

# Learning Together for the Sake of Mission

IAN BUNTING

The report, *Faith in the City* (1985), said, 'It is time for the Church to recognize that the priorities for theological study and education need not always be set by the prescriptions of a traditional academic syllabus and to give every encouragement to the growth of theologies that are authentic expressions of local cultures' (3.36).

Theological education has followed traditional patterns, set within the Western world and inherited from the post-Enlightenment era. The discipline has been fragmented into subject divisions, themselves split into even narrower fields, and it has become increasingly academic, ecclesial and clerical in its orientation. Whether or not this process was inevitable, the first practical effect has been that the churches have colluded in their divorce from their own cultural context. Secondly, in the educational world, theology has been reduced to competing for funds in an increasingly competitive market place which threatens to marginalise its contribution. Thirdly, scholars and students have studied different parts of the syllabus in greater depth, but they have not usually integrated their findings.

Training for the Church's ministries has struggled to come to terms with these developments. Whereas, until the Enlightenment, it used to seek its coherence in theology itself, seen as the comprehensive study of the knowledge of God, since then it has sought it in the experience of a residential Christian community or also, in the twentieth century, in appropriate training for professional ministry. While the position of the institutional churches was assured, the integrating experience of residence and the training in professional skills went largely unchallenged. However, the continuing decline in the impact of the churches in British society changed all that. The practical effect was threefold. First, the churches became more associational than communal in character. This accentuated the tendency of theological training to become a professional induction course, a rite of passage, changing the student from the status of the laity, one of all God's people, to an elite clergy person. The missionary pioneer, Roland Allen, was one the first to raise questions about the exotic nature of the faith, the dependent nature of the churches and of monochrome Christian life propagated by such people.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, most colleges, for a

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1 Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: S. Paul's or Ours?*, Lutterworth Press, London 1968, p 141f. Allen's work was originally published in 1912.

number of good, practical and unavoidable social reasons, lost conviction about the overriding value of residence, and came to offer not residential training but full-time non-residential training with a professional focus. Consequently, a vigorous debate has surrounded the concept of residence. Thirdly, the churches embraced the insights of professional carers in their quest for contemporary relevance and credibility, until, that is, they became suspicious of the distinctions created by professionalism. They then began to display an ambivalent attitude towards that kind of vocational training. With the search for a new theology of the laity, which affirms and wants to use all their gifts in ministry, the churches have now become increasingly uncomfortable about the guild mentality, the in-group mystique, traditionally associated with professionalism.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, this uncertainty about the value of residence and professional training for leadership has accelerated, and been reflected in an accompanying uncertainty about the nature and purpose of the Church and its ministry. Many teachers have lost confidence in the possibility of defining this clearly and consistently. They have difficulty, for instance, in identifying strongly with the institutional nature of the churches. One can trace this in a survey of 92 British theological training institutions which I conducted in 1988.<sup>1</sup> The trainers gave lowest priority to the Church as 'institution', and in their brochures few defined the aims and goals of the churches they served. For example, only 20% of the brochures attempted to outline the nature and purpose of the Church. Only 24% offered any rationale of the Church's ministry. More significantly, a sizeable minority of college and course trainers, Anglican and ecumenical trainers in particular, were unwilling to order their priorities, by numbering the series of models of the Church and ministry in a questionnaire which they completed. They were willing to identify with a wide spectrum of specific models, but not in every case to prioritize them. This contrasted with the greater task-certainty of the interdenominational and independent colleges and courses. Again, the survey showed that although there was a readiness to devote time in the curriculum to subjects one normally associates with professional training, such as management, counselling and church building, there was a reluctance to emphasize them or give them priority. Church trainers prefer theoretical to practical models of church leadership. In short, there is confusion, and some uncertainty, in the minds of trainers about the kind of leadership the churches need today.

To sum up, it appears that most theological trainers are still operating a differentiated code of learning practice, at least in initial training; as though there are clear boundaries to be drawn between the subjects. Albeit uneasily, they go on seeking coherence through the experience of residence in a theological community, and in providing some groundwork for professional ministerial practice. The traditional objectives of theologi-

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1 Ian Bunting, *The Places to Train: A Survey of Theological Training in Britain*, MARC Europe, Bromley 1990.

cal training have not changed; spiritual formation, the laying of a theoretical foundation and the learning of a few basic skills. What has changed, however, is the self-understanding of the churches with respect to their nature and purpose. There has been a loss of certainty, and a serious gap has opened up between training practice and the Church's mission.

In a period when more and more trainers are trying to work out a clear rationale, on the basis of which it will be possible to draw up a more integrated theological curriculum for training the Church's ministers, we look at one institution, admittedly a post-experience pastoral institute, which has drawn up its curriculum on the basis of a highly integrated code. There are theological training institutions in Britain which could move in the same direction. It may be important to note, in doing so, that the trainers put high priority on the benefit of some residential experience, and upon equipping the participants as leaders, one might say professional leaders, in their future ministerial practice.

### **Gaba Pastoral Institute, Eldoret, Kenya**

In 1975, the Gaba Pastoral Institute, which had been founded in Uganda in 1968 by the Catholic Association of the Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA), moved to Eldoret in Kenya. The Institute was set up to further the ministries of the Church in East Africa by providing a centre of pastoral and catechetical training, and personal and pastoral renewal through updating in post Vatican II theology, scripture studies and contemporary methodology. The bishops, acting collegially, adopted the mission strategy of building small Christian communities in East Africa. Although its programmes are currently under review, the Gaba Institute has consistently tried to organize itself around this clear purpose, discerned and endorsed by the wider Church, and has tried to carry through its curriculum in such a way as to allow its mission priority to control every aspect of the course from beginning to end. It is designed to promote pastoral renewal through the interchange of experiences contributed by the participants. The curriculum is an experience-based learning process in which the participants become, in their life together, a new way of 'being Church'. They enter into a new understanding of shared ministry and they are committed to a new cross-cultural communication of the gospel within East Africa.

The course is 'contextual' in that it explores the circumstances in which the gospel is lived and preached in East Africa. It is 'indigenous' in that the total process is determined by the life and activity of the course members or 'facilitators' and 'participants', as they prefer to describe them. They are not staff and students. The residential course, which lasts a year and is designed for clergy, religious and lay Christians living and working together, is an exercise in contextual learning. It explores the ways in which God makes himself known 'in the context of our own lives, of our community of faith, of our culture, and above all in the saving event of Jesus Christ and His Church'.

The four disciplines of the course are the study of pastoral anthropology, the Bible, theology and religious education. There is no question, however, that the emphasis of the curriculum rests less upon the content and more upon the process by which people learn, which is seen as a collaborative enterprise.

In short, Gaba offers a model of post-experience residential theological training which is closely integrated within a strategy for cross-cultural mission which has been owned by the leadership of the Catholic Church in East Africa.

### **The Underlying Pedagogy**

First, there is a deliberate mixing of participants. There are Africans and expatriates, priests and religious, women and men and lay persons. In practice, until recently, the number of lay participants has been small. The concept of joint training, nevertheless, arises from the Vatican II understanding that 'in selecting a pedagogical method, one ought to take into account the circumstances in which the ecclesial community of the individuals among the faithful to whom the catechesis is directed live'.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, no-one may participate in the course who has not spent at least two years in active ministry in Africa.

Secondly, the course is designed to give the participants an authentic experience of ecclesial life through living together and faith sharing: 'In Gaba we learn to bleed together'. In other words, the Institute consistently treats the participants, mostly aged between thirty and fifty years, as adult self directing learners. 'It is through shared efforts at building and living as a Christian community that participants learn how to form a Christian community and how to help it grow'.

Thirdly, the facilitators affirm the previous experience and achievements of the participants as an essential part of their being and personhood. This shared experience is not simply to be used in developing their ministry but also in the course of a growing self-understanding and articulation of the Christian faith.

Fourthly, the participants are involved in directing the learning of the group. As adults, they have taken decisions which have led them to their present level of commitment in the home, in the community, in the church and in the social and political life of their society. The Institute operates on the conviction that they are likely to be more committed learners as they are implicated in the decisions relating to their learning. The outcome of this principle will be a course of learning designed to meet a perceived need in the participant rather than simply an imposed need identified by the facilitator.

Fifthly, adults who attend the Institute as part of the renewal of their ministry, and especially if they have been involved in the decision to be there, will come with a problem-centred frame of mind. The more the

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1 General Catechetical Directory 46.

course addresses those problems, the more will be the learning that takes place. The participants will be ready to learn.

Sixthly, and following from the previous point, the Institute tries to provide a model of integrated learning. This may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the course tackles a theme and approaches it from the perspective of the four core disciplines; anthropology, Bible, theology and religious education. On the other hand, the course attempts to bridge the gap between faith and life, between religion and everyday experience. In both ways, therefore, the Institute aims to facilitate a true conversion in which doctrine and life come together, and so to enable the participants to question their present attitudes and to accept the need to make changes in the light of the Word of God and the teaching of the Church.

Seventhly, the course makes use of small groups not simply as an effective educational tool but primarily as a theologically based strategy for inducting the participants into the living mystery of being Church. The Institute recognizes the importance of people growing to mature Christian wisdom in the context of a loving community. If, as the Institute believes, the declared strategy of the Magisterium is the founding and growth of small Christian communities, participants will learn best by being themselves members of small Christian communities at Gaba.

### **The Basic Method of the Integrated Course**

The Scheme consists of seven areas of study which are covered in the nine months of the course. These include an introductory fortnight, a study of revelation, ecclesiology, the human response of faith and hope, ministry, liturgy and life, and forward planning. There are five movements to the learning in each area of study, and these are described as 'shared Christian life and reflection on life'.

1. At the beginning of each area of the course, participants in basic groups look back on their experience and knowledge of the topic of the area. Each one is invited to describe their present position regarding the topic; sharing experiences, telling their story and listening to others' stories.
2. Participants look critically at their present position in order to discover and identify the influences that have led to this position being held.
3. Facilitators make a presentation of the current thinking of the Church upon the topic under review, together with an account of its development historically. This comprises 'the Christian Community Story'.
4. Participants compare 'the Christian Community Story' with their story and ask the question; 'What does that story demand of me?' and, 'Does my story have any contribution to make to the Community Story?'
5. Members of the course plan for action in the light of this new vision which is recognized as part of the wider vision of the Kingdom of God.

### **Four lessons from the Gaba Experience**

#### *1. A New Way of being Church?*

The Gaba Pastoral Institute trains those who will facilitate and encourage

the growth of small Christian communities. Small Christian communities, as they are called in Africa, arose from a recognition by the Catholic Church that, on the one hand, it was called to evangelize and, on the other hand, it had to meet the increasing demand for more priests to provide for the pastoral needs of the people.

But small Christian communities, or Base Communities, have become a global phenomenon in the cause of liberation. In East Africa, the communities have identified their liberative priority as the inculturation of the faith into appropriate African forms and institutions. In South Africa, as in Latin America, they have also pursued a socio-political liberation from the oppressive ruling powers.

What began as an initiative of the Church to arrest decline and to further evangelization, understood in fairly traditional terms, soon became a subtle and subversive agent of change in the Church itself for a number of reasons, which were not at all obvious at the inception of the communities. True in South America, this is also proving to be the case in Africa and everywhere else that small communities are multiplying.

In brief, if the small Christian community is itself Church, then it leads to an identity crisis for the traditional structures of authority and power in the wider Church. For example, should it not be possible to provide sacramental and pastoral ministries in the local community without depending upon the services of imported priests and religious? The members of the small Christian communities have discovered that there are gifts of ministry to be recognized and developed within each community. The leaders of the Church's hierarchy find, in turn, that these do not fit in with the inherited patterns of belief and practice. The ensuing dialectic can be sharp and painful at the level of practical ecclesiology. Where it is possible to conduct the dialogue in a residential context (not necessarily as long a residence as at Gaba) the eyeball to eyeball confrontation creates the possibility of a new understanding of Church emerging which is owned by a whole variety of different orders within the churches. It will be no good, however, if some of those orders, bishops or academics or seminarians in particular, opt out of the debate.

## 2. *A New Understanding of Ministry?*

The seeds have been sown for a new understanding of ministry. Patrick Kalilombe draws a contrast, unjustified in my view, between the grassroots origins of the Communities in Latin America and the hierarchical initiative in Africa.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in both cases, the strategy has been initiated and planned from above. But, in each case, the idea has been taken up and owned at the grassroots level of the Church, to the discomfort of the hierarchy.

In East Africa, the discomfort can show itself in a lack of enthusiasm, amongst the leaders, for the project they have initiated. For example,

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1 Patrick Kalilombe, *From Outstations to Small Christian Communities*, Gaba Publications, PO Box 908, Eldoret, Kenya 1984, p 75.

Kalilombe is obviously right to suggest that in East Africa, where the orientation has been more pastoral and cultural than political, the success of the 'pastoral priority' depends largely upon the informed commitment of the leadership. Judging by the Gaba experience, this is not always universally in evidence.

At Gaba, the process of training clergy, religious and lay Christians together is designed to be a transforming process. It contrasts starkly with the pattern of seminary training, with its isolating, alienating and separating tendencies. Vatican II looked for an increasingly collegial style of leadership in the Church, together with an appropriate complementarity and subsidiarity.

This concern is not confined to the Catholic Church. The same chord has been struck forcefully in the Report of the Church of England's Partners in Mission Consultation 1981;

To function as a priest is to live in a highly interdependent and complex world. Effective functioning demands teamwork. The inflexible and individualistic priest, typical of many in the Church of England, cannot continue. Priests must be trained to take the risk of teamwork and to respond to the trust such sharing will produce. The laity demand it and must be trained to share these responsibilities with them.<sup>1</sup>

John Tiller took the cause further in his call for inclusion of an element, in the theological education of ordinands, 'which requires a community in which the norms are corporate decision-making, shared responsibilities and joint action. The teaching work should be done on a collaborative basis, not only because the nature of applied theology requires integrated studies, but also because the method of teaching will be highly formative for the style of ministry which results from the teaching programme'.<sup>2</sup>

At the Gaba Pastoral Institute, the facilitators put considerable weight upon the importance of modelling the ministry. By dress, by style, by structure and by articulated policy, there is a conscious attempt to get away from the elitism, which one normally associates with the Church's ministries, and which is reflected in church training institutions. For an example, small in itself but significant, the principal of the Institute came to visit me in the Guest Room, rather than calling me to his study.

In every theological training centre, the principal's and the staff housing, the dress of the lecturers, the location and conventions surrounding the use of staff and student common rooms, the seating in chapel and dining room, the privileged parking or garaging, the accessibility or inaccessibility of staff are all constantly transmitting impressions and information about the nature of ministry. It is quite possible, by teaching one thing and practising

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1 *To a Rebellious House?* Report of the Church of England's Partners in Mission Consultation 1981, CIO Publishing, London 1981, p 24.

2 John Tiller, *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry*, CIO Publishing, London 1983, p 150.

another, to renege on all the high ideals of one's educational goals. Maybe one of the key questions, not nearly so trivial as it may sound, is whether the priest and the bishop, and other church ministers, are not only prepared to promote small Christian communities but also to become community members themselves. A few church leaders have set an example, by crossing the traditional boundaries of church group membership, but the process of transforming ministerial expectations would be speeded up considerably were a few existing theological training institutions to undertake its promotion.

### 3. *A New Ministry of Inculturation and Cross Cultural Understanding?*

The small Christian communities in East Africa have a pastoral focus. The ecclesial and cultural dimensions of Christian witness, therefore, feature more and the political less. It is not, however, a narrow contextual and blinkered vision. The Gaba Pastoral Institute majors on the theme of 'inculturation', and gives much space to questions of communicability and communication. In other words, it wants to reverse the tendency of the churches to de-culturalize Christians, to de-skill them in the art of communicating with their neighbours.

'Inculturation' refers, primarily, to the process by which the gospel and traditional cultures interact in all their manifold forms of expression. It addresses the challenge, as far as possible, to harmonize the Christian faith with local stories, rituals, behaviour and authority structures. It aims to construct local theologies at the point where the Christian tradition intersects with popular theology. Robert J. Schreiter defines 'inculturation' as; 'a combination of the theological principle of incarnation with the social-science concept of acculturation (adapting oneself to a culture) . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Schreiter suggests three ways of looking at the outcome of inculturation, or at emerging 'local theologies', as he prefers to call them. We can end up with a *translation* of Christianity into the culture by a process of discovering and naming its 'dynamic-equivalence', with an *adaptation* of the faith to the culture, or with a *contextual* and much more open ended approach, such as that which Vincent Donovan advocated amongst the Masai. The first two ways are principally concerned with the communication of the faith, and thus tackle the task of communication from the speaker's point of view. The third, and some understandings of adaptation, are concerned with the context in which the faith is received; the hearer's point of view.<sup>2</sup>

Gaba recognizes the importance of both points of view. The curriculum gives extensive treatment to the ethnographic approach to culture, with its search for a proper African Christian identity, as well as to the Christian tradition as it is interpreted by the Magisterium. It offers a good model for working out missionary theology in cross-cultural communication, with

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1 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, SCM, London 1985, p 5.

2 *ibid.*, pp 6-16.



Christians and unbelievers, in an intra-church setting. In the first place, the participants do not simply observe as outsiders but try to feel their way into the concrete reality of each cultural context. Secondly, they do not study cultures or religions, they study people and what enables them to feel at home in the world, and what gives it meaning for them. Respect builds on the basis of the understanding and insight, which comes from shared commitments. One of the strengths of the intensive residential experience is the possibility which it gives for this respect to grow. Thirdly, they not only study diversity of belief but also look for common signs of hope, sometimes called 'seeds of the Word'. Hope lies in the discovery of Christ in ordinary human relationships and events. Fourthly, they attend carefully to the participants, and each different cultural setting from which they come, and in which they live, worship and work. It is like learning, understanding and becoming sufficiently at home in a language as to be able to use it with confidence. In such a climate, mutual confidence and interdependence builds up a faith which is shared across the boundaries which usually divide humankind.

In the United Kingdom, the newly formed Simon of Cyrene Theological Institute in Wandsworth has set as its goal, 'the total task of training both black and white ordinands and lay persons for total ministry in a multi-racial community'. Time will tell whether it is able to achieve this vision which is revolutionary within the panorama of British theological education. It will have failed, however, if it becomes marginalised as merely another training institution, guilty of forwarding the specialisation and blinkered cultural assumptions which were criticised in *Faith in the City*.

#### 4. *Two Ecclesiologies in Tension*

Gaba's fascinating story of how one tries to communicate the vision of a new way of being Church, a new collaborative understanding of ministry, and a truly indigenous and pan-African expression of the Christian faith highlights the important lesson also to be learned from the hidden ecclesiologies which are always operating in the Church, and among the churches. For example, in the seminary style of curriculum in East Africa, the students are unaccustomed to mixing freely with their tutors, are devoted principally to a study of academic theology, and have little or no experience of living with, and sharing with, other non-ordained Christian workers in the course of their training. Not surprisingly, on ordination, they are in danger of perpetuating a traditional hierarchical view of the Church into which they have been inducted at the seminary, a temptation also common in the developed world. For example, recent research has indicated that although clergy training shares with most other professions major academic and practical components, 'it is the intensity and the corporate nature of the spiritual dimension in the initial training of clergy that sets it apart and suggests that its purpose in the training process is signifi-

cantly related to the task of changing a person from lay to priestly status'.<sup>1</sup>

The post-experience Pastoral Institute, however, tries to overcome the division between grassroots and hierarchical ecclesiologies, reinforced, as it is, by the distinction between the training of the priest and lay person. It is not so much that it aims to destroy the Church's hierarchical structures. In East Africa, for instance, the Gaba Institute is deeply concerned to remain in tune with the will and teaching of the Magisterium. Nevertheless, the Pastoral Institute can be an expression of the prophetic Church at odds with the hidebound and institutional ecclesiastical structures. It is a collegial attempt to live, in the Church, with two conflicting ecclesiologies, while pursuing a single Christian mission which is both locally focussed and globally alert.

The ambivalence of the East African bishops towards their own initiative is, therefore, no more perhaps than one should expect when they are struggling, in the late twentieth century, to discern the nature and purpose of the Church and its mission within a plural culture, while, at the same time, they are trying to be true to their traditional inheritance. In the Gaba Institute itself, however, the enrolment of priests, religious and lay Christians as participants, together with the modelling role of the facilitators, should ensure that the question of two ecclesiologies in tension is never far from the surface. It would be more radically effective if the bishops, and the seminaries, were more deeply and directly involved. At present, significantly, they stay on the sidelines. To overcome the same problem in the developed world, it would be necessary for innovative theological training institutions not only to broaden their student enrolment and integrate their course offerings, as some are trying to do at present, but also to include opportunities to break down the existing, but often unacknowledged, segregation which is endemic within the whole theological training project.

## Conclusion

In outlining the principles, the strategy and tactics, of the Gaba Pastoral Institute, I have had several purposes in view. In the first place, and in response to the suggestion in *Faith in the City* that theological education is too academic, it is possible to construct a course which is integrated around a strategy of mission which is both rigorous intellectually and focused upon the practice of ministry. Such a course in Britain, for instance, could prove a valuable training resource for churches engaged in the Decade of Evangelism. Secondly, a course which is designed to foster local theologies can avoid some of the dangers of over-contextualization, taking too narrow

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1 John Gay and John Wyatt, 'Aspects of the Role of the Residential Theological College in the Initial Education and Training of the Clergy of the Church of England', *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1988, p 256.

a point of view, where a residential element ensures that dialogue takes place across the ecclesiastical orders, and the cultural orientation of the groups of participants. Theological training will benefit from the inclusion of a strong residential component, but only when it includes such a diversity. Thirdly, the necessary ongoing dialectic between traditional theology and popular theologies, between hierarchical and grassroots ecclesiologies, can proceed creatively in a single institution which tries to bring together, in one enterprise, levels of the theological project which have hitherto been far too strictly differentiated. There must be less theological segregation between church leaders, professional theologians and grassroots Christian leaders.

**The Revd Ian Bunting** is Director of Ordinands in the Diocese of Southwell and Assistant Priest in Lenton, Nottingham.