

Theological Education and Training for the Ministry in a United Church¹

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I am no expert in the problems of theological education in India, and therefore I hope that there is not too much cheek, not too much laying of unnecessary axes to the roots of too many trees in this paper. Rather my aim is to throw out some thoughts and suggestions about training for the ministry in a united church. There are, I think, three convictions that lie behind my choosing this subject. The first is that this is a matter that we must think about before union comes: whether the attainment of church union is a matter of several months or several years, it must not find us unprepared, with no idea of how we are going to co-operate and pool our resources on the level of theological education.

My second conviction is that in a united church the theological colleges will be of vital importance in making that unity a reality: they will be key places for growing together, and for the understanding and integration of the various traditions which together will make up the united church. If I may illustrate the point from our experience in the Anglican Communion, those colleges, which deliberately seek to make room within their walls for Anglicans of varying shades of opinion, have been able to do a great deal to promote understanding and mutual respect between the various shades of thought and practice that go to make up our Church.

My third conviction is perhaps slightly controversial. I believe I am right in saying that, while the U.T.C., Bangalore, is a union institution, it is not an institution of the united Church of South India, and I think that is a pity. No doubt it can contribute much to the life of the Church of South India, but I feel sure that it could contribute much more, if it were organically related to that church. To use our current jargon, it would be in an existential relationship with the life and problems of the

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united church, in a way that it can never be, while it is slightly detached, slightly apart, from its life. I would therefore urge that in a united church the theological colleges should be institutions of that united church, and not independent organizations. They must be married to her, for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health. But what I have said does not necessarily mean that only students who were members of that united church could enter its walls. At Bishop's, we are a college indeed married to the Anglican Church—some would say with a blind devotion!—but we find it both possible and enriching to have students from other traditions, from the Orthodox, Chaldaean and Mar Thoma Churches, and occasionally from the non-episcopal churches. The point I am making is this: the fact that our colleges would be colleges of the united church would not mean that we would be unable to have among us both students and teachers from parts of the Church, which have not yet been able to join the united church.

Now, when we turn our thoughts to practical questions about how we are going to organize our training for the ministry in a united church, we immediately face a whole complex of problems. And, perhaps first, we ought to look at three of those problems, which interact very much one upon another. What is to be the method of training? How long is that training to be? And where is it to take place? The method and place of training raise a hoary question. Is the training to take place in a general or a specialized college? Is the student to be withdrawn from the world, or is he throughout his training to be very much involved in the world? We know how in their different ways Serampore and Bishop's Colleges are answering these questions at present, but I don't think either of us is answering them satisfactorily. At Bishop's, for instance, we are to a certain extent withdrawn, but throughout the course the students have to face the same fierce intellectual demands on their time that the students face here at Serampore, and there is no real withdrawal in the sense of time to develop the life of the Spirit.

We must face this question of the balance and stress of our training when we come to plan our ministerial training in the united church. I feel that the question of withdrawal and involvement is not a matter of an either/or, but of both/and, in fact a matter of proportion. We ought to follow more closely the pattern of our Lord's own training of the first disciples, when he combined both the times apart, spent away from the crowds, and the times of involvement, when they were in the midst of the vast multitudes.

But all this needs time and, before we can answer our question of method to our satisfaction, we have got to ask ourselves how much time we have available, in which to train men for the ministry. At present, the normal ordinand, if we can imagine such a being for a few moments, has six years between completing his Pre-University Course and his ordination. Three

years are spent in an Arts/Science College, and three years in studying theology. Now, is that the best and most rewarding way of using those six years? I don't think that it is. Our church authorities are extremely loath to give us any longer in which to train our ordinands, and so it is imperative that we use those years to their best advantage. I think that here we are faced with a situation somewhat similar to that faced by the Anglican Church in England. There the normal training for an ordinand is three years at a university and two years at a theological college. At one time it was the policy of the church authorities to discourage the ordinand from reading theology at his university—'Read anything else, but don't read theology', tended to be the motto. But now they have come to see the folly of that, and there is increasing encouragement for the ordinand to read theology at his university, so that he can go to his theological college with a great deal of the spadework behind him, and so be more free to dig deeper in his studies, and also to have more time to develop his spiritual life.

Now, is that a lesson that we could put into practice in the very different conditions of India? At least there must be some reappraisal, in order that we may use the years available to the very best advantage, so that we can provide both the intellectual and the spiritual training required, and also both the aspect of involvement in the life of a general college, and the element of quiet withdrawal. Let me then tentatively suggest a solution, and then we can consider one or two arguments for and against it. We should, I submit, plan our training on a five-year basis, and use the time available in the following way:

1. Immediately after the completion of the Pre-University Course, the prospective ordinand should spend a year in a purely theological college. He has been immersed in school and college life, and now he will have a year to stand back from the crowds and consider his vocation. The first year will be primarily devoted to spiritual growth, together with a testing of his vocation, and some introductory lectures to provide him with a good background and basic knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine.

2. He will then have a three-year course in a general college, not reading for his B.A. or B.Sc., but for the B.D. degree or Diploma in Theology. In these three years, he will do the bulk of the intellectual and academic spadework, and will have all the stimulus of living in a general college among Arts/Science students.

3. His final year will again be a year of withdrawal, in a theological college, providing him on the one hand with time to think round and through those questions which have remained unsolved or unassimilated, and on the other hand to grow in the life of prayer and devotion, and to prepare himself for ordination.

Now let me make some comments and observations on that outline plan.

1. It obviously has in mind those who realize their vocation to the Christian ministry, or at least the possibility of such a vocation, at or before the time when they finish their Pre-University Course. (Incidentally, if we were really doing our job properly in presenting to our young people the possibility of their being called to the ministry of the Church, would not this group be a much larger one than it is at present?) We will have to consider separately a little later those who come to an awareness of their vocation later in life.

2. This first year should be openly recognized by both students and staff as being probationary. On this point, our churches and the united church could well take a very valuable leaf from the Roman Catholic's book. In seeking vocations, they cast their net wide, and so should we. This first year should be open for any young man, whom the church authorities feel suitable, and who feels even the possibility of such a vocation, so that he can test that vocation under ideal conditions and find out God's will for his life. We would of course have to do away with the pernicious idea, that seems to prevail at present, that if you once begin a theological training, it is the utmost disgrace to give it up and not go forward to ordination. We must somehow get it across to our people, that to withdraw from a theological training, if you come to realize that this is not really what God wants you to do, is not to be a failure, but in fact to be open and responsive to the prompting of God the Holy Spirit. So long as it continues to be felt a disgrace to find that you were mistaken in thinking you had a call to the ordained ministry, and that God has some other job for you to do, then the Church will continue to be saddled with mis-vocations in its ministry to its own detriment and loss. And surely, even if a number do withdraw after this probationary year, no money will have been wasted, no effort will have been lost, for no good Christian layman will be worse off for having spent a year growing in the life of prayer and learning a little about his faith. And, in fact, we will by this means help many to find a true vocation to the ministry, who at present are not finding it at all.

3. You will have noticed—some of you perhaps with alarm—that I have made no provision in my suggestions for an ordinand to read either for a B.A. or a B.Sc. This is influenced by two considerations: (a) The first is the decreasing value of a B.A. as any real guide to a person's intellectual ability. (b) The second is the belief that just as a good engineer should know all about engines, so a good minister should know all about theology. The time available for his training must be spent to the best advantage by being used in the study of theology. This scheme does imply that we would recognize the B.D. as a primary degree, not as a post-graduate course, but I don't see that that will involve any lowering of its standards, particularly if the first year is well used to get a thorough grounding.

4. You will also have noticed that, in the suggestions I have made, there is provision for two periods of withdrawal in the first and last years of an ordinand's training, with three years of involvement in the middle. This seems to me to preserve a correct balance between the two elements, and it also seems to have other advantages. The ordinand will have a year in which to wrestle with his vocation and learn the life of prayer at the very beginning of his course. This in turn will strengthen the quality of his life and witness during the three years that he spends in the general college. And he will have a year in which to gather his strength and clearly establish his God-given ideals before going out to his active ministry with all its demands and problems.

5. The fifth point concerns the places where this training could be carried on. There are two obvious places at hand. The middle three years could only be spent at Serampore, where alone in India there is a theological faculty in an Arts/Science college. The first and fifth years could well be spent at Bishop's, where its traditions would, I feel, provide the right atmosphere for the particular type of training to be given in those years. Incidentally, that would also solve the problem of how best to use both colleges, so near at hand, in a united church! This plan does rather leave Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur, out of the picture, but would it be too much to hope that it could become the great centre for training for the ministry in the Hindi tongue? Surely, the development of theological thought and training in Hindi is of vital importance to the life of the church in this land, and in many ways Leonard is by far the best equipped to undertake this great task.

6. As I see it, the supreme value of this scheme would be this—that we would be taking seriously for the first time the spiritual training of ordinands, and I submit that none of us are doing that at present, and that that lack is one of the reasons why the standard of the Christian ministry is so lamentably low. Not even at Bishop's, with all our (apocryphal!) reputation for severe discipline and spiritual training, is there any time in the ordinand's training when the spiritual aspect is clearly and openly given top priority. It is there, but it is constantly being crowded out. In the scheme that I have tried to outline, that crying need would be met, however inadequately, by the periods of withdrawal in the first and fifth years, free from any great examination demands.

Now we must take up a question that I by-passed earlier in this paper. If these suggestions were to meet with approval, would it mean that the church would be deprived of the services and contribution that people, who have read subjects other than theology, can make to its life? Will we be deprived of the valuable witness and contribution of the minister, who is also a biologist, or a physicist; a philosopher or an historian; or a scholar in the classical languages of India? I don't think that necessarily follows at all. While I am quite convinced in my own mind that the vast majority of those who realize their vocation fairly early

in life should spend their university years in the study of theology, there will always be a fair number of people offering themselves for ordination at a later stage—either after they have completed their B.A. or B.Sc., or even after they have been out in the world for a number of years. It is these people who have first devoted their time to some other discipline of study who will provide the church with its necessary leaven of wider learning within the Christian ministry.

A word must be said about the training of those who have graduated in some other subject. It would be neither practical nor necessary to expect them to undergo the full five years' training that younger ordinands would undergo. The older student could well by-pass the first year, and so have a four-year training, the first three of which would be spent in reading for the B.D. or Diploma, the last of which would be spent at a specifically theological college, making his final preparation for his ordination and ministry.

I quite realize that my suggestions will come up against one very severe obstacle, and that obstacle is money—or, rather, our church authorities. What I am suggesting would mean that the church would have to maintain its younger ordinands in training for five years, and its graduate ordinands for four years. I believe it is true to say that the authorities of all the churches represented here are very unwilling even to consider the possibility of extending the present three-year course to cover a fourth year. Their stock answer is a two-fold one: 'We need the men quickly, and we haven't got the money'. They may be right—if they are content to continue with a ministry of the standard they possess at present.

There are two remaining matters on which a word or two must be said. The first concerns staff. In planning for the training of the ministry in a united church, we could avoid a certain amount of overlapping and duplication that goes on at present, but I don't think that we will be able to manage with any less numbers than we have at present. Even Serampore professors claim that they have not much time for thought or research, so you can imagine how much more true that is of the staff of Bishop's College! We would then still need at least as many as our present combined staff, and preferably one or two more. It would be a very good thing if the staff members served for periods in both the institutions that I have suggested, so that they are familiar with the whole range and method of training.

The final matter is perhaps the most difficult of all. We may be able to integrate our colleges, and our teaching staff; we may be able to give our students a more balanced and rewarding course of training; but none of these will touch the heart of the matter, which is the integration of the differing traditions in a united church. That can only be done successfully at the deepest level, on the devotional and spiritual level. And so we have to face very seriously the question: Will it be possible for us to

integrate our devotional traditions, and grow together in our worship and pattern of spiritual life? This is where there are the most obvious differences between our traditions, and we will ignore this difficulty at our peril. It is a difference not only of outward form and arrangement, but also a difference at the much deeper level of outlook and understanding. When Serampore students hear of the sort of devotional life that we live at Bishop's College, their reaction is one of horror, mixed with incredulity. Conversely, the reaction of our students on visiting a theological college or a non-episcopal church is to exclaim how little time they give to prayer and worship. Now both may be very superficial judgements, but they do show the real gulf that separates us here in our devotional traditions, and in the emphasis of our training.

Is there then any way in which we can go about preparing ourselves for this encounter, which is bound to take place in the theological colleges of a united church? And I think that if we can find some constructive solution to this problem at the level of our theological colleges, then we will have made a major contribution to overcoming what is, after all, the greatest barrier to a united church growing together at the local or parish level.

The way to approach this problem is perhaps to recognize a broad distinction between a basic minimum that would be observed by all and a wider range of opportunities for prayer and worship that would be available for those who wished to make use of them. I don't think I would want to use the word 'compulsory' even of the basic minimum, but I would be prepared to move heaven and earth to make it generally accepted that this is the very minimum that any Christian minister would take as the basis of his life of prayer and devotion. To what extent, would we be agreed on the following four elements as the basis?

1. The Celebration of the Lord's Supper every Sunday, as soon as possible according to the order of the united church, while allowing a wide divergence to the individual minister in matters of ceremonial.

2. A daily period of thirty minutes for meditation, altogether in chapel, but not, except on a few occasions, a conducted or led meditation.

3. A daily period of intercession at midday.

4. Daily morning and evening prayers on lines similar to those of the Anglican Offices.

I would be very interested to know to what extent those four elements would be generally acceptable.

If I have been rather dogmatic in this paper, I have been dogmatic for two reasons. The first is that I want to throw out some clear suggestions, even if they are the product of my own inadequate thought and experience. The second is that I have sought to provide a basis for discussion and, even if my ideas are untried, I hope that they will be tried and tested by comment and discussion.