

NEWS ITEMS

Seminaries As Church's 'Think Tanks'

A group of people committed to the cause of theological education in North India, comprising bishops from Church of North India, Church of South India, Methodist Church in India, Church leaders from various denominations active in north and central regions of India, members of the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College, members of a seminary Board of Directors, heads of study centres and institutes, Principals, teachers and students of theological colleges, evangelists, *acharyas* and inmates of Christian *ashrams*, Christian *dalit* leaders and activists, members of the Hindi Theological Literature committee and the head of a diocesan resource and facilitation centre met on 10-11 November, 1994 at Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh to consult on the theme "Concerns for Theological Education in North India". The consultation had the representation of the Evangelical Fellowship of India also who delegated one participant. The focus of the Consultation was the people of the enormous expanse of land in north and central parts of India where Hindi or its dialect, or closely linked languages are spoken and used as media of instructions. This region is one of the densely populated areas of the world with its unique cultural, religious, economic, political and social peculiarities. The programme of theological education under the auspices of the Church, a numerical minority has been a modest enterprise in this overwhelmingly pluralistic context. This region is alive with problems which unite as well as divide people of various communities and the cross sections of the North Indian society. The chief concern at this Consultation was whether the Church has been aware of these contemporary issues and has it addressed these in a bold and constructive way. A concern was voiced about the fact that the Church has been rather tokenish and hesitant in responding squarely to the challenges of these issues. There had been a few consultations in the past whose agenda was restricted to selective issues. So far this region and specifically its problems have yet to be tackled' wholistically. The Consultation aimed to provide a common platform for the participants to come together for sharing, reflecting, articulating and for evaluating the existing pattern of theological education and to devise practical ways and means of joint efforts of contextualising theological education. There was a note of urgency for a shift from mere discussion and debating to doing and implementing of the insights gained at this juncture. It began with an intensive input of analytical reflection with various presentations on the theme followed with discussion and recommendations. The keynote address at the inauguration was delivered by the Rt. Rev. F.C. Jonathan, bishop of the Jabalpur Diocese of the Church of North India. He shared his view with maturity of experience of a theological educator and as a practical church leader. He presented an analysis of the present situation particularly relating to the Diocese of Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh. His forceful plea to draw from the traditional and rich heritage of local cultural resources for the curricula, methodology and disciplines of ministerial formation and theological education to meet the challenges of life in the North

Indian pluralistic milieu helped in formulating the recommendations of this Consultation. According to him, the problem of identifying and recruiting candidates for ministerial formation is a crucial area of concern. He referred to the current debate on recruiting highly qualified candidates *vis-a-vis* "catching them young" as they freshly graduate from high schools. This would enable shaping and moulding them for ministry at an early age. In the next presentation by the Rev. D.S. Satyaranjan, an overview was delineated with the help of a survey of landmark consultations of the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College. He introduced the recent emphases emerging as priorities on the agenda of the BTE such as the urgency of introducing new courses on Christian ministry as a much needed discipline at the graduate, post-graduate and doctoral levels. He informed that this approach to Christian Ministry is designated to contribute to the process of Church's renewal for mission, and to meet the expressed need of the churches to provide continuing education for pastors and others who are engaged in various forms of Christian Ministry and who already have a basic theological degree. It is a programme of advanced level study in the context of the candidate's continuing responsible engagement in the ministry in order to strengthen professional competence to bring about greater integration between the theological understanding and the practical experience. The programme is meant to equip the minister to meet the challenges in the life of the Church and society. He also shared about the prospects of the degree of Bachelor of Christian Studies which aimed to provide the laity with the knowledge of faith, history and practice for deepening of their commitment to witness and service in the world; and also about the vitally relevant disciplines of Communication and Social Analysis. Bishop S.K. Parmar of the Methodist Church urged that the theological colleges should act as the 'Think Tanks' of the Church in India. They should be ahead of people in terms of innovation, experimentations, conscientisation and theological break through and in tackling contemporary problems of justice, social harmony and peace to the extent that they should be relevant to the context and to the cooperating churches. Rev. Vidya Sagar, a promising Christian *dalit* activist and leader from Punjab presented his perspective of the concern for theological education in North India with his stimulating approach. He is a research associate of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society for the North-West India and is based in Ludhiana in Punjab. He gave in preview of the theology of the oppressed people of North India linking it with the theme of the consultation. He traced the historical and the biblical roots of the *dalit* consciousness. His plea was that the task of theological education in North India should be to enable the dispossessed, the deprived, the disinherited and the marginalized people of the North Indian society so that they may regain their lost historical identity and thereby themselves revitalise their spiritual and cultural consciousness. Dr. G.R. Singh dealt with the main theme from the perspective of a teacher involved in ministerial formation through theological education. He argued that the problems in North India have often been neglected in the process to contextualize theological education, whereas the genesis of some of the national issues which dominate the scene has roots in the North Indian context. His advocacy for a programme of contextualised theological education geared to the needs of the grassroots and relying upon native resources which

will stand the test of time, was discussed by the participants. He cautioned that failing this, theological education in North India may face the dangers of elitism and redundancy.

The participants grouped themselves in five workshops and discussed the emergent issues in depth. The group reports were brought to the plenary session and the following statement was issued.

Preamble

We, the participants of the Consultation on "Concerns for Theological Education in North India", representing Churches, Church related organisations, study and resource centres, faculties and students of theological colleges are encouraged by the initiative of Leonard Theological College in providing with the help of the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College, a forum for reflecting on the issues of high priority and for enabling us to share and to exchange our ideas and experiences and thereby to gain insight in order to discern the signs of the time and to recommend the line of direction which theological education in North India should follow. We appreciate this step in enabling us to assemble at the venue at Jabalpur, an important centre of Hindi speaking heartland and to deliberate on the concerns for theological education in North India. Our coming together has been an occasion to reaffirm our solidarity in the common task to do theology in our context and to implement the emergent recommendations in obedience to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a credible manner in the context of North India. The joy and experience of our worshipping, discussing and struggling together to arrive at this statement have been rewarding outcome of this consultation. This has inspired us to move forward for the level of debating to the arena of action and implementing the insights gained here. We have been appropriately reminded that theological colleges and seminaries are one of the "Think Tanks" of the Church and as such bear the crucial responsibility of conscientizing and mobilising the people and the resources of the Church, local congregations and related groups for fulfilling their part in the mission of God.

As a group of concerned people seeking relevancy of theological education in North India, we urge our Churches, institutions and our sending bodies that they should take note of the following areas of concerns which emerged as priorities in our deliberations.

Our theological education should seek to discover new ways and means of cross cultural dialogue and our students undergoing theological education for ministerial formation should have ample opportunities of cultural, spiritual and other exposures within the region. Courses on culture and social sciences, sensitive and oriented to local situation should be encouraged and introduced. Churches and sponsoring bodies are requested to make available more resources for such programmes in the curricula.

There is an urgent need for developing and introducing studies of women's concerns in North India. There should be emphasis on seeking new criteria suited to the North Indian conditions for recruitment of ministerial candidates and appointment of faculty members. A study on an early revision of current policies of remuneration and staff welfare schemes should be launched.

It was noted that there are already syllabi followed in the area of studying the struggle of the *dalit* and the indigenous people, more needs to be done by way of relating to local situations. It was stressed that the theological institutions in North India should promote short term refresher courses, intensive capsule modules in the fields of biblical hermeneutics, indigenous theologies, local histories, cultural studies and popular religion in view of whatever recent advancements have taken place in various branches of knowledge.

The ongoing struggle of finding ways and means in North Indian context to relate to and to work together with neighbours of other faiths should be carried on.

There should be more emphasis on mission to the rural areas and industrial areas. Possibilities for dialogue and interaction with para church groups should be explored.

Considering the need of B.D. studies through the medium of Hindi, possibilities of initiating a course at Leonard Theological College be explored.

For an immediate consideration of these recommendations an ecumenical consultation of the heads of the Churches with theological colleges and seminaries in North India and with the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College should be organised as early as possible preferably before the middle of 1995.

Dr. G.R. Singh, Principal
Leonard Theological College

Leonard Theological College Commemorates Gandhiji's Visit

In December 1994, Leonard Theological College commemorated a red letter day in the history of this institution. It was about sixty years ago, on 7 December, 1933 that Gandhiji paid a visit to Leonard Theological College while touring the Central Provinces and Berar. Bishop J.R. Chitambar, the then Bishop of Methodist Episcopal Church, resident in Jabalpur and Dr. A.A. Parker, the then Principal invited the Mahatma to visit the College. Gandhiji graciously accepted the invitation and addressed the College community in an open air auditorium. At that time the Mahatma was deeply pre-occupied with the problem of untouchability which had become a burning issue of the day. It was reported in the local media that while he was travelling to the College, a *sanatani* Hindu protesting against the Harijans' entry into Hindu temples laid himself prostrate in front of the car in which Gandhiji was coming and obstructed, and delayed his arrival by thirty minutes. Gandhiji spoke fervently how Christians in cooperation with Hindus could help in eradicating the untouchability, an evil which weighed heavily on Gandhiji's mind. He pleaded for the cooperation of the foreign missionaries as well as of the Indian Christians to combat against the evil forces of untouchability.

Six decades later, the event was remembered by gathering at the same spot where Gandhiji addressed an audience in 1933. A special order of worship comprising readings from the Scriptures and singing of the hymns dear to the

Mahatma's heart was followed. An enlarged copy of a file photograph of the visit discovered in the Archives of the College was unveiled by Shrimati June Choudhari, a member from Jabalpur city of the Legislative Assembly. A speech reminiscencing the past memory was delivered by Shri Anoop Choudhari, the Advocate General of Madhya Pradesh and the honoured chief guest of the occasion. Shri Choudhari exhorted that it was a fitting tribute to celebrate the historic visit in conjunction with 125th birth anniversary of Gandhiji. He inaugurated an exhibition of stamps and memorabilia related to the Mahatma and released a commemorative cover and a souvenir labels sheet for sale.

Leonard Theological College is looking forward to celebrating the seventy fifth year jubilee in 1997.

Dr. G.R. Singh, Principal
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