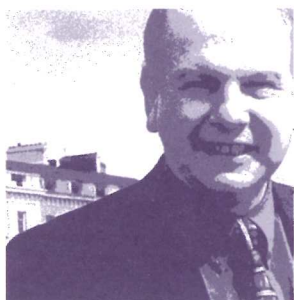


# SHIFTING CULTURES: TRAINING IN TRANSITION

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**MOST PEOPLE, MINISTERS AND OTHERWISE, ARE WOEFULLY OUT OF DATE WHEN IT COMES TO THE SUBJECTS, METHODS AND CONTENT OF CONTEMPORARY MINISTERIAL FORMATION.** In the case of ministers, images are conjured up of their own experiences of seminary which, dependent on age, can be distinctly mediaeval. Equally, the myth that ordinands are uniformly young, male, single and without experience of “the real world” dies hard in the mental repository of many lay people. In the contemporary world these things are just not so. In fact there are some of us in the training trade who think the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of chronological giftedness and that we could do with more, younger people.

In terms of methods and content, a series of seismic shifts has taken place. I can best describe these as follows:

- *The shift to pastoral studies.* For previous generations theological education was about academic learning. Pastoral and practical studies, if represented at all, were regarded as “non-academic” and therefore implicitly inferior to the hard stuff represented by biblical languages and studies, dogmatics, philosophy and church history. This has changed with a new orientation towards the practice of ministry. Academic theology is now pursued to inform and illuminate practice, the past being plundered and sometimes (it would have to be confessed) re-invented to serve the needs of the present.
- *The shift to contextual training.* It is always helpful if necessity turns out also to be a virtue. The withdrawal of grants and the increasing need to support families in training, rather than singles, has led in many colleges to a shift towards training in church-based contexts. Ordinands pastor churches, or serve on pastoral teams or plant churches for part of their week and attend college for another part. Counter-intuitively, this seems not to mean that academic work suffers – rather the opposite. There is a greater understanding of why some things are relevant to the practice of ministry and a quicker realisation that simple answers to complex issues will not do.
- *Adopting the mission paradigm.* If Leslie Newbigin's concern after his return to Britain was to see Western theology, and therefore theological training, as being governed by the imperative of mission, then his labours were not in vain. There has been a widespread shift to the perception that all theology is undertaken as missionary theology and is in the service of the *missio dei*. Theological training is therefore about facing up to the challenge of engagement with a society in which the churches can no longer exist as pastoral churches

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nurturing an inherited faith. The survival and transmission of the Christian faith is at stake.

Where do these shifts now place us? For a start, they leave theological education very much altered. Where these changes have not been negotiated, colleges and ordination courses are likely to find their viability in question. They also bring us to the question of what the next shift is likely to involve and whether it is already under way.

It is plain to me that theological education must now squarely take on board the challenge of cross-cultural mission. This is required, and indeed inevitable, because of the shifts that are already under way. To say that we are preparing people to be missionary ministers and that they are to be imbued with mission-orientated theology inevitably confronts the fact that we are living increasingly in contexts of cultural diversity. The mission to be undertaken requires familiarity and interaction with diversity. Having established that training for ministry is best carried out in a practice-orientated way, the fact is that those who are training for ministry in this way will often be placed in contexts which themselves raise the issues. There is an inevitability therefore that the paradigm now shift to a cross-cultural frame.

The most obvious sense in which this is true concerns the religious diversity that is particularly evident in many British cities. Where once the population practised one faith, there are now many faiths engaged in the conversation about what life means and how it should be lived. Knowledge of and participation in this debate becomes a requirement for theological training and is undertaken at several levels. At one level, there is the debate within each religious tradition about what it will make of and how it will value the other traditions of faith and piety that it has become increasingly difficult to ignore. At another level, there are the conversations that are held with believers in other faiths and the inevitable process of comparison and contrast to which they lead. At a third level, there is the witness that is exercised alongside other faiths in relation to secular ideologies and secular authorities in which the Christian community has come increasingly to resemble one among other minority faith communities. Theological education enables these processes by providing education about other faiths, worldviews and ideologies, and by allowing opportunity for encounter and dialogue.

“Multi-faith” and “multi-cultural” are not however identical adjectives. Within one Christian faith that is shared there are many cultures now represented within the

churches, particularly in the great cities and supremely so in London where growth in church membership comes largely from immigration rather than conversion. This represents a challenge to the content of theological training so that ordinands are prepared for the diversity of what they are likely to encounter. However, a greater challenge still lies in adapting a Western tradition of theology so that it becomes hospitable to and useful for those who increasingly, and dynamically, constitute our churches. The fact is that the critical Western tradition shared by liberals and conservatives alike is only one way of doing theology. Whatever its strengths, it is not immediately attractive to those who are not schooled in its assumptions and who value intuition as highly as analysis. It has no right, moral or intellectual, to proclaim its own superiority. It must itself change to meet the needs of alternative cultures and it can only change by opening itself up to their critique. It has its continuing place as a tradition of discourse in its own right, but it is not the only one and it needs to be complemented by others. Ultimately this will be achieved by attracting, keeping and enabling wider diversities of students who will press for their perspectives and experiences to be taken seriously. In turn, this is related to the ability to attract and keep staff members whose formative traditions and experiences come from other parts of the world.

Even to recognise the variety of cultures within the Christian communities served by theological education is not of itself enough. There is no such thing as “culture” otherwise than as a theoretical abstraction. Within ethnic and religious groups there are generational cultures, cultures of locality and region. For those who have made their home in these islands, there are questions about the second and third generations – those whose homes induct them into one culture even as in their schools they are being inducted into another. The product is a new mutation of culture which at its best may combine the strengths of diversity and cross-fertilisation and at its worst might lead to conflicts of identity, both personally and inter-personally. Pastoral and theological education should equip ordinands to understand and appreciate these processes. What is learnt therefore concerning the nature of cross-cultural mission ceases to be a means of reaching to other ethnic or religious groups and becomes necessary preparation for what is happening in one’s own community, or church, or family. Globalisation and exponential change mean that the pastors who are best able to remain at the cutting edge of the practice of ministry are those who can at least interpret, even if they do not capitulate to, the cross-cultural pressures of their day. ■