

Flexible Asian Leadership Training (1978)

Significant new directions are taking place in the leadership programs for the churches in the Philippines. The same is true for theological education in other Asian nations. The reasons are varied. In general, theological education has been too heavily dependent on the West.

For years, the cultural context of education was not taken in consideration. The students were taught Western theological systems. Their studies didn't equip them for ministries in Asian nations. "Theological training that shuts itself off from the world," writes Dr. Saphir Pathyal, principal of Union Biblical Seminary, Yeotmal, India, "is only an attempt at brainwashing the students, and not education."

The traditional style has led men away from the rural areas to the urban centres. A case in point is the leadership training program for tribal churches in Mindanao, the Southern Philippines. The standard program has proven to be ineffective. Young people were sent to Bible colleges where they were given a Western-style training. What happened after graduation? With rare exception, the graduates of such schools have not returned to their own people. They preferred to evangelize elsewhere.

Another problem faced in leadership training among tribal people is their concept of leadership. The idea of trained young leaders runs counter to the historic pattern of leadership in the tribes, where authority is exerted through heads of families in consultation with one another. A Western style of education doesn't meet the needs of the tribal churches.

Training church leaders is not just imparting knowledge that can be memorized by rote. In the Philippines, where evangelical Protestants form a very small minority, it is urgent that the whole church becomes mobilized for ministry. Lay leaders' programs are now offered in a number of Bible colleges.

"Above all, training school courses must be functional," observes S. Robert Skivington. "The purpose of training is to equip workers to think accurately about their churches and to give them biblical knowledge, skills and spiritual dynamic to serve effectively. To improve the effectiveness of workers, courses in Philippine church growth, evangelism, cultural dynamics and other related subjects should be added."

The problems of the Third World churches are drastically different from those their sister churches in the West are experiencing. In theology, we cannot afford to waste any time discussing the "death of God" theology or any Western isms not known in Asia. In theological and Biblical studies, church leaders must let God's Word shine on the problems of pain, suffering, poverty and injustice. What has God to say about heart-breaking situations in Asia?

Church leadership in the Philippines needs to be innovative and flexible. Highly trained pastors are needed for urban churches. But you also need pastors for the rural areas where the educational level is very low. And workers are needed for places where no cash economy is known. In many hinterland areas in the Philippines, people barter for their daily necessities. They just don't have money. Christians in no cash barrios (villages) can never afford to pay a pastor in pesos. A number of Bible colleges are now struggling with the question: "How can we meet educationally the spiritual and material needs of our people?"

One Bible college now offers a course in cottage industries. Evangelists are trained in teaching the barrio poor to set-up small cottage industries to improve their standard of living.

Some other Bible Colleges are teaching agriculture, besides the usual Bible courses. Many tribal people do not know the standard techniques of cultivation, crops are allowed to grow untended, resulting in limited harvest and perpetual poverty. Even the established farmers' income remains low because of poor methods, worn out land and crop failures. Some tribes move from one valley to another in search for fertile fields. When a field is found, one crop is sown and harvested - and the tribe moves on. People on the move have little chance to build viable churches. Evangelists and pastors, trained in agriculture, help to advance the lot of the farmers and the tribal people. Improved cultivation methods have already stabilized tribal churches in some areas.

Theological education in Asia must be innovative and flexible. The gospel is for every culture, race and tribe. As a young theological institution, with a firm commitment to Scripture, the historic creeds and the Reformed confessions, we do have a vital ministry. The gospel we proclaim and teach is for this life and the life to come, and for the whole of man, wherever he lives, whether in the affluent West or the Third World.