

**METHODIST MINISTERIAL TRAINING AND THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: HAVE WE HIT THE WALL,
OR IS THERE A ROAD AHEAD?**

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The formal study of theology and the institutions offering such study have had a hard time in many parts of the world in the last decades of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first. Many Christian denominations struggle to educate their future leadership and to train their student ministers. The term “struggle”, which became a cliché in the campaigns for political liberation in Southern Africa, seems now to apply accurately to the enterprise of educating and training ministers and other leaders in the Christian church, not least the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This is not to imply that the task was once easy, but has now become difficult. It has never been an easy task – both financially and ideologically its territory has hardly ever been uncontested. In the general difficulties that currently assail the formal study of theology, Southern Africa shares much in common with the rest of the world.

Those general difficulties are well set out by Mary Grey. She sets out five challenges that surely resonate with many who are involved in the provision of theological education and ministerial training. She notes first the conceptual challenge that has come with the growing awareness of the influence of “such social factors as economic situation, position in society, gender, race, historical and community memories, as well as the personal factors of heredity, and psychological and developmental influences”.¹ Such contextual factors, she points out, are now widely accepted as having a major shaping influence on values, decisions and cultural proprieties – in earlier times often thought to be matters of free choice. Grey rightly judges “religious faith and its credal expressions” to be threatened by “claims that truth is context-dependent and partial, and that universal claims of all-embracing truth are without substance”. Her second challenge echoes the grating roar of the outgoing tide of the “Sea of Faith” in Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach* when she notes that theology has been forced on to the defensive “by its increasingly marginal status in a continent [Western Europe], on the one hand secular, and on the other, multi-faith and multicultural.”² Her third challenge will be especially familiar to many of those operating in institutions of theological education, especially universities which offer theological subjects and degrees:

Thirdly, the educational scene itself throughout Western Europe is rapidly being affected for the worse by increased competition for scarce resources, the

¹ Mary Grey, “Christian theology, spirituality and the curriculum”, in (ed.) Adrian Thatcher, *Spirituality and the Curriculum*, (London & New York: Cassell, 1999), 12.

² *Ibid.*

undervaluing of scholarly research which is not income-generating, and the vast pruning exercise which many faculties of humanities are undergoing.³

Mary Grey adds the disaffecting factors of moral scandals of various kinds that have assailed the institutional churches, together with the rejection felt by young people and women, as well as by marginalised groups such as the gays and lesbians. Finally she notes the problematic role of religion in some of the most troubled conflict-ridden regions of the world, where religion seems to fuel the tensions and is widely perceived as the problem, not the solution.

As well as these universally experienced challenges, the Southern African theological scene has generated particularly sharp difficulties that are the concern of this paper. It is instructive to consider broadly the changes that have taken place over the past four decades and to compare the training and its products in 1967 with those in 2007. A student in training for ordination in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in 1967,⁴ was expected to emerge with at least a diploma or degree in Theology gained through three years of full time residential study. The sites of delivery of this education were the Federal Theological Seminary at Alice in the Eastern Cape, and Rhodes University in Grahamstown, also in the Eastern Cape. The equivalent student forty years later, in 2007, must also emerge from training prior to ordination with a diploma or degree in theology, but the norm is now only one year of full time residential study at John Wesley College in Pretoria. Furthermore, the material studied is not that of the College itself, but of the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC), which is designed for distance education. While the development of “in service training” has improved the quality and effectiveness of non-residential study, there can be little doubt that the past four decades have seen a clear decline in Methodist theological education and ministerial training. Certainly the capacity of our theological institutions has declined dramatically. How did this happen?

The 1990s saw serious losses in ecumenical theological education and ministerial training in South Africa. Having fought against apartheid for almost half a century, the two major training schemes of the “mainline” churches did not survive the dissolution of that unjust social order. But what were those schemes? Which Christian denominations were involved? What were their precursors in the Methodist church? What is the current context and how has the church responded? What are the likely ways ahead? Is there a future for formal, and especially residential, theological education? Is there a workable alternative, or is it to be downhill all the way to oblivion? These are the questions to be addressed in this paper, particularly as they concern the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Before proceeding, it is important to note four distinctive eras of theological education and ministerial training, and to recognise the changing cultural and political contexts

³ Mary Grey, “Christian theology, spirituality and the curriculum”, 13.

⁴ The name of the church was changed to the *Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (previously South Africa) in 1978 in order to reflect the fact that it covers the territory of six southern African nations: the Republic of South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique.

within which those successive eras developed. The first (1867-1948) was the missionary era which was characterised by two main interfaces – the interface of cultures between Western Christianity and Africa, and the interface of power between British colonial authority and the loss of African autonomy.⁵ The year 1867 saw the first Africans admitted into training for ministry within the Methodist Church. The second era (1948-1990) saw the imposition of the notoriously oppressive political system known as apartheid. Overlapping with apartheid was the third era (1960-1990), that of resistance against apartheid, especially in the case of the churches that participated in ecumenical initiatives and structures such as the Church Unity Commission and the South African Council of Churches. Finally, from 1994 to the present, there is the emerging post-apartheid era in which the churches are still trying to make sense of their new role in terms of culture, political profile and social influence.

Missions, schools and the beginnings of indigenous ministerial training

Education was an accompaniment of evangelisation. There was dramatic growth in general education, but not in education leading specifically towards ordination. Simon Gqubule says: “From the beginning, education went hand in hand with evangelisation. Each link in William Shaw’s chain of stations germinated a school. The establishment of schools was an essential aspect of evangelism designed primarily to help new converts to read the scriptures.”⁶ Gqubule is almost rapturous in his account of the expansion of missionary education and its impact on the indigenous population.

During the period 1850-1870 there was tremendous progress in African education, a phenomenal growth in the number of schools and the number of children attending these. It was during this period that some of our greatest missionary institutions were established....By 1954 almost every superintendent minister was also the manager of Methodist schools in his circuit. In that year there were 1461 Methodist day schools, 4 548 teachers, and 211 465 scholars. Throughout the country there were thousands of night schools for adults run by various churches. That Methodism made a glorious contribution to African education is beyond doubt. Together with other churches that were involved in African education, it transformed African life in the country. The influence of the church on individuals in society is immeasurable. It is significant that African leaders in almost every aspect of life in this country are products of missionary schools. Nelson Mandela attended Methodist primary schools, and then went on

⁵ The London Missionary Society began its work in Southern Africa in 1799. Important names associated with that work are John Philip, Johannes van der Kemp, Robert Moffatt and David Livingstone. The Methodist missionary initiative started with the arrival at the Cape of Barnabas Shaw in 1816. His sphere of influence was focused on the interior to the north of the Cape around Lilliefountain, and especially among the Namaqua people. It was William Shaw (no relative of Barnabas) who accompanied the British settler parties of 1820 to the Eastern Cape, however, whose mission work had more lasting impact. William Shaw envisioned, and established ‘a chain of missions’ stretching eastwards from Grahamstown towards Natal. It was this chain of missions and the associated schools that provided the infrastructure for the early development of theological education and ministerial training in Southern Africa.

⁶ Simon Gqubule, “Methodism and education”, in (eds.) P. Malinga and N. Richardson, *Rediscovering Wesley for Africa: Themes from John Wesley for Southern Africa Today*, (Silverton: EMMU, 2005), 79.

to Clarkebury, Healdtown, and Wesley House, Fort Hare [University]. To this day he is proud of his Methodist upbringing and membership.⁷

Joan Millard points out that the development of indigenous ministers did not keep pace with the development of schools in general. She says: “Full ordination was almost fifty years in coming. Nevertheless, without the help of the indigenous people among whom the missionaries worked, the Word of God would never have spread.”⁸ It was 1865 when five African men were accepted as candidates for the Methodist ministry. Four of these began their theological training at Healdtown in the Eastern Cape in 1867. They were taught Theology, Biblical and general information, homiletics, English grammar and Wesley’s sermons.⁹ In 1880 the theological training was relocated to Lesseyton, near Queenstown.¹⁰ Noteworthy is the emphasis on English language. Clearly the training was not to be conducted in the indigenous languages, but rather in the language of the missionaries, even though these students were being trained for ministry among African people. In 1920 theological education was moved to Fort Hare University, where the Methodist Church opened Wesley House in 1921. During the next thirteen years the Presbyterians (Iona House, 1924) and Anglicans (Bede Hall, 1934) also opened houses there.¹¹

It is notable that a vital principle of theological education was embodied at this point – that of linking theological education and the training of ministers with the life of a university campus. As Gqubule explains:

The Methodist Church has always wanted to give its ministers both a general and a theological education. For this reason British Methodist Theological Colleges from the beginning have been associated with neighbouring universities. Following this pattern, in 1920, training was transferred from Lesseyton to the recently established University College of Fort Hare, in the hope that theological students might thereby be afforded the opportunity to improve their general education and academic qualifications.¹²

Gqubule goes on to acknowledge that in practice few theological students took the opportunity that was afforded them. This seminary-university arrangement, however, made other valuable opportunities possible. For example, staff appointments could be shared between the churches and the university. Madise points out that a senior lecturer in theology was appointed by the University College, and the three wardens of the hostels who were ordained ministers would also teach theology.¹³ Thus was born in South

⁷ Gqubule, “Methodism and education”, 79-80.

⁸ J.A. Millard, “Training indigenous clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, (June 2003, Volume XXVIX, No.1), 93.

⁹ J. Whiteside, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of South Africa*, (London: Elliot Stock; Cape Town: Juta, 1906), 285

¹⁰ The date of the move to Lesseyton is given as 1883 by Gqubule, “Methodism and education”, 83.

¹¹ M. Madise, Training of Clergy in the English-speaking churches: The native ministry”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, (June 2003, Volume XXVIX, No.1), 72.

¹² Gqubule, “Methodism and education”, 84.

¹³ M. Madise, Training of Clergy in the English-speaking churches: The native ministry”, 72.

Africa, the important principle of theological education linking with higher education in the wider society, and of seminaries operating in partnership with universities. Strengthening this arrangement was its ecumenical nature, with various churches participating together, in an early expression of ecumenical co-operation.

There was also significant financial benefit to the churches and universities in this co-operative arrangement in the sharing of human resources. In the South African context, the historic universities have always been state universities, financed by the central government. Each university student is subsidised, especially by way of the salaries of the academic staff being paid by the state. The Methodist Church was later to make good use of this opportunity in its later partnership with Rhodes University.¹⁴ By contrast, seminaries that stand alone pay dearly for their autonomy – some may call it isolation. They must pay the full cost of the education of their ministerial students, from physical facilities and living expenses to the salaries of academic and support staff. This was a burden that was to weigh heavily on ministerial training in Southern Africa in future years. In summary, then, the early partnership between churches and universities in the education and training of ministers opened up rich benefits – financial, educational, and ecumenical.

From the old country to the new

During these nineteenth and early twentieth century developments, the white Methodist missionaries and ministers almost all came from Britain and it was assumed that their training would take place in England. An example is that of William Everleigh who came from England to South Africa in 1903 and entered the Methodist ministry in Durban. Although his ministry was to be in South Africa, he went back to England for his training – to Didsbury College in Manchester.¹⁵ He returned to South Africa in 1907 and was to play a significant role in the early development of Methodist ministerial training there.

As early as 1891 the idea had been suggested that the training should take place in South Africa, but nothing had come of it.¹⁶ After the 1914-18 war, numbers of untrained white candidates and probationers began to increase. In 1924 two suggestions were made: one that the training be situated in Pietermaritzburg and the other, an early signal from a Presbyterian source of the ecumenical co-operation that was to follow decades later, that it be located in a joint hostel in the Afrikaans university town of Stellenbosch. Neither of these suggestions materialised. By 1928 the number of candidates and probationers had grown to eighteen and the decision had been made that the training should be in South Africa. William Everleigh was appointed convener of a committee that considered the practicalities of the decision.

In mid-1928, five students began their studies for ministry in the buildings of the recently closed Wesleyan High School for Girls in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape, but the

¹⁴ See this point in Madise, *Training of Clergy in the English-speaking churches: The native ministry*”, 78.

¹⁵ Minutes 1946

¹⁶ See E.Lynn Cragg, *The Story of Bollihope*, (Cape Town: Blackshaw, 1967), 3.

Conference of 1929 decided that Cape Town would be better location for a seminary. Lynn Cragg, who had taken charge of the Grahamstown operation from James Pendlebury, was appointed vice-principal and tutor. The principal was Dr William Flint, and the Cape Town institution came to be popularly known by the name of the house in which it was situated – ‘Bollihope’. The official name was the Methodist Theological College and classes began in July 1931, with the official opening in January 1932. Vacillation continued, however, as to the continuation of the college and 1933 the decision was to return to the practice of sending students to train in England. The following year that decision was rescinded in favour of South Africa, but the question was opened once again as the best location. In 1935, the decision was once again for Cape Town, by which time Bollihope had been operating for four years. Underlying the vacillation was a north-south tension with the Transvaal missions, which remained under the jurisdiction of the British Conference until 1932, opposed to Bollihope and inclined towards training in Britain. Another example of the Transvaal mindset was the proposal that Methodist training be opened up at the university college in Pretoria where the Dutch Reformed churches conducted their training. In response, Lynn Cragg asked in a letter: “why an Afrikaans and Calvinist college should be regarded as suitable for Methodist probationers?”¹⁷

Bollihope struggled along until the outbreak of war in 1939, with minimal support from the connexion, limited accommodation and slender personnel, with Lynn Cragg doing almost all the teaching. Cragg expresses his feelings thus: ‘It could not have gone on as a one-man show in inadequate buildings....But my feeling is that during those eleven years Conference never took the matter seriously enough to make a real effort to provide adequate buildings and staff for the work’¹⁸ At the end of 1940 classes ended and Bollihope was put up for sale. It was sold for a low price in January 1940, with the buyer selling it soon afterwards at a substantial profit.¹⁹ In the eleven years of its operation, fifty-nine students had passed through its classes. Lynn Cragg rightly regards it as “an experiment, a stepping stone to greater things”.²⁰

By 1942, the spirit of ecumenism was on the rise, and the Christian Council provided a gathering point at which various churches could talk together about the training of their ministries. Among the universities, Rhodes University at Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape was the only English medium university in South Africa open to the possibility of offering theological study as part of its curriculum. These explorations led to the establishment of the Faculty of Divinity at Rhodes in 1946. This partnership with a traditionally ‘white’ university mirrored the existing partnership with the ‘black’ university of Fort Hare where the Methodist Church had opened residential facilities and appointed chaplains since 1921. Ministerial training in this co-operative arrangement was seen to be beneficial in at least three important respects. First there was the sharing

¹⁷ Cragg, *The Story of Bollihope*, 21. More recently Peter Storey issues the same caution. He warns against “links with Universities where the theological faculty, because of a Calvinistic background, for instance, cannot form Wesleyans.” Peter Storey, *And Are We Yet Alive? Revisioning our Wesleyan Heritage in a New Southern Africa*, (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 62.

¹⁸ Cragg, *The Story of Bollihope*, 47.

¹⁹ Cragg, *The Story of Bollihope*, 45.

²⁰ Cragg, *The Story of Bollihope*, 50.

of the financial load referred to earlier. Second, it was a partnership with those other churches that had come to be seen as partners in mission. Third, the training took place together with those who were studying for positions of leadership in society. Hewson describes it as a double vision of 'joint training' and 'university training'.²¹ This initiative provided one of the pillars of a strong edifice of theological education that lasted for over fifty years until the end of the century.

Ecumenism, academic achievement and resistance against apartheid

The Theology Faculty at Rhodes University was the institutional expression of a giant step forward in theological education. Writing in 1981, when the scheme was well established, Hewson describes the arrangement thus:

Four churches, Anglican, Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian, in 1946 entered into an agreement with Rhodes University College to establish a Chair of Divinity, and there came into being the scheme of Joint Ministerial Training. Our part in this venture was thus the natural historical development of our own experience in ministerial training in South Africa.

Three of these churches, the Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian, in 1947 made an agreement with Rhodes University to build a house of residence for single ministerial students. This was named Livingstone House, and was opened in 1949. By this agreement the partner churches have the right to nominate the warden of Livingstone House, and the appointment rests with the University....

A third agreement made by the four churches with Rhodes University in 1959 led to the establishing of two additional Chairs in the Faculty of Divinity, those in New Testament Studies and of Ecclesiastical History. This agreement gives to the churches the right to nominate for any appointment to a vacant Chair in the Faculty of Divinity.

As well as having its roots in the needs and experiences of the participating churches, and developing a natural ecumenical inclination among those who trained there, Rhodes also helped to contextualise and conscientise its students. One of the peaks of this latter process arose in the 1960s. A Methodist tutor, Dr Basil Moore, not only challenged and disturbed students' traditional ideas and attitudes in class, but was the leading figure in initiating and establishing the University Christian Movement. This movement, which facilitated the development of progressive political and theological attitudes, became influential at Rhodes and on other university campuses among Christian students and academic staff. Always a thorn in the side of the apartheid state, the movement was banned in 1976. Basil Moore, in the meantime, was removed from Rhodes by the Methodist Church, banned by the apartheid security apparatus, and finally left South Africa in voluntary exile, for a short while becoming the General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement in England in the early 1970s.

²¹ L.A. Hewson, *They Seek a City: Methodism in Grahamstown*, (Grahamstown: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1981), 61.

Apart from the challenges posed by individual lecturers, the theological curriculum at Rhodes followed the traditional disciplines of Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Church History. There was an optional provision of Social Work which inclined some students in the direction of pastoral care, and there were additional denominational studies that were not part of the degree curriculum. Methodist students were provided with three years of full time residential study and at first most of them completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in theology²². Those who arrived with degrees were enrolled in the postgraduate Bachelor of Divinity programme, and doctoral degrees in theological subjects were also offered. In the 1970s there was a growing awareness of the need for a degree that took into account the practice of ministry. Thus the four year Bachelor of Theology degree was established, with the fourth year being situated in a practical ministerial setting. The pastoral studies mainly took the form of reflection on the experience of ministry.

Rhodes was not the only successful and growing centre of ecumenical theological education in the Eastern Cape in that era. About two hours drive way, near the town of Alice and adjacent to the campus of the University of Fort Hare, was the Federal Theological Seminary (Fedsem). The need for Fedsem arose as a result of the implementation of the aggressive and intrusive educational policies of the apartheid state. The 1954 Bantu Education Act which limited the education of black South Africans to preparation for ‘certain forms of labour’ had the devastating effect of bringing about the closure of hundreds of mission schools operated by the church. The policy was then extended to the universities in 1959 with the passing of the innocent sounding ‘Extension of Universities Education Act’. The newly imposed ideology made the churches’ participation in a black university such as Fort Hare untenable. They therefore withdrew from theological operations which had operated since 1921.²³

In response, eight churches joined forces and resources and Fedsem was opened in 1963 on land granted by the United Free Church of Scotland. The seminary was federal in structure in that it was comprised of four constituent colleges: St Peter’s (Anglican), John Wesley (Methodist), St Columba’s (Presbyterian) and Adams United College (Congregationalist). It was a remarkable ecumenical achievement, perhaps the most advanced scheme of its kind in the world at the time. John de Gruchy holds it in high regard:

It was, in many respects, the crowning achievement of a century of missionary based theological education, and a bold attempt at ecumenical theological formation.²⁴

²² Some other denominations, such as the Presbyterians, were required to do four years of full time academic study.

²³ At the same time, some tenured professors also resigned their positions in protest. Among them were the Methodist, Professor S. Nyembezi and the Anglican, Z.K Matthews, who came to play a significant role in international ecumenical affairs.

²⁴ J.W. de Gruchy, “From the particular to the global: locating our task as theological educators within the viability study process, *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in South Africa*, 3 (October 1996), 22.

Much of the life of the seminary took place within each of the four colleges – spiritual formation, daily worship, discipline, entertainment. The role of seminary president was filled by each of the college principals in turn on a three-year rotational basis. Classes for the core curriculum were shared and the teaching function was also shared, with the churches delegating suitable individuals to the task. The only staff member employed by the seminary as a whole was the administrative post of registrar. Significantly, there was no shared Fedsem chapel, and this was to become a damaging point of tension in the later life of the seminary.

The 1970s and 80s were in many respects the high water mark of theological education in the mainline English speaking churches. The two institutions were well established, the academic programmes were sound and widely recognised, there was ecumenical co-operation and financial manageability. There was also clear social and political witness in the two schemes. At Rhodes, as has been described, there was conscientisation of students against the injustices of apartheid, and at Fedsem resistance against apartheid was even more focused and overt. Compared with the students on the neighbouring Fort Hare campus, Fedsem students enjoyed freedom of expression and assembly. In fundamental respects the two campuses were contrasts of each other. Fedsem was the birthplace of Black consciousness and Black theology in Southern Africa. The University of Fort Hare, a state institution, operated within the straitjacket of the Bantu Education policy, and there was strict control of gatherings and organisation. Any sign of dissent was dealt with harshly. Students from Fedsem, however, took their spirit of free enquiry onto the Fort Hare campus. Fort Hare students, attracted by the openness of Fedsem, visited there and even sought asylum there on occasion. The recipe for tension between the neighbouring institutions was evident.

In 1974, the Council of Fedsem was issued with an expropriation order declaring that the seminary property was required for the expansion of the University of Fort Hare. A new site for the seminary was now sought. After an unsettled year at the campus of the Anglican St Bede's College in Umtata, capital of the pseudo-independent 'homeland' of Transkei, the seminary moved to Pietermaritzburg in Kwazulu-Natal. Temporary accommodation was found at the Edendale Lay Ecumenical Centre and, in 1980, the seminary took occupation of its final home – a spacious, well appointed, purpose built property in the neighbouring Imbali township. It seemed that the wilderness wanderings of the seminary were finally at an end.

There could be no rest, however, from the pressures of apartheid and the growing tension generated by the struggle for liberation. The seminary continued to experience the surveillance and suspicion of the state security forces. On occasion there was even violent intrusion by those forces. In addition there was tension and unrest in the surrounding neighbourhood. The late 1980s saw growing violence between the black factions of Inkatha and the African National Congress that culminated in the seven-day war of 1990 which left many dead and temporarily flooded Pietermaritzburg and its environs with over ten thousand refugees. The seminary, which was never fully accepted by the surrounding neighbourhood, was often under threat and had to be closed on two

occasions. Security guards were employed and this added to the financial strain on the seminary.

While Fedsem displayed great courage and resilience against these outside pressures, it was the internal fault lines that were to result in its collapse. The theological education schemes of the churches, while strongly inclined against apartheid and vigorous in their denunciation of the government, were ironically an embodiment of segregation. Rhodes was established for whites and Fedsem for blacks. By the late 1980s this pattern was beginning to break down, with black students being sent to Rhodes and a few whites attending Fedsem, but the die had been cast and was not easy to break. John de Gruchy explains: “The segregation of theological education reflected the reality of segregation in the churches themselves, but Fedsem was a symbol also of the churches’ resistance to Apartheid.”²⁵

Perhaps even more of a threat to the endurance of the two institutions were the non-ecumenical and even anti-ecumenical forces at work. Some are convinced that this was the most damaging factor of all.²⁶ Whatever the reasons, the cold hard fact is that the 1990s saw the closure of both schemes – an incalculable loss to theological education in Southern Africa.

Defeat in a time of victory

The 1990s dawned as a time of great liberation and victory for democracy in South Africa. In February 1990 the announcement was made in parliament by President F.W. de Klerk that Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for twenty-seven years, was to be freed along with other black leaders, and that the liberation movements, banned since the early 1960s, were to be free to operate. High points in the growing euphoria of the time were the inauguration of Mandela as President in April 1994 and the institution of the New Constitution in May 1996.

There is a tragic irony in the fact that having fought against apartheid and having survived its vicious attacks, Fedsem did not survive the post-apartheid era. Even more ironic was the day on which closure was decided by the Fedsem council. In the morning of 13th October 1993, there were celebrations for the thirtieth year of the seminary’s existence, and in the afternoon the vote was taken to close the seminary! It is significant that the English-speaking churches voted for closure, while the black churches opposed closure. The English-speaking churches still had the Rhodes University scheme, while the black churches had nothing.²⁷

²⁵ J.W. de Gruchy, “Grappling with a colonial heritage: the English-speaking churches under imperialism and apartheid,” in (eds.) Elphick, R. and Davenport, R. *Christianity in South Africa: a Political, Social and Cultural History*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 159.

²⁶ See G. A. Duncan, “The end foreshadowed in the beginning: the closure of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae*, June 2004, Volume XXX, No. 1, 1-31.

²⁷ G. A. Duncan, “The end foreshadowed in the beginning”, 27.

What caused Fedsem to close? Graham Duncan, a minister of the Church of Scotland, who was a member of the academic staff of Fedsem, is convinced that the main problem was the lack of adequate ecumenical co-operation. He says:

[T]he failure of the Federal Theological Seminary of Southern Africa was due to the inability of those involved in its foundation to articulate and promote a clear ecumenical vision to guide its progress. As time progressed a number of problems emerged which severely tested its durability. Many of these were very real issues, but had the vision been clear and unequivocal, it is possible that these problems could have been overcome.²⁸

Duncan's argument centres on devotional life within the seminary. The Anglicans, who were the only ones with a chapel, struggled to be open to the other denominations. This form of segregation was felt by the others. Attempts to create times of common worship met with little success. It is interesting, however, that Duncan's account with its strong emphasis on ecumenism makes scant mention of the Methodists in the creation and development of the seminary, but gives them prominence in the death throes and last rites. Significant too is that Philippe Denis, who is presently co-operating with Duncan in compiling a major study on Fedsem, omits the Methodists, the biggest single contingent, from his list of the founding churches of the seminary.²⁹ Purity Malinga agrees that the main weakness was the "lack of commitment to structural unity".³⁰ Des Van der Water, like Duncan, sees the end foreshadowed in the beginning and believes that the churches were driven together by adverse circumstances rather than choosing to be together freely and with conviction.

The initial bonding was thus not primarily theological, but praxiological. It was a case of the churches having to come together – some might say forced together – to do something together about their shared needs of theological education and ministerial formation.³¹

James Massey rebuts the argument that the main cause was lack of ecumenical commitment. As an ex-member of the academic staff of Fedsem, he remembers the passionate and often costly commitment to ecumenism of his fellow Methodists who were founders and leaders in Fedsem (Leslie Hewson, David Bandey, Donald Cragg and Brian Banwell), especially in the context of the debates within their own denomination.³² He would probably agree with Carol Mouat's that the main cause of closure was economic.

²⁸ G. A. Duncan, "The end foreshadowed in the beginning", 1.

²⁹ Philippe Denis, "Fedsem ten years later: the unwritten history of an ecumenical seminary," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 117, (November 2003), 70. Denis speaks of the eight churches that joined forces to constitute the seminary, but lists only seven. Is the omission of the Methodists innocent, Freudian or deliberate?

³⁰ Malinga

³¹ C. Mouat, "Ecumenical theological education in South Africa", in (ed.) C. Lombaard, *Essays and Exercises in Ecumenism*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999), 222-223.

³² James Massey: personal conversation with the author on July 2007.

Carol Mouat cites Brian Banwell in her argument that theological education in South Africa is in crisis and that a major cause is the cost factor. In Banwell's words, "Cost of residential training is in danger of 'pricing itself out of the market'."³³ Duncan agrees that finances were indeed a major factor. The seminary could accommodate one hundred and twenty students and needed at least a hundred to meet its costs. Student numbers began to drop alarmingly into the 1990s – in 1990 there were only eighty-five, in 1991, seventy-five, in 1992, seventy, and in 1993 only sixty, with the Anglicans sending no students after 1992. Duncan sees this decline in enrolment and the subsequent financial difficulties as an effect of the deeper ecumenical problems rather than as a primary cause of the demise of Fedsem. Along with her financial argument, Mouat puts forward a strong case for ecumenical theological education and ministerial formation to take the non-residential route of study 'by extension'. She is an advocate for the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) which opened in Johannesburg in 1976, and which has shown remarkable growth in recent years.

The emotionally charged and guilt ridden debates as to the main cause of the closure of Fedsem continue to rage. Whatever the cause, however, the damage to ecumenical relations and theological education has been very great. The need for healing and forgiveness among the individuals and institutions involved has been recognised, but thus far attempts to arrange some kind of formal emotional closure have proved difficult to arrange and, fourteen years later, have yet to happen.³⁴ Sadly, after starting in the vanguard of ecumenism, instead of facilitating an ecumenical advance, the Fedsem experience has probably resulted in an ecumenical setback and diminishing of mutual confidence. It is not unlike the way in which a relationship between friends flourishes but then does not survive a step too far in intimacy!

The financial argument certainly applies to the closure of the Rhodes University Faculty of Divinity in 1999. A new era in university management throughout South Africa decreed that each and every section of a university be financially viable. The participating churches had been warned on more than one occasion by the Rhodes authorities that the numbers of theological students being sent by the participating churches were not adequate to meet the costs. Adding to the woes were poor relationships among the members of the Divinity Faculty. A major point of division among the academic staff was ideological – to what extent should the methods of teaching adapt in response to the increasingly multicultural nature of the student body? How contextual should the study and teaching of theology be in both its content and method? The deep and painful divisions on this issue in the Divinity Faculty were widely known on the Rhodes campus and there was little confidence in the ability of the Faculty to improve its parlous situation. Finally a decision was taken in the Senate to close the Divinity Faculty. No new intake of students was allowed, and the last classes were held in 1999.

Ecumenical theological education in South Africa had survived over four decades of apartheid, but did not survive the decade of liberation. Future reflection will judge the extent of the loss. The obvious, visible effect was the scattering of the churches into their

³³ C. Mouat, "Ecumenical theological education in South Africa", 219.

³⁴ Philippe Denis, "Fedsem ten years later: the unwritten history of an ecumenical seminary," 79.

own denominational training schemes. The Methodists had derelict property in Pretoria that had been part of the Kilnerton missionary institution – one of the schools and teacher training colleges that had closed due to the imposition of Bantu Education by the apartheid government. The new John Wesley College opened there in 1994.³⁵

Dispossession in the new dispensation

The nature of theological curricula and the quality of theological education varies greatly among different institutions. Therefore recognition and accreditation are important considerations, especially in the case of students who move between institutions, usually with the aim of furthering their qualifications. While the provision of sound basic theological education and training for ministry are essential, surely one of the most significant marks of a viable scheme of theological education is its ability to produce its own future teachers. In order to achieve this it must enable some students to go beyond the basics. Hence a scheme should not lead into an educational cul de sac, but facilitate the development of its students to the highest possible levels. This is where formal recognition and accreditation are important – to facilitate the ongoing development and progress of those who study.

When Rhodes University College, as it was then called, first opened to theological study in 1947, its qualifications like those of many similar institutions were accredited through the University of South Africa. In 1951, however, it became known as Rhodes University and offered its own degrees. When Fedsem opened in 1963, the only qualification available to it was the Licentiate in Theology that was offered by the Anglican theological colleges. It was strongly felt that a more broadly based qualification was required and, in 1965, the participating churches together established the Joint Board for the Diploma in Theology.³⁶ The Joint Board became the chief accrediting body for the Methodist Church of Southern Africa for forty years, until in 2005 it lost its official recognition under the new South African education legislation.

In 1997 the arrival of new legislation was signalled by the introduction of new terminology and confusing acronyms. Courses of study, now called “qualifications”, and subjects, now known as “modules”, are measured by “notional study hours”, and “articulated” with other qualifications according to their level on the NQF (National Qualifications Framework). All qualifications are authorised by SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority). This new system does not provide for any accrediting bodies other than itself. Therefore the church-initiated Joint Board was no longer recognised

³⁵ The Anglicans closed all their existing seminaries and on the site of St Paul’s College, Grahamstown, opened their new, combined seminary under the name of the College of the Transfiguration. The Presbyterians headed in the direction of their historic roots at Lovedale in the Eastern Cape, and worked for a while with the University of Fort Hare. Their major training centre now, however, is at the University of Pretoria. The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa has had no home base for its trainee ministers for over a decade, but in 2006 opened a House of Formation in Pietermaritzburg, where their students are registered for theology degrees at the University of Kwazulu-Natal.

³⁶ Information provided by the Rev. Dr. Donald Cragg in a telephone conversation on 18th July 2007. Dr Cragg, then a tutor at Fedsem, was present at the meeting to establish the Joint Board and served at various times as internal and external examiner, Secretary and Registrar of the Board.

and could no longer accredit the work done in seminaries. Each of the nineteen seminaries previously accredited by the Joint Board must now apply to become its own “qualification provider”. The process of application, for which institutions must pay the state, has proved to be an exercise in frustration for the seminaries. It seems that the legislation is designed for two main kinds of education provider – state institutions and private, profit making operations. It does not seem to comprehend that there can be non-profit institutions like church seminaries.

All of the seminaries previously accredited by the Joint Board have found it difficult to gain accreditation and registration.³⁷ Both terms apply and it is indeed a double edged process. There must be both accreditation by the Council on Higher Education, and registration by the Department of Education. In the case of John Wesley College, provisional accreditation has been granted for the academic operation – the teaching faculty, the library, and the curriculum of a “level 6 diploma” which is next level below a bachelor’s degree. Registration, however, was not granted. The main criteria for registration relate to governance, finance and physical facilities. Although all the problems in the previous evaluation have now been addressed and further application has been made, official recognition is still awaited. Until both academic accreditation and registration have been granted, the college cannot admit fee paying students. In the meantime it can deal only with those students for ministry whose fees are paid by the church. In the case of the MCSA this is feasible, because all candidates accepted for ministry are admitted to the ranks as “probationer ministers” and their studies are presently paid for by the church.³⁸

If John Wesley College is not yet registered, for what qualification then are its students studying? As an interim arrangement, the students are registered with the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC). This has the effect of making the classes into coaching sessions for TEEC assignments. No matter how good the study material, most theological teachers would be unhappy in teaching material not their own. Even Lynn Cragg writing of his experience way back in the days of Bollihope said: “I had always felt free to follow my own courses, and no lecturer wants his text books laid down from the outside.”³⁹ Ironically, however, TEEC itself is not yet registered. Having fulfilled all the requirements of the state, it seemed that registration for TEEC was imminent. Having

³⁷ Among the few seminaries now fully accredited and registered are St Joseph’s Theological Institute, a Catholic seminary near Pietermaritzburg, and the South African Theological Seminary, a theologically conservative correspondence school established by individuals who had been employed in the Department of Education and who were therefore well appraised of all the new bureaucratic requirements. Previously St Joseph’s had been accredited by the Urban University in Rome. When enquiries were made as to whether this arrangement could remain in place the official response was that it could, as long as the accrediting institution was accredited and registered by the South African authorities. This would mean a centuries old university in Rome, recognized throughout the world, rearranging its programme to fit the criteria of a “distance provider” as laid down by the South African educational authorities. Fr. Dan Coryn, President of St Joseph’s, acknowledges that the theology degrees offered at St Joseph’s are now in fact “secular qualifications” (Conversation by telephone on 11th June 2007).

³⁸ This has been the arrangement since ministerial studies were first introduced, but changes are now being instituted that require students to pay at least a portion of their academic costs.

³⁹ E. Lynn Cragg, *The Story of Bollihope*, 39.

begged and cajoled the educational bureaucrats for almost two years, however, TEEC is still waiting.

From previously providing three years of full time residential study for its ministerial students in an ecumenical setting, the MCSA now offers only one year of full time residential study in its own small college,⁴⁰ with the remainder of the required modules being taken while in service in the church, working through an education-by extension college and all for a qualification not yet registered. Has theological education and ministerial training in the MCSA ever been in such a weak state since its inception?

Is it all doom and gloom and nothing more?

The move towards in-service training which began in the 1980s, motivated mainly by cost cutting was, in the view of Peter Storey, “a short sighted exercise in false economy” that robbed many ministers of residential training. He bemoans the fact that “the MCSA seems bent on mediocrity”⁴¹ Without denying the overall weakness of the present scheme, two positive points should be noted. First, there is the three phase structure and, second, the impact of outcomes based education.

When new candidates, who must have successfully completed at least one year of local (lay) preachers’ study, are accepted into the ministry, they enter into a three phase ministerial training scheme that is designed to take at least five years to complete. In the first year they are placed in pastoral appointments and located in a Phase One programme. This requires that they serve as student ministers in churches, but for two days of each week attend a residential centre within reasonably close proximity to their church work. There are four such centres in the connexion, strategically situated in Soweto, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Pinetown near Durban. The programme in these centres focuses on their pastoral experience and is described as “action-reflection” learning. Some modules of the TEEC curriculum are also pursued during this year. The Phase One year seems to be one of the success stories of present scheme of ministerial training.

The outcomes based philosophy of the state, which is followed closely by the TEEC curriculum, has much to commend it as a vehicle for ministerial training. The approach is popularly described as engaging not only the head as in more traditional approaches, but also the heart and the hands. In other words, it facilitates a three-fold competence in knowledge and understanding, commitment (values), and practical, operational skills. This combination is surely required for the development of the “learning clergy” that Jones and Armstrong speak of, who are fully engaged in the day-to-day life of the world in which they minister and who continue to learn long after their formal education is over. Significantly, “feet” are added to the standard “head, heart, hands”!

⁴⁰ In 2006 there were only 24 students at John Wesley College and in 2007 there are 27, of whom four are private students committed to studying towards candidature for ministry.

⁴¹ Peter Storey, *And Are We Yet Alive? Revisioning our Wesleyan Heritage in a New Southern Africa*, (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 58.

We suggest that learning is a lifelong vocation: one that begins with learning to feel and think and act as a disciple of Jesus Christ, that continues through formal educative formation to become a pastor, and then continues with learning throughout pastoral ministry as one preaches, celebrates the sacraments, leads, and equips others to learn and grow in their own vocations as disciples. Our image depends on the recognition that “learning” involves the shaping of our hearts as well as our minds and hands and feet, the cultivation of a way of life that is affective, cognitive, disciplined, and integrally connected to action.⁴²

Evidence that the required “outcomes” have been met must be provided, both in the course of study for which student ministers are registered, and in a “portfolio” which is mainly concerned with practical ministry. The portfolio of evidence is a key requirement for the advance from Phase One, into Phase Two (which includes their one year at college), and finally into Phase Three which is the ordination year. This outcomes-based scheme is designed to facilitate practical relevance in ministry compared with the old “ivory tower” approach in which the application of learning was left almost entirely to chance and to the natural inclinations of the students.

Carol Mouat, in her advocacy of the TEEC’s non-residential study by extension, points to further advantages.⁴³ First, TEEC is a thoroughly ecumenical institution, being supported by the same mainline churches that previously participated in Fedsem and Rhodes and some others besides, such as the Lutherans and Catholics. She also believes that this approach helps to close the clergy-laity gap and other gaps such as gender and age; that it encourages the study of theology in the context where it happens; and that it makes theological study available to a far wider range of people. Together with these points goes what is probably the strongest argument of all, that it is vastly cheaper. Learners (as students are now called) can now continue with their employment while they study, and do not have to go the route of sacrificing their earnings as a condition of studying. These are undoubtedly powerful arguments and, given the lowly economic stratum from which many MCSA student ministers are drawn, it is imperative that TEEC continue to provide opportunities in theological study for our students.

The vital question that must be asked, however, concerns the adequacy of the extension method in the formation of ministers. Certainly it is open to both ministers and lay people, to young and old, to men and women, to those in employment, and certainly it is ecumenical. Certainly it can provide information, but can it validly claim to provide effective formation? There can be no questioning TEEC’s opening up of the possibility of theological education to many for whom it would otherwise be closed. In terms of the TEEC slogan, “Equipping anyone anywhere for ministry”, there can be no doubting the “anyone anywhere” part, but what may be in doubt is the extent to which it really equips for ministry.

⁴² L. Gregory Jones & Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 113.

⁴³ C. Mouat, “Ecumenical theological education in South Africa”, 227-231.

Carol Mouat's helpful article ends with a consideration of the tutorial system that is crucial to TEEC's mission. It is the local tutors and tutorials that make the difference between a purely correspondence programme and an extension programme. Mouat lists the advantages of the tutorial system that is designed to enable students to:

- understand the subject they are studying;
- ask critical questions;
- relate their theological studies to their own context;
- meet other students and learn from one another;
- help each other with their research, and also be encouraged to do their own research;
- share resources with each other;
- discuss assignment topics;
- help other students to learn and think.⁴⁴

But is this vital system firmly in place, and how feasible is such a system in the far flung rural expanses of Southern Africa from which so many of our MCSA ministerial students come? Is Mouat's list not a detailed and accurate account of precisely what is provided in residential education? Certainly in service ministerial training and education by extension are cheaper, but is it not cheaper in the way that a bicycle is cheaper than a motor car? Both are means of transport and a lot faster than walking, but a bicycle will never carry you as far and as fast and as efficiently as a car. Some might point out that in some localities, especially in the third world, a bicycle may be better suited to the terrain, but this consideration must be evaluated in the light of rapid urbanisation. With the population drift to towns and cities comes increased sophistication and improved education. The future of ministry in the emerging democratic South Africa surely lies more with the motor car than with the bicycle!

What kind of road lies ahead?

In May 2004 the Presiding Bishop of the MCSA, Ivan Abrahams, instituted a Review Commission on theological education and ministerial training. The commission's report was presented to the Conference of September 2005. A decision was taken that had two main pillars: that the residential component of ministerial training be for three years as a norm, but for at least two; and that John Wesley College be relocated from its present site in Pretoria to Pietermaritzburg.

The attraction of Pietermaritzburg is not retrospective in that it was previously the site of Fedsem, nor is it merely because the School of Religion and Theology of the University of Kwazulu-Natal is based on the local campus. The attraction is the well-established Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions. In March 1990, Fedsem, together with St Joseph's Theological Institute (Catholic) and the university's School of Theology entered into the Cluster agreement. When Fedsem closed it was replaced in the Cluster by the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA). Also attached are the Lutheran

⁴⁴ C. Mouat, "Ecumenical theological education in South Africa", 230.

Theological Institute, the Congregational House of Formation and the Moravian College. The Cluster is unique in Southern Africa and provides a network of shared resources both human and physical that is both rich and varied. There is team teaching and there are courses shared by teachers, there is cross registration by students, there are computer linked libraries which provide probably the largest theological library resources in Africa. Even if the University's School of Religion and Theology were to be downsized or closed, the Cluster would still be able to operate effectively with the various institutions offering each other mutual support and assistance.

Furthermore, the nature of the university courses has changed out of all recognition in the past two decades. It is thoroughly contextual in both content and method, and some course offerings are community based. While the traditional four areas of concentration are still in evidence (Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Ethics, History of Christianity, and Practical Theology), integration between the disciplines is encouraged.⁴⁵ One of the strongest and most prominent programmes is "Theology and Development", which is intentionally practical in its focus, and offers study to doctoral level.

The envisaged arrangement would be for John Wesley College to gain official registration for the Diploma in Theology and Ministry, and to be able to stand on its own as a level 6 Diploma qualification provider. In its academic offerings it will seek co-operate with the other Cluster institutions, especially ESSA which also offers courses at Diploma level. The attraction of the University is that those students who are willing and able could be registered for the Bachelor of Theology degree. The strongest students would then be able to proceed to Honours (4th year), Masters and doctoral study. These students, as well as the MCSA which makes funds available, would benefit in two respects. First, it is estimated that all those studying at university pay only approximately one-third of the actual cost of the education, with the rest being borne by the state. Second, the university's School of Religion and Theology offers significant financial assistance to ministerial students of officially participating churches.⁴⁶ In return for Methodists teaching in degree courses, there would be a substantial reduction of fees for Methodist ministerial students by the university.

Taking into account all the requirements needed in a viable ministerial training scheme, the best and perhaps the only way forward seems to be that John Wesley College move to take its place in the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions. That is not to deny TEEC its vital ongoing role in the Southern African theological education scene. Both the residential and the extension methods seem to be required. There must be adequate provision for both informational curricula and formational programmes of new ministers. Given the limited resources and the vastness of the task, ecumenical co-

⁴⁵ The fragmentation of theological education as lamented in such books as Edward Farley's *Theologia: the Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), has been thoroughly addressed, as has the accompanying "cult of the expert". The question of how these concerns might be taken into the future is dealt with in Neville Richardson, *The future of theology in South Africa: surveying the road ahead,* *Scriptura*, 2005.

⁴⁶ For instance, Lutheran ministerial students presently have between 80% and 90% of their tuition fees paid from the resources of the University's School of Religion and Theology.

operation and institutional collaboration are essential. But residential training is surely necessary at the heart of our operation. Peter Storey is correct when he insists that ministers with integrated intelligence and imagination can be formed only through intensive seminary experience.⁴⁷ The immediate challenge to those involved in Methodist ministerial training in Southern Africa must be to communicate as widely as possible the urgency of the present situation, to inspire as many as possible with the vision of what might be, and to raise the funds required to make it happen. This is surely essential if there are to be educated, well trained, fully formed ministers for the Southern African church of the future.

⁴⁷ Peter Storey, *And Are We Yet Alive? Revisioning our Wesleyan Heritage in a New Southern Africa*, (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 60.