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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: Can We Do Without It?

An AJET Editorial

Theological Education conjures up all kinds of images in the minds of some people: an education for the elite who are detached from the common man; an education which is moribund with a curriculum and educational philosophy that is western and out-of-date; an education that ignores the pressing social issues of contemporary society.

But theological education, properly conceived, does work and is essential for a healthy, growing church. In any discussion of theological education, however, one must recognise that there are different levels of leadership in the church. Ephesians 4:11-13 clearly teaches that the "gifted leaders" (vs. 11) are intended to train lay leadership ("God's people") so that all believers may contribute their gifts in service for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Lay leadership can be trained in many different ways. **Christian Education** programmes in the local church are essential for a healthy, growing church. Christian Education programmes include Sunday Schools, adult Bible studies, Christian teaching among the men, women, youth, married couples, single adults and such like. Ideally, written materials should be available to provide graded and comprehensive instruction.

The traditional mode of training "gifted church leadership" has been residential **Bible schools, theological colleges** and **seminaries**. These have proven their worth over the years, but they can be expensive and require students to be resident in an institutional setting for several years.

Theological Education by Extension (TEE) was begun in 1963 in Latin America as a means of "extending" theological education out from a central theological college to educate untrained church leaders where they were living and working, without requiring them to be resident in an institution. The Theological Commission of the *Association of Evangelicals of Africa* has produced a series of programmed study materials printed by Evangel Press in Nairobi. In some circles TEE is used as the means of training pastors for ordination while other churches use TEE as a means of training lay leaders.

The advantages of TEE are many. Students are not required to leave their employment or families to live in an institution. TEE students are usually more mature and experienced in church ministry and are eager for training even while they are engaged in ministry. TEE, however, is not without limitations. TEE for advanced theological education has yet to be developed in Africa. TEE often lacks the dynamic interaction of the student classroom, the provision of in-depth research and thoughtful reflection, and the opportunity of spiritual formation in a training institution with mentors.

Short Term Institutes (or Training Centres) are attempts to combine the advantages of TEE with residential Bible Schools. Short Term Institutes provide intensive study programmes of several weeks duration, usually in the vicinity where the people are living. Students and teachers live on the same campus for those short terms and develop a close, mentoring relationship. This approach is helpful for those with minimal academic background. But such an approach is limited by the duration of the term of study. Most students cannot have a leave of absence for more than a few weeks in a year.

Other approaches in training of leadership without dislocating a person from his family and ministry include **internships** (guided training in actual on-the-job ministry experience, such as evangelism, church planting and pastoral ministry), **evening Bible schools, seminars, conferences, congresses, camps, retreats, and apprenticeships**.

Any healthy, growing church would be amiss if they would choose to neglect the various training approaches mentioned above. The more trained leaders at all levels which a church has, the more that church will be able to grow. There is no way that high level theological colleges will be able to train all the leaders needed in Africa. The early church in America is a vivid illustration. Before independence in 1776 the largest churches in America were Congregational, Presbyterian and Anglican. However, these churches required their pastors to be trained at seminary level with ability to read Greek and Hebrew. When thousands of immigrants flocked to America and began moving west there was great need for a large cadre of clergy who could meet the pastoral needs. The Baptists and Methodists did not require such highly trained pastors. As a result the Baptists and Methodists were more capable of evangelising and planting churches due to their emphasis on lay leadership and circuit riders. Consequently, by the end of the nineteenth century the Methodists and Baptists were by far the largest denominations in the United States.

We need flexibility in leadership training which educates *all levels*, both lower and upper levels so that they can disciple all believers in the faith.