

LEADING SEMINARIES AND THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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I believe that theological education is a three-legged stool where the three legs are 1. Spiritual formation 2. Academic studies 3. Ministerial formation. The role of the principal of the seminary or theological college is first, to try and make sure that the three legs are as strong as possible and second, to see that the three legs are balanced, so that the ministerial candidates get a well-rounded training. We have to try and fulfil this goal, within the various limitations that seminaries face, of finance, infrastructure, church support, time and so on. The work of co-ordination to plan activities and review the implementation of policies is a major aspect of a principal's work.

Regarding the first leg of the theological education stool, the work of the principal is to see that a structure is put in place so that the spiritual needs of the students are met and that they can grow in their spiritual life. We have to see that faculty members are given the responsibility of working with the students so that they can prepare worship guidelines that provide good spiritual nourishment for the college community which give the students good practice in composing orders of worship. Apart from this, inviting retreat speakers and those who can deliver a chapel talk is something that the principal can also do. I do find it essential that a principal makes every effort to attend all the spiritual activities that go on in the college. This firstly, encourages the person taking the worship and makes him/her take their sermon or worship order seriously. Secondly, it sets a good example for the rest of the faculty and the students and prevents them from thinking that chapel attendance is something that can be avoided with the flimsiest of excuses.

Regarding the second leg of the theological education stool, the academic, this is where the principal has to act to try and improve the academic standard of the college. One of the biggest challenges that I have faced as a principal is that of recruiting and motivating good faculty to give of their best to the training of ordinands in the seminary. The first challenge is to find faculty members who will have adequate qualifications and experience to satisfy the academic standards of the university to which we are affiliated/accredited (Bishop's College is affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College). In India, where theological education has no link to the state education system the option of asking foreign missionaries from outside India to come and teach is not there as central government does not give them long-term visas. We have to rely on local Indian staff. The second issue is making sure that there is diversity of language groups and denominations among the Faculty

(while at the same time making sure that there is the preparation of a second line of leadership from the denomination which has founded the seminary). The balance between different language and ethnic groups is also something that we have to look at in India. A diverse faculty helps in bringing varied insights to the students being trained and helps them with expanding their knowledge of other cultures, languages and denominations.

A great challenge is getting faculty members to work together as a team. This requires the principal to maintain good and friendly relations with all members of the faculty. Being fair and impartial is also very important. Realising what responsibilities are best handled by which faculty member is not easy, but something that a principal must learn quickly. Members of the faculty like being involved with various aspects of running the college and delegation of responsibilities is important not only for the health of the institution but saves the Principal from being over worked. The family members of the faculty members should also be on good terms with one and another and this requires that the principal should organise occasions and outings so that the faculty members and their families can interact with one another and deepen their friendships. Until the Covid pandemic struck we found that a bi-monthly potluck dinner was a good way for faculty and their families to interact.

No good academic work and theological research can take place without a good library. Keeping the library of a theological seminary in the Majority World well stocked with the latest theological books is a big challenge, especially when books are so expensive because most have been published in the West and have to be imported. Academic journals are also very expensive, as is the subscription to journal aggregators like JSTOR or ATLA Religions Database. So, one of the most important roles of the principal is to see how donations of books and funds earmarked for the use of the library can be obtained. Applications to funding agencies for funds to help with maintaining the library is an important part of the work of principals.

The third leg of the stool is ministerial formation. This requires that ordinands are given the best possible exposure to various types of ministerial and mission activity. In our university it is called Field Education. A good start is always to attach students to local churches and ask the priests and pastors to involve the students in the ministry of that church. This requires the support of the local clergy and it is the principal who can best convince them to take on the responsibility of training the students in various practical pastoral matters, while at the same time adjusting to the academic calendar of the college. This is necessary as often various mission activities in churches can clash with programmes organized by the college placing the students in a dilemma about which to attend. By working with clergy our students get a feel of how a church is run. However, it is not enough for ordinands to work only with churches. They need a broader exposure to various forms of ministry. A

good start are attachments to Christian hospitals to work alongside the hospital chaplains. In Kolkata we have also found that students gain a lot from working with the Missionaries of Charity (founded by St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta) which runs homes for the dying and destitute and homes for children. In India where there is much economic injustice and distress we have quite a large number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or community development projects that work to improve the lives of the marginalised and oppressed. Working with such organisations gives our students insights into how the mission of God (*missio Dei*) can be promoted at the grass-roots level. Students are inspired by those who work with dedication and sacrifice among the oppressed. The main role of the principal in all this is to oversee the work of the director of field education and to support him/her with advice and help in time of need. Sometimes work for the oppressed can cause a reaction from vested interests and it is the role of the principal to see that the students are not placed in harm's way. Working in the slums and rural parts of the country lead to challenges to vested interests which can result in threats of physical harm being given to our students. The principal along with the director of field education need to assess the situation and see the level of risk and then make a call on the placement of students.

Finally, how do we recruit students to the college? Since Bishop's College is affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College, which is the main theological university for Protestant and Orthodox churches in India, and follows the English medium of instruction, we are able to cater to students from many denominations other than the Church of North India (which runs Bishop's College) as all churches want their ordinands to obtain the BD degree from Serampore. These churches want their students to gain broader experience to be able to send them far away from their homes. Thus church sponsored candidates from the Church of South India, Presbyterian Church of India, Mar Thoma Church, Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church etc seek admission in the courses that are run by Bishop's College.