

MISSIONAL ADVANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Highlighting the inseparable link between theological education and the mission of the church has been one of the concerns of Latin American theologians during the past few decades. Almost 20 years ago, Orlando Costas emphasized "...the close relationship that exists between theological education and the mission of the church. The mission gives rise to theological education and is at the same time influenced by it."¹ Izes Calheiros adds in CLADE III that "...theological education exists to serve the church, and therefore its mission is intrinsically related to the mission of the church."²

This was also one of the emphases that the leaders of the Church of the Nazarene wanted to highlight during the first South American Encounter of Theological Educators Leaders that took place in 1994: "We reaffirm that theological education in its different levels and modalities is fundamental for the life, development and extension of the church, in its faithful fulfillment in the mission received".³ One can observe another example in the declaration of the vision for theological education on the Mexico and Central America Region: "To train with the greatest excellence the highest number of ministers possible for the extension of the Kingdom of God."⁴

Our church in Ibero-America has increased in the number of believers and congregation in the last 20 years, in a manner without precedent. Although hundreds of pastors have been formed during these years in the campuses of the theological institutions, in classic residential programs with the students living on campus, these efforts were not sufficient to prepare all of the workers that God needed. In response to this imperative of taking theological studies to the thousands of students outside of the walls of the institutions, programs of decentralized education were born.

This alternative of decentralization has provided leaders for the church in the past and in recent years has accompanied the church in its numerical and geographical expansion. It is undeniable that the ministry of theological education on the Ibero-American regions of the Church of the Nazarene has significantly contributed to advancing the denomination. Today, in many of our countries, our leaders are the fruit of these programs.⁵ At present, very complete Guides and Manuals for Decentralized Theological Education have been developed for the MAC

¹ In the consultation promoted by the Latin America Theological Fraternity, "Nuevas alternativas de educación Teológica". Published as C. René Padilla, ed., *Nuevas Alternativas de Educación Teológica: Documento Final* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nueva Creación), 131.

² Izes Calheiros, "Educación Teológica y Misión Integral en CLADE III" (Quito, Ecuador, 1992), 431.

³ SAM Region, ESULET, Regional Theological Education Conference that took place on October 21-14, 1994 in Lima, Peru, with invited educational leaders from the MAC Region.

⁴ MAC Region, *Guía de Administración de ETED* (San José, Costa Rica, 2003), 12.

⁵ On the MAC South Field, for example, the majority of the current district superintendents are graduates of the prior program of CENETA (Centro Nazareno de Estudios Teológicos Afiliados).

and SAM Regions. Beyond just the norms or regulations, these manuals contain Biblical and philosophical principles of theological education.

However, in spite of the achievements gained, theological education today faces great challenges in order to serve a growing church, with students more and more academically prepared and that will be ministering in a context that demands amply trained servants. On the MAC Region, we reached more than 300 new students in the past four years. However, if we look at the statistic of new members, proportionally we have not grown enough. There is much work ahead of us.⁶

In the following some of these challenges will be considered that require appropriate solutions in order that the missional advance of the church not be affected.

1. We need more and better intentional theological education, with well-defined purposes in the local church.

We need to see all the forms of Christian discipleship that take place in the local church as essential theological education. In many of our churches we do not disciple sufficiently or well enough. Frequently, the most we do is give some form of follow-up with the new believer and lasts a few weeks and later we hope that he or she will “miraculously” become integrated into the life of the church. This model of discipleship “lite” is not compatible with the model of Jesus and of the first Methodists; for them the purpose of discipleship, more than to teach a basic doctrine, was to “give life”. It is urgent that we teach new believers to “live the life of Christ”!

We cannot do solid theological education in the seminaries if the local church does not make discipleship a priority in its agenda, since many times the seminary has been filling in the gaps that the believer has about essential aspects of theology. On the other hand, we need to be honest in admitting that our discipleship, in general, has not trained every believer for the ministry nor have we trained to discover and develop the gifts that the Lord has given her or him.⁷ Probably we find here one of the reasons why it has been so difficult to close the “back door”.⁸

Another important aspect that has been neglected during the past decades is the holistic formation of the believer by means of a relationship with a spiritual mentor. A candidate who wants to dedicate his or her life to a full-time ministry (pastoral, educational, missionary or other) should not come to higher theological educational programs⁹ without an integral and intentional preparation done with a mentor.

The local church is the place where we can train the people of God instead of giving training to just a small select group that comes to the classrooms of the seminaries. To paraphrase the words of Ramón Sierra in Peru, “theological education is for all those called to

⁶ The percentage of growth of new students in 4 years was 20.74% while that of new believers was 31.60%.

⁷ MAC Region, *Discipulado ABCDE* (San José, 2001), audiovisual material.

⁸ The Mexico, Central America Region, during the 14 years of its existence, gained 99,494 members by profession of faith. During the same time 37,059 Nazarenes were lost due to removal, voluntary removal or transfer to other denominations. That is to say, 37.25% of those added.

⁹ Those that are given in the programs of seminaries and theological institutions.

the ministry, independently of their education and/or secular preparation, the status of the person (lay or clergy) or the particular ministry that they have been carrying out.”¹⁰

2. We need more diversity and flexibility in our theological education programs.

Should we shut the door of formal theological preparation to those brothers and sisters who have not had access to secular education? We are indebted to those Nazarenes who are not literate or have not had access to education in the middle levels due to contextual problems in their countries. Instead of worrying, we should concern ourselves with these problems: How can we take theological education to the large number of indigenous and poor people in Latin America with high percentages of illiteracy? Should theological schools teach reading and writing to those called to professional ministry? Perhaps we need to work more in getting hold of the lay resources in our churches so that these servants can be prepared holistically to minister in their contexts.

On the other hand, we need to open the doors for theological education to those that God is calling to different ministries, instead of giving priority or exclusivity to the ministry of the senior pastor. It is not that we minimize pastoral ministry. We continue to affirm that it is a central ministry because the pastor is the servant-leader of the local church where all the other ministries come from and are developed. We reaffirm that his or her function is to “equip” or “prepare God’s people for works of service” (Ephesians 4:11-12). God needs and continues to call many in our congregations, but not all are called to the pastorate. The pastoral call is not the only call to Christian service, nor is it the only ministry that needs formal theological education.

At the same time, we need to teach that “...in the body of Christ there are no members that are more important than others, or that should have dominion over everyone else. The clergy model, that has remained for centuries in the Christian church where laypersons remain away from the ministry and the professional ministers are the only ones that exercise gifts for the spiritual growth of the church, is not the Biblical model. In the early church there were distinctions between different functions or ministries, but not one was more important than the others; all have equal value and importance (1 Peter 2:5). Martin Luther and John Wesley, among others, rediscovered this truth about the universal priesthood of the believers in the church of their generation. The founders of the Church of the Nazarene believed that the church of Christ there was no place for divisions between professional ministers and laypersons. What is important is that each one of us respond to the call the Lord has given us, in the ministry for which he has given us gifts and commit our lives to his service.”¹¹

3. We need for our theological education to be always focused on the mission of the Church of the Nazarene and to reaffirm our core values.

The Church of the Nazarene “...was founded to transform the world by spreading scriptural holiness. It is both a Great Commission church and a Holiness church at the same time. Our mission is to make Christlike disciples of all nations.”¹² In view of this declaration, several questions arise. Are the administrators and teachers in our institutions focused on this

¹⁰ SAM Region, ESULET, op. cit., 78.

¹¹ Monica Mastronardi, “Descubriendo mi vacación en Cristo”, Workshop for Lay Retreat, MAC South, 2002.

¹² Board of General Superintendents, *Christian, Holiness, Missional* (NPH, n.d), 1.

great and noble purpose? Are we as teachers of the mission models of service, as was Jesus? (Luke 4:16-21). Are we really fit or suitable (in all the fullness of the term) to teach others? (2 Timothy 2:2). Do we have such high spiritual as well as academic qualifications? (Titus 2:7). Speaking of our core values, do we live them all of the time and teach genuine worship in our schools? (Juan 4:24). Are we truly compassionate agents of evangelization? (Matthew 9:36). Do we—every administrator and professor of theological education—have at least one disciple? (Mark 4:34). Is our Christian education noticeably “higher”? Are we really training with “excellence”? Ultimately, the people always make the difference.

4. We need to develop more our human resources.

Although progress has been made in this area there is still a long ways to go:

- a. We need training in the area of educational administration for the personnel of the seminaries.
- b. We need more faculty but one that is characterized by excellence.¹³ In stead of imitating the models of secular education that are times deficient and out-of-date in our contexts, we should rather present the content using the best creativity and variety of methods and techniques that are within our reach. At the same time, we need professors that specialize in specific areas to offer a higher level of teaching.
- c. We need to intentionally develop Ibero-American thinkers, theologians and writers. We are pleased that a good group of our professors are advancing to Doctoral of Ministry studies. At the same time, we need professors with academic doctorate with specialties in Bible, theology, pastoral ministries, among others to be the “teachers of the teachers” of our students.

It is up to us to be the protagonists in this historical time in the expansion of our church. Theological education in Ibero-America can not sit still and be content with what has been done up to this point but needs to go on to greater accomplishments, giving solidity to the growth of the church, training ministers that will serve with excellence in the 21st century.

¹³ Some good examples are the *Diplomado en Formación Docente* (Diploma in Teaching) of the Mexican Nazarene Seminary and the *Profesorado en Educación Teológica* (Bachelor’s in Theological Education) of the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Guatemala.