

EDITORIAL

A CRISIS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION?

Few things about the Church of Scotland, the country's national Church, are so distinctive as the provision it makes for the training of its ordained ministry – distinctive, that is, within the United Kingdom, and also when set against most churches through the world. Indeed, the phrase 'the provision it makes' is almost a misnomer, for its distinctiveness lies largely in its making little or no provision of its own, but in relying on the departments or faculties of Divinity of the four older Scottish universities. It is in one of these, and not in a Church of Scotland seminary or theological college, for none exist, that ministerial candidates receive all their institution-based education for ministry.

There are, to be sure, good historical grounds, and reliable constitutional grounds too, for regarding these Divinity departments and faculties as more than units within universities, as in fact also having an identity as Church of Scotland colleges – the Church's theological halls, as they were long called. This second identity is to most observers an elusive one, to some wholly illusory. This is not the occasion to explore its subtleties.¹ If its most substantive continuing manifestation is found in the Church's nominating half the members of the boards that appoint professors in Divinity, it has other embodiments of importance, such as the senates of three of the colleges (St Andrews being the exception) which are presided over by principals or masters appointed by the Church's General Assembly. The senates' responsibilities include the stewardship of the colleges' financial endowments. Real money is at issue here, and it must be theoretically possible for the General Assembly through one of the boards or committees to require these senates, or at least their presiding heads, to give an account of their stewardship.

That this does not happen, at least in any publicly reported manner, is but one measure of the extent to which these Divinity faculties have ceased to be in practice colleges of the Church. In staffing, a Church which does not pay the piper cannot expect to call the tune. (In respect of professorial chairs, Church representatives have no say in decisions to leave any of them unfilled, or in the filling of newly established chairs, or in appointments to personal chairs

¹ They are explored from different angles in *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846-1996*, ed. David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996).

whose holders tend naturally to do duty for non-existent occupants of established professorships.) If one looked for evidence of control by the Church to put flesh on the constitutional bones of this Church-college identity, one might hope to discern it, in a financially-strapped Church in an age of all-pervasive post-Thatcher accountability, here, in an examination of its colleges' books. For they record resources which, unlike most of the collegiate patrimony of the Church – most concretely, buildings and library holdings, have not been formally ceded to university ownership.

These and many other reflections have been prompted by *Crisis in the Church. The Plight of Theological Education* by John H. Leith, long-time professor at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, one of the seminaries of the Presbyterian Church (USA).² The crisis in question has been in the making for at least three decades. In a nutshell it consists in seminaries such as John Leith's beloved Union in Richmond having in large measure ceased to represent and serve the Presbyterian Church (USA). They have grown away from their constituency in that Church, so that their teaching staff increasingly lack pastoral-ministerial experience, are appointed almost exclusively for their academic prowess, no longer for the most part come from a seminary's own former students, and own no apparent allegiance to the defining beliefs of the Church. Another dimension of the crisis is the misuse of the considerable endowments these seminaries possess – a misuse, that is, that fails to honour the clear intentions of the original benefactors. The crisis has been able to develop because the governing bodies of the seminaries are more and more filled by persons unrepresentative of their Church and seminary constituencies, but chosen 'to meet requirements of political correctness, or of current advocacy movements, or because of wealth'.

This is a depressing book. Leith recognizes that the crisis in the seminaries is coextensive with the crisis in the Church. His diagnosis wields statistics to good effect, and deploys a wide and deep familiarity with Presbyterian theology and church life in the States over a century and more. The alarm it sounds is nevertheless not meant as a death-knell, for the author is passionately and irrevocably committed to his Church.

The dominant criterion his analysis applies is effectiveness of ministry. Do the seminary faculties include professors with proven track-records as builders of congregations?³ Is the teaching and

² Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1997; 125pp., ISBN 0 664 25700 3.

³ 'Every faculty should include a few professors who through their own efforts have brought into the life of the church a sufficient *net*

training they give similarly geared to produce pastors with the abilities and vision to lead in the growth of the local church? Do trustees, boards and professors cordially confess the central doctrines of the Christian faith which alone can sustain such pastoral and evangelistic effectiveness?

John Leith is wise enough to know that there are no simple fixes for such a crisis. But at least recovery lies in the Church's own hands. Can the same be said of the very different situation of theological education in the Church of Scotland? The answer must be: 'Certainly, at least in part'. New initiatives are not lacking. A reshaped degree of B.D. (Ministry) will shortly come on stream which will incorporate within it as part of its assessed requirements periods of fieldwork intercalated with university courses. More focused concentration on post-ordination training will include universal provision for annual study leave. 'Education for the Ministry' has been shunted from Education to Ministry in the Church's departmental structures, and Ministry's empire expands with new appointments.

Yet one wonders whether the diagnosis has penetrated deep enough. If John Leith's controlling criterion is applied, the question cannot be indefinitely deferred whether our progressively more secularized universities are the proper contexts in which to train effective builders of congregations. To raise this question is viewed in influential circles in the Church of Scotland as doubting an almost unquestionable article of faith, namely, that the intellectual openness and freedom of the university is the absolutely correct setting for the formation of ministers in today's world. The tenacity with which this conviction is maintained bespeaks at times a truly fundamentalist myopia. Perhaps the financially unthinkable – the prospect of the Church having to make its own provision for the training of its ministers – decrees the intellectually unthinkable. Meanwhile the mismatch between university faculty and Church college grows apace. The recent calamitous collapse in recruitment for ordained ministry is exacerbating the marginalization of the Church of Scotland community in the faculties – which the introduction of the new B.D. (Ministry) will further exacerbate as an unanticipated by-product. As a shrinking minority it cannot hope to be more than (to coin a phrase) a *collegiolum in collegio*. University Divinity increasingly overshadowed by its younger partner Religious Studies, has no choice but to service a predominantly non-ministerial market. What price then preparation for effective ministry that can defy inexorable decline and build congregations again?

number of persons whose contributions would pay their salary and expense accounts' (p. 5).

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Scotland is not the USA, nor the Church of Scotland the Presbyterian Church (USA). John Leith would be the first to recognize the differences. Yet uncanny similarities persist, *mutatis mutandis*, between the picture he paints and the situation in Scotland. This editorial cannot open up the nest of issues at stake with the thoroughness they deserve. The pages of this *Bulletin* will gladly play host to the discussion that must take place. It extends to such broad themes as the relationship between the church of Christ and the culture and society within which it is set. Over-reliance on university theology, which is bound to reflect the dominant pluralist or secularist assumptions that shape its intellectual and institutional context, is unlikely to provide the new generation of church evangelists that mission to Scotland will require in the next century. Above all, one longs to see the kind of robust, courageous exposure of the Scottish scene that John Leith has given of his patch in *Crisis in the Church*.