

**RELEVANCE AND IMPORTANCE OF TEF/PTE/ETE**  
**Vignettes from the Past and Possibilities for the Future**

**Ross Kinsler**

As we celebrate 50 years of World Council of Churches' involvement in theological education, I can only begin to express my own gratitude for the extraordinary privilege of working with outstanding colleagues and widespread networks in this arm of the ecumenical movement over the past 40 years. In addition to those mentioned below I must add the names of Directors John Pobee, Ofelia Ortega, Nyambura Njoroge, and Dietrich Werner.

Jim Hopewell was the Director of the Theological Education Fund when he visited the Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala in the late 1960s. In our conversations we soon realized that, because of his work and travels with the TEF, he probably knew more about theological education around the world than anyone else had ever known. That observation eventually led to the creation of the journal, *Ministerial Formation*, beginning in 1978.

The Guatemala experiment in Theological Education by Extension caught Hopewell's attention. In fact not much after his visit to Guatemala he suggested in an article that, if churches around the world were not so tied to the Western school model for theological education, they might well create something more like the TEE model.

The TEF Committee chose as the study theme for its 1973 meeting, *Learning in Context: The Search for Innovative Patterns in Theological Education*, and I was invited to present the TEE model based on our experience in Guatemala and more widely in Latin America. In 1977 the TEF was reorganized as the Programme on Theological Education of the World Council of Churches. Aharon Sapsejian became the director; he invited me to become Assistant Director; and Shoki Coe continued as Advisor, followed later by Assistant Director Sam Amirtham. Tom Campbell, who became Chair of the PTE

Commission, commented at one point that decentralized programs might well become the predominant form of theological education.

One of my assignments with the PTE was to follow the TEE movement as it spread rapidly around the world. In 1983 we published a collection of 29 reports of TEE programs on all six continents under the title, *Ministry by the People*, and this year (2008) we have published another anthology of 13 case studies under the title, *Diversified Theological Education: Equipping All God's People*. I was also asked to create and edit a periodical to share news and reflections about theological education coming to us from many regions. We called it *Ministerial Formation*, which was the name for the new focus of the PTE. That journal has for the last 30 years provided a forum for a wide range of ecumenical issues and reports about developments in theological education at global and regional levels. For obvious practical and ecological reasons, future communication about ecumenical theological education may well shift to the Internet.

Throughout the history of the TEF, PTE, and ETE our primary concern has not been method but mission, not form but substance, but method and form are essential for the realization of our mission in theological education and the mission of our churches. New wine requires new wineskins.

One of the most important contributions of Aharon Sapsezian has been the concept of *contextualization*, which he introduced in 1972 and which spread rapidly throughout ecumenical and evangelical circles. This has become one of the continuing challenges to theological education and the mission of the churches. Contextualization is another word for the biblical concept of incarnation, which is theological and pastoral as well as cultural and socio-economic.

Another major concern of PTE and ETE has been Paulo Freire's understanding of education as *conscientization*, which has little to do with memorization of information and everything to do with human and social transformation. This concept continues to be

used by theological educators around the world, especially in Latin America and Africa. This concept, too, is biblical, theological, and pastoral, cultural and socio-economic.

It can be said that contextualization and conscientization culminate in various *liberation* theologies and liberating theological education programs in different parts of the world. As the churches and their theological institutions become ever more deeply aware of the structures and dynamics of poverty, marginalization, and oppression, they develop biblical, theological, and pastoral tools for personal, ecclesial, and social liberation. The churches and their theological institutions struggle to overcome all forms of injustice and dehumanization, in particular those based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender, and we are beginning to face the enormous challenges of global warming and ecological destruction, violence and militarism, the marginalization of people with disabilities, economic polarization, and consumerism.

Throughout the history of the TEF, PTE, and ETE we have seen that theological education can be a significant channel for the pursuit of the great ends of the ecumenical movement and the mission of the churches. It can be a channel for spiritual renewal through contextualization, conscientization, and liberation. It can continue to open up deeper understandings of the biblical Good News of God's Reign, so that we all may live more faithfully in today's world.