

Theological Education for Ministerial Formation: An Indian Reading

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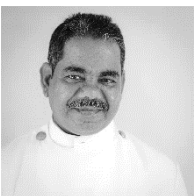
Introduction

The word *seminary* comes from the Latin *seminarium*, meaning “seedbed” or “nursery,” where plants are nurtured before they are transplanted.¹ Seminaries are like good soil for ministers-in-training: they support growth and maturation so that graduates can thrive within the church system upon their graduation. Seminaries are meant to train ministers of the Gospel. Therefore, those who train seminarians should have a clear perspective of the Gospel; that is, whatever they do, say, teach, and criticize should be in the interest of the Gospel.

Seminaries are established to meet the needs of ministries and churches. However, a complaint common among seminary graduates is that their education did not prepare them well for actual challenges in the ministry. Further, they complain that much of what they learned at seminary is irrelevant to the situations they find themselves in after graduation. This begs the question, Is the problem with the seminaries themselves, the students, or the Church? Most people readily blame seminaries for not being “contextual” in their teaching. In other words, seminaries seem to be answering questions the Church is not asking and not answering the questions the Church is asking. This implies that seminary curriculum fails to prepare students to “meet the needs” of the people in the Church.

In response to the criticism about the formation of Christian ministers, many seminary faculties keep revisiting their curriculum in a bid to meet the trending challenges and needs in the Church. New courses are introduced on a regular basis while the contents of older courses are reworked for this purpose. Invariably, it appears that seminaries are trying their best to make their graduates relevant to the Church. Not only that, but some of them have courses/programs affiliated with universities in order to “qualify” their students for public service. These programs help seminary graduates serve beyond church frameworks. Despite all this, it seems to many that seminaries are not doing enough.

Many have recognized that we are facing a global crisis in theological education. We see students entering seminaries zealous for ministry and leaving passionate for academia. But they have very little idea how to empower the Church, and often they



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have no genuine desire to do so. Churches complain of graduates who have lots of answers for the wrong questions, and who fail to engage with the communities in which their churches reside.

However, churches still look to theological colleges for their leaders, and consequently the solution must lie with changes in the system of seminary education. The questions that need to be investigated are, Does theological education prepare ministers for “glocal”² culture? How should theological education transform to better equip ministers?

To address these concerns, we must analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the ongoing theological training system.³ This article does so in four sections. First, I examine theological education in the context of emerging issues. Second, I describe Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil (CTSN), with which I am closely associated. Third, I report on the educational structure and curriculum details of Serampore University, India, an affiliate of CTSN. Last, I provide a few additional observations and evaluations.

Part I: Theological Education in the Context of Emerging Issues New Trends in Christian Ministry

In the global culture, new kinds of ministries are emerging. Many preachers have their own television channels; others live stream their sermons. Electronic media gives ministers the opportunity to create their own ministries according to social demand, outside of their local context. Ecumenical and charismatic movements, mega church ministries, prosperity gospel preachers, independent evangelists, and emerging new messiahs are all contributing to confusion about the pastoral ministry in public as well as within the Church. Furthermore, corruptions, unending disputes and disunity, administrative stagnations, moral degradations, and power politics are weakening the ministry of the Church. As a result, dedicated and God-fearing young people are not coming forward for ministerial training.⁴

Some critics say that pastors and church leaders are self-centered. They question these leaders’ money, motives, and moral weakness. Some leaders are more interested in self-serving projects and maintaining institutions than the core mission of the Church. This truth can easily prevent healthy Christian ministry. Additionally, Christians easily confuse the mission and ministry of the Church as they get involved in church administration. Lack of perspective is evident in their ministry outlook.

Technological Development and Seminary Training

The digital age in which we live raises important philosophical and theological questions about what constitutes true community. The quality of personal relationships in a technological society, the interplay between the “real” identity and “constructed” identity, and the discernment of God’s “presence” in the virtual world are important questions we face today. The place of e-media in theological education and spiritual and pastoral formation must be carefully weighed. Online learning has become a highly competitive educational marketplace today. What is our theological, pastoral, social, and pedagogical responsibility in nurturing this new generation of church

leaders? How can we evolve a theological-ethical response in this regard? Hybrid modes of teaching-learning are likely here to stay.

Other Challenges

In recent years, the question of nationalism in India and South Asia has been undergoing tremendous changes since Hindutva⁵ has become mainstream. The unholy alliance between religion and politics has been a continuous attack of secular nationalism in India. Religious minorities are portrayed as aliens to Indian culture. The exclusive attitude toward other religions is dangerous. Freedom of religion and expression of faith is threatened. The current situation demands a theology of nation building to protect and respect diversity and promote the peaceful coexistence of all communities.

The world is marked by the climate emergency crisis, systematic injustice and corruption, and the exploitation of poor, indigenous, and marginalized people by pro-capitalist, market-driven economies and development initiatives. Narrow-mindedness and racism nurtured by national populisms, issues of human sexuality and exclusion of minorities, issues related to migrants, etc. are on the rise. The theological community must be proactive in promoting justice and peace to address these emerging issues. Lutherans in India have a role to play in this important venture.

Significance of Theological Education

Theological education is the training of men and women to know and serve God. It has the potential to be the seedbed for the renewal of church ministries and missions, and their commitment to Christian unity in a changing world. Christian education is Christ-centered, which puts salvation first and teaches the claim of Christ upon one's life in harmony with the teachings of the Bible. *Theological* education has the broad goal of equipping church leaders and their congregations within their respective lives and contexts. This includes the doxological, liturgical, *koinonial*, diaconal, and missional dimensions of the Church. In other words, the aim of the theological education is to cultivate an integral and holistic spirituality that sustains ministerial students in their commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they live out the truth and values of the Gospel, thereby helping them become faithful and effective ministers, teachers, and servant leaders in the Church and society. Therefore, the theological education system should take into serious account the candidate's personal and professional formation that will contribute to his or her communitarian and vocational service to the Church and world.⁶ With these ideas as background, we turn to an overview about Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil, India.

Part II: Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil

Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil (CTSN) is an educational institution in India that is entirely owned and governed by a single church, the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC). CTSN exists to provide higher education and training in

theology for pastors and church workers. Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM)⁷ started their work in Nagercoil in 1907. Along with the propagation of Gospel, missionaries felt the need for education in effective communication and leadership. So, educational institutions at different levels became part of almost all local mission centers. Since missionary personals were few and the demand for workers was vast, local people were educated in Lutheran doctrine and catechesis and deployed for evangelistic work.⁸

A theological school was started at Nagercoil in 1908,⁹ and The Missionary Conference revised the seminary program in 1916 with definite goals and objectives. The eleventh General Conference held at Ambur in 1921 resolved to open a three-year pastors' course with vicarage between the second and third year.¹⁰ Rev. Theodore Gutknecht (1924–1928) was the first principal of the seminary, and Paul Heckal and E. A. Noffke were assistants.¹¹ During Gutknecht's administration, a new seminary building was built with additional classrooms, a place of worship, a library, and quarters for students. Gutknecht also started women's classes.

Under the third principal, Anton J. Lutz (1937–1948), students received diploma certificates, and student wives were given special instructions during their stay on campus. Mr. M. Philip was the first Indian national professor at CTSN.¹² In 1957, the seminary became affiliated with Serampore College (University).¹³ In 1962, the first batch of CTSN students received the Serampore Diploma of Licentiate in Theology (LTh). In 2011, CTSN was upgraded to an English-medium Bachelor of Divinity institution, and the first batch graduated with their BD degrees in 2015.

Under the Serampore curriculum, CTSN has been offering nonresidential diploma and degree courses for the interested lay people. The seminary also conducts periodical and annual programs like Pastors Refresher Course (PRC) and In-Service Training for Pastors (IST). These programs help pastors stay up to date on meeting contemporary challenges in church ministry. Faculty members serve as resource persons for the various nurture programs and leadership trainings throughout the IELC.

CTSN is distinguished from other Christian educational institutions in India since it focuses intentionally on following the scriptural, confessional, liturgical, and sacramental characteristics of the church.¹⁴ While framing the constitution of our church IELC, the former missionaries made special efforts in naming the board of the seminary as the "Board for Pastoral and Lay Training (BPLT)." This board decides the functions of the seminary in terms of training the clergy and equipping the laity. The board also oversees the production of materials for Sunday Schools, youth work, and women's work. Thus, the seminary is playing a vital role in upholding the IELC's Confessional Lutheran position in an ecumenical and multi-religious context. CTSN will celebrate its centenary in 2024.

Among other large and notable ecumenical institutions, CTSN remains as a denominational seminary in its assertion that Confessional Lutherans have a distinctive mission and message in an ecumenical age. Ecumenism, pluralism, sociology, philosophy, and other Indian religious traditions and theological subdivisions are part of the curriculum. This helps students develop an open-minded and respectful attitude toward others without giving up their own beliefs and traditions.

Part III: Senate of Serampore College (University).

The Bachelor of Divinity is a master's level program at Serampore University and its affiliates. Most protestant seminaries are affiliated with Serampore, and the senate has given its affiliates freedom to maintain their respective denominational identities. Most secular universities in India do not have a Christian theology program. Already at the BD level, Serampore introduces students to the foundations of theology. The program is primarily aimed to prepare and equip candidates for the diversified ministries of the Church and service to the society in general. Through the curriculum, students become familiar with critical academic scholarship in a Christian environment, and they mature as disciples of Jesus Christ for the cause of the Gospel. The program seeks to instill and cultivate good moral values for a lifetime in resonance with the vision and mission of the Church. Character building and spiritual growth are part and parcel of theological education. In essence, the BD program is intended for ministerial training to serve the Church and society.¹⁵

Theological education and theological educators do not exist apart from the Church and people of God; they are integrated within the Church's life of worship and witness. But the special character of theological education as a vital and integral ministry is to be recognized, respected, and owned by the Church. Today, Serampore has sixty-five affiliated theological colleges and seminaries of Protestant, Orthodox, and Pentecostal traditions, among others.

Part IV: Observations and Evaluations

A globalized world necessitates global partnerships. For first-century Christian ministers, Jesus Christ was their seminary. The New Testament shows numerous partnerships among church planters, subsequent disciples, and local leaders. In our age, the world is interconnected, and people are on the move as never before in history. The kinds of partnerships that existed for first-century Christians should continue within the realm of theological education today so local churches can benefit from the global Church!

Twenty-first century theological teachers must equip themselves with the necessary skills to teach effectively, and they must adopt the firm belief that effective teaching helps the entire theological system achieve its goals. Exchange of students and teachers between different theological institutions will enhance the teaching and learning experience. Ongoing revision of curriculum and syllabi, teaching methods, disciplinary procedures, and evaluation strategies move together with a common understanding. Ministerial candidates must focus on their academic, spiritual, and communitarian formation. Institutions must develop strategies to respond to new learning situations along with effective classroom management and the use of technology and digital media.

The pioneers of theological education in India were Christian missionaries from the West. Even today, theological education in India still looks like Western models since the system was borrowed from non-Indian cultures. Some of the curriculum we follow was written for Western contexts. The illustrations and case studies are taken from Western contexts. Western books and journals dominate Indian seminary

libraries. Thus, a sense of dependency is visible in the infrastructure, architecture, academic system, curriculum, and leadership patterns of Indian seminaries. These ideas also encourage Indian students to migrate to the West instead of advancing themselves in their native culture.

Every theological institution in India is running with financial aid from their overseas mission partners. How we can move beyond the dependency syndrome is a daunting question for Indian churches and their theological institutions. Globalization has also increased the issue of dependency in the neocolonial world. One step toward avoiding dependency is for indigenous Christian institutions to be consciously contextualized in their local situation.

Dependency need not be a problem if Western contributions can come without depriving non-Western Christians of their leadership roles. In the postcolonial mission, Western standards for operations will no longer be the principle for work. Each locale may set standards based on local resources, history, and culture. Local ownership and accountability will free the churches and seminaries from dependency. New mission models suggest genuine partnership and solidarity in *Missio Dei* rather than paternalistic relationships, which may be doing more harm than good. Unquestioned dependency might be affecting the development of an indigenous theological education for the Indian Church.¹⁶

All seminaries seek to prepare ministerial candidates to be successful church leaders and citizens of the world outside of the classroom. After leaving college, they must continue to learn and explore new solutions to life's challenges. The impact of their molding extends to the people and communities they serve. When we discover the impact of a pastor on a church, we are likely to understand the impact of the seminary on the church. Churches are looking for true visionaries as their pastors. Seminaries should take this desire seriously.

St. Paul noted to Titus, his pastoral trainee, “[elders] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9–11). Pastors should be prepared to give a defense of their faith with gentleness and respect (see 1 Pet 3:15). They must develop a sound mind which can readily refute errors and philosophies that contradict healthy doctrines. If in the formation period a ministerial candidate is not disturbed about the assaults on the Gospel, they may end up as a pastor who does not care about false doctrines in the Church. When seminary lecturers are dispassionate about missions, evangelism, prayer, and daily devotions, churches end up with pastors of the same attitude. Seminary graduates must be passionate about their spiritual vitality and growth for the sake of the Church.

Seminary academicians should assume pastoral ministries and missions in their classrooms and in all relationships. When those mentoring pastors are themselves pastors at heart and in all they do, their mentees become more effective pastors. Students are bound to imitate their mentors, and they will reflect in their ministry what they absorbed from their seedbed.

Today, many Christians are not satisfied with Christ alone. They want something more, and to this end they gather teachers for themselves who will tell them what their itching ears desire (2 Tim 3:3). Pastors are thus placed in a dilemma: Obey the Bible's mandate or listen to their churches' cries for teachings and services relevant to their immediate needs. Pastors must learn to keep a healthy balance between the teachings of Scripture and the needs of congregations and communities. Students are often at a crossroads, unable to apply what they had learned in school with what they face in their churches.

What the Bible says about humanity's total depravity and Christ's finished work are as relevant in our generation as ever before. This is why pastors and preachers cannot afford to let the world and their churches dictate to them, just as the sheep cannot dictate to the shepherd.

Pastoral training and Christian ministry are now more specialized and professionalized. Seminary education is to continually reveal and reflect the Biblical mandates for the Church. The message of the Bible is not old-fashioned because human needs throughout history remain constant: salvation from sin and eternal judgment, reconciliation, regeneration, repentance, and eternal life. What the Bible says about humanity's total depravity and Christ's finished work are as relevant in our generation as ever before. This is why pastors and preachers cannot afford to let the world and their churches dictate to them, just as the sheep cannot dictate to the shepherd. Therefore, let the seminary and the churches listen to one another, and let them follow Scripture with the Holy Spirit guiding. This will ensure that pastors and churches are always ready for service in our world today.

Another observation is that present seminary training emphasizes curriculum content much more than character values. Whereas the certification for ordination is for both character and learning, there seems to be a greater slope toward learning than character formation. If we expect pastors to be blameless, as the apostle Paul suggests, especially in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, then seminaries must train candidates thoroughly in biblical virtues, and their teachers must exemplify those virtues in their own lives. We cannot have lesser standards for lecturers than we do for their students and expect better pastors.

Conclusion

Theological education for ministerial formation faces new challenges globally as well as locally. Both theological education and Christian ministry are part of God's mission. Mission is our total response to God.

Seminaries exist to serve the purpose of the Church. If graduates are not cultivated with the values, virtues, skills, experience, and information necessary to serve the

Church, irrespective of other achievements, the seminary has failed. If the students and graduates are ill-prepared and ill-equipped for the Church's ministry, the seminary has lost its essence. Therefore, to achieve their purpose as seedbeds for ministers who serve the Church, seminaries must move together with the Church to be effective. We must remember that the seminary is a brainchild and the backbone of the Church. Without the Church, seminaries are of no relevance or use. Seminaries and churches need each other for both to become more efficient and impactful. Seminaries are more than academic centers for theological studies. They are instruments of the Church for forming ministers of Word and Sacrament.

Theological institutions today are confronting profound transformations, dilemmas, and questions. These challenges call for both interpretation and action. For pastoral training to be more effective, it must become more relevant for the places and spaces in which the candidates find themselves. For sustainable excellence, academics and *praxis* are to walk *side by side* in our seminaries. Seminaries have been a tremendous blessing from God. Certainly, they must carry on the essential duty of forming pastors for the Christian mission to the wider society.

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Grolier International Dictionary* (1981), s.v. "seminary."

² This word was first recorded in 1980–85 and is a blend of "global" and "local." It is an adjective of or relating to the interconnection of global and local issues, factors, etc.

³ For an overview of contemporary realities and trends in theological education across the world, see Dietrich Werner et al., eds., *The Handbook of Theology in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010).

⁴ Churches and theological institutions need to study this issue in depth to arrive at possible solutions.

⁵ Hindutva is an ideology or movement seeking to establish Hinduism and Hindu culture as dominant in India.

⁶ In 1932, John H.C. Fritz issued a warning as follows: "No book on Pastoral Theology can cover in detail all the cases which will ever arise in pastoral experience, but can and should state the divine principles according to which any case can and must be decided." *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), 2.

⁷ MELIM is the first international mission organization of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, USA.

⁸ Henry Hamann, "Report" (unpublished conference proceedings, General Conference, Nagercoil, India, January 18, 1922), 1, hard copy available in the archives at Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil, India.

⁹ "Minutes of the Education Committee of General," vol. 2 (unpublished manuscript, 1943), 10, hard copy available in the archives at Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil, India.

¹⁰ Before opening a new Seminary, the founders of the Seminary had to confront many problems such as regionalism and language. Henry Hamann, "Report," 12.

¹¹ Nagercoil District Conference (unpublished conference proceedings, South India, 1907–1957), 13, hard copy available in the archives Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil, India.

¹² Nagercoil District Conference, 13.

¹³ Herbert M. Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy*, MELIM 75th Anniversary Publication (Malappuram: Concordia Press, Vaniyambadi, 1970), 53.

¹⁴ See the CTSN website, www.ctsn.edu.in

¹⁵ The nature and objectives of the BD degree program at Serampore College (University) can be found in the revised edition (2014) of the Senate of Serampore College Regulation and Syllabus, available at

https://www.senateofseramporecollege.edu.in/assets/uploads/cms_pdf/1586072491bdcourse_2017.pdf

¹⁶ For more discussion on this matter, see Christu Das, “The Indian Christian Lutheran Communion: Challenges and Hopes,” *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies* 22 no. 2 (June 2011): 66–75.