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Toward Preparing Equippers

Some Thoughts on Training for Ministry in India

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The author has been seconded by the Board for Missions of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to serve with the Theological Education Fund as coordinator of a finance study of theological education in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and South America, a two-year appointment beginning in July 1972.

Twenty-four years in India, sixteen of them in seminary teaching, might sound like good credentials. Put differently, the credentials wilt: 24 years working within 100 miles of land's end of this vast country, reasonably fluent in only one of India's 18 official languages, barely conversant with another, in contact with nationwide theological education only recently, a member of the steadily diminishing group of expatriate seminary instructors. At Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil, Indian professors have outnumbered expatriates for only 2 years; the first Indian principal in Concordia's 48-year history is just completing his second year. From this kind of experience reflections come! Use the salt!

Even the obvious questions pose dilemmas: "What is the status and future of ministerial training in a developing country like India?" India is only one of many developing countries; within India there are many stages of development. The variety is numbing. "In a poor society?" What kind of poverty? Starvation level with all its hopelessness? Or the level of poor people growing to self-sufficiency? Both are here. "In the middle of a non-

Christian majority?" Which kind? Hinduism ranging from crude polytheism to subtle philosophy? Monotheistic Islam? Sikhism? Jainism? Some other cult? "In an Eastern culture?" What does that mean? Which Eastern culture? Culture is like mercury, the harder you try to grab it, the slipperier it gets.

So what can one say? Certainly no prophecy for the rest of the century. Perhaps some comments on what has developed, where we are, and where we seem to be going. Perhaps a word on where we ought to be going. But no prophetic word beyond the assurance that "His kingdom does come when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and live a godly life on earth and in heaven forever." The prophetic nature of that Word is inevitably exciting, also in the Indian scene of theological education.

Enough of the facts are in to hazard the statement that theological education in the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM) from 1895 to 1958 and in the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC) since then developed in a fashion roughly parallel to that in the other

churches in India. Training for ministry became urgent business in every major mission venture. Francis Xavier, usually remembered for baptizing converts by the thousands, would be better remembered for his insistence on training schools for Indian clergy from the beginning of his short ministry. Early educational efforts by Carey and Duff were directed at training those who would witness to their Lord and minister to His followers; that some of these efforts drifted into undirected secularism does not detract from the value of their vision. MELIM-IELC has from the beginning pursued a course of theological education which leads the IELC to a vision of the challenges in this time.

Theological training began with the first converts in MELIM. Mission "agents" were needed to multiply the work of the early missionaries. New converts were given basic theological instruction so that they could pass the Gospel on to others. Christians from other missions were hired to teach in schools and given training for their tasks. The schools themselves were designed to produce the future church workers. This first training was of the Paul-to-Timothy type, except that the early missionaries rarely entrusted serious responsibilities to their agents. These helpers, with minimal education and little understanding of theology, could scarcely be trusted beyond specific tasks assigned to them. They remained responsible to the missionaries and the missionaries to God. The time had not yet come to recognize the power of Indian Christian ministry to their fellow countrymen. Perhaps the Christian message was too closely oriented to the Western world.

But for World War I, formal theological

education would have begun in the middle of the second decade of this century. Missionary strength dropped from 15 to 5 during the war years; baptized membership rose from 675 to 1,681. No manpower could be spared for a seminary. In 1924 the first classes entered Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil. In addition, local classes were conducted for catechists who would serve under missionary supervision. Organized training of mission agents began.

These agents were paid by the mission and controlled by the missionaries. They remained agents of the mission; as such they studied hard and learned their lessons well. They carried out the duties assigned to them. They preached on Sundays, visited the sick, and reached out to the non-Christians. When the time came to baptize new Christians, to approach new groups about the Gospel, or to conduct Communion services, the missionary returned to the scene. In the case of the few ordained pastors, more responsibility was given. But final decisions lay with the expatriate missionaries.

Mission agents of this period had to learn through verbal instruction for the most part. Few could read English and material in Tamil and Malayalam was scarce. They absorbed and quoted their missionary instructors' lessons faithfully; their knowledge of the catechism and its Missouri Synod interpretation was astounding. In the process, their natural shrewdness in dealing with people and their natural, graphic ability to communicate the Gospel in less logical categories had to struggle not to be submerged.

World War II set changes in motion. The difficulties of the war forced responsibility into the hands of Indian agents,

pastors, catechists, and evangelists. These men soon came to realize that they were indeed agents, but agents of the Lord of mission rather than of the mission. When India became an independent nation in 1947, it was only a matter of time before independence would come to the church.

During this period Concordia Seminary trained increasing numbers of pastors. Between 1943 and 1951, 60 pastoral candidates completed seminary training, as against 21 in the first 19 years of Concordia's existence. In 1954 the prerequisite for seminary training became a high school education with the ability to read English. Instructional methods brought library books into action. New ideas were more readily available. The ferment of change and independence was working. The mission agent idea faded and new pastors saw more clearly their responsibilities to the Lord of the church.

These lessons were not learned rapidly. Good seminary training could teach a proper understanding of ministry. The habits of decades could undermine it. For years the church worker had been involved in keeping people faithful from cradle to grave. He conducted prayers at every event in the life of the village; he represented his members in their trouble and, when necessary, gave recommendations for help from the mission. He had become a consummate parallel to the village priest of Hinduism, except that he represented the Christian God. In postwar independent India he found himself in a new setting crowded by a new vision. He saw that his ministry was more than cradle-to-grave service to his little flock. He saw the task of proclaiming the Gospel to the whole community and being concerned for the needs

of all. As the young pastor caught this vision he often went into his ministry with new energy and zeal. It wasn't easy, for the pressures to get back into the old patterns often discouraged him. Some gave in to the pressure. But the change had come and there was really no return to the old.

In 1958 the India Evangelical Lutheran Church was formally established. This meant a shift in authority from the Mission Board and its representatives, the expatriate missionaries, to the Indian church. That shift took time to work, but the change was irreversible. Expatriate missionaries continued to exert influence, but now as advisers or elected officials of the church. The difficulties of changing authority came. Struggles for power arose between individuals and groups. Misunderstandings caused divisions. In the midst of these difficulties the concept of "mission agent" died. It could not be resurrected. Ministry needed a new identity.

In 1959 Concordia Seminary affiliated with the Senate of Serampore College. This affiliation, which gave recognized academic standing to Concordia's graduates, brought the seminary into the mainstream of theological training. Syllabi broadened, and the seminary, staff, and students became more conversant with India's theological world. Mass movements to Christianity, church unions, experiments in Indian theology became relevant matters which were happening among people with whom one had direct contact. The Gospel assumed the character of God's gift to India in a fresh way.

With autonomy in the IELC came a move toward self-support. The IELC has continued to move toward a reducing subsidy from overseas. As reduction of subsidy began to pinch, the concept of pastors

serving as cradle-to-grave village priests faded. The pastor who had served one congregation in the days of heavy foreign subsidy now found himself compelled to serve enough congregations to make up his support by their contributions. Serving each congregation in every need became impossible. In some cases congregations became dissatisfied with this lowered service. Some energetic men doubled their efforts and continued to serve well in the old pattern. Some tried to supplement income with other employment. A crisis has developed.

A new concept of ministry is growing out of this crisis. The IELC is asking whether its pastors should conform to the old norm of "village priests." Are there new forms of ministry that are more promising and relevant? The questions are being asked, and the answers will come. Over the years the Spirit has led the IELC to build up a strong and well-trained ministry. This will not be in vain.

Some signs are evident. Pastor and people are beginning to recognize a new relationship in which the pastor equips his people for ministry more than exercising that ministry himself. Lay training is becoming training for ministry of the Word, not simply the ministry of helping the pastor. Pastors with several congregations in their charge spend time with elders and teachers who conduct Sunday services in the places the pastors cannot reach. Young people, especially college students, are involved in programs of outreach. Their pastors are kept busy equipping them for their ministry. Perhaps the best sign of this change is the exasperated remark of one pastor in an unguarded moment: "If this

keeps up some of our people will begin to wonder what they are paying us for."

The seedbed for these changes has been Concordia Seminary. Here an eager student can learn new and challenging ideas. The excellent library offers expansion for those ideas. Periodic refresher courses bring pastors together for periods of study, discussion, and worship. In-service training opportunities give continuing refreshment. The very necessity of having to cover more territory than in the old days of high subsidy forces men into using these avenues for finding new possibilities.

Such a broadened concept of ministry is no panacea. It will not answer the basic problem of a developing country: How can a church which is below the poverty level carry on an aggressive program of mission complete with adequate theological training and a fully paid ministry? All the attempts at answering that question end up in a struggle for survival and a return to the poverty level. The return to the poverty level discourages able candidates for ministry; they can gain security outside the ministry with less difficulty. In a poor country that is an almost invincible argument.

Even here opportunity remains. In India's economic situation young people with adequate education often find themselves government jobs. These government jobs are usually undemanding and lack challenge. Such Christian youth are eager to get training in theology so that they can fulfill a more specific Christian calling. They can't leave their jobs to attend a seminary full time; they would lose them irretrievably. But they are willing to receive this training if the seminary is willing to "come to them." Evening classes in cen-

tral places, correspondence courses, retreats during the frequent holiday periods, and—in the case of government schoolteachers—short courses during vacations can give them the opportunity to build their theological background.

This opportunity demands careful planning. What should be the objectives of such training? Is a "worker priest" goal a realistic one? Can such young people fulfill a ministry in a small area near their homes? Should their ministry develop into a pastoral type, or should it remain one of a Christian presence where they are? Is ordination a valid goal? How much training should be required for ordination? Should standards of training be differentiated from those of full-time, paid ministers? Could such young leaders provide a source of capable theological leadership? Will it be possible to select some for advanced studies and full-time ministries?

At issue is the question of whether the Western style of a paid, full-time ministry is helpful. Certainly, the questions are not theological; the issue of salary and working hours is not a New Testament problem. The questions are practical and historical: Can a church which has operated on a paid, full-time ministry basis for 76 years now change direction to new forms of training and ministry, at least in part? Is the financial problem stern enough to force the church into this kind of radical rethinking? Primarily, is it possible to remold the concept of ministry to be one of equipping God's people for their ministry? Is it possible to remold the concept of seminary training to be one of preparing such equippers? If such a remodeling is possible, new forms can emerge which could respond to the challenges of this vast subcontinent.

Nagercoil, India