

Towards a Unified and Contextual Program in Theology

Formal Theological Education was originally an enterprise restricted to those persons whose goal was to serve as ordained ministers of the various Churches in the region. This enterprise began at a time when there was no formal process for ordination, and when aspirants to ordination served with some priest or other minister on the basis of guided reading and instruction. For Anglicans it then entailed a hazardous voyage to England to seek ordination from a bishop, before returning to the West Indies to assume duties in a parish. The process also witnessed the establishment of a variety of institutions over time, beginning with Codrington College in 1745. Although the College's first graduate was ordained in 1759, it did not attain its exclusively Theological status until it was restructured in 1830. For more than a decade after that, the College had to resist strong challenges to its mission, on the part of those who saw it as a College for the sons of the gentry, and eventually accommodated itself to a dual purpose – offering Theology alongside Classical and other areas of study.

Other institutions were started by Churches in Jamaica and Trinidad, as well as in Antigua for a short while. Among those started were Caenwood for the Methodists, one for the Moravians in the Virgin Islands in 1885, Calabar for the Baptists in 1843, in St. Andrew's, Jamaica in 1877, and much later for the Roman Catholics St. Michael's in Jamaica and the Seminary of St. John Vianney and the Uganda martyrs in Trinidad in 1943. This last was started as a Diocesan College, becoming a Regional seminary in 1970. While each did much good in catering to the needs of its own denomination, none could be said to be either fully viable or to have the necessary resources for a satisfactory execution of its tasks. All of these institutions in their turn would have appreciated the challenge of preparing persons for the ordained ministry in a context of limited human and financial resources. This limitation would prove to be the most intractable problem for the Churches throughout the history of this enterprise.

The middle of the twentieth century would witness the beginning of change. It was a period of unprecedented development at the political and other levels of society. A sense of nationalism gripped the people of the English-speaking Caribbean, who were once considered, and who considered themselves, a part of the British Empire. This was facilitated by the emergence of strong leaders in the various islands, following the beginning of a vibrant labour movement. People began to think of themselves as Barbadians, Jamaicans, Trinidadians, and so on, rather than as subjects of Britain. Gradually this led to the desire for independence of the colonial suzerainty, and to look forward to national independence. On the part of some leaders there was the added dimension of a desire to remove barriers which once divided and to see their identity as inhering in the Caribbean rather than in the “empire”. It was a slow process, which has not yet reached its zenith. The Churches could not stand aloof from such influences, and not surprisingly there began to be muted voices expressing a desire for Churches to come together whenever and wherever this was possible. This saw the gradual growth of cooperative activity among the Churches, the formation of Christian Councils in various territories, and eventually the formation of the Caribbean Conference of Churches in 1983.

Playing major roles in the process of regional identity were two institutions, whose functions bore not the slightest resemblance to each other. One of these was West Indian cricket, whose team had begun to show itself a force to be reckoned with in that sport. The exploits of the three W’s, and the spin twin of Ramadhin and Valentine, imparted a sense of pride, which laid the foundation for West Indian identity and unity in the late 1970’s and much later. At least for a time, the labels of insularity could be put aside as the region took pride in the exploits of their sons. The second institution to play a role in this identity was the University College (later the University) of the West Indies, founded in 1948 as an extension of the University of London. The production of graduates trained in the region, and having a less limited understanding of the Caribbean, helped to ensure a sense of regional pride that only

fell short of rivalling the exploits of the West Indies cricket team. One could receive “at home” an education that measured up to that received overseas.

In the context of such developments, and perhaps that of the short-lived Federation, must also be seen the beginning of conscious efforts towards ecumenical cooperation. The Caribbean was a region in which Christianity was originally presented by competing groups, each wishing to take advantage of a truly captive audience. Between the late fifteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Caribbean has been exposed to Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Quakerism, Moravianism, Methodism, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism, and Pentecostalism, contributing thereby to a strong sense of rivalry and division. It has therefore been no easy task to try to reverse the centuries-old pattern of not only division but divisiveness, imparted by European forms of Christianity. The process towards ecumenical cooperation in Theological education might have started towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Codrington College opened its doors to coloured Moravian aspirants to ordination, who could not be accommodated at their own seminary at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Today every institution has a mixed student body from a wide range of denominations, thus providing a service which many persons would not otherwise have had.

A notable indication of this change was the transformation of various denominational colleges into the United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI) in 1966. This new development followed an earlier one involving five Churches, and designated Union Theological Seminary, sharing scarce human and other resources. The formation of the UTCWI was apparently inspired by a position taken by the Theological Fund of the World Council of Churches, to the effect that theological education should be developmental and that it should be a cooperative enterprise. The positive response of Jamaican Churches resulted in the construction of the new facility with considerable funding provided by the TEF. The Anglican Diocese of Jamaica participated in this enterprise from its inception; but its sister institution, Codrington College, could not enter in a cooperative arrangement. A court ruling

made quite clear that the terms of the testator's will had to be observed. The Roman Catholics could not enter into a cooperative arrangement. St. Michael's stood alone, though on a campus contiguous to that of the UTCWI; while there was no institution in Trinidad to which the Seminary of St. John Vianney could relate in that way. In any case, the Roman Catholic authorities in the region could not make such a radical move without the approval of Rome.

Another index of change was the affiliation of four Theological colleges to the University of the West Indies. The first to enter this arrangement were the UTCWI and Codrington College in 1965, followed some years later by the Seminary of St. John Vianney and St. Michael's Seminary. Codrington College had been affiliated to the University of Durham, England, while St. Peter's College (Anglican) had some arrangement with London University. This affiliation had a number of benefits for the Colleges: first, it enabled the graduates of these Colleges to be awarded a degree of the University of the West Indies. This made good sense, since the Colleges themselves did not have the legal right to confer degrees. Secondly, it allowed cooperating Colleges to take an active part in the design of their own curriculum, without abandoning denominational commitments. A third benefit entailed the recognition of the staff of the Colleges as staff of the University. This gave the university the opportunity to participate in the appointment of the staff, as well as to review the staff as might be necessary from time to time. A fourth benefit followed. Because of the need to keep their programmes under constant review, the Colleges found it useful to form an association to facilitate work together, where denominational obligations might have proved to be a deterrent. Thus was borne the Caribbean Associations of Theological Schools (CATS), comprising those institutions which were affiliated to the University. This Association became one of the founding members of WOCATI (the World Organization of Associations of Theological Institutions), when that body was established in 1989, the Chair of CATS at that time becoming one of the members of the first Executive. Other representatives of CATS have served on that body from 1992 to the present.

A further index of change in Theological studies was the expansion of the programme to include participation by members of the laity. As indicated earlier, the Theology degree was restricted to those persons who were being prepared for the ordained ministry in the various Churches. In responding to the needs of the region and of the Churches, the thirst for knowledge saw two developments take place: on the one hand, the Colleges started introductory programmes for members of the laity, leading to a Diploma granted by the particular institution; on the other hand, members of the laity soon began to request entry into the degree programme. Thus, what was exclusively the preserve of the prospective minister, soon became the **concern** of the lay person as well. The result has been that the programmes increasingly catered to more members of the laity than of those preparing for ordination. This naturally meant examining the structure of the programme, since not all the laity would have wished to do the type of pastoral programme that prospective ministers were doing.

“Caribbeanising” the Program

The model of the Theological programme followed by the Colleges was that in use by them when they were first started, and was based largely on the B.D. degree of the University of London. As time passed, and as the staff of the Colleges became increasingly West Indian, the need for a change in orientation became urgent. Beginning in the 1980's, the Colleges embarked on a concerted effort to bring a Caribbean perspective to the Theological enterprise. This approach would affect in particular such courses as the following:

- Caribbean Church History, which was still in a nascent stage at that time.
- Comparative Religion (a) to focus on those groups which were unique to the Caribbean region; (b) to examine ways in which religions such as Hinduism and Islam may have changed in the new milieu, and (c) to interpret the phenomena from the perspective of Caribbean persons, rather than merely to repeat perceptions of extra-regional writers.

- Pastoral Care and Counselling and related courses, to which a Caribbean perspective was imparted.

In other ways the programme was challenged by a Caribbean spirituality and a reality, which required that interpretations of the Christian faith and life pay respect to the region in which the training for ministry was taking place.

Post Graduate Studies

A major shift in the process of expansion was the introduction of post-graduate studies at Codrington College and the UTCWI. In part, this development recognised that any degree programme offered by the Colleges needed the support of on-going research to impart freshness and to facilitate the process of “Caribbeanising”. In part also, this development was intended to provide material which could be of great use to the Churches in the development of their mission and ministry. While encouragement must be given to local students in the practical areas, such as the popular Pastoral area, there is a real danger in not having a sufficient cadre of persons in the Biblical, Historical and Systematic areas. This in turn will have serious implications for the recruitment of staff in these areas, making the institutions continually dependent. This is a problem which the Churches must wrestle with, but it is not one the Colleges can ignore.

It is not only research for higher degrees that is of concern here; there is a further problem of On-going research and publication undertaken by members of staff. Material on the West Indies is contextually restricted, and is therefore not easily “sold” to international publishers. In a discipline that is new at this level, the Churches in the region also lack the research and financial resources to sustain a viable journal; and Theology is not the most popular subject. Providing funding has been a challenge to enable staff to gain access to large and high quality libraries. Yet this would facilitate greater research activity. There is a great need for Churches to encourage their appointees in this activity; but there is also an understandable demand for their services in pastoral responsibilities in various congregations, which

leaves staff very little time for research and publication. Thus shortage of personnel serves as a restriction on the kind of work staff may be able to do.

Accreditation

Theological Colleges, in this setting, are not merely Church institutions; they are also educational entities. If they are to offer degree programs, they will inevitably become subject to the evaluation process to which tertiary institutions are exposed as a matter of course. Thus Theological programmes for degrees of the University of the West Indies have to meet the Quality processes put in place within the university, and must establish such processes as their resources would enable them to do. This was the most significant change which the Colleges faced in 2001, when the first formal quality assessment was carried out under the auspices of the University of the West Indies. The process was useful in many respects, in

- Helping the institutions to eliminate duplicate courses and those no longer offered;
- Challenging the Colleges to develop new courses in areas not previously considered;
- Raising questions about staff development; and
- Promoting on-going quality assurance.

Within six months of receiving these initial reports, the Colleges responded with a week's retreat at the Mona Campus to reflect on those reports, and to plan the way forward. The result was a more organised program, eliminating much of the diffuseness that was characteristic of the earlier stages of the process.

The Technological Challenge

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Colleges at the present is that posed by Information and Communication Technology. This exists on various levels: first, there is a need to facilitate the use of available technology by students and staff for study and research. This is not an optional extra, but a basic need. Students of the present cannot always expect to obtain material in hard copy, and must be prepared to do much of their study online. Similarly, available technology must be used for teaching purposes; chalk and talk is an approach of the past. The Colleges have been trying to make this adjustment, and find themselves doing so in the company of other institutions with considerably greater financial resources.

In due course, efforts to work together will bear fruit as the Colleges reach the stage where they can reasonably share personnel or even the technology in delivering their courses. This has been under discussion for some time, and its realisation will see not only expansion but strengthening of the programme. The exercise is one in which the Colleges need the help of those who have had longer experience in this enterprise; and it is to be hoped that discreet advice and help will be forthcoming. In the meantime, the task goes on and the workers wrestle with the task that seems to be getting even greater daily. As we go forward, we are bolstered by the thought that in due course we shall overcome.