

TRENDS AND TENSIONS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Imagine a very ordinary penguin waddling along the Antarctic ice shelf reflecting on the nature of bird life around the globe. "The air is cold, the landscape white and the best smell in the world is fish!" None of those penguin observations would be true for the hummingbird in the Amazon Basin, the vulture on the African veldt or the emu in the Australian desert. In the same way, it would be totally presumptuous of me to talk of megatrends in theological education today from the tiny data base out of which I operate. New Zealand is often seen by its residents as the centre of the universe, though it enjoys that reputation nowhere else. The plain truth is we are very small and very far away from just about everyone and everywhere else.

Yet as I read of trends and tensions elsewhere, I find myself saying over and over, "Yes, that's how it is! That is what is happening here." In this essay I review some of the ways Carey Baptist College sought to respond to these issues in the 1990s.

From Ministry to Mission

Western Christianity has moved through a number of significant phases over the past 20 years. It is now a commonplace to speak of western society as mission field and

the task of the Church as mission.¹ Comparative graphs of growth in different parts of the globe only serve to illustrate this. As a teenager I still vividly remember Dr. Phillip Potter, then I think Secretary of the World Council of Churches, challenging an audience of New Zealand Christians with these words:

What makes you think you should send missionaries to my country, where 90% of the people attend church each Sunday, when only 10% of your population does so in New Zealand?

That was in the late 1950's and yet it took a long time for the complacency to shift, for us to wake one morning to the truth that we live in a mission setting. In the early 90s Brian Smith led Carey in a number of responses to this context.

In 1991, a proposal was brought to the Assembly of the Baptist Churches of New Zealand that the way in which Carey operated should be radically altered.² The major changes were as follows:

- * Carey be relocated to reflect a mission setting rather than the affluent residential setting of the existing College
- * the timetable be altered to restrict lectures to three days a week so that students could be involved in a mission approach to field education during the remainder of the week
- * the College become non residential so that students would be more aware of the surrounding culture in which churches are set
- * subjects be revamped to give them a specifically mission intent as far as possible, students be encouraged to do their field

1 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983); M. Robertson "New Zealand as a Mission Field" (*NZ Baptist*, March 1993).

2 Brian Smith, *Towards Mission: A redesign of the College Training Programme*, A report prepared for NZ Baptist Assembly 1991.

work in church planting settings, both initiating such ventures and joining existing ventures.

Since then, the College has relocated to an industrial area on a major arterial route. The College is non-residential although it does own three clusters of housing in different parts of the city. The three-day lecture schedule was put in place successfully and subjects shaped to reflect the mission focus.

The one area in which only partial fulfillment can be demonstrated is in church planting. The timing of the changes coincided with the end of the church planting boom era. Some students and staff indeed became involved in church planting. Brian Smith's own involvement at the Mangere East Baptist Fellowship was an example. Another lecturer was involved with establishing a new fellowship. Students were church planters at Randwick Park, Glenbrook, Graceway and Albany, graduating to continue pastoring in these settings. Another lecturer was significantly involved in a highly creative alternative worship venture called Parallel Universe, designed to communicate in contemporary fashion with 20-40 year olds who had dropped out of church or never been part of one.

Despite this degree of completion, the boom has passed and the majority of students are now on assignment in more conventional settings although the requirement of placement is that the student be on the mission edge of church life and not simply there to plug a gap. The move over recent years in New Zealand is towards the larger church, although of course the majority are still small. The will to plant many small congregations is no longer the climate of church life here.

It is worth expanding a little on the way the mission focus has affected timetable and curriculum. For all subjects to be taught in a three day week means subjects are taught in three hour blocks. That sounds a long time to sit and listen yet in fact it has altered the dynamics of the teaching process. Teaching staff need to be far more creative in their communication with students and include ample tutorial activities in those three hours. My observation is that it has worked well. Occasionally

the days seem very long and night lectures drain the last drops of energy. Yet it has produced as standard, full lecture notes for the students, well prepared tutorial activities, increased use of media input and a very interactive relationship between students and staff.

In curriculum, Brian said to his staff, "If you can't teach a subject with a mission focus, then don't bother to teach it." Some of the Carey subjects are now highly sought after because of the mission edge that has broken them out of the standard theological packages. For example, *Mission in an Urban Context* allows students to grapple with the issues of the city. Assessments for this one year included a choice of essay or a week building houses with "Habitat for Humanity". *Bible and Mission*, a level two biblical paper combines a theology of mission, exegetical questions and communication theory to face students with the question, "How would you communicate this passage to these people in this context?"

The mission focus has flowed on to the library which is now designated as the "mission" library of the Auckland Consortium for Theological Education.³ "Mission" in this context means especially mission to western society but has also brought a rapid expansion of cross-cultural resources. Funds have been used for multi-media resources giving students access to computer-based research tools such as the Internet and research CD Rom facilities. It is fascinating to see how radically a decision to take mission seriously can alter the entire approach of a seminary such as Carey.

3 The Auckland Consortium for Theological Education (ACTE) is a consortium of five theological colleges in the Auckland area, affiliated with the University of Auckland.

Training professional or lay ministry?

The New Zealand Baptist Theological College was founded in 1926 to train ministers for our churches. Baptists struggle with a theology of the laity. In some ways such a tension is out of keeping with our history and our style of church government. If the local church is self governing and all the members form the ultimate decision-making body, surely that implies a very strong theology of lay participation? In practice however, the churches have entrusted the key role to a professional minister/pastor. While the lay deacons and elders have no difficulty finding ways to keep this person under control, they have at the same time expected of their leader a performance that reflects a professional level of training. For this reason the NZ Baptist Theological College was formed to equip men (almost exclusively) for leadership of our congregations.

The laity were there to fill the pews, the rosters, the coffers and the list of other vacancies in teaching, leading and administration. For some of these roles, from time to time, they were offered training but such training was always distinct from the theological training of our ministers and generally offered by a different department of the Baptist Union.

Over the past decade or so, a growing number of lay people have become dissatisfied with such a gulf. Some have become theologically aware, some more biblically literate, some evangelistically active and some socially concerned. Youth Pastors have been appointed and even offered a modest level of training. At periods in our history, attempts have been made to train deaconesses (for pastoral ministry) and social workers for the growing social outreaches of the churches. More often than not however, highly gifted lay people have sat week by week in the pews, drawn into the programmes and maintenance of the churches but rarely in a conscious fashion, into significant and focused "ministry". It seems at times the more able they are, the more bored they have become. My personal theory has been that the most bored segment of our church community has been the well educated and highly employed male between 35 and 50

whose weekdays have seen him deciding on multi-thousand dollar issues and handling extensive staffs and whose Sundays have offered him a handful of songs, a lawn mowing roster and if he is particularly committed, the chance to become a deacon and attend meetings run with an inefficiency he has never before encountered!

Elsewhere, pressures have been building to overcome this alienation. Marketplace theology is growing, especially in USA under the leadership of people like Pete Hammond,⁴ William Diehl,⁵ Paul Stevens and Robert Banks.⁶ Tentmaking in missions has incorporated some of these people into pioneer roles in countries closed to traditional missions.⁷ But many remain bored and under-used.

Brian Smith tackled this tension on two fronts. In his Master's thesis,⁸ he explored in depth the ways in which the gospel can be communicated to people on the lower socio economic level, the "workers." Why are most of our churches solidly middle class? Why do large suburbs remain impervious to our evangelism? Brian has explored this in study and explored it also in the church plant he supports which is in an area well outside the manicured green belt.

4 Pete Hammond leads the "Marketplace" operation of Intersociety Fellowship in USA and amongst other things was editor of *The Word and Life Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993) which is, in effect, a marketplace Bible.

5 e.g. W. Diehl, *Ministry in Daily Life*, (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1996).

6 e.g. R. Banks, *Faith Goes to Work*, (Washington DC: Alban Institute 1993).

7 J. Christy Wilson,, *Today's Tentmakers*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1979). This is the classic text on modern tentmaking.

8 B. Smith, *Baptists and the Working Class In New Zealand*, (Bristol: Unpublished MA Thesis, 1990).

He has also tackled it through the creation of a Diploma in Mission at Carey. The Diploma is designed for people other than senior pastors, the people of the pews who can choose from a variety of tracks of ministry. These include evangelism, community work (including chaplaincy), church life and leadership, children and youth ministries and cross cultural mission. The Diploma is a two year full time equivalent course but most take it either part time or by distance education.

The fascinating thing has been to observe the impact of this course on the College community. For nearly seventy years, future pastors have been the sole full time students. Lately they have been joined by a few brave independents and a number of part time University students adding a theological paper to their degree. None of these however had the impact of the diploma students. Here for the first time were the people of the pews, sitting in the same class, eating at the same tables and playing with the same volley ball. As director of the diploma programme, I watched in fascination as the two groups struggled with their new roles. In the first year, diploma numbers were low but in the second, they equalled that of the ministerial students. Most classes were taught in tandem so students shared lectures, assignments and staff. There is something very healthy when a future pastor finds a future church member has scored a higher mark in theology than he has!

Yet the battle is not over academic pride. It is over the true nature of the Church, over the intentions of the Lord in making us "body" and gifting us uniquely and harmoniously.

The experiment has also signalled that the churches of the future are team efforts, not solo stages. While there will continue to be senior pastors of outstanding leadership and reputation, none will do the task completely alone. None has all the gifts and none can afford to exclude from training, those who have something different to offer. The Diploma course is planning now for extension to Bachelor and Masters levels, opening up even further the diversity of contribution and

training the “laity” can bring to church life. In other words, Carey has moved from a theological college exclusively dedicated to training people for senior pastoral roles, to the resource and training centre for training of the entire constituency. It has not been an easy transition nor is it complete but it is a highly significant one. If the territory surrounding us is now mission, then the whole people of God need to be engaged in mission and for that they need to be equipped.

The tension between residential and non-residential training

It has long been assumed that we train people most effectively in a residential setting. Where people getting ready for the same task, work and eat and play and sleep in the same geographical setting, some valuable processes are set in motion. Bonds are formed, especially within year groups that for future ministers, are vital in the lonely pulpit. Social skills are developed as strong personalities learn to accommodate to one another and future leaders learn that leadership does not occur in a vacuum. Spiritual formation can more easily be targeted as chapels, small group activities and staff-student interaction take place.

Yet over recent times we have also recognised certain drawbacks in this approach. Institutionalisation can separate students from engagement with the “real world.” A few years ago I was invited to help a group of graduating Bible students readjust to the “world out there” after three years in a protected environment. They themselves recognised they had lost touch.

Living together does not automatically produce growth in grace! Sometimes we simply become more skilled at hiding our dark side. Sometimes we remain stubbornly carnal in spirit despite the best efforts of those round about us.

And where do the sending churches fit into the formative equation?

Questions of cost, family demands, age of entry into training all confuse the issue further. The final truth is that while some missions and some institutions still demand a residential approach as the key to formation, others are recognising far greater diversity.

The decision to move Carey students off the grounds of the teaching campus was in part to throw them out into the real world. The College is now on a major arterial route in an industrial area. The sign at our gateway that I can see from my window reads, "Auckland's Industrial Edge." The traffic is heavy and commercial and getting out into the traffic flow at the end of the day is a dangerous exercise. When staff don't bring their own lunch, we go down to a shabby industrial lunch bar and compete with local factory staff for the last of the pies.

We also recognise that the sending church is a part of the formative equation.⁹ The appointment a Director of Ministry Training who devotes considerable time to nurturing church links has been a real advance. If a person cannot be formed in their local congregation, why should we be expected to accomplish in our brief time with them what the local expression of the Body of Christ has either not accomplished or not addressed?

Leaving aside the link with the local churches, let us examine a little more closely the question of formation. Over recent years, a great deal has been written about community¹⁰. There have been experiments in western Christian circles with communal living arrangements. Some have brought spectacular results. Some have gained a great deal of attention for a short span of time. Yet all too many have quietly dissolved

9 e.g. R. Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline* (Wheaton: IVP, 1993).

10 A helpful resource in this area, now quite old is C. Mellis, *Committed Communities: fresh streams for world mission* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1976).

themselves back into typically western individualism. New Zealand experiments, especially amongst people of European descent, have been the same.

Part of the problem has obviously been the immense pressure towards individualism within western society. Most of our measurements of success are expressed in terms of the success of the individual. While work evaluations measure the way the worker has contributed to corporate success, it is significant that these evaluations are done on individuals and generally by individuals. Team building exercises are popular today at the expensive end of the corporate world. Yet the individual remains distinct, separate, caught up for a weekend or a few days in a joint adventure but at the end, still distinct and unique.

All this leads me to conclude that "communal" and "community" are not the same word. Formation for community is not accomplished in communal living alone. That forces us to rethink some of these issues. And the place where we begin to rethink them is primarily the local church. There is little value in ignoring the issues there and then forcing a communal solution on people training for leadership of those same local churches.

Carey abandoned the "communal" for community, seeking to provide experiential bases for community and leadership growth. The students retain access to some communal links as most ministerial students are able to rent houses in one of three clusters of College-owned housing. Yet these houses are now set in normal residential areas, surrounded by neighbours and students have to commute some distance to their studies and battle with the motorways and petrol fumes like anyone else.

We have discovered weaknesses. It is harder to form and shape character when we do less together. As a student of the College over thirty years ago, I was shaped to some extent by the dishes rosters, three meals a day together, Monday afternoon gardening and seeing the same sorry sights in the bathroom (and the mirror!) on a cold, winter's morning. Yet as I reflect on that, I recognise that my home church sent me off to College in the

undimmed hope that the formative task was no longer theirs but that of the College. I am sure in the three years I spent there the College did not complete the task. I am equally sure that some of the churches with whom I have served since understood practically nothing about formation, either of me or of their other members.

In other words, the non residential policy has forced churches to reconsider their formative responsibilities. Students for training are now basically selected under the guidance of regional superintendents in partnership with home churches. We are asking churches to become more involved especially as larger churches are producing their own interns who in turn receive some of their training with Carey. Even for students who have come from other centres, the church leadership is asked each year to comment on their perceptions of the student's growth and formative needs.

We still have a great deal of work to do on the formative processes within the existing College programme. We face the tension faced and well understood in many theological seminaries and colleges. If the study component is built around a qualification, that qualification tends to take over the timetable for the student. Family, food on the table, formation and field education tend to be fitted in round the qualification, usually in that order. That means that formative activities outside of the regular lecturing structure are harder to sustain and students more easily find "reasons" for missing some of them.

Carey has partly compensated by building a number of extras into student requirements such as attendance at a weekend *marae* experience, participation in a marriage enrichment seminar, or a spiritual retreat. Students are also required to undertake two summer assignments, ideally of 12 weeks each, usually in a sole charge church setting. Some students do a Clinical Pastoral Experience course for one of these. We have also developed, in partnership with the Diploma programme, intensive courses in the long break between semesters. There is a student camp, chapel services, meals,

student prayer meetings, celebratory events, sports on campus and a weekly groups in which students and wives engage in discussion about personal issues, ministry and mission issues under the guidance of an experienced staff or guest leader.

Formation is not easy. Perhaps it is fair also to comment that reformation is even more difficult, given the fact ministerial students come in averaging about 35 years old, often trailing a family, mortgage and a previous career. We no longer deal solely with fresh faced single men in their early twenties, ready to soak up the wisdom of their elders. Learning and formation are now both negotiated contracts achieved by different methods and marked at times by compromises and trade-offs.

All of which seems a very long way of saying the non residential move has been a brave and ultimately valuable experiment that is here to stay. As churches become more aware of their part in this process, we will have greater freedom to explore the ways in which we are best equipped to help form students for future ministry.

I should also comment in passing on what elsewhere needs to be explored at length, that Carey is intensely aware of the fact many students, especially in larger churches, now do most of their training as interns. This challenges us to develop fresh ways of offering supportive and cooperative training resources by distance and this we have begun to do especially through the Diploma programme.

Theology and pragmatism

This essay has focused on design issues for training. There is a deeper theme: "What drives training? Theology or pragmatism?" Below which lies the question, "What drives the Church? Teaching or practice?"

We live in times of immense change in church life and especially in leadership style. The Church growth movement has introduced the concept of measurability to our practice.

Currently in New Zealand, the mega-church emphasis casts a long shadow over the way we perceive the future, including the way we train people for church leadership. Are we producing graduates of vision and passion, of skill in management and team development?

Yet we must consistently ask whether our practice is a product of our theology. Do we sing, for example, what we actually believe?¹¹ Do we participate in worship that comes out of authentic relationship with our Creator? Is our leadership lifestyle consistent with that of Jesus our Lord? In the turmoil of training worldwide, in the midst of endless changes and experiments, theological anchors are vital. It is so easy to become so gripped by the latest trend in curriculum that we loosen our grip on conviction.

Many outstanding questions remain in theological education today. Carey Baptist College continues to address them, building on the heritage of Brian Smith's years of principalship. The changes outlined above provide a glimpse of what has already happened in this small College, in this tiny nation, amongst this fragment of the great Kingdom family.

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11 See B. Smith, "Theology off the wall", (*NZ Baptist*, July 1995).