

REPORT

Management and Accountability in Theological Education

ATESEA Workshop, Singapore, July 10-17, 1985

At the invitation of the Executive Secretary of ATESEA, Dr Yeow Choo Lak, I had the privilege of participating in the Workshop on “Management and Accountability in Theological Education”, and the General Assembly of ATESEA.

The workshop addressed itself to the issues of managing theological education, with a well-defined, but broad, view of accountability, taking into account the ethical and theological grounds for accountability. This was covered in two phases, through topics ranging from “Asian View of Management”, “Cultural Hindrances”, “Holistic Management”, “Decision Making”, “Strategic Planning”, to “Integrated Fund-raising Programme”.

The first phase of presentation was made by three lay Christian business professionals, Timothy Ang, Khor Tong Keng, and Wee Chow Hou, who spoke separately, but followed the topic in an integrated, interesting, and teachable manner. All was done with the needs and views of Christian and theological institutions in mind.

A “contemplative concept of management” was pinpointed as a significantly Asian principle and concept of management. Here, a difference is drawn between “work” ethos and “self” ethos. Much good management/stewardship involves “self-discipline”. It is getting the right things done, and not just getting a job done, that counts. A proper approach to management in the Asian context (Melanesia?) is by way of compromise, where there is also a greater sense of accountability – perhaps the kind of accountability, where there is less corruption and deceit.

Critical human realities in management/stewardship are identified as envy, self-pride (emperor's complex), vested interest, impatience, and hastiness. Environmental, organisational, and time realities, as well as cultural realities, are also important considerations.

It was emphasised, again and again, that, unless Asians become financially independent, they are not free. This is quite true to say also of Melanesians. Unless Melanesians are financially independent, there is no real freedom. But freedom, to me here, is the freedom to be creative. The issue of financial independence is rightly coupled with the issue of contextual priorities, rather than being burdened by inherited structures, from which we are constantly dependent.

Defining identity, and establishing priorities, is important for effective management. It also involves establishing resources. How far has MATS gone in this direction, and what is the projection for the future?

The second phase of the workshop was theological presentations, and reflections on the meaning of accountability in theological education. What are our reasons for being, developing, managing, and directing, theological education? It was noted, with a certain regret, that, at one time, the church offered the best in education. Is government overtaking the churches in offering the "best substitute"? If we have a purpose to be in education, be it theological training, or liberal arts, it is to offer the best, and attract the best. Government can never offer the best, as a substitute for the churches. This is part of our concern in management and accountability.

Perhaps the highlight of theological reflections was presented in "The Spirit and the Tao of Theological Education in Asia", by C. S. Song, the keynote address given by a Presbyterian scholar from Taiwan (to appear in next issue of *Melanesian Journal of Theology*).

Song raised some eyebrows. In replying to his responder, Revd Sientje Merentek-Abram, a female theologian from Indonesia, he referred to Jesus as being syncretistic. Revd Merentek-Abram was concerned that, in speaking of accountability to Asian histories,

religions, and contexts, there is danger of syncretism. It was an appropriate concern.

As one listened to the speaker, there were traces of emotional overtones in trying to speak of Asianness over against Westernness in theology, perhaps a sign of a person who truly feels about Asian contexts of church and theology. Song made some very important observations.

“Theology”, he said, “is like an art. As an art, it requires creativity. A good artist needs to be creative rather than imitate the form.” He challenged Asians involved in theological education to generate new dignity in theological vocation. How to go about it involves creativity, distinct form, beauty, and unusual perception. He described Jesus as the most-independent thinker and creative theologian.

The paper concluded that Asian theology has not yet become a creative art. It called for effort in management of theological education and training to be artistic in style and context. In short, it was a call for reformation in church and theology in Asia. Song was careful to add that, to be creative and artistic is not the final aim of theology, but that we are accountable to God, and being guided by the Spirit. This should be the beginning and end of theological education, management, reformation, and accountability.

My overall observation of the Workshop and General Assembly is that there is a lot to be learnt from ATESEA. The programme offered by the South-East Asian Graduate School of Theology is worth exploration by MATS. In this connection, may I reiterate the 1981 Mats Executive proposal to initiate masters-level studies in South-east Asia. The schools that look promising are the Trinity Theological College in Singapore, and Lutheran Seminaries in Hong Kong.

Included in the Workshop and Assembly of ATESEA, were visits to Trinity Theological College, in Singapore, run by the major Protestant churches in Singapore; the South-East Asia Adventist Seminary, also in Singapore; and the Seminary Theolji Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur, run by the Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist churches in Malaysia. Ecumenical partnership in these schools is a visible reality in Asia. This,

again, gives us reasons for a closer working relationship and sharing between MATS and ATESEA. Mutual invitations to Workshops and Study Institutes have begun, and must be encouraged to continue, while other areas of sharing should be explored.

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