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21st CENTURY INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Chapter 8

Recovering A Focus on the Church

In the simplest terms: God is the solution to the problems of the world, not the church. The church, although orientated to, and governed by, the solution, still remains part of the problem. (Healy 2000, 12)

. . . since the primary aspect of the church is penetrated by the activity of God it must be understood as a theological mystery and, as such, is essentially indefinable. (Healy 2000, 32)

The two quotations that begin this chapter, mark the tension that confronts the contemporary church. As a sociological, organizational entity, the church bears the inevitable flaws of all organizations—thus Healy’s first observation. However, as a theological entity, the church is the mystery of God, and bears the mystery of God to the world. A thoughtful pastor once wrote,

I realize now that for all my ideas and skills eagerly put in practice, the truth is, I had no theology of the congregation. I had various notions of what to preach. These I advocated fervently. I was sure of the biblical mandate to help the helpless. These I pushed into action. But I had no sure ground for understanding the congregation itself as *ecclesia*, that is, people of God called together and gifted for ministry in a particular place. (Frank 2000, 12)

If the Scripture is to be taken seriously, the church is God’s greatest concern. The church is God’s chosen means for making known the mystery and the wisdom of God (see Ephesians 3: 9-10); and the agency for reconciling the world to God (see 11 Corinthians 5:18). One could argue that the institutional church, which should be a reflection of the church as *God* sees it, is the *foundational* community; that is, principles of life and faith learned in the church inform and transform all other human communities and functions in society. To the extent that this community is dysfunctional, other human relationships and communities in society are impoverished—including the families who are embraced by the church. It follows, then, that organizations such as theological institutions, serve the mission of the church in the world. In themselves, they bear no special mandate from God as unique as that of the church. When the church gave away two of its central functions, education and mission, to schools, mission agencies, and other serving organizations, three interdependent functions of the church that have defined the community of faith from the Old Testament time to the present, the worship of God, obedience to God’s Word (a function of learning), and justice to one’s neighbor (the heart of mission), were pulled apart. The loss of the synergy of these practices has contributed to many of the concerns expressed about the loss of the church’s relevance and vitality. For many of us, the church as *we* see it is not what we would consider a “foundational community.” In fact, many have given up on the organized church establishing parachurch agencies or personal missions in

order to accomplish what they believe the church cannot or will not do. George Barna, after years of trying to find the formula for a successful congregation, by 1998 was no longer hopeful about the future of *the organized church* in North America. “Let’s cut to the chase. After nearly two decades of studying Christian churches in America, I’m convinced that the typical church as we know it today has a rapidly expiring shelf life”(Barna 1998, 1). I can sympathize with his judgment. For several years, I worked among congregations and theological schools in Canada. After one particularly difficult church board meeting, I wrote the following:

If Churches Were Parks

If we tore down our church buildings and replaced them with parks would the buildings be missed? If churches were parks, there would be trees and grass and places for pleasant walks, neighborhood families enjoying the changing seasons, and our “old ones” sitting on benches telling children stories of their lives and faith.

In the fall, as the leaves changed from green to yellow, orange and red, we could invite our friends and neighbors to corn roasts and BBQs; invite them to laugh with us, talk with us, and enjoy the beauty of God’s creation--in the park. We could leave the children something wonderful in a world gone mad.

In the winter we could roll in the snow with the neighborhood children, throw snowballs, create snow sculptures, and grow to know each other again as we walked under trees heavy with hoar frost. At Christmas, we could string colored lights, decorate a Christmas tree, savor the story of the nativity and sing carols under quiet stars.

If churches were parks we would have to forsake our games of power and our dreams of empire for pleasant walks, snow forts, corn roasts, Christmas trees, carol sings, Easter pageants, and heart to heart talks with those who need to know why we still believe in God. If our churches were parks, all people could gather there; they could come whenever they wished, for there would be no locked doors or security windows on our parks--no stained glass windows to hide behind. Members of the church eating lunch in the park could strike up a conversation with a business person, university student, or shopper resting before heading home, admire the multi-colors of a group of teenagers and ask them if they are afraid of the world we have created for them; or angry because of the future we may have taken away from them.

Of course, we would find pain in our parks. Lonely people, unhappy children, sullen youth. We might confront those trying to buy drugs in our parks. We might fear those who would hurt us and steal from us. If our churches were parks we would have to confront the world outside our buildings. We would have to be those who make peace and speak of redemption and hope rather than those who hide behind fortress walls and wish the world away.

At the start of the world, God put the man and the woman in a park. God chose to walk and talk with the man and the woman in a park. When we were cast out of the park, we began to build towers, empires, cities and temples. We had to acquire and possess--not only the present, but the past and the future. We found ways to control our world and other persons. It’s hard to do this in a park.

Admittedly, this short essay grew out of youthful, personal disappointment that the church was not living up to *my* personal ideals. As I have grown older, I am less naïve about the nature of institutions, and more hopeful because of a larger view of the church. The reality is that the institutional church is a mess; it always will be a mess. Interestingly, Barna after his series of indictments observes that

the stumbling block for the Church is not its theology but its failure to apply what it believes in compelling ways. The downfall of the Church has not been the content of its message but its failure to practice those truths. Christians have been their own worst enemies when it comes to showing the world what authentic, biblical Christianity looks like . . . Those who have turned to Christianity seeking truth and meaning have left

empty-handed, confused by the apparent inability of Christians themselves to implement the principles they profess. (Barna 1998, 5)

Perhaps without realizing it at the time, Barna intermingled the aspects of the church that must be understood as two distinct realities: its institutional and theological character.¹ Since *ecclesial* or institutional perfectionism is impossible in the light of a fallen Creation, we will become discouraged if all we see is the organized expression of the people of God. While we accept the reality of the institutionalized church, we must look deeper to its fundamentally spiritual character and purpose. Missing this, we will always struggle with pessimism about the role of the church in the world. Only a theology of the cross in light of the eschaton gives us the freedom—and the faith—to assert that if the institutional church as we know it crumbled into ruin, the church as the people of God would persist. Ted Ward’s image of organizations as leaky boats is apt. As leaders we will spend all our years of service in institutions, bailing. However, even as we recognize that organizational entropy is inevitable, we are obligated to give constant attention to what God demands of the church; to teach and lead faithfully; and to speak prophetically when necessary. These are the tasks of theological education as well. “A Christian community has no choice as to whether theological education, for all its members, will be an element of its educational work; it only has a choice as to the kind of theological education it will be” (Wood in Astley 1996, 307-308).

Many who have struggled with the dysfunctionality of churches and seminaries tend to believe that the only way forward is to bypass existing institutions and start afresh. This chapter reflects two premises: the inevitable *institutional* dysfunctionality of churches and schools must be accepted; and understanding of the *theological* character of the church as the people of God is fundamental to what theological education becomes in the 21st century. Willard observes that “We have this treasure in earthen vessels. And the earthen vessel is never right. . . . No man (*sic*)

¹The growing effort to understand the church as both a theological and institutional entity is spawning a new growth industry in books and periodicals. Titles include: Douglas Webster. 1992. *Selling Jesus: What’s Wrong with Marketing the Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Thomas Bandy. 1998. *Moving off the Map: A Field Guide to Changing the Congregation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press; Thomas Edward Frank. 2000. *The Soul of the Congregation: An Invitation to Congregational Reflection*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. Manuel Ortiz. 1996. *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Philip Kenneson and James Street. 1997. *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press; Jim Cymbala. 1997. *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. Grand rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House Eugene Peterson. *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Henri Nouwen. 1989. *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. New York, NY: Crossroad; Os Guinness. 1993. *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House; Don Posterski and Gary Nelson. 1997. *Future Faith Churches*. Winfield, British Columbia: Wood lake Books; Johannes A. Van Der Ven. 1996. *Ecclesiology in Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Donald Posterski and Irwin Barker. 1993. *Where’s a Good Church*. Winfield, British Columbia: Wood Lake Books; Edmund Clowney. 1995. *The Church*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; George Barna. 1998. *The Second Coming of the Church*. Nashville, TN: Word Publishing; Kevin Giles. 1995. *What on Earth is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Thomas Hawkins. 1997. *The Learning Congregation: A New Vision of Leadership*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press; Hans Küng. 1967. *The Church*. New York: Sheed and Ward. They are indicative of a range of responses: from a charismatic, emotive response, to a deeply felt organizational-leadership response, to a theological-historical response. We may not have found the way forward in this matter, but the concern for the church and its true nature and function is growing.

can see the church; only God sees the church. The church lives before God; it is greater than any of its manifestations . . .” (Willard 2000). Theological education, then, becomes viable only as it develops in relation to the church as institution and as the invisible reality seen only by God.

Until recently, concerns related to churches and schools were catalogued in mutually exclusive domains: school problems or church problems. Increasingly, theological educators and church leaders attribute the disconnect between theory and practice and lack of relevant leadership development, at least in part, to an ineffective partnership between the church and theological schools. Describing the problem in this way tends to generate three common, potentially unproductive, responses: (1) churches, particularly the “super” churches, bypass theological institutions and create their own seminaries, or conduct conferences to teach what they perceive the seminaries have taught inadequately; or (2) theological schools seek to connect with the church by teaching existing courses at a church site, or by placing more of their students in churches as interns; or (3) individuals and groups form institutes or training centers to train leaders and develop resources *for* the church. The potential benefits of these initiatives are obvious. More important are the potential difficulties. In the first instance, church-housed seminaries and conferences can be controlled by a single focus or dominating agenda. In this case, the church-housed seminary may have little to no contact with broader communities of the church and scholarship.² On the other hand, when courses are simply transferred from the school to the church, or when interns are sent by schools to a church, the church provides the space but the school—and its particular agenda—can control all matters related to the educational process. In this case, the seminary tends to be out of touch with the realities of the church and its ministry. Since the schools were established as centers for leadership development for the church, this disconnect defeats the purpose of the school and further weakens the church. Finally, when agencies see their role as developing leaders and resources *for* the church, the dominating emphases can be program as ministry, or leadership as effective management without a corresponding effort to understand the church as God sees it. Alston argues that if the reformation of the church is possible, it will require and include the recovery of the church as a theological community, and the ministry of the church as a theological vocation (Alston in Alston 2000, 19). Alston maintains that the recovery of a theological community (as opposed to a market-driven, program oriented, worship as entertainment, center) will lead to a corresponding resurgence of theologians who write for the service of the church. The two sections that follow attempt to describe the church as both a theological community and as a sociological or organizational entity, and argues that a productive tension between the two must be sustained.

²For this reason, some are making a distinction between church-based theological education and church-housed theological education. Church-based theological education, as it matures, is increasingly aware of the implications of the *ecclesia* as base, recognizes the need for greater diversity of perspective, and is more intentional about the design of education process. Dan Aleshire, the Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, has reminded us that the ancient tradition of theological education was church- or Cathedral-based. However, it doesn’t necessarily follow that church-based theological education is better. The issue is not church-based theological education, or nonformal education, or a richer pedagogy *as corrective*. The issue is a reformation in understanding of the character expected of the church, the people of God as clearly identified in Scripture. It is understanding and living out this character that determines the nature of theological education.

The Church as a Theological Community

Numerous theological texts have been written on the nature of the church. In this section, I have chosen to draw on simple and obvious descriptions of the church in Scripture and raise the question, what would result if we took even the most obvious characteristics of the church seriously? The New Testament offers provocative descriptions of the church:

- the church is the community of the redeemed;
- the church is gathered by God for God's purposes;
- the church exists as an agent of reconciliation;
- Christ is the head of the church;
- the congregation called together by God for God's purposes is under the leadership of Christ and empowered by the Spirit;
- the church is a community of people on mission and as such must fulfill God's purposes;
- the church is a community where the Holy Spirit is active;
- the Spirit of God empowers, gifts, sustains, and sets apart the church for the accomplishment of God's purposes;
- authority resides in God and God's revelation;
- congregations have particular responsibility over matters of decision-making, and discernment of error;
- the church is a community where church discipline is practiced—where members help each other follow the path of obedience.

The Bible gives very little information about organization or structure. It does give very clear pictures of what we are to be as the people of God, and how we are to relate to God. One day I determined that I would read all the letters to the church in the New Testament and write down every phrase, every word, every statement that was addressed to the congregations who received these letters. What were the congregations being admonished to do? To be? To know? It was readily apparent from the long list that resulted, that very little explicit direction was given to the churches with regard to organization or structure. However, there was substantial, sober, explicit direction given as to the character of the church—the people of God. Significantly, the letters in the New Testament are not intended primarily for individuals. Even the letters addressed to an individual were to be read over the shoulder, as it were, by the congregation. The admonitions, the encouragement, the instructions to the church, then, are minimally structural, and addressed to the congregation as a whole. What difference would it make if all the people of the church are expected to demonstrate to the world a particular sort of character? Dallas Willard has noted that the American church has made the serious error of presuming that discipleship, or the expectation of obedient followership, can be separated from belief in Christ as Savior. “It is not essential anymore that you be a disciple of Jesus Christ in order to be a Christian. What is essential is that you believe the right things about him. If you believe the right things, then you're a Christian. . . . Where there is little attention to character and matters of the nature of belief, then discipleship is nice but not necessary. . . . The natural bridge from faith to obedience or abundance is precisely discipleship to Jesus Christ” (Willard 2000). Healy asserts that the church is constituted by the activity of the Holy Spirit but also “*by the activity of its members as*

they live out their lives of discipleship. . . . The identity of the concrete church is not simply given; it is constructed and ever reconstructed by the grace-enabled activities of its members as they embody the church's practices, beliefs and valuations. (Healy 2000, 5 emphasis mine)

In the search for a theological expression that can inform what we do as the church, Giles argues that the “best solution to the quest for the fundamental church concept, under which all other titles and descriptions of the church can be subsumed, is ‘the Christian community’” (Giles 1995,15). He argues that though the word *communio* (or *koinonia*) can be translated fellowship—our customary usage of fellowship is inadequate for what the word means in the original. Community or fellowship is not expressed by just getting along, or by feeling good in a certain place. Community emerges as people participate together in suffering, in giving, in the gospel, in the body and blood of Christ. “The word is thus used of the relationships that constitute the Christian community, the church—but, we add, never of the social reality thereby created” (Giles 1995, 16). In other words, *communio* or *koinonia* is never used to describe a concrete group of people or an institution. The term speaks of the relationship Christians have with Christ and, then, with each other. Willard's observation is pertinent:

. . . we are not here to create a community. God is creating a community, and we are a part of that. But we're here to redeem community by living in the kingdom of God. We are here to create something with God, if you wish, but not by ourselves. When we set out to produce community, I believe that we are stepping into an area where God will not bless. It may be that we'll do good things—God knows we need community. But it is one of the great temptations historically to suppose that human beings are capable of creating community. (Willard 2000)

Giles reminds us that “God's work in history, as it is presented in the biblical drama, involves the gathering together of a people who are united to him and to each other” (Giles 1995,18). *In other words, community is first and foremost defined by what God expects.* The church God envisions is a unity (John 14, 1Corinthians 12:12, Romans 12:4, Ephesians 4:12)—a people that worships and serves God. However, as Fee has observed, Paul's concern with the body metaphor “is not that the body is one *even though* it has many members, thus arguing for their need for unity despite their diversity. Rather, his concern is expressed in v. 14, that *even though the body is one*, it does not consist of one member but of many, thus arguing for their need for diversity, since they are in fact one body” (1987, 601, emphasis his). In other words, unity requires diversity! This diverse community must be defined by obedience, service, community, and the desire to glorify God. In this respect, it is significant that the people of God existed long before there was the Bible as we have it today. A danger for evangelicals is to assume that God is interested *only* in the preservation of the Bible (a distortion made worse when its interpretation is assumed to be that of a privileged group), and that *cognitive* mastery of that Scripture is sufficient, while we ignore the imperative of growing as a people toward Christlikeness in character and in our responses to others. Furthermore, the very purpose of the congregation is weakened when prohibitions and practices are imposed on the church through the use of isolated passages divorced from the struggle of the community of God to ascertain meaning in relation to context and experience. In this respect, we can miss the New Testament emphasis on the authority that is *given to congregations*, which implies the need for greater attention to congregational development (not church growth in the numerical sense). Carson notes that congregations are involved in decision- making alongside the apostles and elders (Acts 15:22). Congregations hold

decision-making responsibility over a wide range of issues affecting internal order (II Corinthians 8-9, 1 Corinthians 11:20-26). Congregations have the authority and responsibility to protect themselves against false teachers (Galatians, 11 Corinthians 10-13, 11 John). When discipline is needed, the appeal is to the entire congregation to act (Galatians 6:1; 1 Corinthians 5). Congregational members are responsible participants in the selection of leaders and delegates (Acts 6:3, 15:22, 1 Corinthians 16:3) (in Elwell, 1984, 228-230). The need for more than transmissive teaching and preaching in the congregation and for leaders who are 'apt to teach' and 'not a novice' becomes apparent if these significant areas of congregational authority are taken seriously as areas of development. To use this authority wisely necessitates that congregations are growing to maturity in Christ.

At this point, a consideration of the sociological or organizational nature of the church is necessary. The congregation of God's people is expected to live as God demands. It is a community under one head, Jesus Christ, and empowered by one Spirit. What are the significant implications for organization, leadership, relationship, and style of ministry for a church that understands its identity as the people gathered for God's purposes, whose head is Jesus Christ, and whose purpose is fulfilled only through the gifting, guidance, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit? What types of organizational structures and patterns of relationship will make possible the development of the spiritual character clearly described in Scripture? If Christ is the head of the church, what is the role of leaders in the congregation? What is the nature of authority, power, responsibility, and accountability? In what ways would worship, education, and mission be affected if a congregation made these connections and took the implications seriously?

The Church as a Sociological Community

To a great extent, the search for a theological understanding of the church grows out of a concern that the emphasis on the organizational and social dimensions of the church have diminished the emphasis on spirituality and accountability to God. However, it must not be forgotten that the organizational and social concern emphases were themselves a corrective for a church considered bound by theological rigidity and irrelevant to human concerns. A healthy interplay is needed between the theological and sociological dimensions of the church such that organization, leadership, human interaction, intercultural interaction, care, advocacy, and so on, are stimulated by the rich literature of the social sciences and assessed theologically. Because the church is also a human construction, we have to deal with structures and procedures for the organized church—what they are and how to evaluate them. Organizational structures profoundly affect the behavior and attitudes of persons in the congregation. Organizational patterns and practices communicate. They speak to the world of our sincerity, of the quality of our relationships. They reveal our understandings of the nature of power and authority. Insights from the social sciences informed by theological principle, and vice versa, can help us understand these dynamics.

The church has *both* a sociological and theological character. As an institution it is informed by institutional principles and procedures, and organizational and relational dynamics. At the same time, the ways in which we 'do church' (e.g., organization, styles of ministry, leadership, relationships) should be consistent with the character God expects. The theological character of

the church provides criteria for how we interpret, apply, and evaluate organizational principles, procedures, and relationships. Without attention to the fundamentally theological issues of identity and character, the role of the church in culture is confused, often indistinguishable from most other organizations in society. Sadly, for many in North American society, and for many in congregations, the church does not have the kind of “persona” that even non-believers instinctively feel it should have. Without a lively integration of its theological and sociological character, the church becomes incomprehensible, not only to the world, but also to Christians. Part of this chapter was written at a resort center in Nova Scotia. As we looked out at the Atlantic Ocean the owner said, “If you want to see church on Sunday around here, go to the local Walmart!” How do we answer the owner’s implicit criticism? If we are unable to disentangle the institutional forms of the church that *we have created* from the church as God sees it, we have no answer. Clearly, the answer is not to be found in Walmart-style communities with better programs, user-friendly services, and efficient organization. In a culture searching for community, the *institutionalized* expression of the church alone is not an option.

In my judgment, the organizational pattern we have established for congregational communities is upside-down. We often *begin* our planning with discussion about what programs or ministries we need to establish, believing that effective programming characterizes a successful church. If the ongoing challenge for the church in the world, renewed in each new generation, is to learn its identity as a people gathered by God and to live out that identity in the world, then the organizational pattern must be turned upside down. Think first of the church as the people of God, rather than as an organization defined by programs. Then envision those experiences that are necessary for the maturing and spiritual development of the entire congregation: worship, learning, authentic service, prayer, relationship, and so on. As the life of the community of faith emerges and as people come to know one another, specific needs, concerns, ministry options, and ways to communicate the gospel within society will become apparent. *Only then should programs and other specialized activities be developed.* Some of the programs and ministries that emerge will be age-related, many will be time-specific, most should grow out of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given through individuals to the community of faith. In a success-oriented culture, beginning with matters related to the formation of the spiritual character of the congregation may seem a waste of time. However, without such consideration, the church is simply one more helping agency in society, and God’s presence in the body is optional, or worse, unnecessary!

Before we can think productively about theological education and leadership development for the church, the dual character of the church must be apprehended; and the institutionalized church must be demythologized. Its organization is essentially a human creation—no matter how hard we try to justify it theologically. Yet, the existing institutional structures of the church have become so deeply entrenched that they have taken on a pseudo-theological verity. The problem, of course, is that we often don’t know what would emerge from the robust interaction of the theological and sociological character of the church. The familiar is comfortable; and because it is comfortable, we are shaped by it. When we have an investment in the *institution* and a stake in its continuance, it is hard to let it go or to allow it to change. We may become loyal to the institution to the degree that our service is to preserve the institution; and we are soon unable to

critique the nature and function of the institution on the basis of biblical and theological principle.

Theological Education and Leadership Development

A commonly suggested antidote to the perceived problems of today's church is to develop leaders who know how to manage an organization, and who communicate in an appealing fashion from the pulpit. As necessary as it is to have someone in a congregation who can assist with organizational matters, the more urgent need is for leaders who are able to assist congregations to understand and live out their identity as the people of God in the world. Seminaries are under pressure today by denominational leaders and congregations to train better leaders. However, the nature and role of leadership is distorted when churches seek to be successful or efficient rather than being the people of God. Churches seeking strong leaders who can create successful churches should always be unhappy with the product of seminaries. Churches who are simply seeking pastors who can function well (in preaching, teaching, relationships, office management) should likewise be unhappy with the product of seminaries. The answer is not to create church-based seminaries *for the purpose of* creating strong leaders for successful churches. Nor is the answer for seminaries to enhance and enlarge the functional aspects of the curriculum in order to develop the pastoral skills that many churches want. If the church has departed from the most basic descriptions of its character and purpose in Scripture, leaders will be in the undesirable position of "trying to make an organization work that has departed from its function" (Willard 2000). Churches and schools that fashion leadership development experiences based on understandings of the nature and purpose of the church, other than what the Scripture itself identifies, are not serving well the people of God and may be setting leaders up for failure. What then is the purpose of theological education in relation to leadership development? Without question, leaders are needed who understand both the spiritual realities of the people of God, and who have some sense of the needs of an organization. However, we make the mistake of pitting organizational charisma over spiritual leadership. Eugene Peterson is one of many who sharply criticize churches and denominations who don't understand the difference between these tasks.

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches, They are preoccupied with shopkeepers concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, ow to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.

Some of them are very good shopkeepers. . . . Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping to be sure, shopkeeping all the same. (Peterson 1987, 1)

In the late 20th century, the larger churches, in particular, began to take over the tasks of leadership development and theological education. The trend has escalated to the point where theological institutions are concerned about the threats to their survival; but many theological educators and church leaders alike are also concerned about consequences for the church. Churches, especially those struggling for survival or wanting the world to see them as important, tend to respond first to factors from the "market," from human need, or even from the agenda of powerful individuals. They see "what is" and respond with program and ministry, before they have also considered the theologically driven "what ought to be" questions. For instance, Matthew 25 presents both a challenge and an indictment to the contemporary church. However,

ministry as meeting needs can easily devolve to sustaining dependency; or even become a subtle form of control over the other. Is there a theologically driven “what ought to be” response that should inform our understanding of ministry? My commitment to the priesthood of all believers, and to the imperative of development implicit in the Creation, leads me to view ministry as development of the other. In other words, simply meeting needs may never help the needy become ministers themselves. Similarly, ministers who persist in describing themselves as shepherds who care for the flock, may likewise never see the need for the sheep to become shepherds!

Flawed views of the church and ministry inevitably lead to flawed leadership development strategies. Graduates of seminaries inevitably find themselves deficient and seek out assistance from what they perceive as successful enterprises. Consequently, the 21st century church is in danger of being buried alive by an avalanche of ideas intended to stimulate leadership skills and programs. Church leaders flock by the hundreds and thousands to the latest conference on how to have a successful church—and too often come away unable to effect significant change or renewal in their churches. The barrage of survival concerns, television images of the successful pastor, messages from innumerable “how to” conferences, and the dizzying swirl of expectations from their congregations, often leaves church leaders in doubt about their role and vocation. Concern for institutional survival compels church leaders to seek advice from those they consider successful or effective. However, images of leadership and organization borrowed from presumed successful churches or from the world of business are nearly always inadequate and incomplete. If chosen or adapted without good judgment, borrowed images will fail and, without appropriate guidance, church leaders will be compelled by this failure to seek another image, and another. They will remain caught in the maze of literature and conferences, searching for the best image for themselves and their church.

The rhetoric of church growth strategists, organizational planners, trainers, and promoters is empty rhetoric when it is grounded in motives that are oriented to success and effectiveness.⁴ These motives tend to create a perspective that sees church growth as the result of strategic planning, leadership training, management, and marketing. In this respect, church growth becomes an entrepreneurial effort driven by a strong leader rather than a work of the Spirit of God. Efficiency, effectiveness, and success are powerful gods in the contemporary church but they are false gods—often unrecognized in contemporary church life as such. One who knows something about marketing strategies, who understands the kind of music and style of speaker that attract a crowd, who knows how to manage the platform, who is able to plan programs that meet the sociological needs of a community, would be able to build a large church without much difficulty. However, one wouldn’t have to be a Christian to do it!

⁴One should never assume that all efforts by the superchurches of America are without merit. Many leaders are concerned about underlying spiritual values. However, the tendency to export the latest “flavor of the month” is becoming particularly problematic in other countries where pastors, desperate to learn how they, too, can have large successful churches, flock to conferences that are often planned and presented with little or no understanding of the realities that confront churches in the particular culture; and even less awareness of the ways in which culture makes a difference in practice and in the definition of problems.

The problem that afflicts the Christian community in many countries of the world, is not the existence of large churches *per se*; the problem emerges when size becomes a *human* quest and obsession rather than accepted as something God will grant if God chooses (note the emphasis in Acts 2: 37-47 and 5:12-14). It may be a fine point—after all it seems that God added to their number because they did something. Perhaps. But look carefully at what they did. Walter Liefeld, Distinguished Professor Emeritus Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in a sermon entitled, “The Church That Nobody Dared to Join” noted that Acts 5:1-14 presents a picture of congregational development unfamiliar to most North Americans. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and were struck dead for their deception, causing great fear in the church, and among all those who heard about the event. After their deaths (not exactly a church marketing strategy) and the performance of many signs and wonders by the apostles, *no one dared to join them, but many believed in the Lord and were added to their number.*

Willard (2000) is concerned that congregational commitment in North America is considered voluntary—exclusively a matter of personal choice—which creates a situation where pastors feel it is *their* responsibility to entice people to come to *their* churches. Suggesting that the user-friendly church may be nothing more than a reflection of a personal need to get people into church, he expressed doubt that “Jesus could have carried on his ministry if he had to . . . try to get people to come and hear him.” The consequence of this trend is efforts to enhance the profession of the ministry. Unfortunately, the nature and formats of professional education are not well understood by theological educators. For instance, the M.Div. degree is considered a professional degree by North American accrediting agencies; but as Dan Aleshire has often noted, it is treated in seminaries as if it were in the same educational category as a liberal arts degree. Since the 1960s, professional initiatives in theological education have helped the church; but in today’s high pressure climate, professionalism is increasingly a problem.

Effects of the Professional Model of Ministry on the Church

As North American churches increased in complexity through the 19th and 20th centuries, the notion of professional leadership borrowed from the German university model, and modified substantially in post-revolutionary America, was embraced by the churches. Churches, in effect, evolved into a corporation managed by a CEO with special skills. The role of the minister as pastor and preacher did not disappear, but the relation between the minister and the community seemed to become that of a specialist serving one particular sector of society. The dominance of professional and corporate images of leaders led to a curriculum in the schools focused on preparation: the schools existed to *prepare* leaders for ministry in the church and the world. Often the implicit assumptions were that the schools were best equipped to prepare leaders, that the churches had little to no role to play in the affirmation of suitability and giftedness, and that leadership was a matter of developing skills and acquiring information.⁵ The experience of the candidate became unimportant, for his or her preparation would begin and end with the school. Over time, as leadership has become more functional, and churches more corporate, the capacity

⁵Van Engen avers that “Only students called by God, empowered by the Spirit, and acknowledged by the church for ministry in the world are indispensable. Administrative infrastructures, permanent buildings, well-stocked libraries, published books, resident faculty, and classroom instruction are all luxuries” (1994, 15).

of churches and schools to contribute meaningfully to the continued development of leaders has declined.

Through the early decades of the 20th century, theological education was tailored (consciously or unconsciously) to produce clergy and, ultimately, other professional staff for the church. In the 1970's, the call to “liberate the laity” was heard for a brief time and the theme of the “priesthood of all believers” re-surfaced in the literature. However, the corporate structures of the church were now so deeply ingrained and the relationships of clergy and laity in relation to those structures so defined, that only as questions began to be raised in the 1990's about the liberation of structures would the nature of leadership assumed by clergy be seen by some not as a biblical imperative, but rather as a corporate invention. It has been observed that the word ‘leadership’ does not appear in the Greek New Testament. This omission may not be significant, except to underscore that the emphasis in the Scripture is clearly on leaders and not on some abstracted theory of leadership. With the increasing professionalization of the church, leadership became a theory to be applied or a set of skills to be learned and practiced. Consequently, numerous books promise that effective leadership results from applying a number of ‘keys’ or ‘habits’ to circumstances. The more important lessons to be gained from the leaders described in Scripture are found in how they came to understand God’s purposes for his people and how they responded—*with considerable variation in style*—in relation to that understanding.

Willard (2000) suggests that the church is in trouble in North America, not because of leaders, but because of an idolatry of leadership—which leads to inevitable “evasion of responsibility by the followers.” Carson notes that even the lists of qualities derived from the pastoral epistles and applied to leaders, are really qualities that are expected of the whole people of God. Only two qualities might possibly be singled out as particular to a leader: that person should be able to teach,” and “must not be a recent convert” (1 Timothy 3:2, 6 NIV). All other qualities in the lists are elsewhere mandated of the entire people of God (in Elwell, 1984).

Therefore, the work of the pastor-teacher is to equip or make fit God’s people for acts of service (Ephesians 4:12). Paul describes a three-fold pattern for the development of leaders in his instruction to Timothy: a leader teaches another, who in turn teaches others, so that they can teach others (II Timothy 2:2). The understanding that people are to be developed in ways that they will, in turn, be able to develop others, challenges assumptions that pastors are being trained to lead the ‘sheep.’ The shepherd image is an appropriate and biblical image; however, the question has to be asked, When do sheep become shepherds? and, What is the role of the shepherd in creating a climate wherein the sheep can become shepherds? If valid, these questions imply that theological education must be for the whole people of God. Theological education can no longer be restricted to the training of a ministerial elite. However, if we accept the premises that leaders are necessary, and that the Spirit of God gives diverse gifts to the church through the people of God, theological education that fosters the development of leaders and that serves the whole people of God will likely require different, though integrated, educational strategies, curricular forms, and more importantly, different educational venues. For instance, one possible future would be to scale back a hopelessly overcrowded theological education curriculum, allow the seminary to do what it is uniquely designed to do; and establish institutes or centers in relation to the seminary around the notion that professional development is largely nonformal,

and requires a commitment to lifelong learning. To prevent the inevitable problem of scholars who have no sense of the real world and professional educators who have no sense of theoretical and theological grounding, productive linkages are fashioned between the two venues.

Emerging Initiatives in Theological Education Related to the Church

Concern is building over the perceived ineffectiveness and mounting costs of school-based theological education, and its distance from the church. In response to these concerns, concrete initiatives and ideas that allow for more productive connections between the church and the theological school are emerging.

Church-based theological education. Reasoning that theological schools are not only dubious centers for ministry development, but that they take students/leaders out of the very contexts where their skills and awarenesses need to be fashioned, the growing church-based theological education movement sees its mission as developing leaders in-context. The more mature expressions of church-based theological education contribute what Ted Ward describes as a dominating ecclesiology within the scholastic approaches to theology. In other words, reflection on the theological meaning of the Church in relation to its institutional expression grounds theological education (as opposed to teaching men and women who can then build a successful institution called a church). Where theology in the seminary tends to begin with abstractions, Ward suggests that many church-based leaders are growing in their capacity to foster theological reflection in relation to the practices of the church and in relation to the question of how God wants his people to respond. Curriculum, therefore, is not “content packed in boxes and delivered to students,” but learning organized around the notion that knowledge must be understood in relation to issues of importance for the church and service.⁶ As church-based efforts continue to mature and discover criteria and principles that will guide their practice, church-based models could effectively replace existing seminary models.

The most obvious vulnerability in the church-based efforts is inherent in the tendency to bypass the seminary as a place for equipping leaders for today’s church. But, as supporters of the church-based efforts disparage the seminary, they flirt with the danger of losing the depth and missing the vital questions that a *true community of scholars* brings to the development of the whole people of God. When churches relegated their responsibilities for education and pastoral and missionary development to the schools, the habits, attitudes, and skills required to be a center for theological education were diminished or lost. Then, as churches today discover and complain about inadequacy in the seminary’s product and bypass the schools, they do so with almost no corresponding effort to create new settings and new roles for a *community* of scholars. A community of scholars *in some form* is desperately needed by churches that tend to base decisions about leadership, organization, and ministry on other than biblically informed principles. However, the community of scholars must not be disconnected from the church and its mission in the world.

In-ministry models of theological education. Banks (1999) suggests that theological education is directed to three audiences: the laity, the clergy (or those who lead), and the scholar. The

⁶Comments from personal conversation.

resulting model of theological education is oriented to the whole people of God—not just to the training of a ministerial elite, involves learning in ministry, may entail a “coming apart” for a time, and requires a closer relationship between the church and seminary. He places the Bible at the center of the curriculum with other disciplines added as derivative. Study is integrative and collaborative. Faculty and students are together involved in ministry. The movement of the curriculum is toward personal formation, theological reflection, and ministry.

Multiple sectors for theological education. Ward suggests that theological education may split into two sectors: the more academic and longer programs for those churches that feel they need leaders with doctorates; and the more functional shorter programs that will serve the majority of churches. If there is a defensible difference between the sort of educational experiences that are offered for those who are now or who will be pastors and other church leaders, and those who have the gifts of scholarship, the formats of theological education may well be reshaped into three distinct, but mutually permeable categories: *church-based theological education*—holistic educationally, concerned with the development of leaders in context, intentional in the inclusion of professional ministers and laity in learning experiences; *apprenticeship of the scholar*—men and women with significant gifts in scholarship (to be distinguished from formidable feats of memory), affirmed by the church and connected with the church and society, are brought into relationship with mature scholars in various disciplines who are likewise connected with the church and society; *professional development of the leader*—utilizing his or her context, as well as experiences away from that context to shape capacities and enable reflection on authentic practice.

A variation of this suggestion is that theological education could come to consist of three *movements*: (1) Responsible education initiatives in the local congregation would stimulate adults to reflect on the life of faith in relation to real world issues. (2) When questions emerge that require specialized input, one or more scholars are invited into the process—not to give the right answer—but to introduce knowledge and ideas and new questions into the process. (3) If men and women with particular abilities and interests in scholarship emerge through this process, the church would support their involvement with a community of scholars. The role of existing seminaries could become that of serving the church in developing those who have the gifts of scholarship.

Niche seminaries. As institutions realize that their survival is threatened by trying to maintain a large number of programs, and realizing that passing burgeoning financial deficits onto students is seriously depleting enrollment and creating unacceptable, ministry-threatening financial indebtedness for graduates, “niche seminaries” could emerge—each embodying a particular speciality. Whether this will exacerbate an already fragmented educational effort remains to be seen. Or, theological education may decentralize into mobile centers around the world—connected by face-to-face consultations and through technologically mediated networks. Temporary intentional communities could then be created where different configurations of scholars, laity, students, and church leaders would come together in retreat-style settings for 1-2 weeks to engage one or more particular problems or issues.

Communities of discernment. The notion of the seminary as a community of discernment recalls a former emphasis that the seminary is the intellectual center of the church. This notion has a long history and is not without merit; however, when it is assumed that all the information a person will need must be acquired in his or her degree program, the role of the intellectual center is seen in relation to the number and types of courses offered. Consequently, the number of courses has proliferated to the point where the curriculum is not sustainable as a framework for the development of leaders. Intellectual development understood as merely the acquisition of information is not adequate. Bender describes the intellectual task more holistically and argues that “The fundamental task of our seminaries . . . is the task of discerning the Word and the will of God for our day. I would go further and affirm that the task of spiritual discernment is the fundamental task of the church and that the seminary, being a seminary of the church, shares in this task” (Bender 1997, 179-180). He proposes that the task of discernment is “carried out within a cognitive frame of reference which involves first, the perception that God is acting in human history; second, a lively sense of being caught up in God’s purposive activity; and third, an awareness of the eschatological character of our existence.” Bender qualifies reference to the cognitive frame of reference by describing the task as a task of intellectual reflection, and as a “total response to the God of faith, obedience and love” (1997, 187).⁷ Bender’s continuum of discernment includes two types of activity: critical reflection and purposeful activity which “issues out of the response of obedience to God” (1997, 193). However, in his efforts to describe a unique role for the seminary, he seems to stumble over the distinction between the seminary as the community of reflection and the church as the community of action.

Communities of faith. The specialization of theology into cognitive categories and the distancing of theological education from the church has desperately weakened the Christian community. Wolterstorff, in his discussion of the distancing of university theology from the church, argues for a refashioning of theology in relation to the gospel and the life of faith. “. . . if ecclesiastical and theological interest in doctrine is not directed toward this faith but rather to doctrinal development in and of itself, then it misses life and with it its own real task” (in Volf et al 1996,131). The task of the church is to awaken a sensibility of God’s presence. “And one of the most important theoretical tasks of theology today is to provide the conceptual clarification necessary for this task, that is, to develop, probe, and critically investigate what *God is present* means” (in Volf et al 1996,132-133). Theology, then, must not be understood simply as a social science. “And neither can it be a guiding science for some religious system or for the church if it is not first something different and much more basic, namely, *critical knowledge of God . . .*” (in Volf et al 1996, 133).

Wolterstorff defines theology as “sustained reflection about God” (in Volf et al 1996, 36). When does the community feel a need for this kind of reflection and who leads them in it? The theologians? With the fragmentation of theology and its persisting specialization, sustained reflection is virtually impossible. To be fair, the educational structures don’t exist that would bring theologians, students, and church members into a sustained dialogue characterized by mutual respect—a dialogue that would allow critical questions to be asked and examined. Even if

⁷In 1983, Fletcher reported on a survey of 136 seminary administrators. Of the goals cited for theological education, the most often cited was “To be a center for theological and ethical reflection to the churches, denominations, and the communities in which seminaries are located” (Fletcher 1983, 102).

the educational structures did exist, Wolterstorff's observes ". . . that the root of the alienation of university theology from the church lies in the modern church wanting the wrong things of its theologians, and that the theologians of the modern academy are often nothing short of heroic in refusing to give the church what it wants—forcing it to ask the questions it *should* ask rather than those it prefers to ask, forcing it to accept the answers it *should* accept, rather than those it would like to accept" (in Volf et al 1996, 37). This claim of heroism presumes (1) that modern theologians are, in fact, aware of the complexity of the issues confronting the church and the theological challenges these present; (2) that churches are actually asking questions of theologians; or (3) that the church cannot ask questions of and present answers to theologians. Stanley Hauerwas takes a more blunt approach in his criticism. "Modernity marks the time when theologians began to believe that their task is to explain the truth of what Christians believe in a manner that assumes the explanation is truer than the belief itself. Such theology is no longer the servant of the church but tries to be its master" (Hauerwas 1999, 15). One conclusion from the debate is that theological education is valid only if the community is broadened to include the church. In such a community of faith, theologians and church leaders become partners in the task of theology.

A Congregational Paradigm for Theological Education

The term "paradigm" is so overused, or ill-used, that one can hardly manage the effort to describe yet another proposal for a new paradigm. Perhaps the proposals are better understood as efforts to bring elements together that have for too long been separated; with the primary culprit in this separation the fragmented and specialized nature of the theological curriculum. Hough and Wheeler (1988), and Hopewell (1984, 60) proposed that a congregational paradigm replace the current paradigm of theological education. Their proposal allows for the community of scholars—but shifts the focus of educational efforts from the cognitive and character development of the student to the cognitive and character development of the church. The congregation, therefore, is conceived as the organizing principle for the curriculum.⁸ But, if the church is viewed as an institution that needs to be managed, without careful thought to the implications that derive from even the most obvious descriptions of the church in Scripture, congregational and leadership development emphases in theological schools, conferences, and seminars will stress skills, programs, tactics, and corporate growth almost to the exclusion of spiritual reflection, discernment, and perception.

Hough and Cobb point the way to understanding the primary role of leaders as helping congregations understand and learn how to live out their identity as the people of God. They attest that the problem with theological education is not that it has been oriented around a clerical paradigm, but that the church has fundamentally misunderstood the nature of church leadership (Hough and Cobb 1985, 5). Assuming that the seminary will continue to be construed as a

⁸To test his vision, Hopewell initiated a program at Candler Seminary that brought together a pastor, a professor, twelve laypeople and twelve senior students to work on a problem of congregational significance for a term. However, Hopewell wasn't necessarily seeking for alliances between seminaries and congregations. "If church and school adopt the same norms and perspectives, each institution loses its prophetic and constructive power" (1984, 64). Theological institutions need the freedom to help congregations evaluate and reflect theologically on their mission and practices; just as churches need the freedom to interact with the schools about tendencies that are incompatible with kingdom values.

professional school, it must be preoccupied with the clarification of Christian identity, i.e., the identity of the people of God (Hough and Cobb 1985, 18). The purpose of the school, then, is not to train skillful managers but “practical theologians” who can critically reflect on the church’s life and practice (1985, 91-92). Peterson describes the role of leaders as keeping the community attentive to God. He continues, “Three pastoral acts are so basic, so critical that they determine the shape of everything else. The acts are praying, reading Scripture, and giving spiritual direction.” Peterson then describes these acts as acts of attention. “Prayer is an act in which I bring myself to attention before God; reading Scripture is an act of attending to God in his speech and action; spiritual direction is an act of giving attention to what God is doing in the person who happens to be before me at any given moment” (Peterson 1987, 2).

However, the church also requires leaders with administrative ability. In many cases, pastors find themselves consumed with administrative detail—often to the detriment of the “acts of attention.” In order to share this responsibility, business men and women are often placed on church boards with the assumption that they are most able to govern an institution. The fact that business people are on church boards is not the problem. The problem emerges when these men and women are not enabled to think and act both organizationally and theologically in relation to their mission as leaders in a congregation. If time and opportunity is not given to explore this dimension, business professionals are generally such busy people that they will automatically default to the skills, conceptions, and habits of mind and behavior they know best—organizational behaviors. These behaviors and ideas will be laid over the church and, in time, the church will be no different in its ethos from any other institution in society. Only when leaders are present who can help members understand their identity as the people of God will the implications of this identity for organization and ministry be considered. It follows, then, that some of the more important tasks of theological education are to help pastor-teachers understand the nature and role of the *ecclesia*; and to partner with church leaders in addressing particular institutional realities (power, authority, organizational dynamics, decision-making, and so on) from biblical principle and in relation to the clear descriptions of what God expects of the character and behavior of his people.

Schipani uses the term “ecclesial paradigm” to describe a model of theological education that is “focused on the church’s identity, nature and purpose, namely its very life and its ministry.” Theological education, therefore, “will take place within contexts of authentic evangelical piety and spirituality, genuine Christian ethics and moral behavior, and an epistemology . . . governed by the very Spirit of God” (in Heisey and Schipani 1997, 22-24). Theological education, then, serves and supports outcomes within the church’s community “*to enable persons for worship, to equip them for community, and to empower them for mission*” (in Heisey and Schipani 1997, 26, emphasis his). The theological curriculum is shaped around the text of the Bible, the life and story of the *ecclesial* community past and present, and cultural and intercultural circumstances. Learning processes are “communal, dialogical, collaborative, and discipleship/ministry-oriented” (in Heisey and Schipani 1997, 30). Schipani’s model is not what some would describe as a church-based model. Rather, the ecclesial paradigm is worked out in relation to both graduate (i.e., academic) and professional schools, as distinguished from the ministerial paradigm where the seminary is exclusively a professional school.

In the ministerial paradigm, the educational process is oriented to the nature of ministry, its focus is on the formation and training of ministers, and the outcome is to enable ministers to carry out their tasks on behalf of the church. Schipani suggests that, in the *ecclesial* paradigm, the educational process is related to the purpose of the church, its focus is on the formation and transformation of congregations, and its outcome is to support and renew worship, community, and mission (in Heisey and Schipani 1997, 35). Summarizing Schipani, Enns identifies the characteristics of theological education operating within an *ecclesial* paradigm: first, the nature, identity, and purpose of the church is the starting point. Second, theological education is concerned with the formation and transformation of the church. “The primary focus is not on the development of the students (potential and present leaders of the church), but on the development of the church” (2000, 4). Third, theological education is an extension of the church’s teaching ministry. Fourth, *ecclesial* theological education is an alternative to both the academic and clerical approaches to ministry development. Most notably, the *ecclesial* paradigm posits that the Christian community is fundamentally responsible for the educational task not individual theologians. Theologians are not removed from the process but they work in dialogue with the community, as part of the *ecclesial* community.

Based on these characteristics, Enns discusses the need for a conversation between the Bible, the *ecclesial* community, and real life situations. The conversation is not simply a cognitive exercise, but one that includes the mystical heritage of Christian faith (2000, 9). The Anabaptist tradition within which Schipani and Enns speak stresses obedience and the revealing power of the Holy Spirit as keys to knowing that eventuate in wisdom and justice. It follows, then, that the functions of the church—worship, relationship, and mission—are organically linked to education. “Theological education is ‘in the business’ of helping the church to be more faithful as a People of God, more spiritual as a Body of Christ, and more incarnational as the Spirit’s Temple” (Enns 2000, 19).

The move to a congregational or *ecclesial* paradigm, related to the schools, is threatened by the fact that theological schools are receiving less ecclesiastical and denominational support and are increasingly driven for funding to sources outside the church. Many incoming students are less involved with churches and some are seeking a theological education for reasons other than a career in the church. Further, the perceived need for credentialing, the assumption that credentialing is accomplished in relation to formal, classroom-based models, and accomplished through forms of testing common in the academy makes it unlikely that theological schools will embrace this new paradigm. The academic model is not terribly effective in measuring that which matters in the life of faith, ministry, and leadership. In the literature that serves the academy, the notion of a congregational paradigm seems to have lost momentum.

However, the notion of the theological school as the only, or even primary, source of trained leaders is no longer sustainable. Increasingly, small groups of faculty and church leaders, independent associations or foundations, or even students are experimenting with a variety of initiatives in theological education. Though it is relatively simple to fashion alternative curricula and learning experiences, the momentum of the initiatives often falters when confronted with the perceived need for academic rigor and credentialing. Thangaraj was bold enough to try to demystify the notion of academic rigor: “Almost all the recent writers in theological education

plead for an increase in academic rigor . . . Though there is a widespread agreement that there should be more academic rigor, what we really mean by ‘academic’ is still unclear” (1992, 13). If academic rigor is understood in terms of conceptual understanding, examined knowledge, vital questions, holistic development, reflection on practice, mutual learning, and so on, new initiatives will be well served. If academic rigor is simply understood as the transmission of the content of particular subjects by qualified scholars, emerging initiatives will indeed falter. Credentialing and accreditation are assumed necessary in order to guarantee a certain level of academic and professional performance, and to simplify the movement of students from one school to another. However, it is not necessary that accreditation be based on one particular set of standards; nor is it necessary that accreditation be the exclusive province of the academy. In higher education generally, challenges to current models of accreditation and credentialing are gaining momentum.⁹ In theological education, evidence of less than adequate competency and increased urgency about *learning*, will lead increasingly to experimentation in the standards and agencies of accreditation. As church-based movements and other initiatives mature, they will develop their own forms of accreditation.¹⁰ These experiments will succeed in some areas; however, temptations to power and prestige are also part of the dynamic of institutions. Whether in North America or on another continent,¹¹ the persisting need for recognition, status, and social power is part of the pressure on institutions to maintain familiar systems. If this pressure is recognized for what it is, institutions may realize the importance of affirming values that are more appropriate for institutions concerned about development, lifelong learning, and service and examine accreditation and credentialing procedures in relation to these values. Admittedly, these values are beginning to be reflected in the accreditation standards that affect North American theological education but, it appears increasingly that theological institutions are slow to recognize the importance of these values.

For several years, I was involved in a consultation on the aims and purposes of theological education under the leadership of Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary. About 20 faculty from different evangelical seminaries in the U.S. and representing a variety of disciplines met twice a year for several years. George Barna was invited to one of our meetings. We found him an engaging person and our interaction with him was useful. During his presentation, Barna used two different sets of overhead transparencies. One set summarized his findings from interviews with pastors. The other set presented information he had gathered from congregations. He dealt with each set separately. The findings from his interviews of American clergy could be summarized basically as “Clergy feel confident in their understanding of the

⁹Concerned about flawed assumptions in university credentialing procedures, Hayes writes, “While proof of qualification is clearly necessary in the professions, the current system allows credentials to represent a transfer of power rather than demonstrated competence. The process often leads to pointless restrictions that prevent many talented people from realizing their full potential. You can have a good education without having credentials just as you can have credentials without a good education” (Hayes 1995, 18).

¹⁰About 25 years ago, Ward and others proposed a framework and criteria for a church-based accrediting body that would provide input for the schools currently unavailable through the academy-based accreditation associations. See also Sweeney and Fortosis (1994).

¹¹Stevens and Stelk offer a hard-hitting critique of the Western degree as the ultimate credential in many countries. “While Western political, economic, and military imperialism is not acceptable in the Two-Thirds World, cultural and educational imperialism is both acceptable and, by and large, welcomed. It holds the promise of success” (Stevens and Stelk 1993, 33).

Bible, their knowledge of theology, and their capacity to teach and preach. They feel less confident about their ability to manage a changing organization, and their ability to work effectively with people.” As he presented the other set of transparencies he said, in effect, “Members of congregations tell me that they are not growing in their understanding of Scripture or in their spiritual lives, and they are confused about the nature of their ministry.” I’m sure I wasn’t the only person seated at the table thinking, “What’s wrong with this picture?” The chasm between what church leaders feel are their primary capacities and abilities, and what members of congregations affirm is not happening in their lives is a critical issue for the future of theological education.

Recovering the Focus on the Church

The burden of this chapter is that an understanding of the dual character of the church is essential in any effort to move forward in theological education. Recently, at a consultation with theological faculty and administrators from various schools and countries in Central and Eastern Europe, a theologian affirmed the importance of a suitable framework that “really works for the church.” For him, the least suitable framework is the institutional framework for it is utterly inadequate to describe the role of the church. A trinitarian framework, as suggested in this chapter is more suitable because it positions the role of the church in relation to kingdom principles and values. In his judgment, we must begin with the premise that God is restoring Creation and that the church has a role to play in this task. “Real transformation comes from transformed people not from well organized churches.” The church is a way of life, and in order to restore the meaning of the church as both a theological and sociological entity, we will need to transform systems. This was especially his concern in post-communist countries; but it is nonetheless a concern for all of us. When we view the church as the people of God, we also acknowledge that Christians are in the world. One of the tasks of church leaders is to help the people of God make better connections with the world. My friend, the Eastern European theologian, suggested that if we “train Christians to serve society, they will be better prepared to serve the church. Get Christians into the world, not into the church!” Such a statement will be upsetting to some, but, think about it. If a recovery of focus on the church only deepens our commitment to the institution, we will consistently employ or recruit people to serve church purposes. If the church is seen as a people gathered by God to accomplish God’s purposes, Christians are set free to serve the mission of the church in the world. As we serve the mission of the church in the world, I suspect that the mission and purpose of theological education as a center for *learning* will become much clearer.