *tentatio* did one really learn the meaning of Scripture: "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to dig deeper, where my temptations took me." This

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<sup>6</sup>Actually, the Lutherans in Guatemala had already implemented a TEE program of sorts by the late fifties, when Missouri Synod missionary Robert Hoeferkamp and Edgar Keller developed a self-study manual for catechists. This manual is still in use by Lutherans throughout Latin America and the U.S.

<sup>7</sup>Another term that often is used in educational circles is *distance education*. Distance education means, as the term suggests, basically any program of education that takes place away, or at a distance, from the centralized institution offering that education. The principal accreditation agency for theological education in the U.S. and Canada, the Association of Theological Schools, has recognized and set standards for extension and distance education, although the recognition did not come easily (See Elizabeth Patterson's article, "The Questions of Distance Education").

<sup>8</sup>Although the above mentioned three dimensions are basic to the TEE philosophy, today what is understood by the term TEE can vary greatly. As it is commonly used today it can refer to almost any form of non-traditional theological education.

*tentatio* is a real experience of struggle and temptation that can only take place in the arena of life. Any purely speculative approach to theology was deficient, according to Luther. One of his most powerful sayings for the young pastor or student experiencing trial was: "*Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando.*" In the trial of life and ministry experience is the theologian made.<sup>9</sup>

## V. "Challenges" to Traditional Programs

At one time distance theological education or extension theological education was being promoted as the panacea for all the ills and problems associated with the traditional means of providing an effective and faithful ministry in the Christian church. It is now recognized, after some forty years of experience, that there are problems and challenges to this model too, however, all of which have not been adequately addressed. It is also true that a polarization has taken place between theological educators from the residential seminaries and those who work with non-formal, alternative models. This polarization has been in part due to the harsh criticisms that the early proponents of TEE were leveling against the residential seminaries. They would assert that the residential seminaries were "stifling, impeding, and thwarting" the growth of the church. Today, however, most recognize that the non-formal options for theological education should not be seen as replacements, but rather as a complimentary aspect to the residential seminary.

In summary, I would like to reiterate some of the advantages or positive aspects of many of the non-formal or non-traditional programs that have been established. There are ways in which the alternative models "challenge" our assumptions and methodologies. Some of those have become apparent in the earlier discussion of pedagogical theory, methodology, candidate selection practices, etc.

***Conducted In Context:*** Distance theological education does not decontextualize the learner. A distance program can allow the participants to learn and grow without removing them, whether geographically, psychologically or socially, so far from their context that they have great difficulty returning to the places where they are expected to serve. The proponents of extension theological education would say that the goal of theological education is to produce men who are prepared to minister faithfully among their own people in contexts that vary vastly from the sheltered walls of the residential theological seminary.

***Provides for the Experiential Dimension:*** Non-formal programs rely more heavily on the dynamic of engagement in the training processes. This can have the effect of deepening the student's understanding of theological concepts as they see how they are related more directly to the needs and problems of people in real-life ministry situations.

The question of "formation" is of paramount importance here, and I believe it is with regard to this question that we see the greatest difference of opinion between proponents of residential and non-residential theological education. Where does the formation of a theological *habitus* take place? How is it best provided for? Proponents of non-formal programs would say that it takes place best in the context of ministry, where the students can wrestle with the tough questions and issues that one involved in ministry must confront. Others would say that there are certain important formative

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<sup>9</sup> The last words Luther is known to have written also demonstrate his esteem for the experiential dimension in theological training: "No one can understand Virgil who has not tended sheep or farmed for five years. No one can understand Cicero who has not been a politician for twenty years. No one can understand Scripture who has not had the care for souls for a hundred years."

processes that can best be carried out through the community life of the seminary, which includes plenty of time for interaction between teachers and students, and between the students themselves, and even the teachers themselves, and most importantly, through the worship life of that community as all are brought together in God's presence to hear his word and receive the sacraments. This is, I believe, the crux of matter regarding the question of non-residential versus residential theological education. In other words, are theologians formed by or in the church or by or in the school?

**Cost Effective:** A pragmatic point is that distance theological education can be cost effective. Instead of one hundred students moving themselves and their families to a centralized location, for example, one teacher travels to various locations convenient to the students. Instead of a large centralized campus, the facilities of local churches, for example, are put to use for distance learning opportunities.

**Theological Education Available to More Students:** This is related to the previous point. Non-formal programs make it possible for many more students to be involved in some form of theological education. We have heard reports during this conference of the numbers of people who are taking advantage of the extension programs. Not all will go on to prepare themselves for the pastoral ministry, but it has been seen that many who might not otherwise be able to receive advanced theological education are afforded the possibility of doing so through a variety of non-formal models.

**Ministerial Candidate Selection Processes:** Many of the "grave men" of the church and the "natural teachers" can participate while maintaining their relationship with their communities.

**Open Ended:** A non-formal program is more open ended. Participants can embark upon a study program more easily because they do not have to go through the disruption of moving themselves and their families to a centralized location. There is the personal risk involved. If a student comes to the realization that pastoral ministry is not for him, or if the church should come to the conclusion that the candidate is not fit for ministry, it is much easier for the individual to gracefully withdraw.

## **VI. Disadvantages, Problems, Challenges**

At the same time, several concerns and issues have been raised by those both inside and outside of the alternative models. The following challenges to the non-traditional programs of theological education, from my experience, seem to be the most prominent. What I here mention are not necessarily in order of significance.

**Lack of Credibility:** In many places the distance programs of theological education have not achieved the credibility necessary for them to be fully recognized by the participants and/or the church. One of the reasons, perhaps, is that much of the older leadership of the churches has come from the residential model, and they view the new model as inferior or second-rate. Even in our LC-MS mission publications my work in Guatemala has been described as that of preparing "lay-pastors" and "evangelists" for work in the church, when, in fact, the goal was to train fully authenticated and duly called and ordained pastors. There is a common misconception that an inherent requirement for public ministry is a residential seminary degree. I have seen that for many people, the unmarked meaning of the word "ordained" is "graduated from a four-year residential seminary." We have seen that historically there have been many paths to the ordained ministry, and the current model of the theological seminary is a relatively new development. That is not to say the four-year seminary model is not a good development. I would hope that it has been a positive development as we attempt to improve always the way in which those who will be called and ordained to proclaim the gospel in an

increasingly complex and challenging context will be prepared for this office. But ordination, especially from a Lutheran theological perspective, has never been simply a matter of graduation from a residential seminary. Yet, all of the talk about the insights of adult education theory and methodology, contextualization and the importance of the experiential dimension notwithstanding, the alternative models continue to suffer from a lack of credibility, although perhaps things are changing in some places.

**Accreditation:** Related to the lack of credibility is the practical concern for accreditation. Although this is changing too, most accreditation associations are not designed to deal with the methodology and presuppositions of an extension program, for example. Accreditation, as even recognized by the ATS ("What is a Good Theological School," *Theological Education*), has somehow become a matter of the number of books in the library, the number of Ph.D.s on faculty, the size and layout of the campus, the financial condition of the operation, etc. While those things certainly are relevant, they do not necessarily define the good theological school. Nevertheless, the fact that most distance theological education programs are not accredited has undermined their credibility.

**Administration:** There are many difficulties inherent in the administration of such a program. Some of this is due to the fact that the students are separated from one another and from the headquarters of the program, sometimes by great distances. Students often participate irregularly. Probably most distance theological education programs suffer from understaffing. Non-formal programs of theological education require a great deal of administrative support in areas such as the collection of fees, management of budget, student records, scheduling of classes, production of materials, etc. Often this is not adequately provided for, and the programs suffer from a lack of credibility as a result.

**Institutional Stability and Dependence on Expatriate Leadership:** All too often, the non-formal programs of theological education that have been established in some of the smaller, younger churches are more the vision of the expatriate missionary than the local church. If care has not been taken to involve the stakeholders in the planning and development of the program it generally will not enjoy much local ownership. Such programs continue to function only as long as an expatriate missionary is present to take care of the administration and usually the bulk of the teaching, and funding continues to flow from the outside. This is one of the most lamentable aspects and concerns, in my estimation, to the non-traditional programs that have been implemented in our circles. As a result, many of the non-formal programs that have been started suffer from instability, in which the rules change when the foreign missionary changes. Some analysts contend this is a primary reason national leaders are unwilling to endorse the non-formal models, or take them over eventually. In other words, it wasn't their vision. Why should they now be asked to take on the burden of maintaining something that was not their idea in the first place?

**Student's Outside Activities:** It is only to be expected that participation in a non-formal, distance theological education program often presents a great challenge to the student. He must somehow balance his family life, occupation and ministry responsibilities with his study program. Sometimes family responsibilities and work duties can make it difficult for the student to find time for his studies, and he simply cannot do it, or he does not have the time to do the work well. In fact, this was listed by the supervisor as the number one disadvantage to our distance education program (DELTO) at Concordia Theological Seminary.

***Lack of On-going Contact:*** The fact that the student is doing a great part of his learning at a distance from the professor means that the on-going opportunity for dialogue, evaluation and mentoring is quite difficult to maintain. This makes it difficult for the teacher sometimes to accurately assess the progress of the student in a holistic way.

***Lack of Formation in Community:*** Related to this is the question of formation discussed above. How is the kind of formation advocated by Dr. Kleinig in our opening essay to be provided for when the students are not afforded the opportunity for on-going contact with their professors, fellow students, and are not brought together regularly, daily, in word and prayer?

***Feeling of Loss of Control:*** Related to the above is the concern often voiced by teachers that they do not have adequate control over the learning experience. The student is more on his own to carry out his studies, and sometimes needs additional help that is not readily available. The use of local pastors as facilitators helps greatly to reduce this tension, but our experience in using local pastors as mentors has been quite spotty, to say the least.

## **VII. Conclusion**

As can be seen, there are challenges and difficulties to be faced. The non-formal, non-traditional programs that have been implemented around the world are not the panacea that some of the early proponents claimed they would be. On the other hand, they have raised important issues for any program of theological education, and maybe they have become part of the answer--not necessarily the whole answer, but part of the answer--at least in some quarters. The proliferation of extension and distance models, even by most of the traditional residential seminaries represented at this conference, demonstrates that they must see some positive value in them for meeting the challenges of providing ministerial formation for the wide variety of contexts in which Christian ministry is carried out.

There are caveats and issues, though, that need to be explored further and addressed. My hope is that we can evaluate and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of all models, and continue the process of improving theological education whether it be the residential seminary, an extension model, a combination, or some other way that we have not made use of recently (or have yet to discover) for the preparation of men to faithfully exercise the mission and ministry of the church.

Douglas Rutt  
April 7, 2001

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