

## Insights from Conversations of Central and Eastern European Leaders

Last August several of us were present at the Summer Reunion Conference at Malenovice in August 2004. Much of what we discussed related to the church and the future of theological education. Here are some of the questions and issues that emerged from our conversations:

- In some countries, older leaders are threatened by younger leaders. Change is needed in the way we think about leaders: from authoritarian leaders to shepherd leaders. We need positive examples of biblical, godly leaders. Younger leaders see the need for good mentors. Who are these mentors? We feel the need for accountability but we are often suspicious of one another—afraid of gossip. During the years of Communism clusters of three would confess to one another. Significantly, most of Jesus' mentoring was in groups of three or twelve.
- Institutions in Europe are often ancient and remarkably enduring. In more recent years, these ancient institutions are using North American resources, copying North American patterns, and translating North American resources. A recurring concern is that these materials are inadequate for leadership development in our contexts. We need new patterns and new resources. In some instances, old curricular models and outdated statistics are counterproductive in leadership development.
- As faculty retire, we face the challenge of determining the type of faculty we need for the future. How do we understand the nature and role of scholarship? What forms of assessment and accreditation do we need? In what ways are the assessment and accreditation initiatives emerging in Europe helping us or hindering us? How should we respond?
- Time and opportunity is needed for conversation across our many borders. Competition remains a problem in our ministries.
- What is important from the past that we wish to preserve? Significantly, each generational cohort of Central and Eastern European leaders responded to this question slightly differently. Those in their 20s identified biblical authority, priesthood of all believers, and sense of community. Those in their 30s identified faithfulness under the pressure of circumstances without compromise, historical heritage, and the essential content of faith. Those in their 40s identified relationships, hospitality, simple lifestyle, and lay ministry. Those in their 50s identified maintaining a spiritual focus in a materialistic society, doctrinal unity in a world of fragmentation, Christian values (education, community, hospitality), and joy in small things.
- Since the fall of Communism, we confront an explosion of opportunity. We tend to feel guilty if we are not exploiting all of these opportunities. Further, we are tempted to engage society through our personal energy and program development skills. How do we identify from all that could be done that which must be done?

What is the nature of ministry that will allow Christians to connect with an increasingly secular society? God, not ministry, is the solution to the world's need. God so loved the world, but he chose the church. Here is our biggest problem. We are disappointed time and time again in a church that so often fails to demonstrate the character that even non-Christians believe it should have. We tend to do ministry as if it were our responsibility to save and to reconcile the world. Perhaps a more intentional Trinitarian framework would help us understand the church adequately and provide a basis for ministry decisions and development: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the heartbeat of the church rather than our institutional trinitaries of leader, program, and building.

- The reality is that Christians are in society! Our task is to help them make connections with that society. Let's change the paradigm—get Christians into the world as priority. Should we change the emphasis in theological education to training leaders to serve society? If our graduates know how to serve society they will be better able to serve the church.
- We need to train men and women to serve the society of 10-15 years from now. What are the implications for theological education if this is true? We also need to develop ongoing learning experiences for current church leaders.
- What changes are we anticipating or experiencing now in our churches? Which of these changes do we welcome? Which do we fear? How do we present the gospel wisely in light of new realities? We struggle in many of our contexts with ethical issues. In what ways are Christians able to speak to society in relation to ethics in life and business?

February 2005 a few of us were at a conference in Prague sponsored by IBTS: "Theological Education as Mission – Mission in Theological Education." (Andrew Kirk's paper was presented at this conference.) Relevant to our thinking are the following statements and questions raised at the conference:

- What are the fundamental tasks of theological education in light of the need for a re-formed ecclesia--an eschatological community, and the need to develop communities of lifelong learners? What is the role of theological education in contributing with increasing maturity to communities of practice and discourse?
- In many ways accreditation is a flawed ideology. One could argue that theological education should not be accredited. The particular roles of theological education are to assist the primary community of the church, to foster virtue, to nurture academic responsibility for reflection and critique, and to help society confront its own illusions. In many ways, accreditation imposes a vision on theological education that is incompatible with its purpose.