

**MELANESIAN ASSOCIATION OF
THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS**

SECRETARY'S REPORT

*(Presented to the Secretary/Directors of Theological Associations Meeting,
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The Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, by its membership, draws most major theological seminaries in Papua New Guinea, representing mainline churches (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, United church, as well as an alliance of evangelical missions and groups). Ethnically, the name implies that a large number of people, served and represented through member schools of MATS, are Melanesians, but we are also glad of our associations with our neighbours in Australia, the Solomon Islands, and the rest of our Pacific and Asian neighbours. Geographically, our Association accounts for the mid-Western Pacific, with a total of around 3-5 million people. A third general description of our Association is in the fact that our member colleges represent the so-called third-world churches, or third-degree churches (Unfortunately, I don't even know how we got ourselves into the third-degree churches, let alone, third-degree Christians and theologians.)

In Papua New Guinea alone, there are over 100 missions and religious organisations, besides the major-established churches, most of whom are involved in some form of religious training and theological education. The churches, as a whole, run more than 60 percent of the schools in the country, of which around 40 percent are for religious and theological training. Comparatively, at the present time, MATS has only nine active members of the Association in the country, and the other two are in the Solomon Islands and Darwin, Australia. This is only 4.4 percent of religious and theology-related schools. This suggests to you the obvious need for engaging the remaining 35.6 percent, who are not involved with us in our joint efforts in theological education and sharing.

With the foregoing need, a two-fold direction in our theological education and training can be realised and pursued. Firstly, an effort to engage those schools and institutions, which are not part of our sharing at the present, no matter how small and low their standard of training. Secondly, to assist those schools and collective groups to pursue higher academic training for various needs of member churches, at both graduate and undergraduate levels within the country. Pursuing graduate training overseas is necessary, but cannot cater for the bulk of our graduates. This cannot be the key to our success story. For it is a slow and costly process, besides the emotional and cultural cost. We cannot send five students abroad at a time to do a doctorate programme, for this alone would cost in the hundreds of thousands of kina.

This is part of our justification for pursuing an ultimate goal of a time when we can have graduate studies for as many of our graduates as we can. This may not, altogether, remain a dream, for there are good signs. MATS, together with the Melanesian Council of Churches, have recently met for a consultation on religious studies at the University of Papua New Guinea. As a result of this consultation, and previous initiatives, a curriculum is being prepared for introduction at the Goroka Teachers' College, hopefully in 1988, while a joint committee is liaising with the university authorities to reintroduce religious studies, with a long-term view toward establishing a full department of theology, providing for both graduate and undergraduate programmes. Indications so far are that, if churches have the money, the university will be happy to take it up, perhaps only initially. A religious or theological studies programme at the university is not to take the place of what the individual churches, and their seminaries, are doing. Rather, it is to provide for graduate and continuing studies for many, who, otherwise, would not be able to pursue such studies abroad, for reasons mentioned earlier in this report.

Recently, MATS undertook the challenge to publish its own *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, which is now surviving its third year of infancy. If we can consolidate our funding sources with a more local and self-supporting base, it has a good chance of growing, and providing a forum for theological discussions in Melanesia and the Pacific. While the Journal tries to conform to a standard publication of a similar nature, at the same time, it tries to avoid technical jargons, which are academically prestigious, but are out of touch with the average reader in theology.

The bi-annual Study Institute continues to be an important forum for ecumenical theological dialogue, and sharing between member colleges. Within seven days or so, participants from member schools will be arriving in Lae for the 8th Study Institute, taking up the current general themes: *Theology by the People*, with theological reflections on issues ranging from peace, justice, development, which are all important issues for the church and society, though not fully realised as a church's urgent concern. What I personally propose for this, and future Study Institutes, is to have a mutual sharing with neighbouring associations, such as, the Australia-New Zealand Association, the South-East Asia Theological Association, and the Pacific Association of Theological Schools, and others.

Activities

Accreditation continues to be a major purpose of MATS. Accreditation teams have just completed rounds of evaluation visits, and are compiling their reports for the bi-annual assembly, which will be meeting the week after next.

Faculty development also plays an important part in MATS programmes, though it is a slow and costly exercise, as mentioned earlier. Finding the money is one thing, and developing the right people to meet our goals, both collective and individual, is another.

Student exchange is still a useful programme MATS has undertaken, for quite some time now, though a proper evaluation would help in assessing its past and future purpose.

Faculty exchange has not been pursued during the last four years, at least during my term as Secretary. Informal discussions were held, but not as a collective effort. This is the programme I would like to see pursued as a component of faculty development, as it is often stated that theology is best learned by doing.

Current membership in MATS includes the following:

Bishop Patteson Theological Centre, Honiara, Solomon Islands (Anglican).

Christian Leaders' Training College, Mt Hagen, Papua New Guinea (Evangelical Alliance).

Highlands Lutheran Seminary, Mt Hagen, Papua New Guinea (Lutheran).

Holy Spirit Regional Seminary, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (Catholic).

Martin Luther Seminary, Lae, Papua New Guinea (Lutheran).

Newton Theological College, Popondetta, Papua New Guinea (Anglican).

Rarongo Theological College, Rabaul, Papua New Guinea (United church).

Nungalinya College, Darwin, Australia (Anglican).

St Timothy Lutheran Seminary, Wabag, Papua New Guinea (Lutheran).

Senior Flierl Seminary, Finschhafen, Papua New Guinea (Lutheran).

Melanesian Institute, Goroka, Papua New Guinea (Ecumenical).

Salvation Army School for Officer Training, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (Salvation Army).

Some concerns and issues

1. The old Adam of “self-centredness” continues to isolate member schools, and are not open for serious discussions and sharing between member schools.
2. Developing a graduate programme at a master’s level is our urgent need and concern. Common effort toward this goal is a viable option. Initial steps are being taken, as already referred to, as an initiative to establish a religious studies programme, and, eventually, a theology programme at the University of Papua New Guinea, which aims at meeting at least three purposes:

- a) Produce graduates with competitive qualifications that the church needs urgently.
 - b) Provide alternative education for national leaders, both in government, private, and church.
 - c) Provide education that is contextual.
 - d) The influx of new religions, and Pentecostal revival movements, both within, and from outside, that cause growing instability, calls for an urgent need for theological education that is contextual, and true to its historical traditions (biblical, doctrinal, etc.).
3. Self-support in finance and manpower is also a serious concern for us. We received support from PTE, and other outside sources, for many of our programmes can not go on forever. We do not want to be dependent forever. Initiatives are being taken to move away from this dependence, but they are very slow.

Conclusion

MATS is now in its 18th year. While progress made so far is good, we can not remain at this level forever. Review of our achievements toward the future is due. In concluding, I would like to thank PTE, through its director, Dr Samuel Amirthan, for its support in our programmes, and we look forward to greater ecumenical-theological sharing as a tool for effective service and ministry of our Lord.