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### A Reflection on the Role of Theological Schools

In its resolution on the Mission in Unity Project, the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches expressed the hope that study materials could be developed which would help the WARC member churches to «*understand the role of theological schools as uniting or dividing force in churches, and identify ways for Reformed seminaries and schools to promote unity*». It is evident that the issue is relevant for the Mission in Unity project. As a first step towards a response to the General Council's recommendation a paper on Reformed ecclesiology under the title '*Keeping the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace*' was drafted and distributed. It is addressed to theological teachers and students in the hope that it will contribute to develop new, more realistic approaches to the theme of ecclesiology in Reformed teaching. But the General Council's resolution has more in mind. It calls for a reflection on the theological schools both as places of theological learning and as institutions, and in particular on the relationship between theological schools and the life and witness of the churches.

The Advisory Committee briefly discussed the matter at its meeting in November 1999, but since there was no time to pursue it, the Committee decided to postpone the discussion to the next meeting. How can the General Council's recommendation be best implemented? To facilitate an adequate answer to this question, I submit the following considerations to the Committee.

**(Intro paras, revised version, rest is left as was)**

#### **Introduction**

In its resolution on Mission in Unity (1997), the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches expressed the hope that study materials could be developed which would help the WARC member churches to «*understand the role of theological schools as uniting or dividing force in churches, and identify ways for Reformed seminaries and schools to promote unity*». As a first step towards a response to the General Council's recommendation, the Mission in Unity Project 1999-2002 circulated a paper on Reformed ecclesiology under the title '*Keeping the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace*'. It was addressed to theological teachers and students in the hope that it would contribute to develop new, more realistic approaches to the theme of ecclesiology in Reformed teaching. Responses are still being received. But the General Council's resolution had more in mind. It called for a reflection on the theological schools both as places of theological learning and as institutions, and in particular on the relationship between theological schools and the life and witness of the churches.

The Mission in Unity Advisory Committee briefly discussed this matter at its meeting in November 1999, and explored the issues in more depth at its October 2000 meeting, aided by the discussion points below. The discussion made clear that underlying the specific questions about theological education and mission in unity, there are broader questions about « what today constitutes relevant theological education as such ». It was resolved to consult – by email - a small group of about 10 persons around the world who have been involved in renewing theological education, and on the basis of their insights and suggestions, to plan the next steps in the reflection on theological schools “a uniting or dividing force in the Church”.

### ***Theological Education held in high esteem by Reformed Churches***

Reformed churches attach great importance to theological reflection, theological education and to education generally. The number of theological schools and educational institutions run by Reformed churches is impressive. Even small churches regard the foundation of a theological school as one of the first priorities. The – incomplete – list of theological schools published in Bauswein/Vischer, ‘The Reformed Family Word-wide’ bears witness to this characteristic of the Reformed tradition.

The emphasis on theological education has roots in the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Since the Reformers insisted on the preaching of true Christian doctrine, they had to make sure that people were trained for the ministry of the word. Preachers needed to be familiar with the content and meaning of the Gospel. To establish the truth in Geneva, Calvin set an example by interpreting himself, in sermons and lectures, almost all books of the Bible. But he also took the initiative in 1559 to found the Geneva Academy, a school to train pastors – to minister not only in Geneva but in other places as well. The *Académie* soon developed into an important centre of Reformed theology. It is interesting to note that Calvin promoted the idea of a special ministry of ‘teachers’ (*docteurs*). In his eyes four ministries are essential for the life and mission of the Church – the *pasteurs*, the *anciens*, the *diacres* and the *docteurs*. The function of the *docteurs* is to study and to interpret the Bible and Christian doctrine. While the pastors are involved in all kinds of daily duties, they should be free to devote their time entirely to study and teaching. In Reformed theology, especially in the period of Reformed orthodoxy, the value of the ministry of *docteur* was strongly affirmed.

When Reformed churches engaged in mission work, they normally gave high priority to theological education. At an early stage, indigenous people were trained and ordained to the ministry. This was, for instance, the case in Korea; many attribute the phenomenal rise of the Christian movement in Korea to this fact. Mozambique can be cited as another example. When the country became independent in 1974, the number of ordained pastors in the small Presbyterian Church was higher than the number of priests in the Roman Catholic majority Church. In many countries, Reformed missions decided to offer opportunities of general education – as a way to communicate the Gospel to society. In several Latin American countries, for instance, Presbyterian missions concentrated efforts on the missionary ‘tool’ of schools; the expectation was that educated people would see the light of the Gospel and serve both the church and the country.

### ***The double role of theological schools***

The multitude of theological schools represents no doubt an enormous potential. In hundreds of places, theologians – *docteurs* – reflect on the meaning of God’s word and seek to communicate the Gospel to a new generation of ministers and lay people. The schools are the expression of an impressive theological zeal. Often, they give birth to constructive new insights and theological perspectives.

But the multitude of theological schools also represents a threat to the coherence of Reformed theological thinking. On the whole, there is little communication among the various centers of theological learning. Schools tend to be self-sufficient and develop their thinking and their activities along separate lines. Often, both in past and present, theological schools have been the cause of splits, or have at least contributed to maintain divisions within the Reformed family.

A few examples may serve as illustration:

- In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the rise of liberal theology, the authority of the historical Reformed confessions of faith and even the ancient creeds was called into question in the Swiss churches. In response, theological schools were founded to maintain the traditional teaching of the Church. A similar initiative was taken in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the foundation of the Freie Evangelische Theologische Akademie (FETA) in Riehen/Basel.
- In 1953 a major split occurred in the Presbyterian Church of Korea. The cause was a dispute over the authority of Scripture. The issue was the use of the historical-critical method in interpreting the Bible. As the Assembly decided against the innovation, a group of professors decided to establish a new seminary. Eventually the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) was formed.
- Often, especially in Korea, theological seminaries were established with a view to the outreach of the church. Pastors were trained to become missionaries and to found new congregations. Theological schools have been the source and centre of several separate Presbyterian churches in Korea. Korean missionaries often apply the same method abroad. In many countries, Bible schools, theological academies, even universities, have been founded, to advance the missionary cause (Bolivia, Uganda, Russia). Often, little attention was paid to the relationship with existing educational institutions.
- Theological schools can easily develop into a symbol of identity of an individual church. In order to overcome separation, an agreement needs therefore to be reached on the role of each theological school in the united church. Hostility and competitiveness need to be replaced by complementarity and collaboration. In the union negotiations in the Netherlands between the Hervormde Kerk, the Gereformeerde Kerken and the Lutheran Church, for instance, the future place and function of the schools proved to be an extremely important item. How will the various schools serve the life of the united Church ?

### ***Freedom and Communion***

How can theological schools effectively serve the communion and the common mission of the Church ? The basic thesis of this paper is the following : If Reformed theological schools are to contribute to the unification of Reformed churches, a clearer understanding of the nature of theological reflection is required : both of its *freedom* and of its roots in the *communion of Christ's Church*. In many schools, theology is expected simply to confirm and to defend the teaching and the positions held by the church. Other schools consider theological research and thinking as an exercise which is to be carried out in complete independence from the church. Thus, theology is exposed to two temptations. Either it confirms and solidifies the *status quo* and moves in narrow circles, or it develops theological insights without regard of the communion of the Church. Freedom and responsibility towards the communion of Christ's Church must be brought into a constructive relationship. The relationship must not be allowed to develop into an either-or. Freedom is to serve the communion of the Church.

In the first place, the vocation of theological reflection is to lift up Biblical truth. By doing so it is bound to challenge the *status quo* and point beyond the church in its present form. Theology is called to address issues which have so far not been clarified by the Church. Theological schools just confirming the *status quo* fail to live up to their vocation. In order to

fulfil their vocation, theological schools, need to be free to develop their research, their thinking and their teaching.

At the same time, the other side needs to be stressed. Theological reflection always takes place *within* the communion of the Church. Theology seeks to interpret the faith confessed by the Church. It has its roots in the praise and prayers offered by the Church. Both teachers and students are members of the Church. They are called to serve a community, not the abstract vision of a Church not yet existing, but an actual community with its strengths and weaknesses. As members of *this* community they are also servants of the Church universal in all places.

What are the implications of this double commitment?

1. Theologians and teachers are *accountable* to the Church. Theology is not an individual performance. In the Reformed tradition, church authorities are not entitled to exercise any control on the soundness of theological reflection. No imprimatur is required. Rather, theologians are expected to exercise self-control. Several old books of order contain the rule that no pastor should publish any book without previously having consulted at least two of his colleagues.
2. To combine creativity with respect for communion, a *culture of dialogue* is called for. A theological discourse needs to be developed which is characterised by both clarity and the will to understand and appreciate divergent positions. There is room at theological schools for different theological perspectives. Departing from the general line, is no reason for expulsion or secession. There are, of course, limits to diversity. Teaching needs to remain within the boundaries of the confession of the Church. But theological schools will not seek uniformity of teaching; it will promote theological thinking through a diversity of approaches.

Often, Reformed theologians adopt an aggressive and polemical style. They seem to believe that authentic theology requires the effort to demolish theological adversaries. Unfortunately, the Reformers, including Calvin, have set the model of this style. In their writings they often attack, caricature and denigrate their opponents. Often, they use scathing language. There is no doubt a legitimate place in theology for fair polemics. But there is a difference between clear straightforward criticism and the *rabies theologorum* which creates bitterness and antagonism. Calvin has also been exemplary for another effort – to formulate common perspectives going beyond apparently irreconcilable positions.

3. Sound theology will always take place in a atmosphere of *prayer and worship*. It is a rigorous intellectual exercise. But *theo*-logical reflection is carried out in front of God – prayer is the framework of all theological activities. This is not a matter of course in Reformed theology. Often, the dimension of prayer in theology is neglected. Often, the effort to interpret the Biblical message is regarded as such to be a sufficient act of worship. Reformed theology has often a touch of intellectualism.
4. As theologians are members of a *specific* community, they will reflect on behalf of this community: What is its context? What form should its witness take? What are the issues calling for a theological answer? Theology is bound to be contextual and should not be ashamed of being contextual. Reformed doctrine is not a system giving the answers to all issues in all contexts. At the same there is an increasing need for *common* reflection on

the global challenges which the Church faces today. Even more than in the past, theological reflection has become a common task. An interaction needs to take place between contextual and inter-contextual reflection. So far, Reformed theology is relatively weak in this regard.

### *Training of Ministers*

The same two dimensions of freedom and communion also apply to the training of ministers. The training of ministers must take place in an atmosphere of both freedom and commitment to the church – to its tradition, to its calling and its witness. Students are to become free and responsible persons. They should learn to think and interpret the Bible and the Reformed tradition on their own. They are not to become copies of their teachers, and any inclination to ‘cloning’ on the part of teachers should be resisted. True education enables students to discover themselves and interpret their calling.

But clearly, theological schools must also be places where students are made aware of the Church, the ‘mother of all faithful’ (Calvin). They are to learn what it means to be part of Christ’s Church. Theological schools need to introduce students into the service of the Church. Ideally, theological education leads to a passion for the Church, the fulfilment of its calling, its unity and its mission.

Through the act of ordination, normally after the successful conclusion of theological studies, students are accepted as ministers by the Church. Ordination is an act of the Church – recognising the vocation of the candidate, the Church includes him or her into the company of ministers of Word and Sacrament ; while the candidate commits himself or herself to the service of the Church, the Church agrees to recognise and to honour his or her service. The crucial question is in what way the prospect of this act is present in the course of theological training. Is theological training an end in itself or does it lead to the service of the Church expressed through the act of ordination ? Often. Ordination is treated as if it were a mere appendix to final examinations.

What are the implications for theological training ?

1. In addition to conveying the theological knowledge which is required for responsible theological thinking, students need to be made familiar with the history, the present situation and the witness of the church they belong to, as well as with the life of the Reformed churches of their country and indeed worldwide. Reformed Christians have on the whole only a limited knowledge of their own church. Theological teaching tends to overlook the reality of the Reformed churches as they actually exist today. In order to participate in the reform of the Reformed tradition, accurate knowledge of the churches involved is required.
2. The time spent at a theological school also should include an experience of shared Christian life. Students must be given the opportunity to learn what it means to members of Christ’s body.
3. The theological school – teachers and students – need to form a worshipping community.
4. At an early stage of studies, opportunities should be offered to discuss with students the vocation to the ministry. The issue should not be postponed until the eve of ordination. Theological schools need to be place where pastoral care is exercised.

### ***Theological Schools and the Authority of the Church and its Leadership***

The relationship between theological schools and the Church has often been the cause of tensions. To advance the cause of the Gospel, ways of mutual affirmation and constructive collaboration must be found.

Theological schools need to enjoy a certain degree of independence from the Church. They are to challenge the church. Calvin's insistence on the ministry of *docteurs* is significant in this respect. They are freed from daily obligations in order to be able to devote themselves entirely to the interpretation of the Word. The same freedom is to be granted to theological schools. It is in the self-interest of the Church to respect this freedom. On the other hand, theological schools have to respect the fact that they do not represent the voice of the Church. They are the theological conscience of the Church but they do not speak on its behalf. The ultimate authority lies with synods and assemblies. This implies that synods and assemblies can intervene in extreme cases of false teaching or mismanagement.

There is then a double temptation : for the Church, to treat theological schools as simple 'tools' or, for theological schools, to claim entire independence from the life and witness of the Church. A sound relationship can only be established if both sides commit themselves to partnership – reminding themselves through dialogue of their respective functions.

Some implications :

1. Training ministers is not the only function of theological faculties. They are to be places of theological research. They are to contribute to the *theological inspiration* of the Church. Each individual member has his or her function. But there is also a function of the faculty as a whole. Through combined efforts new issues can be clarified and new perspective offered to the Church.
2. To achieve this, there is need for an *interdisciplinary approach* within the faculty. The various disciplines of theology – Old Testament, New Testament, History, Systematics, Pastoral Theology etc – must not be allowed to be pursued and taught in isolation from one another.
3. Theological schools must seek to promote theological thinking in the Church generally. Very easily, theology can develop into an esoteric enterprise. Often, the language used at theological schools can no more be understood by a wider public. Schools and synods use different discourses. Mutual understanding becomes difficult. There is need for a permanent theological debate within the Church. Theological schools must seek opportunities to promote it, e.g. by visits to congregations, by vacation courses etc.

### ***Institutional Dimension***

Theological schools are institutional realities. It is important that they are aware of their particular institutional identity and its impact on their understanding of the Gospel, their teaching, the relation to the Church and its eventual renewal.

There are widely differing types of schools, e.g.

- schools which have been founded, and are financed, by churches

- schools which are independent from the Church and are financed by endowment or by an association of friends.
- schools which depend on mission agencies, and are are financed, totally or in part, by money coming from abroad.
- theological faculties which are part of an university, and are financed either by the state or by endowment.

Each type has its strengths and weaknesses. Each type has an influence on the ways and methods of teaching. To each type corresponds a style of doing theology. To overcome the limitations inherent in each institutional type, conscious efforts are required. In order to contribute to the unification process of Reformed churches special attention needs to be given to the weaknesses going with each type.

Institutions tend to be self-sufficient. They represent a small world and are not open, as a matter of course, to the wider world. There is, with all institutions, a certain degree of inertia.

By what kind of steps can they contribute to the unification process ?

1. Ideally, Reformed theological schools within the same country should *relate to one another and seek to collaborate*. They can exchange teachers and students. They can launch common initiatives, e.g. student encounters, courses to prepare for ordination etc. They can possibly form a national association of Reformed schools. Through joining forces they can contribute to form a generation of pastors prepared for a ministry in a united Church.
2. Instead of competing with one another, theological schools can seek to develop *complementary roles*. While one school concentrates on higher education, another can give more room to lay training. One school may be entrusted with the pursuit of a special project. The vocation of another school may be to serve a particular language group etc.
3. At the same time theological schools need to regard themselves as part of *the international Reformed 'theological community'* and actively participate in international contacts. Much already happens in this regard – exchange of students, meetings of international theological association (Calvin-Congress, IRTI etc.). But in order to develop a concerted approach to global issues, additional efforts are required. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has an important role to fulfil in this regard. Through its activities (offering focus for an network of theological schools, consultations on crucial issues, leadership training courses etc) it can create the framework within which Reformed theological thinking can develop in new ways – in more deliberate exchange and dialogue, in mutual affirmation and critique, in the perspective of the church universal.

### ***Concluding Proposal***

In order to advance the reflection on theological schools 'a uniting or dividing force in the Church', the Mission in Unity Project should call a small but geographically representative consultation of people involved in the life and work of theological schools and especially familiar with the impact of theological schools on the life and witness of the churches.

The consultation should respond to the following questions : What is the role of theological schools in face of the present divisions of Reformed churches ? What can they contribute to the unity movement among them ?

*Purpose* : to elaborate a statement on the issue to be shared with *all* Reformed theological schools.

*Preparations* : invite a selected number of theologians to put on paper their view on the issue.

*Date* : the earliest date for such a consultation would be autumn 2001, possibly early 2002.

*Finance* : the finances needed for the consultation would need to be raised by a special effort.

***Literature*** :

There is much literature on theological teaching and the role of theological schools but little on the specific issues addressed here.

John S. Pobee (ed), *Ministerial formation for Mission Today*, A WCC study (Ecumenical Theological Education), Accra 1993

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