

Restoring mission to the heart of theological education A South African perspective ¹

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IN A seminal article written more than twenty years ago, South African missiologist David Bosch lamented that little attention was given to missiology – the formal study of mission – in traditional programmes of theological education (Bosch 1982).

The theological curriculum in Western Europe was typically arranged into four “streams”: biblical, historical, systematic, and practical. This pattern, Bosch noted, was canonised “when the church in Europe was completely introverted” (Bosch 1982: 26). If mission was studied at all, it was usually as part of practical theology, as if it were largely a matter of technique or practical application; or it was offered as a totally separate subject, as if it had little to do with the other “streams”; or it was an optional subject, competing with preaching, pastoral counselling, or liturgics for the learner’s attention (:17-19).

This pattern of theological education was exported to the rest of the world in the wake of the missionary expansion of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and uncritically adopted and implemented in the formation of generations of local Christian leaders in what is now the Majority World.² Even the occasional critical analysis of this pattern – such as Bosch’s article, or the 1985 Latin American consultation on new alternatives in theological education (Padilla 1986) – made little impression on the way missiology was regarded in seminaries and colleges around the world.

This was particularly true in Anglican institutions, where, for various reasons to do with our distinctive history and ethos, missiology was not really taken seriously at all – except, perhaps, for practical courses in evangelism in colleges and bible schools in the evangelical tradition.³

Thankfully, the situation of neglect is changing. Not everywhere, and not consistently. But theologians of many persuasions increasingly agree that mission lies at the very heart of the theological task, and therefore at the heart of theological education. Martin Kähler’s oft-quoted dictum that “mission is the mother of theology”, written in 1908, has won wide acceptance.⁴ From a few lone voices at the end of the 19th century, to the wide ecumenical consensus that emerged in the later 20th century, a vision for the foundational nature of God’s mission for all theological work has grown.

Bosch’s proposal in 1982 was that missiology be neither incorporated into the familiar theological streams as simply a dimension of each (though it certainly needs to be seen as integral to all other theological disciplines), nor left as a quite separate subject (though it deserves to be taken seriously as a discipline in its own right). Instead, he argued, missiology needed to be both *dimensional* (that is, integrated into, and in close dialogue with, biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology) and *intentional* (maintaining a critical distance from the other disciplines, bringing its own distinctive perspectives to bear on the theological task).

¹ This paper is a revised and expanded version of one submitted to the March 2005 meeting of the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Mission and Evangelism (IASCOME).

² See Esther Mombo’s essay in Wheeler 2002: 127-133 for an African perspective on this.

³ This was my experience as a student at an evangelical college in England in the late 1970s, where practical workshops on evangelism were offered in the week or two between the end of exams and the start of the summer vacation.

⁴ See Bosch 1991: 16, and Orlando Costas’ essay in Padilla 1986, especially pages 5-6. Costas has suggested that theological education is a dimension of mission, rather than the other way round (in Padilla 1986: 5-24). Andrew Kirk (1997) discusses the interplay of mission and theology in greater depth.

Latin American theologians, meeting in the early 1990s, went further. They called for “a drastic revision of the curriculum of theological institutions patterned after the Anglo-Saxon system”, allowing it to be shaped by “a rediscovery of the missionary nature of the church”.

This is much more than simply adding a missiology course to the curriculum. It means a reformulation of the disciplines by placing the mission of the church at the center of their object of study. (Samuel Escobar, in Woodberry *et al* 1996: 108)

This paper is an account of how profound changes in the national educational system in South Africa since the mid-1990s have forced theological educators in this country to redesign the curriculum – and, in the process, given them the opportunity to restore a missional focus to theological education.

In particular, this paper focuses on how one institution, the Theological Education by Extension College of Southern Africa, has developed its new Diploma in Theology and Ministry and the Bachelor of Theology degree in order to put missiological perspectives at the centre of its curriculum.⁵

An educational revolution⁶

This is not the place – nor do I have the necessary skills – to give a full account of the changes that have swept through the South African educational system, from primary school to university level, since the first democratically-elected government began to transform the educational system it had inherited from apartheid.⁷ Essentially, it abolished the discriminatory educational framework that had been in place for more than fifty years, replacing it with a vision for a system that offers equal opportunity to all, fosters critical learning, and focuses on the kind of learning that integrates knowledge, skills, and values/attitudes – widely known as Outcomes Based Education (OBE). To give shape to this transformation, a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was designed that would guide the lifelong learning experience from the preschool phase to postgraduate qualifications.

The NQF defines three broad bands of education and training, each with differentiated levels (EIC/IEB 1996):

- **Band 1: General Education and Training** (Level 1). This is the basic, compulsory band for all school-age children, taking them to Grade 9 (around age 14 or 15).
- **Band 2: Further Education and Training** (Levels 2-4). This band takes learners to the Level 4 school-leaving certificate in Grade 12 (equivalent to the old “matriculation”, usually around the age of 18).
- **Band 3: Higher Education and Training** (Levels 5-8). This is the band occupied by tertiary education in its various forms, from vocational colleges to technikons,⁸ universities and research institutes. It is where most theological colleges and programmes find themselves.

⁵ TEE College, an ecumenical distance education institution founded in 1977, is a major player in the delivery of theological education in Southern Africa. In 2005 it had 2,768 learners registered for 5,877 courses. Of those learners, 219 were taking the BTh Degree, 681 the Diploma, and 1,114 the Certificate in Theology. The rest were registered for Award-level courses.

⁶ Readers who are not interested in the history of national policy or the detail of educational systems may like to skip this section.

⁷ Democracy and majority rule came to South Africa in April 1994.

⁸ “Technikons” or technical colleges have largely become technical universities in recent years.

Not only were the structure and philosophy of education being reshaped, but its management was also placed under much stricter control. The staff and governing bodies of South African theological colleges – left to their own devices for decades – now had to comply with an array of new laws and regulations, many of them complex and strictly enforced, if they were to remain open. Colleges had to register with the national Department of Education (DoE), be accredited by the Council for Higher Education (CHE), have their courses accepted and registered with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) – and learn a whole new language of acronyms and technical jargon. These processes were often lengthy, rigorous, and expensive. Those that failed to meet the new requirements had no option but to close or to fold themselves into another institution that had made it through the hoops.

Until 2004, many theological colleges and programmes in Southern Africa – not just in South Africa itself, but also in Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana – were united under the banner of the Joint Board for the Diploma in Theology (Southern Africa), a broadly ecumenical body set up by the Southern African Council for Theological Education (SACTE). The Joint Board was the accrediting body for SACTE's member churches. It defined the curriculum of the Diploma in Theology, which most member churches required as a minimum qualification for ordination; it set the externally-moderated common assignments and exams; it maintained quality control; and it awarded the Diploma in Theology to successful learners. This enabled a number of less well-resourced colleges to offer a Diploma that, by themselves, they were unable to do.

That era has ended. Now each institution located in South Africa must register and be accredited in its own right with the national education structures, or cease to operate. Those outside South Africa, beyond the ambit of its legislation, have been largely left to their own devices – though many of their learners who take distance education courses such as those offered by TEE College will benefit from the new system. The Joint Board will continue in some form, probably only as an advisory and consultative body. Legally it cannot offer a theological qualification after 2005.

Reinventing theological education

There has been another far-reaching change to education in South Africa, which is the main point of this article: the complete revision of the curriculum.

All learning in South African educational institutions *must* now be based on the principles of Outcomes Based Education.

Theological educators in the region have had to grapple hard with this fundamental shift. For a century or more, we and our predecessors have mostly offered content-based courses built on the inherited Western model of cognitive (knowledge-centred) education.

This model asked: *What must students know and understand in order to gain this qualification?* The required knowledge was delivered through lectures and written texts; it was assessed through assignments and exams; and it was validated with a degree, diploma or other qualification. In theory (and too often in practice), a learner could complete a theology diploma or degree, and satisfy the requirements for ordination, with little or no direct personal experience of ministry and mission, and few demonstrable skills in Christian leadership. That the system has in fact produced many outstanding pastors and theologians is a cause for much thankfulness; but it has often happened *despite* the formal educational process, rather than because of it. I am reminded of Mark Twain's definition of education as that which you must acquire without interference from your schooling.

The challenge that OBE poses is quite different. The question that now has to be answered is: *What competence does the learner need to gain in order to be able to fulfil this or that task / job / vocation?* The required competence is gained through an integrated process of learning

that addresses the head (knowledge), hands (skill), and heart (values); it is formally assessed through a range of tools that include written work, practical projects, field research, workshops, and the like; and it is validated when the learner is able to demonstrate her/his capacity to carry out the required tasks, using all the intellectual, practical, and attitudinal resources that have been acquired.

But who defines the tasks in which competence must be shown? And how is the competence demonstrated and measured? Here we meet another recent acronym, the SGB.

Once the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) had been created, one of the next steps was to define the range of competencies that learners, from pre-primary toddlers to doctoral candidates, would gain as they made their way through the Bands and Levels of the NQF.

To do this, the national education authorities created field-specific Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs) to come up with the building blocks of the new qualifications, called *Unit Standards*.⁹ The SGBs were composed of people who knew their field, whether it be flower-arranging or neurosurgery. SACTE (remember it?) was asked to constitute the SGB for the sub-field “Christian theology and ministry”. The people making up this SGB represented every Christian tradition and all the major theological education stakeholders, from denominational colleges to university theology faculties. Over several years they constructed new qualifications – mainly the Diploma in Theology and Ministry (DipThMin) and the Bachelor of Theology (BTh) degree, both in the Higher Education & Training band of Levels 5 and 6.¹⁰ These were finalised and registered with SAQA in 2004.¹¹

The Theology and Ministry SGB was genuinely creative in designing the new qualifications. The detail of the qualifications they designed – for example, the “titles matrix” that gave them their structure – need not detain us here.¹² The key thing is the fact that, in deciding what outcomes they sought in properly-equipped learners of theology and ministry, *they made a missional focus foundational to the qualifications*.

They did this by requiring every learner to complete a number of compulsory core Unit Standards, including one that equips new learners with a missional perspective for all theology and ministry.

A closer look at this Unit Standard may help both to clarify some of the terms used in this new approach to education, and to illustrate how theology is being renewed as a missional enterprise.

Getting to grips with mission in theology

The Unit Standard is entitled “Demonstrate understanding of mission throughout church history and define personal mission”. The title states the *competence* that this Unit Standard offers. When the learner has successfully completed it, s/he will be able to demonstrate an

⁹ A Unit Standard (US) defines a single *competence*, made up of several *specific outcomes*, each with its own *assessment criteria*. These criteria may be further refined through *range statements*. Each US is allocated a number of credits, based on the notional time the learner will need to take to complete it; and those credits help the learner to accumulate enough to complete the qualification. The DipThMin, for example, requires a minimum of 240 credits, and is completed by fulfilling a range of Unit Standards, most of them worth 12 credits each. A learner can go on to complete the BTh by gaining an additional 120 credits.

¹⁰ While both qualifications include some Level 5 Unit Standards, these are mainly in the foundational and core phases. The majority of the required credits come from Level 6 Unit Standards.

¹¹ See the SAQA web site – <http://www.saqa.co.za> – for more information about the DipThMin and the BTh.

¹² An early version of the matrix can be seen on the SACTE web site, <http://www.sacte.co.za/>. The matrix eventually registered with SAQA is different in several respects from the one still on the SACTE web site. The earlier version is nevertheless worth a look. The SACTE web site has not been updated for almost two years, but it does set out the work of the SGB in some detail. The senior academic staff of TEE College played a particularly significant role in drafting the Unit Standards for the new Diploma in Theology and Ministry and the Bachelor of Theology degree.

understanding of mission throughout church history, and define her/his personal sense of mission in relation to it. It has three specific outcomes:

- Outline the changing understanding of mission in church history
- Describe and evaluate mission-focused churches
- Define personal mission in relation to the mission of Jesus

Each specific outcome describes an area of knowledge, skills, and/or values that the learner demonstrates as a dimension of the overall outcome (the title of the US) before the credits can be awarded. Each specific outcome also has its own *range statements* and *assessment criteria*. The first, for example, is assessed according to these ranges and criteria:

Specific outcome: Outline the changing understanding of mission in church history

Range: *from Biblical times to the present day.*

assessment criteria

1.1 Key historical mission events are described in sequence.

1.2 Models of mission are compared in context. The comparison highlights key differences in the understanding of mission in church history as revealed within the various models.

Range: *At least three models in two different periods and two different contexts.*

1.3 Descriptions are provided of key shifts in understanding of mission over church history.

Notice that the emphasis here is not on *content*. Nowhere does the Unit Standard specify, for example, that learners must analyse mission in the letters of St Paul, or study the evangelization of Central Africa in the 15th century. The content of any course that is built on this Unit Standard is determined by the institution that offers it, as long as it meets the range statements and assessment criteria. So, for example, an Anglican college is free to spend time on Anglican models of mission, just as Pentecostals, Methodists, Catholics, and others will want to emphasise their own historical and theological patterns of mission. The important thing is that learners gain the knowledge, skills, and values they need to in order to achieve the outcomes within the framework of the range statements and assessment criteria.

The “mission” Unit Standard itself is not particularly remarkable: it covers the kind of basic missiological ground that one might expect to see included in a rounded course of study. It requires the learner to give significant attention to a range of biblical material, to the whole span of church/mission history, to aspects of mission theology, to the life and witness of local churches, and to the learner’s own context and personal engagement with it.

The remarkable thing is that it is a *compulsory core course* in the new qualifications. In fact, in earlier versions of the SGB’s titles matrix, this Unit Standard was called “Recognise mission as basic to theology and ministry”, and it was located on the titles matrix as an entry level course on which rested the four “pillars” – Sources in Context, Faith for Life, Ministries in the Church, and Faith into Community – that the SGB once thought should make up the

qualifications.¹³ The title of the Unit Standard and the layout of the titles matrix may have changed since then, but the original intention has been carefully preserved.

That was certainly how we at TEE College understood our task when we looked at turning the titles into teachable courses in distance education mode.

Missiology and the TEE College of Southern Africa

Unit Standards are not courses. They are statements of outcomes that learners need to achieve. They are the starting point for course design.

At TEE College, in common with other members of the Joint Board, we decided that the eight credits assigned to the “mission” Unit Standard made it too small to be turned into a course in its own right. So we joined it with another, rather larger, US from the compulsory core called “Implement transformation in a community using Christian principles”, worth 18 credits.¹⁴

Together the two US’s make up a substantial 26-credit introductory course that focuses on the missional nature of transformational ministry in context. We called it “Doing Ministry for a Change”, and I was contracted to write the course materials, which I did during 2004.¹⁵ In 2005 the new course was taken by nearly 600 Diploma or Degree distance learners around Southern Africa.¹⁶

Long before the new qualifications came into existence, I liked to provoke my colleagues at TEE College by insisting (probably too loudly and much too often) that missiology was – or should be – the touchstone of all theology. As a late convert to the discipline of missiology, I gladly adopted Martin Kähler’s credo. I believed that it needed to be heard by biblical scholars, church historians, systematicians, and pastoral theologians, even if this came perilously close to theological imperialism. After all, the Joint Board Diploma in Theology, as offered by TEE College for nearly thirty years, was structured in the classic non-missional Western way, with a single optional course in Missiology offered as an elective in the Practical Theology cluster of subjects. Relatively small numbers of TEEC’s learners took it. Missiology was thoroughly marginalised.

Thankfully I was not a lone voice: my colleagues at TEE College, and many in the Joint Board, also had a vision for a model of theological education that was genuinely transformational, equipping people in our subcontinent for forms of ministry that make the good news of God’s reign, the *basileia* that Jesus proclaimed and fulfilled, more of a reality. We wished to offer educational materials that would enable learners to bear faithful witness to the mission of God in our world. And so, at TEEC and at Joint Board meetings, we worked long and hard to understand just how this new educational framework would impact our lives and those of our learners, and what it would demand of us to make it really work well. And as we worked together at TEEC to shape courses for the new Diploma and Degree, the vision was written into the course materials. To revisit the terms used by David Bosch: we sought to build the mission *dimension* into the qualification, in large measure by placing a course rich in mission *intention* at its very entrance.

¹³ See [http://www.sacte.co.za/TitlesMatrix\(Mar2003\).htm](http://www.sacte.co.za/TitlesMatrix(Mar2003).htm). See also the previous footnote. TEE College has adapted the “pillars” idea for its own qualifications, arranging the elective courses – those chosen after the core has been completed – into three streams called Working with Sources, Engaging with the Christian Faith, and Applying Theology in Ministry.

¹⁴ Each credit represents 10 notional hours of work on the part of the learner.

¹⁵ I hope, in a separate article to be prepared for the November 2005 issue of the *ANITEPAM Journal*, to give an overview of the course that I wrote for TEE College.

¹⁶ TEE College is willing to sell copies of its course materials to non-students, provided that copyright is strictly observed. Contact the Registrar at <admin@tee.co.za> for more information.

Our roots are in the future

It's early days yet. At the time of writing the new courses have only just begun. The learners are still trying to get to grips with this strange new way of studying, in which the familiar subject titles of the former dispensation – Old and New Testament, Church History, Ethics, Systematic Theology, and so on – have apparently disappeared, and in which “what you know” (and therefore, passing exams) is less important than achieving competence in a range of important outcomes. For them, and for us who oversee the courses, this is uncharted territory. It is often scary. It is sometimes tempting to try to turn back and return to the safe and the familiar.

But I think we can say that the old way of studying theology – or the way it was done through TEE College, at least – is dead. It is now being raised to new life in an integrated, cross-disciplinary approach – one that stands or falls on the conviction that it is the mission of God that gives coherence, direction, and purpose to all Christian ministry.

I love the ecclesiological image used by the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, who pictures the church as a tree with its roots in the future and its branches in the present.¹⁷ It wonderfully describes the current state of theological education too. Even as we deal with the day-to-day realities of designing courses and learning new skills and serving our learners, we must keep our vision fixed on what is yet to come – and be ready for it. We must be rooted in God's future, because, as we equip God's people to serve God's mission in the world, and as we seek the fulfilment of the *basileia* that Jesus proclaimed and embodied, we need to be nourished by the life-giving Spirit who both journeys with us into that future, and beckons us towards it.

The transformation of theological education in South Africa has happened relatively quickly. It has been driven, in part, by the national agenda of ridding it of an outdated, ineffective, and discriminatory educational system; and, in part, by the growing conviction among key players in theological education that we *had* to change. Good theological will not be satisfied merely with “banking” education, as Paulo Freire called it (Freire 1972). It will seek to *form* people in effective, faithful mission and ministry.¹⁸ The times and the tasks demand that we teach and learn in new ways.¹⁹

That is the context for the rediscovery of the missional core of theological education in South Africa. It has happened elsewhere too, as we have noted. There's no reason why it should not happen in every part of the Anglican Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury's high-profile concern for theological education gives us a clear mandate to seek the global transformation of Anglican institutions and programmes.

To this purpose we need to bring a passion for serving God's transforming mission, and for seeing it given its rightful place at the heart of our endeavours in theological education.

¹⁷ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as communion* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), page 59, quoted in Dietterich *et al* 1998: 2.8. I have often used this image in workshops with theological educators to emphasise the eschatological, *basileia*-centred focus of the church as sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's mission. (Zizioulas' surname is also sometimes spelt Zizoulas.)

¹⁸ TEEC's principal, James Massey, often insists that TEEC believed in the principles of outcomes-based education long before it was called that or formally required.

¹⁹ See Andrew Wingate's study of theological education in India and Britain over two decades or more (Wingate 1999) for his assessment of its effectiveness.

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