

Equipping Emerging Leaders for Community

Oscar Campos

*Academic Dean, Professor of Theology
Seminário Teológico Centroamericano, Guatemala*

presented 7 October 2009
at the ICETE International Consultation for Theological Educators
Sopron, Hungary

The given question is: How might the values of relationship and community be best exemplified in the outcomes that the theological school seeks through its programs for forming and equipping its students?

A. Christian ministry today: A community focus

How we see the world, how we understand society and social context, how we make sense of ministry and ministers for today and tomorrow, and how we approach theological education, are all related issues. The globalized world today highlights the importance of relations and community for business and political direction, and this has been talked of as “relational capital.” We also seek partnerships and strategic alliances because we all recognize that we can’t do it alone with our limited resources, or simply because we need to make the best use of resources by networking with others to complement each other and to add strength and outreach to our efforts. Now that the world has become smaller and flatter than ever before, and that we are more conscious of the global village, we have better opportunities to manifest the nature of global Christianity and to take theological education’s relational mandate, “energising community,” to all levels and to all contexts.

1. Holistic ministry

In our local communities, both the church and the un-church suffer under all kind of needs and complexities of life. The minister is therefore called to serve in a variety of ways, but especially in providing leadership to that community in the name of Christ. As John Stott said: “There is a wide variety of Christian ministries... because ‘ministry’ means ‘service’...”. He then relates that to Jesus’ example:

He preached the kingdom, healed the sick, fed the hungry, befriended the friendless, championed the oppressed, comforted the bereaved, sought the lost and washed his apostles’ feet. No task was too demanding, and no ministry too mean, for him to undertake. He lived his life and died his death in utterly self-forgetful service. Shall we not imitate him? The world measures greatness by success; Jesus measures it by service.¹

We can say that Christian ministry is a social calling but also a relational task, even more when we see it from a holistic perspective. Evangelism, church planting, cross-cultural ministries, church leadership, any kind of social service, or any imaginable ministry for that matter, are all relational tasks and cooperative efforts.

2. Community in the Bible

Biblical Christianity points to community. Salvation history throughout the Bible is directly related to and centred on the communitarian concept of the People of God. Old Testament regulations (Mosaic Law), principles, prophecy, wisdom, poetry, and so forth, are all directed to the community life of the people of God, who are called to love God and neighbour as an expression of the theocratic kingdom. Jesus pointed this out in Luke 10:25-37, illustrating it with the Good Samaritan story. The New Testament presents the early church as the community of followers of the risen Messiah in his inaugurated kingdom (Acts 2). The Apostle Paul also teaches the principles of ecclesiastic community life and testimony.

There is no need for a lengthy presentation of biblical insights in this paper, so I will refer the reader to the volume edited by Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ* (Kregel, 2008). I found very useful Gordon Johnston's contribution to that volume on the concept of community, biblical terms for community, obstacles to building community and important benefits of Christian community. One of his statements illustrates this, when he says:

The postexilic prophets called for the practice of genuine community, rather than oppressing the poor and excluding outsiders; the people of God must reach out to the excluded and serve the needy. Likewise, the new covenant community is called to moral righteousness and social justice, shown by reaching out to the disenfranchised and meeting the needs of the poor (James 1:22-2:26).²

Bill Hull, in *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (NavPress, 2006), also takes this theme. Working on Ephesians 4:13, he says that "the 'whole measure of the fullness of Christ' refers to the responsibility of the community of Christians to manifest and represent Christ on earth. The mysterious organism called the church exists to show Christ to the world as one."³ Then, we can summarize by saying that we serve in community at both ends because we are a community to serve the community. This places Christian ministers in a crucial position. What is the profile of this minister? How does he or she acquire the adequate characteristics to become a community minister? This is the challenge for theological education.

B. Theological programs today: Equipping community leaders

For the sake of simplicity, we can try to answer the previous question, at least partially, with a formal and pragmatic approach, namely by reference to programs and curriculums.

1. The curriculum

Theological education, like many other disciplines, inherited the modern approach to education. School boards decided what a student should study in order to be prepared for ministry. Education was formally structured with biblical methodological research, traditional theological knowledge and practical ecclesiastical training, the *how* to do church ministry. At this point it is useful to check on Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Ideal Seminary: Pursuing Excellence in Theological Education*

(Westminster, 2002). In his section, “Tomorrow’s Seminary Curriculum,” he proposed a change of paradigm from what he called the clerical paradigm to the people of God paradigm. He said:

The “clerical paradigm” that has long ruled reinforces the existing curriculum so that theological education is seen as simply clergy education. “When it dominates a school, the theological student is seen as a future ‘professional’ who must learn ‘theory’ to be applied to ‘practice.’ This isolates theological wisdom into ‘academic disciplines,’ which then seem irrelevant and empties practice (what ministers do as ministers) of theological understanding.” This condition ought to motivate us to review the curriculum in theological schools from the standpoint of ministry by the people of God (clergy and laity in partnership together), ministry no longer limited to a “clerical paradigm.”⁴

What many theological schools have done in the last decades is to open up their programs to accommodate a variety of ministry needs. Seminaries and school boards have followed a market approach to determine what programs should be offered by their institutions. From this approach, programs are more flexible, temporal and pragmatic, but also, more ministerial and less biblical and theologically grounded. Students come to receive what they pay for, and the institution is responsible for delivering a specific product. Ministry from this perspective is a job position that requires specific knowledge and skills that you can get from a particular seminary program. However, Calian suggests a more responsible approach, as it should be. He says:

Seminary education... is dedicated to interpreting and integrating biblically informed faith to human experience. The task of the theological school specifically is to educate and develop learned leadership among the people of God, the Body of Christ. The effectiveness of the seminary’s efforts can be measured by how graduates sustain and satisfy a congregation... overwhelmed at times by the presence of violence, suspicion, injustice, and lack of direction.⁵

Theological education is a more complicated topic than this simplistic account. Should not a more holistic approach to ministry lead to a more holistic approach to theological education?⁶ Then, from structured learning to market programming it should be a more humane relational and community-sensitive theological education.

2. Challenging realities

We want to move far from cold curriculums and programs, and we are doing it, but still we have to face some realities of formal education. For example: time limits, budgets, professors’ salaries and development, adequate logistics, technology, library resources, administrative personnel, and so on. Does all this have to do with curriculums and programs? Sure it does, and we can make the best of it. As Steve Hardy (*Excellence in Theological Education: Effective Training for Church Leaders*, 2006) points out:

A good curricular plan will use the time it has available for formal study with wisdom. There are only so many courses that can be included in a three to four-year program. Not everything that has ever been taught needs to be taught by you... remember that students will learn more from the informal or non-formal training... teach with realism and humility... Even the best seminary cannot make people into pastors or evangelists. But it can... help them to pastor or teach better. Equipping students for ministry is a complicated task, as we work with students who come with a variety of gifts, abilities, experience and training. They have differing interests, motivations and attitudes and learn in different ways...⁷

After all, as Hardy says "...it isn't our task to do everything, only to participate well in what God is already doing in our students."⁸ This is a relieving statement but also challenges us to do our best not only in our training programs, but also in the very nature of what we are as an institution for theological education.

3. Enacting community

What is a Seminary or a theological school? We not only face our own expectations about ourselves, but also all kind of expectations that our students bring to seminaries and theological schools. Many are not only thinking of ministry training, but also growing from all kind of personal situations such as searching for an undefined something, looking for a good place to overcome personal struggles, or to acquire biblical knowledge to ground themselves for life and other occupations, and so forth. While a theological school is not going to meet all of the expectations, it should at least provide a good Christian model for life and ministry as an active community, even more since its main focus is training for ministry, and ministry is a relational and community calling. Johnston (citing Tite Tiénou and Larry McKinney) says:

In 1990, the International Council of Accrediting Agencies for evangelical theological education identified one of the most significant challenges of evangelical seminaries as the need to build a great sense of community on their campuses. After examining demographic and cultural changes over twenty-five years, McKinney concludes that Christian higher education can best minister to its students by building a sense of community and reaffirming the value of sacrifice and service to others.⁹

Theological schools as active communities should have a different approach to how they "do business" and how they integrate all of the administration, inter-departmental relationships, programs, curriculums (formal, informal, non-formal, visible, non-visible), logistics, spiritual formation, mentoring, discipleship, campus life, church ministry practice and service to the community, etc., so that they are enacting community in the educational process of equipping and forming the students for life and ministry.

C. Emerging leaders: Community transformation

Holistic ministry from a community perspective is not only a challenge for curriculum and programs but also for a new generation of leaders in the process of formation. Who are these students in our classrooms? How are they going to face the demands of community ministry?

1. Profile of entering students

Calian, tells us that "the enlistment of qualified candidates for ministry... is the single most important issue confronting theological schools now and into the foreseeable future."¹⁰ In his section, "Who Is Qualified to Minister?" he says:

[Students] worry about whether they are truly called to ministry. Admissions committees wish to have candidates who possess the intelligence, creativity, commitment, and caring spirit necessary to lead churches struggling in a changing society. The affirmation that students and schools seek is unfortunately not always evident to either party.¹¹

How do we choose students? Or, what is the profile we are looking for, to recruit students? This is so important in light of the community ministry we are targeting. Hardy recommends that we should research our candidates better. He says: “We need to develop a profile of entering students to discover their calling, gifting, experience and previous training. To equip them well for ministry requires learning about them in three related areas – knowing, doing and being...”¹² However, it might be that the more we know about our students and their cultural background, the more we realize how limited we are. Some may even suggest we raise the admissions bar.

Our students may come from a hedonistic culture that emphasizes individual satisfaction and self-gratification. They come from dysfunctional families that do not model community values and unity. Then they go to churches that misrepresent the kingdom of God by fighting and dividing for the most unimportant matters, or that fall into the entertainment mode of postmodern culture. If we look into educational backgrounds we might also find the lack of needed foundations for adequate higher theological education and community values. However, here we are at a turning point. This is a completely human perspective. We have to remember that it is not about our plans, our curriculums, our conception of ministries, our limited resources, but God’s own program for humanity.

2. Formational and transformational focus

What is the focus of theological education? Is the student the target or the ministry? Is it personal formation or ministry formation (pragmatism)? To be, or to do? How do we balance this? Is it the minister, or the ministry effectiveness of the minister? How can we be holistic on this too? Hardy says:

Our purpose is to prepare our students for life and ministry. For us to develop a curriculum plan for them, we need to understand what specific knowledge and competencies they will require to be effective in the ministry roles that they will assume... What attitudes and character are required in a cross-cultural missionary?

This is the heart of what a curricular plan is: getting real students from where they are to where they need to be in order to minister effectively. Whether we offer them new information, train them in new skills or disciple them in right ways to live, everything that we include in our curriculum needs to contribute to getting our students from where they are to where they need to be.¹³

Hardy takes us back and forth while looking at the goals of theological education and the realities theological institutions face. With his feet-on-the-ground approach he says:

The primary educational goal of a theological education curriculum should be to equip real people for real ministry. But there are many different kinds of ministry, and people have life-long needs. Your training institution doesn’t have the capacity or the calling to do everything for everybody... we need to know our mission and purpose.¹⁴

Bill Hull, from the vantage point of discipleship, sees this process as spiritual transformation. We can take this perspective to expand the possibilities for theological education by integrating it into our relational mandate and community approach. He says:

We call this process spiritual transformation. The word *trans-formation* comes from *trans* (Greek, *meta*), meaning to move something from one place to another; and *formation* (*morphe*), meaning to change (see Romans 12:2; Galatians 4:19). In spiritual transformation,

we *move* from the person we are and continue to *change* by degree into the image of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3:16-18).¹⁵

Hull supports his argument by proposing what he calls “the transformational triangle,” which incorporates the elements he considers “we need for spiritual transformation. Those are: Community, Holy Spirit and Scripture. Community is at the centre. “Community describes the relationships we form to help us live out our beliefs. God never intended us to follow Christ and engage in the disciplines of this life alone.”¹⁶

3. The minister’s or graduate’s profile

We Christians are all called to serve, and to serve in community. Therefore, theological education should also be a community project: “In community to serve the community.” As Hull says:

We each have roles within the body individually, but we can build ourselves up in love only when we have others to love. With the basic understanding that maturing – increasing in Christlike character – is a community project, we can look at the stages of how we mature, based on how Jesus led his disciples to live and grow.¹⁷

Then, he goes on to explain a common problem in culture today, as he refers to what he calls “ministry minus me.” He says that “some people just don’t get it. They want to be Christian without being Christlike.” He compares this situation with James and John in Mark 10:35-37. He says:

James and John didn’t get how following Jesus and their lives connected. Instead they thought, what can we get? James and John were quick; they did a bit of spiritual calculus, and suddenly the prospect of thrones, power, wealth, and grinding the Romans into dust came to mind. Like many ambitious disciples, they didn’t understand the characteristics of leadership and how people change. They were consumed by their self-interest.¹⁸

To remedy such a sad but common ministry trap, we have to be conscious of our higher calling and make transcendent anticipated decisions about disciplined life training (and take it as a continual self-education plan). In words of Bill Hull:

So let’s put together how God transforms us. We position ourselves by choosing to live a certain pattern of life and to be trained. We choose to place ourselves in community. We willingly live under the authority of Scripture and submit to the will of the Holy Spirit. We interpret events and circumstances in light of Scripture, with insight from the Holy Spirit, and in the context of community. And we find fulfillment as we serve others – living life to the full (see John 10:10; Ephesians 2:10).¹⁹

Conclusion

Let’s search for balance. Community ministry demands community leaders. In order to empower a new generation of servant leaders to take this challenge we may need to re-engineer our institutions of theological education so that they are enacting community and equipping emerging leaders for community.

Theological schools of every tradition are not simply graduate schools where we learn to think theologically, but also graduate schools of leadership... . Seminary communities as well as

churches “need leadership that simultaneously keeps faith with the past and puts faith in the future, leadership that is as sensitive to deep traditions as to profound change.” Seminaries and churches require leaders who are willing to be educated in the context of continuity and change, a never-ending tension that faces every generation of believers.²⁰

¹John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 141.

²Gordon Johnston, “Old Testament Community and Spiritual Formation” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, edited by Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 76-7 (71-102). See also, Darrell L. Bock, “New Testament Community and Spiritual Formation”, *Ibid.*, 103-17.

³Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 165.

⁴Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Ideal Seminary: Pursuing Excellence in Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 45.

⁵*Ibid.*, 46.

⁶Ecumenical theology and tradition are far more experienced in these topics than we evangelicals are. See for example, Ofelia Ortega, “Contextuality and Community: Challenges for Theological Education and Ecumenical Formation,” *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 1 (2009): 25-36.

⁷Steve A. Hardy, *Excellence in Theological Education: Effective Training for Church Leaders* (Green Point, South Africa: Modern Printers, 2006), 162.

⁸*Ibid.*, 163.

⁹Johnston, “Old Testament Community and Spiritual Formation,” 86. Citing first, Tite Tiénou, “The Future of the International Council of Accrediting Agencies,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19, no. 3 (1995): 287-91; and Larry J. McKinney, “Ministering to College Students at the End of the Twentieth Century,” *Didaskalia* 7, no. 1 (1995): 3-19.

¹⁰Calian, *The Ideal Seminary*, 81.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Hardy, *Excellence in Theological Education*, 164.

¹³*Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁵Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 188.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 146-7.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 192-3.

²⁰Calian, *The Ideal Seminary*, 12.