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**“Reenvisioning Theological Education, Mission and the Local Church”**  
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**Summary**

There is a fresh wave of interest in local churches reshaping themselves around mission, but what does this mean for theological education? This article draws on the author’s experience as a student and teacher, and innovative approaches at Australian College of Ministries and Whitley College, two Australian theological colleges. It discusses six principles for reshaping theological education around mission and the local church. Theological courses and classes and informal processes for developing leaders will be at their best if they are communal in the classroom, assessment and shared mission; conversational between students and with other sources; contextual and engaged with contemporary needs in society; cross-cultural and engaged with global issues; character forming as part of the curriculum; contemplative both for prayer and space for reflection; and congregationally connected for faculty, students and their research.

**Keywords**

Theological education, *Missio Dei*, spiritual formation, adult education, ministry training, contextual theology, culture, Australia, Baptist, Churches of Christ

**The theology of *Missio Dei* and the local church**

One of the most significant theological developments of the twentieth-century was a rediscovery of *Missio Dei*, the “mission of God” or “the missionary God”. In relationship to the local church, this imagination-grabbing conviction recognises that it is not that the church has a missionary program but God is a God of mission and has the church to fulfil that. The church is missionary by its very nature as a reflection of the nature of God. David Bosch expresses the idea as a central tenet of the emerging paradigm for mission:

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God ... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world ... a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission ... There is a church because there is a mission, not vice versa (1991:390).

This perspective has gained momentum through different streams of the worldwide church; from Protestant conversations in the World Council of Churches and International Missionary Council, the evangelical Lausanne Movement, Roman Catholicism’s Vatican II and through to the conversations of the Emerging Missional Church (Cronshaw 2009: 39-40, 100-151).

*Missio Dei* implies that mission is bigger than just what happens through local churches, yet God’s key instrument for mission is the church. Lesslie Newbigin described the local congregation as “the hermeneutic of the gospel” and declared that the church exists for others as the “sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming

grace for the whole life of society” (1989:227, 233). The mission of God is all that God is doing in the world, but God invites the church to join in and lead in that.

There is widespread consideration of what it means to recalibrate the church around mission. For example, this is filtering into my church tribe the Baptist Union of Victoria, from writers like Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost. Instead of starting with an assumed and inherited picture of church, they ask what would be the shaping of church if we centred on mission, and formed our understanding of mission around Christ? (Frost and Hirsch 2003: 16, 209) Furthermore, what would be the shape of our mission if we shaped it around a renewed Trinitarian understanding of a sending God, and moreover a social Trinitarianism that invites the people of God to join in where God is moving, creating and “dancing” in the world? In this perspective, the church is a community-in-mission that mirrors the overflowing self-giving community of Trinitarian life (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:287; Cronshaw 2009:61-62). Local churches are freshly eager not just to develop their own programs but to join in with what God is doing in the world.

### **Reshaping mission in Theological Education, the Australian colleges’ experience**

Given a renewed sense of the mission of God and how this reshapes local churches, how can we reenvision theological education? What is the future of theological education, especially if we want to engage freshly with the mission of God and the local church? Robert Banks, one of Australia’s foremost theologians and most progressive theological educators, appeals for a reenvisioning of theological education with a distinctively missional posture – one that is more field-based, life-encompassing and addressing the mission opportunities of the whole people of God (Banks 1999). Missiology has become a respected field in theological education (Moran 1999:301-314; Woodberry, Engen, and Elliston 1996). Many colleges offer cross-cultural mission subjects and some have introduced units on “Mission and the local church” or “Missional leadership”. The bigger challenge, however, that some colleges are grappling with is to reshape a whole curriculum and leadership formation process around mission. This is leading to some interesting structural change and experiments. I will draw on two Australian cases of reenvisioning – ACOM and Whitley.

ACOM (Australian College of Ministries) was formed in 1999 from the merger of Churches of Christ theological colleges in Sydney and Brisbane (<http://www.acom.edu.au/>). ACOM developed a distinctively decentralised approach to ministry formation that works out of state-based regions and local church based training institutes around Australia.

At a higher education level, ACOM is accredited through the Sydney College of Divinity and offers courses by distance learning supported by individual mentoring, small group subject facilitations, formation groups and retreats. The syllabus has been redesigned around developing not just knowledge but spiritual formation and practical ministry skills – “head, heart and hands”. Subjects have all been reshaped around mission and all include mentoring and practical ministry reflection. Core subjects include introductory biblical studies but also Cross-Cultural Ministry, Scriptural Foundations of Mission, Becoming a Missional Leader, Personal Formation and History of Missional Movements. It is a flexible and accessible model and aims to

keep students connected to their ministry contexts. It works best with Regional leaders who take an active interest in student formation and help students stay engaged. I have seen it work well in Victoria under Region Director Neale Meredith's coordination. In 2010 ACOM had 301 higher education students or 123.5 Equivalent Full-Time Students (EFTS), served by 18 staff and faculty (12 EFT) (Parker, 2011).

ACOM is also a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) for Vocational Education, which grown dramatically since it started in 2003. In 2010 they had 1234 Vocational Education Students focusing on practical ministry and leadership training from Certificate through to Diploma studies. These programs are supervised by a team of three ACOM resource staff and 216 trainers and assessors through ACOM's 53 partner institutes and school in local churches, schools and Christian organisations. ACOM's partners include other colleges who want to diversify or transition into a more vocational-training focus to practically equip leaders, including Alliance College, Kingsley College, Lutheran College, Reformed College, Church Army, Youth For Christ and Christian Revival Crusade. ACOM's Vocational Training is flexible and has allowed courses to be shaped around mission and the local church. For example, Wycliffe Australia has developed with ACOM a Certificate IV in Bible Translation for teaching around Australia and the Pacific. Churches can draw on existing subjects or write material for their own context, drawing on ACOM pedagogical expertise and accreditation. ACOM's Director of Vocational Education, Jason Potter, says this model revolutionises theological education by uniquely placing curriculum development in the field (Potter 2011a; 2011b; <http://www.acom.edu.au/page/40/Vocational+Education>).

Stephen Hinks is the most recent Principal (2005-2010) and ACOM is currently reviewing its systems and searching for a new Principal. ACOM will be a college to watch in their ongoing development of online learning and vocational education, and a key partner for colleges who are open to collaboration for flexible delivery of training.

Whitley College, the Baptist Theological College of Victoria and part of the Melbourne College of Divinity, have recently reviewed their life and theological curriculum. (Langmead, 2010; <http://whitley.unimelb.edu.au>) With a vision for "equipping leaders for a different world", they are building on their strengths in holistic mission, radical discipleship and formation for ministry. They are also giving fresh priority to opportunities for action-reflection, helping students integrate faith and life, pursuing interdisciplinary studies and engaging the life of local churches. A new unit "Living the Faith: Spirituality, Vocation and Community" helps students begin their studies with a focus on spiritual formation and self-discovery and develop skills for connecting theology and faith. These are themes that continue throughout Whitley programs. From 2010 a three year thematic framework for College life is formed around Hope & Mission (and the gospel of Luke) for one year, followed by Love & Justice (and Matthew), and Faith & Ministry (and Mark). Thus they hope to form faith, hope and love in their students, centre studies on the life of Jesus, and reflect on the relevance of what they learn for mission, justice and ministry.

In 2010 Whitley had 353 students (98 EFTS), including 26 postgraduate research students and 90 TransFormation students. TransFormation is an innovative and successful program for culturally and linguistically diverse students which has been

running for almost a decade. The student community is served by 14 staff and faculty (10 FTE) and a sizable and diverse range of adjunct teachers (16 in 2010 or 41 across 2009-2011). (Langmead 2011) Whitley's overall Principal is Frank Rees and the Academic Dean of the Theological School is Ross Langmead. Whitley also has a highly-respected University of Melbourne residential college and has strong relationships with the Baptist Union of Victoria – reflecting Whitley's dual academic and ecclesial engagement.

## **Characteristics of missional training**

Banks reminds me of where I have been best formed and equipped for ministry – in contexts of learning communities and reflection-in-action, and from teachers who have taught and coached out of their experience. I am reflecting on my own theological education, but also considering my philosophy of teaching and role in training. As a student and teacher of mission studies, and as a missionally-minded pastor, what do I consider essential in missional training? Here are some initial guideposts to reenvision theological education centred around mission and the local church.

### **1. Communal**

He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach. (Mark 3:14)

Jesus does not call people just as individuals but in community. We all need God's people and their fellowship, community and discernment to help us follow Christ in the world. Community is essential for discipleship and mission. And learning at its best is not just an individual but a communal exercise. One college has the motto, "The pursuit of truth in the company of friends" (Palmer 1998:90). That is an inviting picture, and a biblical vision. Jesus and Paul trained their disciples in community, and did that while ministering to others. Jesus' band of disciples and Paul's teams were learning and ministering communities (e.g., Luke 9:1-10:42; Acts 13:1-4; Philippians 2:19-30; Banks 1999:172).

Learning communities can build trust that enhances formation and collaborative learning. And we can learn so much from others. Our different cultures, genders, gifts, perspectives and backgrounds make for richer learning. Augustine in his community, Luther in his house with students, and Bonhoeffer with his underground seminary all model the virtues of communal learning (Banks 1999:181, 205). In our postmodern Western context, and in colleges where more students are studying part-time and at a distance, we need to do all we can to foster learning communities – in our classrooms and online, at college meals and church worship, and through retreats and hospitality.

I appreciate the value of my learning communities, especially Bible College of Victoria (BCV) and Whitley College. At BCV, my residential community experience and seeing lecturers minister and work helped form my leadership capacity and missional outlook. Having a registrar Adrian Rickard who came outside and helped with duties challenged me to have a work ethic that is not just "do my minimum part" but "go beyond what's expected and help others do their part." Riki Watts, a biblical studies lecturer who in tears invited us to seek God in prayer after class inspired me to

minister from the heart not just the head. Ian Hawley's vocational counsel helped me realise my ministry needs to develop in relationship with and not in isolation from others. At Whitley, training with a cohort of ordination candidates fostered a different and more focused kind of community. We practised spiritual disciplines together, discussed how to lead the churches we were serving, and reflected theologically on ministry dilemmas and what drives us. Part of the value of the community of Baptist pastors preparing for ministry together is the collegiality that forms and continues as an asset for mutual support throughout ministry. Later, as a postgraduate research student at both colleges, the community and support of faculty and other research students helped develop my capacity as a scholar and reflective practitioner.

Another key communal aspect of training is shared mission. As students engage in mission they will be motivated to learn. As they engage together they will learn teamwork and foster support networks for future ministry. And as they cooperate in mission with teachers they will see healthy ministry modelled (Banks 1999:171, 197, 201). Some colleges see their programs as preparation for ministry and have little practical ministry experience required. Where students are placed in a formal ministry placement, it is usually as an individual student. BCV offers an annual mission week, where student groups with a faculty member minister alongside local churches or mission organisations. A few other colleges place students in teams or have contexts where faculty can minister alongside students, but it is a relatively rare and untapped potential aspect of communal learning.

One of the features of modern education that militates against community is individualised assessment. Assignments that students can work on together, or at least be encouraged to share resources and ideas, will enhance mutual learning and cultivate teamwork skills. It is unfortunate that so much assessment measures individual isolated achievement when so much of ministry is collaborative community effort. I have seen some terrific presentations when two or three students have researched a topic together and then presented a joint paper, or at least papers that engage sequentially with one another's work. Palmer insists we need to get past the misconception that cooperation is cheating: "If we gained knowledge through a collaborative, communal process, we would possess a knowledge that could be used in cooperative, not manipulative, ways" (Palmer 1983: 37-38).

## **2. Conversational**

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them. (Luke 24:15)

Theological education that is missional and communal will also be conversational. A good lecture can be inspiring and full of helpful information, but for students to be formed in their thinking and transformed in their actions they need to grapple with what they are learning through conversation. It is a basic principle of adult education that the best learning is active learning. The best lectures will have space at least for questions and feedback. The best courses will include scheduled time for discussion, such as tutorials, workshops, case studies, simulations, student papers and weblogs. And the best teachers will cultivate safe space and permission for students to debate, express feelings, confess sin, grapple with doubts, explore spirituality, compare dilemmas and discuss how to practice obedience to truth (Banks 1999:202; Palmer

1983:83-103). Luther practised this approach at his dining table with “Table Talk” where students who lived with him were invited to discuss anything – from doctrine to vocation, public issues to pastoring (Banks 1999:181, 184, 205).

Conversation can foster surprising insights. It brings out the best in me as a teacher and energises the classroom and helps keep students engaged. Sometimes extroverted students might dominate conversation or discussion can seem like pooling ignorance, but at its best conversations open us up to learning new things from others and gives us space to express opinions and experiences. Palmer elevates the place of conversation to “create a space in which obedience to truth is practised”. He bemoans the lack of space in grade-driven education and classes dominated by lectures:

But to study with a teacher who not only speaks but listens, who not only gives answers but asks questions and welcomes our insights, who provides information and theories that do not close doors but open new ones, who encourages students to help each other learn – to study with such a teacher is to know the power of a learning space (Palmer 1983:70-71).

Entry level units arguably require more content, but conversation is essential at all levels of education. Facilitating conversations is a learned skill. Colleges do well to offer training in adult education and learning modes through in-service workshops, mentoring and courses, as in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment that ACOM delivers for faculty and others in Christian ministry (cf. Sherlock 2009:100-105).

ACOM’s facilitations epitomise a class-based conversation approach to learning. The traditional role of the lecturer has been transformed. Content delivery is not through lectures but through learning packages or online subject materials students read through, and then interact with through online forums. Instead of normal weekly classes, ACOM offers three-day facilitations for most higher education subjects which function as small group discussions to process course content and discuss how to apply it to the student’s lives and ministries. Facilitators are told not to lecture or answer all questions as the “font of all knowledge” but stimulate discussion and offer frameworks for learning. Facilitating is a collaborative art using a different skill set to lecturing. The best facilitators draw on creativity, small group leadership skills, practical experience, a broad subject knowledge and the ability to ask good questions (Edwards and Parker 2009:5-17; Parker 2010).

Education through conversation is intrinsic to active learning but also a helpful approach to ministry. It is important to train leaders with methods and skills that they can use for ministry. Students will reproduce in local churches the forms that they caught in college. If students are lectured at, they will be comfortable lecturing at their churches. If learning relies on one-directional lectures, it is no surprise it is difficult for pastors to think beyond preaching as the dominant framework for teaching and be less inclined to practise mutuality in ministry. But students taught with a conversational model are more likely to foster collaborative and mutual models of ministry. They are more likely to adopt healthy approaches to leadership and change that invite the input of their congregations. And they are more likely to come alongside seekers for spiritual conversations.

As well as being helpful for classroom interaction and local church ministry, conversation is a foundational metaphor for theological education. Class members converse with one another but also with conversation partners beyond the classroom. Mission in a pluralistic world has to build on conversation with people of other faiths. Whitley Professor of Mission Studies Ross Langmead teaches “Dialogue with Living Faiths” as the way to learn about other religions (Langmead 2007a:41-50). Other subjects require dialogue with people of other faiths or no faith, for example an essay on “Who is Jesus?” drawing on three interviews with diverse people about what they know of Jesus (Rees 2010:3-5). Real insights can come from conversations on apologetics with seekers, ethics with businesspeople, urban mission with sociologists and creation with environmentalists (Banks 1999:179). Whitley Professor of Hebrew Bible Mark Brett encourages conversation with indigenous people and postcolonial theology (Brett 2003:247-256; 2008). Theological education has to be in conversation with the world around us to be able to help students discern and join in with what God is doing in the world, *Missio Dei*.

Whitley Principal Frank Rees suggests we can also learn wisdom from conversation with those who are weaker and marginalised; “We may learn to see treasures in the experience of those considered incompetent, uneducated or unskilled. Through such experiences of listening, loving and learning we may find not only a wisdom from life, but that the words of Scripture have a presence and power we did not imagine: the Word, taking flesh, in us” (Rees 2009:74; also 1999). Reading this reminded me that two profound insights in church worship last Sunday related to conversations with a homeless person about their struggle with alcoholism and an intellectually disabled woman who still feels “exiled” in Australia after living here for decades. Reenvisioned theological education will bring classes into conversation with these kinds of experiences and cries of world need.

Whitley encourages conversation in classes, but if ACOM epitomises class-based conversational learning, Whitley epitomises conversational theological education in a broader sense. Interdisciplinary subjects and co-teaching are common, such as with subjects Mission in the New Testament, Theology and Practice of Pastoral Care, and Facing Crisis and Transition (pastoral care and worship) (cf. Bevans 2005). A whole subject “Exploring Ministry Through Case Studies” grapples with issues of change, sexuality, emotions, conflict or whatever issues the students bring, but mainly to develop and practise theological reflection. The STFE program adopts James and Evelyn Whitehead’s model of theological reflection. This invites lively conversation (literally) among a class, but always in conversation (metaphorically) with theological sources – tradition including Scripture, cultural information and experience of the person and the faith community (Hunter; Whitehead and Whitehead 1995). Rees’ “conversational” approach to contextual theology invites biblical, experiential and cultural elements to contribute together to theological reflection (2005:101-113; 2007:32-49). As Walter Brueggemann suggests, the conversation of theological education has to engage deeply with the script of the Bible but also with the context of our society where other scripts are loud and powerful (1987:103).

### **3. Contextual**

Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22b, NLT)

Theological education centred around mission and the local church will also be contextual. God loves the whole world but places people in their local culture and neighbourhood. Theology and ministry develops in response to challenges in local churches, neighbourhood and society. In a culturally diverse world, the church is called to communicate faith and express worship in culturally-meaningful ways. Although the gospel has absolute truths and universal application, it is always expressed locally. The Bible was contextual for the context it was written in, and we need to apply it as such (Davies 1997:197-214). Douglas Hall suggests “contextual theology” is a tautology, since a neutral or non-contextual theology is not possible. (1989:69). Part of the beauty of contextual theology is that we can learn different things about understanding God and interpreting Scripture from different cultures (e.g., Bevans 2009; Langmead 2007b). I have appreciated the space in my studies for reflecting critically on where the gospel engages with different cultures – whether Indonesian Muslims, readers of Harry Potter, Australian Aborigines or new immigrants. We can be both faithful to Scripture and critically engaged with our culture; indeed, faithfulness to Scripture and following an incarnate God demands it (Cronshaw 2006:8, 160-175).

Whitley faculty would tend to agree on the importance of contextual theology and the implausibility of non-contextual theology. They make a similar point about practical theology, that all theology should be practical in its outworking and all practice should be theologically based (see also Langmead 2004:10-14). Charles Sherlock, in his analysis of Australian theological education, praises Whitley in leading the way in teaching for the Australian context:

Perhaps the most integrated contextual approach is that of Whitley College (MCD, Baptist), which offers both a wide range of units related to mission and ministry in Australian contexts, aims to develop theology using Australian motifs, and seeks to take these seriously in each discipline’s units (while being aware of the danger of not allowing the discipline to be itself) (2009:115).

Popular units at Whitley include Lifestyle Ethics, Beyond Consumerism, and Faith and the Environment. They are not the only subjects that relate to contemporary issues, but they demonstrate a clear commitment to starting with context and experience, and then having the conversation with the resources of Christian tradition.

ACOM are pioneering educational methods that prioritise engaging local ministry contexts. ACOM’s Randy Edwards maintains that contextual and practical theology are related. ACOM teaches out of a practical theology framework, which draws an inseparable link between practice and thinking, action and reflection. ACOM also encourage contextual theology, both for thinking and practice. All practice happens in a context, but not all theological thinking necessarily relates to practice. Edwards suggests this is a dichotomy between thinking and practice that is typical of “Gnostic” culture which has a strong influence in Western education. It is possible to contextualize theological thinking while not contextualizing the resulting practice. Contextual thinking requires understanding the context (at personal, local and global levels), while contextual action requires application within the context (in a culturally relevant and acceptable way) (Edwards 2010). ACOM thus aims for both contextual

thinking and contextual practice, or contextual “reflection-in-action”. Contextual engagement is a theme through all of ACOM’s courses, but typified by subjects such as Christian Worldview, The Emergence of Modern Thought, Cross-Cultural Ministry, Reaching Aussies with the Gospel, and Mission, Discipleship & Leadership in Cultures of Change.

Philip Hughes critiques most theological education for revolving around Christian traditions – church history, biblical studies, historical theology – and not giving due attention to understanding the worldview of Australians and how they develop faith and express spirituality (2010: 136-137). This means understanding their contexts in which they live. Hughes observes, however:

Many contemporary theologians and leaders of the churches reflect with great skill on the Biblical text. They apply great scholarship to understanding the history of the traditions of the church. But when it comes to relating this to the contemporary world, many rely on hearsay, hunches and a little participant observation. I believe it is still true that not one theological college in Australia employs a full-time professional sociologist, psychologist, or expert on the analysis of culture, to assist in the exploration of faith to the contemporary world. Few theological colleges take the contemporary context seriously. As a result, a great deal of the theologising that goes on in Australia (and many other parts of the western world) ignores many of the major issues of culture: issues of the business world, of economics and politics, of world peace and the impact of globalisation, of mass media and mass forms of community (Bentley and Hughes 2005:18).

Reenvisioned theological education needs to allocate course space and specialised faculty or guest lecturers who can develop and teach skills in cultural analysis.

Reimagined theological education will equip students to address the contexts and ministry challenges they face. To do mission in today’s world, the church has to grapple with the influence of Christendom, postmodernism, postcolonialism, the digital age and generational differences (Cronshaw 2007:20-28; Hinks 2006:7-35, 137-148). There are huge theological issues for the world’s environmental crises, global poverty, and war and terrorism (McLaren 2007). How do we approach gender relations, bioethics, multiculturalism, globalisation, consumerism, the creative arts, indigenous issues, and the place of other living faiths and spiritualities? In an omni-literate world how do we learn from movies, music and relationships as much as books and lecturers? (Bandy 2004: 81, 171) These are some of the issues people live with today and which demand the greatest attention from our greatest minds. This is not to suggest that all these topics (and only these topics) are important to cover in a theological education course. The critical thing is that students learn to reflect theologically and contextually. Reenvisioned theological education that takes seriously *Missio Dei* will equip students to engage with the political, economic and socio-cultural contexts shaping the twenty-first century (Veling 1998:195-210).

#### 4. Cross-cultural

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Reenvisioned theological education in the global context, and the multicultural context of the Western world, has to be cross-cultural. God shows his love and desire to include people of all nations throughout Scripture – from the calling of Abraham to bless the nations (Gen 12:1-3) through to Revelation’s vision of heavenly worship with people from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7:9). The Kingdom of God is inherently multicultural. Jesus bridged cultural barriers and reached out to people of diverse and despised cultural groups (e.g., Matt 15:21-28; John 4:1-26). The church started at Pentecost with an outpouring of the Spirit and people from every nation hearing the gospel in their own language (Acts 2:5-11). The early church included and reconciled people of different backgrounds (Gal 3:28).

As well as the biblical mandate, there is a contextual imperative of our multicultural society. Churches are often not as culturally diverse as their neighbourhoods. This might make church more comfortable, but means less missional engagement and less learning from people of different cultural background. To engage our context, we have to form leaders who are multiculturally sensitive and engaged. In my home city of Melbourne one in three people were born overseas and one in four speak a language other than English at home (Hughes and Reid 2009). Ethnic churches serve some of these language groups, but second-generation new Australians are usually less interested in ethnic worship. Whitley offers a unit “Global Mission Today” to inform students about global cross-cultural mission issues, but also “The Multicultural Church” to help students develop a vision and appropriate skills for cross-cultural ministry in multicultural churches in Australia.

Whitley’s TransFormation program for culturally and linguistically diverse students is one of its most successful initiatives ([www.buv.com.au/ministries/multicultural/transformation](http://www.buv.com.au/ministries/multicultural/transformation)). TransFormation started in 2003 to make training accessible for students with limited English language, time and finance. Students attend a Saturday of classes each month over a three year cycle. It combines worship, community, lunch and study, and optional extra English for Theological Studies classes. In 2011 there are over a hundred students in the program, some of whom are working towards a Diploma of Ministry and/or ordination and accreditation for Baptist ministry. It is important for theological education to be accessible not just to well-educated native-English-speaking students who can take time off and study midweek.

Part of reenvisioning theological education for a multicultural context is developing leaders with cross-cultural communication skills and sensitivity. Misunderstandings and offense can easily happen when different cultures are involved in worship, leadership, relationship building and conflict (Law 1993). A culturally diverse student body helps develop intercultural skills. Ministry-training programs could consider adopting the Uniting Church of Australia’s policy of encouraging students to learn a second language. It is also beneficial to take students to cross-cultural contexts and reflect, as with overseas study trips or mission exposures or sending students to

local mission placements that expose them to different cultures. ACOM and Whitley encourage students to engage in ministry experience and do internships among different subcultural groups. Whitley offers Cultural Anthropology. ACOM offers Cross-Cultural Ministry at a higher education level and Vocational training in local mission (in partnership with Church Army) and in cross-cultural church planting (in partnership with WEC) (Potter 2011b). Theological students learn about the cultural background of the Bible as they study, but reenvisioned theological education will equally prioritise helping students exegete their culture and the diverse cultures of their context.

It is also critical in today's world for theological education to expose students to global and non-Western theology (e.g., Bevans 2009). There are things that all cultures can learn from others. There is so much treasure in Scripture, as Jacob Loewen suggests, that we will not learn it all until all cultures of the world apply their interpretive perspectives (Kraft 1996:18). Theological education will be richer as a non-Eurocentric exercise. More colleges are integrating global perspectives into courses and community life (Berling 1998). Laidlaw College in New Zealand offers a core subject "Majority World Theology" to explore how different cultures bring different insights to Scripture. With Christianity's centre of balance shifting to the global south and the awareness that mission is mutual and not just "from the West to the rest", it is imperative that students grasp a vision and understanding of what other cultures offer (cf. Jenkins 2002).

## 5. Character forming

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)

As well as understanding context and the diversity of surrounding cultures, theological education must prioritise personal formation and help students understand themselves. The best theological education will involve character formation as well as intellectual development. Our chief aspiration is to become more like Christ and to model that for others. This sits with the "Athens" school, which Banks calls the Classical model, which assumes theology is about reflecting on wisdom and forming character to contribute to society. It asserts training is not just about information but formation and transformation (Banks 1999:132, 143; Kelsey 1993). Christopher Wright reflects, "I may wonder what kind of mission God has for *me*, when I should ask what kind of *me* God wants for *his* mission" (2006: 524). Character formation is often informally a function of the openness of the student, the quality of community and the availability of lecturers, but it can also be intentionally built into a syllabus.

My experience as an ordination candidate and research student at Whitley was significantly formative. The ordination program is designed for ministerial formation and fostering a mutually supportive cohort, and the academic degrees were secondary and served the process. We practised spiritual disciplines together, with Jill Manton challenging me to go deep in reflection and not just get assignments finished. Leadership classes with Geoff Pound felt like reflection-in-action when I had two pages of notes – one for the class discussion and one for implications for putting it into practice in my church. Whitley helped organise placements at three churches where I discovered a love for pastoral leadership and community building. We

reflected on ministry experience with Colin Hunter's Supervised Theological Field Education (STFE) and were encouraged to reflect on what drives us. As a postgraduate research student I was supervised by Ross Langmead who took an active and ongoing interest in coaching me as a writer and sponsoring me as an adjunct teacher, and all faculty members became friends and fellow scholars. More than anything else, I have been formed as a pastor and scholar through the input of my Whitley lecturers, as I engaged in ministry. That is a tribute to their character and commitment to mission and the local church, and a reflection of the value of formation processes that value vocational identity, ministry skills and *doing* theology.

ACOM students do a Personal Formation (PF) subject every year of equivalent full-time study. PF includes mentoring, a formation group, a retreat, setting growth goals and written reflections on formational issues. ACOM's Director of Formation, Sue Whiteley, oversees the process and wants to see all students develop their souls as well as their minds. She wants to see students grapple with spiritual, psychological and theological issues to develop their soul lives and cultivate healthy frameworks for long-term ministry. For example, three of ACOM's key PF emphases are "humility rather than pastoral prestige, authenticity rather than image and acquiring the 'power of love' as opposed to the 'love of power'" (Whiteley 2010; also Hinks 2006:101-135). The PF syllabus includes a theology of formation, relationships, autobiography and self-awareness, vocation and calling, balance and boundaries, emotions, vulnerability, spirituality and sexuality. ACOM have re-imagined their whole curriculum so all students have space to grapple with character formation as well as intellectual development.

To be effective and last the distance in mission means we must give attention to our personal lives – our character, our spirituality, our wholeness. Unhealed wounds have the potential to fester and undermine ministry. I went through a time of vocational crisis after returning from Asia and the door closing to go back there in the short-to-medium term. The help of mentors and a counsellor helped see me through that, but it was something I had to deal with (Cronshaw 2006:29-30). It is easier in many ways to read a book, write an essay or dream a vision to change the world than to engage in soul work and have our character formed. Palmer suggests: "We want to know in ways that allow us to convert the world – but we do not want to be known in ways that require us to change as well" (1983:39). Even where not part of a syllabus, wise faculty across the disciplines will address issues of character and formation – they arise naturally as you study the Bible, history and congregational life! It is stretching work, but developing character and a healthy ministry approach are foundational for any vision of theological education.

## **6. Contemplative**

Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth. (Psalm 46:10)

Knowledge is important for mission and the local church, but three of the most critical areas of knowledge are to know the world (contextual awareness), to know one's self (character development or personal formation), and to know God (through contemplative prayer and spiritual formation). Henri Nouwen appeals for theological

education to lead students into greater communion with God and with other people, for which we need to reclaim the silence of the monastery (1991:46-48). The best classes will make space for contemplation, including silence, and teach students to pray (Banks 1999:162-163).

Unfortunately theological students, like anyone, can marginalise prayer in the face of demands and busyness. Eugene Peterson appeals for an approach to ministry that is contemplative and “unbusy”, in order to help people appreciate the world and be attentive to what God is doing in it. Theological education will serve students well if they can learn this posture of engaging deeply with God and fully with the world (Peterson 1989). It can seem easier to read a book or write an essay than to practice contemplative prayer. Colleges reward academic excellence with grades and churches reward professional development with job offers, so that spiritual formation can receive less priority. But if students can cultivate a contemplative approach to learning and life in college, they will be well placed for a lifetime of discipleship and ministry.

Contemplative spirituality is an important basis for sustainability in ministry, but also a basis for mission. I remember realizing when preparing to go to Asia, that unless I had an authentic spirituality, I didn’t have much to offer, and in fact wouldn’t last long. In pointing people to Christ, we need to be close to him ourselves. We are an example to others to the extent that we follow Christ, as the early Thessalonians did: “The news of your faith in God is out. We don’t even have to say anything anymore – *you’re* the message” (1 Thes 1:8, MSG). Stuart Devenish, a previous ACOM teacher, wrote about the importance of the church rediscovering its own deep spirituality for its own sake and for connecting with Australians beyond the church who are interested in spirituality and understanding the mystery they encounter in life (2008:9).

Whitley Professor of Missiology and Dean of the Theological School Ross Langmead practices a “theological reflection for mission” which guards space for contemplation. As a bearer of good news he describes how mission engages him in difficult areas that need transformation, but warns:

If mission were all action, with no reflection, we would go off the rails. We would ‘hard sell’ the gospel, organise our way to being an international brand name, manage the church and cram every living moment with mission activity. But it’s mission with mystery, and waiting is as important as outreach, listening as speaking, responding as pro-active planning. The reflective and meditative dimension of mission is central (Langmead 2004:25-26; drawing on Messer 1989).

Theological reflection has developed in practical theology from training pastors for ministry and helping them reflect on their pastoral practice. Langmead’s reflective approach to mission arises out of committed action and advocacy for liberation, but still makes space for reflection, and then feeds back into ongoing missional action (2004:12-13). Contemplation is not a separate optional addition after mission, but an interdependent source and inspiration for mission.

Contemplation and spiritual formation can be part of a curriculum. ACOM has a component of spiritual formation in Personal Formation subjects and offers units on Discipleship, Spiritual Formation, Soul Care and “Leading out of Deep Places”. Whitley has an impressive range of spirituality subjects including Living the Faith: Spirituality, Vocation and Community, Experiencing God: Spirituality in the Christian Tradition, Patterns in the Practice of Christianity, Table Spirituality: Hospitality, Community and Mission, Spirituality of Everyday Life, Contemporary Spiritual Writers and Curly Flat Theology. A highlight of my teaching has been seeing students engage diligently with vocational explorations and practising spiritual practices as part of some of these subjects. Given a choice, the tendency of some students is to keep to book reviews and head-focused assignments, but when students elect an assignment that offers to stretch them in new directions with God and spirituality it can germinate potential for growth.

Theological education can also cultivate a contemplative approach to reading and learning. It is easy to read quickly and gather thoughts and theories of others for exam preparation or essay writing. The more stretching task is to read slowly, think through why an author is arguing a point and develop one’s own argument. This kind of deeper learning takes slow reading and contemplation (Griffiths 2002:32-47). “Spiritual reading” of the Bible has classically been known as *lectio divina* – reading, meditating, praying and living the text to really hear it as spoken and revealed to us by God (Peterson 2006:4). Simone Weil says that learning requires us to focus our attention on something for long enough to be drawn into it, and perhaps even changed by it. Paul Wadell discusses Weil’s comment and suggests theological learning requires us to be captivated by God, which comes from making ourselves available to God. This is what contemplation is – fixing our attention on God until we are drawn into and changed by God. This prayerful attitude uses “study skills” devalued in our entertainment culture – reflection, patience, solitude, vulnerability and openness to conversion (Wadell 2002:124). But again this kind of contemplation is the path that will best foster discovery and growth.

Reflecting on my own theological education, I have taken shortcuts with contemplation. I too often completed essays and courses quickly rather than engaging fully with their ideas and ministry implications. The treadmill was to get as much education as I could, in the name of preparation for mission and teaching, but to the detriment of practice of mission. My training was too much too soon. I could have gained more value from half the education if I had engaged with it more thoughtfully and with more action. Half the number of books with twice the amount of reflection, and more space for putting them into practice, would have done more good. That gives me inspiration as an ongoing learner and teacher to create space where obedience to truth can be practised, as Parker Palmer describes the role of teaching (1983). It leads me to ponder how to ensure education makes the most of missional action and deep reflection.

## **7. Congregational**

Well, my brothers and sisters, let’s summarize. When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what

is said. But everything that is done must strengthen all of you. (1 Corinthians 14:26, NLT)

A reenvisioned theological education will engage with local churches as well as the academic requirements of college life. There is sometimes an unfortunate disconnect between colleges and congregations as stakeholders. Historically, colleges were seen to take students from churches, train and equip them academically, and then send them back. But students have not always returned more passionate, motivated or equipped for mission and local church ministry. Colleges relate to the academy and to the churches, but largely identify firstly as a 'sector' of the churches who they serve; and as demands and challenges on churches change, theological education needs to adapt (Sherlock 2009:168, 218). While colleges need to be intellectually rigorous and benefit from academic frameworks, it is local church partnership that helps ground learning for effective ministry (Banks 1999:209; Wood 2008: 290-304).

An effective way of bridging college and congregation is having students and faculty involved in local church leadership (Banks 1999:226-227, 302-303). For students, training is then learning in ministry, rather than studying about or preparing for ministry. ACOM's delivery of training is designed to help students stay connected to local ministry, taking seriously the appeal of Banks and Hirsch and others for training to be intertwined with ministry. They see their training as "on the job training"; more an apprenticeship for a lifetime of ministry than entry into membership of the academy. With this end in mind, ACOM is convinced that "reflection in action" is the best teaching method. ACOM's flexible delivery of higher education courses and the Government Funded Traineeships for Vocational Education help ACOM students stay connected with their original church context (Potter 2011b). Churches sometimes celebrate and sometimes mistrust the role of colleges in stretching the radical and critical edge of students, and at times ACOM and Whitley experience this tension. But each of them wants to do all they can to strengthen partnerships with local churches and encourage students to do more practical ministry and internships.

For faculty, part of their modelling and basis for teaching can draw on their local church involvement. Ideally, this will involve faculty dedicating time to serving in local church ministry or other mission appointments, such as through part-time or Sabbatical appointments. Sometimes faculty and students may minister together (Banks 1999:185, 215-218, 237-238). Colleges love to see churches who take seriously their role of nurturing ministers-in-training, like the old "student churches". Churches appreciate the resources of faculty available for teaching and consulting. All this makes extra demands on students, faculty, college and churches, but it is a juggle worth making. Parish and classroom enhance one another in helping us join in *Missio Dei*.

Bridging college and congregation can also happen through congregational studies and research that engages local church needs. The Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) suggested to Whitley a number of research topics that would help the denomination. The academy rewards faculty and colleges for publications on generally any topic, and the saying is "publish or perish". But theological colleges have a responsibility to the churches to promote leadership development and healthy church life. It is appropriate, therefore, to prioritise research tasks that address presenting ministry issues and that arise from congregational life, "publish and parish" (Banks 1999:217,

238). This makes practical theology especially relevant, but we also need to explore and maximise the contribution to congregations from other theological disciplines.

There is a growing tendency for tertiary theological students to accumulate higher degrees. The discipline involved in further theological studies is helpful for enhancing skills and expanding knowledge in theological reflection, but it can direct students to narrow topics that are not necessarily helpful to mission and the local church. Admittedly everyone has a bias for their own area, but as a practical theologian I am convinced it would be helpful to expand offerings and encourage more cross-disciplinary research with practical theology and mission studies. An honours year for Bachelor of Theology or Master of Divinity students or a Graduate Certificate or Diploma in Vocational Education could focus on launching people in ministry and help them reflect on their experience. This could involve major assignments in self-reflection and congregational leadership. Students can only retain so much without applying it. Mission and the local church need more generalists rather than specialists, and more leaders experienced in mission, not just committed to it as a theological ideal.

Colleges and training providers need to connect with local churches, but churches are also helped by becoming more like colleges themselves. Two of the paradigm changes for churches involve seeing mission as a local responsibility of churches (not just an overseas project) and seeing mission as a personal responsibility of all of God's people (not just professionals). It is thus appropriate to teach accessible missiology to local church members, such as the Perspectives course, which has been helpful for thousands of local churches to grasp a global vision for mission and which is now accredited in ACOM's Certificate IV (Winter 1996:171-173; Winter and Hawthorne 1999). Part of reenvisioning theological education for mission and the local church is doing more theological education at the local church level. Theology and mission are not just for theological students or overseas missionaries. Theological education and missions training extends into the role of the church, in order for the church to reenvision itself as a missional community which prayerfully engages its context and forms people into the character of Christ (cf. Rees 2006:4-12).

### **Missional training at its best**

These are some initial guideposts in reenvisioning theological education, particularly focusing on mission and the local church. Courses, classes and informal processes for developing leaders will be at their best if they are:

1. Communal as well as individual
2. Conversational as well lectures
3. Contextual as well as universal
4. Cross-cultural as well as global
5. Character forming as well as intellectual
6. Contemplative as well as active
7. Congregational as well as academic

Whitley and ACOM illustrate different aspects of these characteristics of missional training.

I would like to explore more of what other colleges are doing and investigate other characteristics of missional training in a follow-up article exploring more reenvisioning of theological education.

Reenvisioning theological education is a powerful leverage point for enhancing mission and the effectiveness of local churches in Australia. Grappling with the challenges, I find some resonance with Michael Leunig's prayer:

God be with those who explore in the cause of understanding, whose search takes them far from what is familiar and comfortable and leads them into danger or terrifying loneliness. Let us try to understand their sometimes strange or difficult ways; their confronting or unusual language; the uncommon life of their emotions, for they have been affected and shaped and changed by their struggle at the frontiers of a wild darkness, just as we may be affected, shaped and changed by the insights they bring back to us. Bless them with strength and peace.  
Amen (Leunig 2004).

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