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FOUR KINDS OF RENEWAL

Viable theological formation

If theological education is to be viable, programmes to train ministers must give life to students and all God's people.

In a recent conversation about the place of theological education in the formation of ministers, a church leader was heard to insist: "I don't need people with intellectual accomplishments. I need persons of the Spirit."

Leaving aside the questions of whether the two categories are mutually exclusive and whether this person's assessment of the needs of his own denomination was right or wrong, the sentiments he expressed are shared by many in the churches.

Indeed, that number includes a lot of seminary students, who can hardly wait for their programme of theological instruction to end, because they do not feel that it is preparing them for "real" ministry beyond the seminary.

All too often theological education programmes seem to induce a kind of depression of faith for many of those who pass through the doors of a seminary.

Undeniably, one reason for this is that there are professors of theology who sacrifice the concerns of pastoral ministry on the altar of rationality and reason.

In any case, the comment of this church leader points to a perceived need for the renewal of theological and ministerial formation. Moreover, the financial constraints faced by most churches today dictate a renewed look at how structures of ministerial and theological formation might become more efficient, relevant and viable.

In a second conversation, another church leader said, "Theological education is our nerve centre. Our willingness to shoulder it in Africa — and for that matter everywhere else — is a measure of our growing maturity in Christ."

Viability

Behind this remark, too, is an appeal for a vital and coherent theological formation, a programme and an end-product relevant to the business of being a people of God in contemporary society and the world.

It is against this background that the Ecumenical Theological Education stream in the WCC's Programme Unit on Unity and Renewal has begun a study of the viability of ministerial and theological formation in the world today.

The word "viability" derives from the French word *vie*, meaning "life". Applied to formation processes, it signals the need for programmes that can give life to students and staff and through them to the people of God, who, after all, are the "consumers" of the "products" of theological institutions.

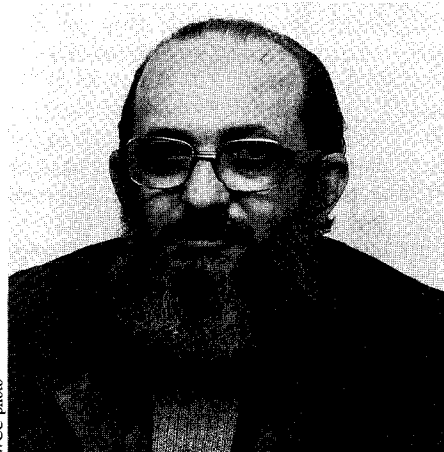
Because the capability to give life or to renew people depends on the participants or students being themselves alive, our discussion of the viability of ministerial formation must take place at two levels: the renewal of the people of God and the renewal of the learners.

This signals the need for mutuality be-

Educators for liberation: Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire.



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tween theological institutions and the community of faith. It is a plea for corporate and complementary responsibility for programmes of theological formation, to be shared by the people of God and institutions of theological education.

Renewal is possible when four areas are revisited with a sense of continuity and change: *continuity* because we do not start all over with a blank sheet but with a heritage from the past which is still relevant and helpful and is in any case part of our identity; *change* because new times demand new methods and emphases.

To put it another way, this is about treating tradition in a dynamic way out of openness and sensitivity to new challenges. The concern for continuity and change suggests four areas of renewal: (1) renewed understandings of education; (2) renewed understandings of theology; (3) new emphases in ecclesiology; (4) renewed understandings of ministry.

Changes in education

Even a casual observer of educational processes will recognize that there have been significant advances over the past generation, growing out of a renewed realization that the verb "to educate" takes a double object: a subject matter and a people to be educated.

Reaching the wavelength of the people is as important as explicating the substance of the subject. The people are subjects of the process, not just objects to be bombarded or filled with information.

The writings of Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire have made us more conscious that relevant education must foster the liberation of the learners.

Freire recommends a theological method based on the actual experiences of students and continual shared investigation as a way of developing the creative intelligence of people.

It is obvious that theological and ministerial formation will be viable to the extent that it fosters liberation of people. Did not Jesus say, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32)?

Theology as a commitment

That theology is a scientific discipline and thus committed to intellectual rigour is not in dispute. But we have also rediscovered it to be a threefold commitment: to faith, to the missionary vocation of the people of God and to an ecumenical vision.



Library in a theological seminary in Lisbon.

This commitment to faith was given classic expression in the definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding". It is this which distinguishes theology from philosophy.

On the other hand, in a certain captivity to rationality, the theological discipline has sometimes acquired the traits of a kind of agnosticism; and many theological students, as noted above, have been caught up in a faith depression. Obviously that needs to be redressed if theology is to be renewed as a commitment of faith.

Theology is a discipline in aid of the mission of the community of faith. For that reason theology serves to confirm the faith of the community of faith not only by investigating the text and uncovering the content and nature of the Christian tradition and common wealth of the community of faith, but also by jolting the perspectives of the churches from an independent point of view.

In doing so, theology becomes a renewed instrument for the community of faith. Again, theology fulfils its missionary vocation by discovering new symbols for dialogue with the contemporary world and, if it be God's will, generating faith in others, but more importantly building a community of communities under the inspiration of the rule of God.

Discovery of new symbols may sometimes be a rediscovery of old symbols. For example, Africans who still uphold sacred kingship in their political organization may find helpful Anselm of Canterbury's *satisfactio* theory of the atonement, which was formulated in a feudalistic age.

Thus the task of theology is to make connections between the present-day search to make sense of the Word of God and the living stream of tradition. For that tradition is also part of the identity and consciousness of the community of faith.

To put it in another way, the viability of theology and theological education consists in part of a dialogue between contextuality and universality.

This last point indicates that there is an unbreakable link between the missiological vocation of theology and the ecumenical vocation of the church.

For discovering the common wealth of the people of God across denominational, religious and human lines is one way of describing ecumenism. Maintaining a dialogue with the world is also a quality of the ecumenical vision. Summing up all things to God is an item on the ecumenical agenda.

Theology will become viable if it helps to articulate the faith of the community of faith, to identify and tackle the cutting edges of its missionary and ecumenical vocation.

Renewed ecclesiology

The New Testament uses many different images of the church.

But no matter what the theology, models of church have developed which betray the assimilation of the theology to secular patterns.

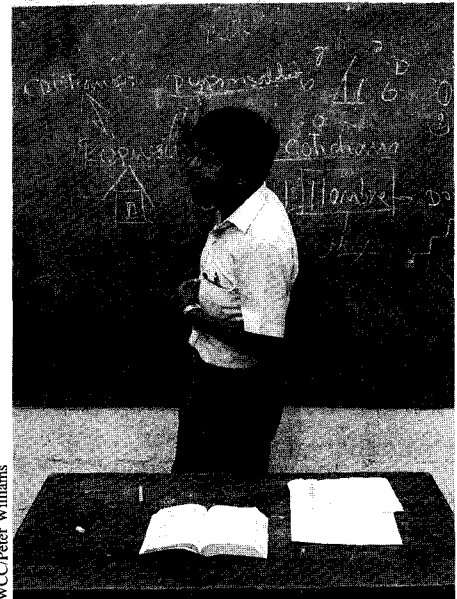
For example, the ideology of Christendom influenced the development of the model of the church as a powerful institution either at the court or at least not unrelated to it. The resulting image of the church resembled a Solomonic temple more than the tent of the servant-Lord.

However, ecumenical theology has rediscovered or put renewed emphasis on the church as *koinonia*, people of God and body of Christ.

These emphases must shape ministerial formation or be the principle of interpretation for forming persons who in turn will devote their lives to securing that vision of the church. That task requires a corresponding reminding of formation programmes.

What, for example, does the ecclesiological significance of people mean for the teaching of theology and the formation of ministers?

What does the understanding of the church as the bearer of God's preferential option for the poor mean for the teaching of theology and the formation of ministers?



Classroom in a Bible institute in Guatemala.

New understandings of ministry

For some time now there has been evidence of crisis of ministry. That crisis may be an index of the inability of contemporary programmes to equip people for what ministry is all about — to be interpreter, animator and celebrant.

The acid test of a viable programme of ministerial formation is whether or not it equips people intellectually and practically to be interpreters, animators and celebrants of the church, the *koinonia*, people of God and body of Christ.

The current crisis of ministry cannot be treated in isolation. It is of a piece with a wider contemporary crisis about authority and leadership in society as a whole.

The reader may have noticed how often the word *renewal* recurs in this article. That is no accident.

This elicits two reminders. First, novelty is not to be sought for the sake of novelty. Renewal comes when the church's sense of history, expressed in the traditions which have informed its identity and consciousness, is treated in dynamic terms.

Second, renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit. No renewal of theological and ministerial formation can happen until spirituality becomes the dynamo of the process. Only then can viability become a reality.

Theological and ministerial formation must take seriously the biblical affirmation that "God is Spirit" — and take the consequences of it.

John Pobee

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