

THE ACADEMIC DILEMMA OF THE FRONTIER MISSION EDUCATOR

■ Though there is no lack of resource for frontier missions in the 90s, workers need to be effectively trained—particularly in the rising missions movements of the Third-World churches. Here the author offers concise advice on how this agenda might go forward.

By *Stephen E. Burris*

"Two generations ago John R. Mott stated that the greatest weakness of the missionary movement was our failure to produce well-trained leaders for national churches. Half a century has come and gone since then and the problem is still with us. In spite of all that has been said and done in the intervening years, the churches in many parts of the mission field are still without adequately trained pastors and evangelists."¹

Introduction

If we don't train people in the field, we slow down the frontier missions movement. If this statement is true then training leadership in the field should take on a new priority. This article, reviewing the options available to the field missionary, concludes that Theological Education by Extension is the best hope to support missiological breakthroughs in the frontiers.

According to most demographic estimates, population growth will continue to speed ahead of the ability of traditional forms of education to provide educational opportunities. Virtually all of the population increase into the next century will occur in developing nations rather than industrialized nations. This is where the bulk of unreached peoples are situated. The need is great and will become greater to reach more people with theological education.

Our general educational objective is to take the individual from where he is to where he needs to be in order for us to operate at the optimum level of usefulness. To be effective, this objective may need to cover more than one delivery system. While it will not be possible in all cases, our goal is to take educational opportunities as near to the frontiers as possible wherever possible. It is important, therefore, that we conceive of education as extending beyond traditional colleges and

seminaries into other settings.

"Genuine education has to do with understanding and ability to face one's world, deal with his problems, and meet his own and his group's needs. Theological education is growth in Christian living and ministry, and it is best achieved through action and reflection in church and society. Theological Education by Extension offers the possibility of educational renewal in the ministry in this fundamental sense."²

Using Kinsler's distinction, a balanced view of education will include, it seems to me, all three basic educational delivery systems, informal, formal, and non-formal. The combined result is the preparedness of individuals to function appropriately in the culture to which they belong as church leaders ready to lead the church of the Third-World to new frontiers.

*1. Informal Education*³

This is the lifelong process by which every individual accumulates skills, knowledge, and insights. Informal education is learning through day-to-day living as we carry on our normal activities. It comes from exposure to our environment. This type of education is likely the most influential. It allows each individual to learn behavior that ultimately becomes habitual. Informal education lays the initial foundation in areas such as language, values, and group cohesiveness gained by individuals before any schooling takes place.

*2. Formal Education*⁴

Since its inception in Guatemala nearly thirty years ago, Theological Education by Extension has gained noteworthy acceptance. Extension programs are now operating on every continent with perhaps 100,000 students enrolled. Many evangelical seminaries operate extension programs in addition to the traditional centralized curriculum. The

great value of this is that it allows more mature believers with remarkable leadership ability to share in the high quality curriculum of residential schools. However, the problem is that if the truly gifted leaders in the local congregations do not have access to residential schools, however fine their curriculum may be, they will fall short of the needs of the growing church.

Thus TEE is directed specifically to leadership needs as the church is established in the Third World. In some cases it may lead to ordination. In other cases it may lead to a further theological education as evidenced in the ability to equip others to do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11).

In traditional schools academic schedules are laid out for full time students, with plenty of time to study, and usually no major outside commitments. Successive terms of study to fulfill the standards is required. Therefore one is limited to a costly educational format without it extending to the leaders with the greatest potential. There is inadequate demonstrated relationship between what one studies in a formal classroom and effectiveness on the field, in ministry. This is similar for almost all professions. However, more and more, people need "credentials", for instance to get visas, to be heard, respected. It would be marvelous if we could make the obtaining of the necessary credentials a truly useful process.

Extension education is a viable alternative—it is possible to identify and equip natural church leaders while presenting opportunities to church members in sound biblical/theological instruction. It allows the emergence and selection of natural leaders by the

congregation and the fulfillment of academic standards for leaders and its members. James Emery believes increasingly that leaders tend to be "self-selected" because they want to be leaders. This puts a premium on those who seek self-aggrandizement through the "ministry." In the same way that much of the issue of academic degrees is prestige and pride, this self-selection tends in that direction. In the New Testament leaders were chosen, not self-selected. If TEE were structured properly, many of these would find the route to prestige too strenuous, and would opt for other careers. Those who prove themselves by faithful service would more likely be selected and appointed by the congregations, for there is time to observe their ministry and know whether they can truly serve, or if they are in it for other motives.⁵ TEE does not require students to divorce themselves from their work, family, or other commitments. In fact, these factors may enhance learning and therefore heighten the students effectiveness.

3. Non-Formal Education

There is yet another group of people with whom we should be concerned. A full-spectrum strategy will include opportunities for theological education among church members and new converts. Without a doubt, with encouragement and training, many will become leaders—pastors, Sunday school teachers, and church leaders. It is hard to imagine that frontier mission efforts would not be helped significantly by offering continuing education opportunities to churches in the Third World.

A need exists to augment schooling already received. Lay people also are poorly served by traditional models of education. The frontier missionary should bring education to this rapidly growing group which will not be addressed by traditional forms of education. To put it simply, we cannot build enough educational facilities, not to mention the enormous staffing and therefore financial requirements, to meet this growing need.

Some components of the education by extension approach should be designed with lay people in mind. Not every communicant believer will occupy a formal leadership role in the

church. Every believer should, however, use his gifts to further the cause of Christ through frontier missions. As the frontier church matures it should be encouraged and expected to reach out and establish "beachheads" in neighboring unreached groups. While the identified leaders will pilot the way in this effort, many others will be needed to reinforce those on the front lines of the church planting effort.

Conclusion

Where possible there should be a natural movement toward integration of the three educational modes. In whatever form learning takes, many are realizing that informal and extension training models must not be left unrecognized in favor of traditional centralized institutions.

Some key questions the frontier missionary must answer are:

How do we strengthen the bond between education and work? One doesn't have to look very far to find tragic examples of how taking a bright prospect and placing him in another environment, especially a radically different culture, has actually destroyed that individual's value to frontier missions. TEE goes a long way in preventing this devastating problem. We cannot encourage "brain drain" and at the same time expect strong pioneer church movements to grow rapidly.

What kinds of tools and methodologies are especially effective in transferring knowledge across cultural, social, and linguistic boundaries? Additional research in this area is clearly needed. Creativity should be applied to this critical area. It is becoming clear that curriculum development is a clear priority.

What kinds of knowledge are most needed to improve educational opportunities and the achievement of individual students? What is the goal of education in a pioneer field? Frontier missions might even make certain that the new believers understand the urgency of taking the gospel to still other unreached people. Their education should include general educational studies and a sufficient biblical/theological base to allow the establishment of the "beachhead" in an unreached people and, at the very same time, pinpoint the need to establish still

other churches, especially in neighboring unreached groups.

Do new organizations, cross-cultural and global in scope, need to be created to fulfill the various educational objectives so vital to frontier missiology? History shows that we must rely on the multiplicity of organization working together. The task is immense. The need to work together is therefore all the more significant.

Extension education seems to be a vital means for upgrading church leaders talents as well as equipping the general Christian population. TEE can no longer be debated as a viable educational model. It is clearly the best method of training whoever surfaces in congregational life with the gifts of the ministry. The frontier missions movement cannot afford to bypass its most mature and gifted leaders simply because they cannot go to a residential school. TEE may be the only way they can be trained and preserved for the crucial needs on the frontiers. ■

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Endnotes

1. Quoted in Kane, J. Herbert, *Wanted: world Christians*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986, p. 99.
2. Kinsler, F. Ross, *The extension movement in theological education*, Pasadena, CA; William Carey Library, rev. ed. 1981.
3. Henry Griffiths gives a helpful perspective on the importance of informal education, as it applies to Africa, when he says: "In African society, most learning takes place by doing, instead of by hearing. Girls at a relatively young age share the duties of the homestead, such as cooking and gardening. Boys help build houses, hunt, fish, care for the livestock, and perform numerous other activities. Learning in Africa is essentially experience-oriented and takes place in real-life situations, as opposed to artificial training situations." Henry Griffiths, "We Can Teach Better Using African Methods", *Evangelical missions quarterly*, Vol 21, No. 3, (July 1985), p. 249.
4. Kinsler and Emery provide a helpful distinction: "TEE programs should be considered formal theological education if they offer academic and/or ministerial credentials, as do more traditional, centralized programs; they should be considered non-formal if they do not." Kinsler, F. Ross, and James H. Emery, eds. *Opting for change: a handbook on evaluation and planning for Theological Education by Extension*, Pasadena, CA; William Carey Library, 1991,