

# **Tools to Equip and Empower: Twenty-first Century TEE as a significant Tool for Church-based Theological Education.**

## **1. Setting the big context**

God is building His church just as He promised. Every year many millions of people become Christ's followers. But many thousands of mushrooming new churches are led by untrained pastors and many new believers are not well disciplined.

Even before the current pandemic, there was a sense that theological colleges and seminaries are at a crossroads, with falling numbers; growing costs, changing ordinand expectations... And now, world-wide responses to Covid -19 have forced us into new virtual ways to train...

The Cape Town Commitment reminds us that "The mission of the Church on earth is to serve the mission of God, and the mission of theological education is to strengthen and accompany the mission of the Church."

So how can the body of Christ, the global church, work together to meet such a dynamic need? We believe that campus-based and church-based training providers can and should be partners in this great task. Of the many opportunities for this, here we focus on TEE as one tool for church-based training; how God is using it for the growing church and how it has and could partner with seminaries to equip the whole people of God for His mission.

## **2. A brief story of transformation and equipping through TEE**

We start with one brief story about a man called Ram Bahadur. As a young boy in Nepal he caught leprosy, became 'untouchable' and had to leave home. He heard about Jesus in a Christian hospital and later strongly felt God's call to plant churches. But how could he be trained for this? He had never been to school and doesn't even have fingers. Yet through a local TEE group he was able to study. He testified later, "I am now confident in my work of discipleship & church planting because of TEE".

Ram Bahadur planted seventeen churches in eight years between 2008 and 2016 in the remote hills of Nepal. And the only theological education he has is through TEE courses.

## **3. So what is TEE?**

"TEE" traditionally stands for Theological Education by Extension. But it can also be explained as "Tools to Equip and Empower" – tools for local churches to equip and empower all their members for whole life discipleship, ministry and mission. Thus, TEE is theological education for all, in the heart of the local church.

Let us comment on three frequent misconceptions about TEE:

**First, TEE is not a thing of the past.** True, it began almost sixty years ago in Guatemala. But later TEE shifted from seeking to imitate seminaries to becoming a church-based model in its own right, with perhaps 200,000 students a year worldwide. Our own experience is in Asia, where TEE is proving a dynamic tool in contexts for example of rapid growth or poverty or persecution. So TEE in Asia is alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we tell the story in this book *TEE in Asia*. It is published by the Increase Association which exists to connect and strengthen church-based training programmes around Asia.

**Second, TEE is not substandard education.** True, it can start at a basic educational level, as with Ram in Nepal. But TEE helps learners in their study skills as well as in their holistic Christian growth, thus offering an integrated learning pathway to higher levels.

Several national TEE organisations are accredited by the Asia Theological Association, including for example the Open Theological Seminary in Pakistan. This TEE programme is flourishing, with some six thousand students each year under the guidance of more than four hundred trained leaders in local learning groups. Their learning pathway starts at foundation level and some of them continue through accredited levels leading to a Bachelor of Theology Degree including a 30,000 word research project. This is not substandard.

Yet the programme's importance lies not so much in its academic measures but in its impact, equipping Pakistan's Christian minority to witness among the majority population. A young woman explained, "Living in this context, people ask us many questions about our faith and beliefs, these courses help me to respond to their questions and express my faith." A TEE leader confirms that "if people are equipped, they can be a living testimony among non-Christians."

**Third, TEE is not distance learning.** True, the term TEE has been used to mean many things, including online learning for isolated learners, evening classes at a theological institution, or a series of seminars. All those education methods have brought blessing! But they are not TEE, in the classic usage of the word.

Instead, classically, TEE integrates three elements in combination: personal study, group meetings, and practical application. These three steps are connected in each learning cycle:

First, *Personal study*. Participants work through a carefully prepared lesson that involves active learning, not passive reading. They're engaging with Scripture, gaining new knowledge, and starting to connect it with their own life experience. This leads to the next step...

The *group meeting*. The group is small enough for every member to contribute. A trained group leader helps members share what they discovered in the first step, reflect on their experience and learn from one another. They study Scripture together and may use role play, learning tasks and other group activities as well as discussion. This leads to the third step...

*Practical application*. Learning must now be applied at home, church, work and in the wider community. Practical application, the integration of learning and living, intentional discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus, is the goal of TEE courses. There may be specific assignments in ministry and mission.

None of these three strands is exceptional on its own, but the TEE method weaves them together...

This learning cycle is repeated with the next lesson, typically once a week for ten to twelve weeks to complete the course. With repetition, this learning cycle becomes a habit, integrated into learners' routines. TEE learners are equipped in the context of their normal daily lives. They need not be extracted from their jobs or families. Therefore the training costs are rather low and so TEE can theologially equip a much higher proportion of God's people than is otherwise possible.

#### **4. Pastors as equippers, and TEE as a tool to help them**

A good example comes from the Anglican Church of the Good Shepherd in Sandakan, in the Diocese of Sabah in East Malaysia, led by Archdeacon Moses Chin. When he started training his leadership team with the TEE series, *The Life of Christ*, he noticed a real change in them and in their enthusiasm in serving God. They also found they could help new believers with confidence and clarity. It made his role as the senior pastor much easier. Moses later commented "TEE courses have helped raise a group of biblically literate, deeply dedicated and highly motivated lay-people". He recommended TEE to all Anglican churches.

#### **5. Together equipping God's people for his mission**

We have seen that TEE can equip the people of God at the level of the local church – to re-connect training with the context of the majority of God's people. But its fruitfulness depends critically on local clergy as equippers of their congregations with this focus on God's mission, with every-member ministry and intentional discipleship.

Therefore, we see the role of the seminary as equipping these equippers. Church-based TEE and seminaries can work as partners in several ways. For example:

1. TEE studies can prepare learners for campus-based training (Bangladesh CCTB)
2. Mutual recognition can lead to credit transfer between TEE and campus-based institutions (Mongolia, Vietnam)
3. TEE courses can form one component of a campus-based training's curriculum – modelling and preparing for future use
4. Campus-based students can be trained as TEE facilitators to lead TEE groups as part of their fieldwork.

But there is a more profound level of partnership that could be so fruitful...

... Seminaries that grasp this vision could have the stated goal to train, educate and form men and women to

become recruiters and equippers of TEE group leaders,  
form writing teams to author new, contextually-focussed, TEE course materials  
and connect local TEE groups with the wider church context.

As Stephen Spencer has written, this would be not so much a 'flipped classroom', but a 'flipped seminary' – where the seminary is focussed on and re-connected with the church context.

=> What a vision for synergistic partnership for equipping equippers for equipping the whole people of God for holistic mission in their context!

This vision can harness the strengths of institutional colleges:

- with their environments where analytic and synthetic thinking can happen in a constructive way, they can offer short intensive periods of residence to refresh, renew, and provide reflective space in equipping for local church-based ministry.
- And their in-depth study of scripture, Christian history, liturgy, doctrine, pastoral care and ministry can feed into TEE courses for equipping the whole people of God.

## **6. Conclusion**

This is our hopeful way forward – a vision for collaboration – using different tools and methods – seeing them as complementary and synergistic in equipping the whole people of God for the people of God.