

The Role of the Bible Institute in Training Evangelists and an Examination of Alternatives

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What is written in this essay reveals the small amount of experience I have had in one corner of a mission field our synod sponsors in Central Africa. I am not well informed about the Bible Institute work which is being done outside of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa, but I can tell you my impressions of the work being done here. Hopefully some of the thoughts presented here will generate a discussion that is profitable for various areas of our world mission work,

1. The Path to the Seminary

We have two Bible Institutes in Africa. The one in Lusaka, Zambia is about a generation older than the other, which is located some 500 miles away in Lilongwe, Malawi and which opened its doors just nine months ago. Nevertheless, except for the age difference and somewhat different locations, the two schools are quite similar. Both aim to train "effective witnesses and workers for Christ." Not everyone who attends becomes a full-time worker for the Lords because some drop out and some are weeded out. Not everyone who graduates and becomes an Evangelist will necessarily become a seminary student later on. Yet I feel that in Central Africa at this time in the church's development the primary aim of our Bible Institutes must be to find and prepare men who indicate that they want to enter the seminary and become pastors. I feel that the use of these schools to train part-time lay workers for the church and lay people in general is also important, but it is secondary at this time in Zambia and Malawi.

Ideally the LCCA should have one national pastor for every four or six congregations depending on the size and location of the churches, and there should be several more national pastors teaching in the two Bible Institutes and in the seminary. In 1980, the LCCA was 27 years old, and by God's grace it numbered 110 congregations in addition to its schools. Yet it had only seven national pastors. In the past few years the LCCA has been ordaining an average of one national pastor per year. This is good, but it is only a beginning. Because there is a high attrition rate among the pastors and because the number of congregations keeps growing the ratio of national pastors to congregations is not improving. As an example of the attrition rate, of the six pastors ordained in the last six years, four are still in the ministry. That is why I think that the primary goal of the LBI in Africa at this time is to train men who are heading for the seminary and to train as many as possible.

At certain times mission fields need Evangelists, or well-trained laymen to help start new congregations, or to assist pastors in serving several congregations. But when the congregations begin to far outnumber the national pastors who can serve them, then the entire system needs to be geared toward producing more pastors than before, and if possible more quickly than before. The alternative would seem to be a church body that never becomes indigenous because it keeps on importing expatriate pastors who in turn work hard to open new congregations as well as serve old ones while the staff of national pastors remains consistently small in comparison. In Africa we have about twice as many expatriate pastors as national pastors. If for some reason the expatriates were asked to leave I am sure that the 8500 baptized members and 30 or so Evangelists of the LCCA would soon disappear into the bush. They would be absorbed by other religious organizations with a stronger national leadership. Again this is why I feel strongly that the LBI in Africa and elsewhere, and also the seminaries, deserve to be high on the priority lists and they must be operated as efficiently as possible if we are going to accomplish our goal of establishing indigenous churches,

2. A Home Away From Home

This matter of training as many candidates for the ministry as possible is somewhat limited by the size of the facility that is used and the way that it is used.

In Africa where distances are great, highways few and transportation difficult, housing units are necessary at the LBI because most of the students come from scattered villages rather than from an urban area. Also the students are asked to remain at the school for two years rather than commute between the school and their villages. Since students are known to do better if they are in a healthful environment, the housing which is provided should be better than the grass hut variety from which they come. The five student units at the LBI in Lilongwe are simple but adequate. At a cost of about 15 thousand dollars each the houses provide two bedrooms, one main room, and a small utility area for the toilet, shower and cooking grill. They have no electricity. Each house can serve as a home away from home either for an entire family or for several single students.

At the present time both Bible Institutes in Zambia and Malawi ask that married students bring their wife and children with them. Thus the size of our classes is limited by the number of houses and the number of married students that we have. If the admissions committee for the LBI in Malawi had accepted the applications of five married men instead of accepting four married and four single men, our enrollment this first year would have been five instead of eight. I feel that even eight is too few for our purposes here. If the experience of past years is any guide, only four of those eight will enter the seminary in about three more years. Then after four seminary years including the vicaring year, perhaps two will be ordained and only one will remain in the ministry any length of time. This is what is meant by the attrition rate here in Africa

Financial reasons have limited the Malawi LBI to five houses, but other reasons have contributed to the policy of having entire families live at the school. One is the fact that if a married man were away from his family for two years while enrolled at the school it would not be good for him, his wife, his children, or his work. Another reason is that his wife can benefit from certain Christian education and homemaking classes if she also lives at the school. There may be other reasons, but I think these are the main ones.

I would like to suggest an alternative to this role which has been given to the African LBI of housing entire families. For the reason stated earlier, namely the need, the great need for more pastors at this time, I would like to suggest that consideration be given to changing the housing policy and to modifying the school year so that it would be reasonable and possible to have all students living on campus in dormitory-like situations without their families. Twenty or more students could be trained at the same time as one class in the present facility if this were done. If the school year were modified, the married students could go home and be with their families at regular intervals. For example, if the year were divided into three widely-spaced terms, such as September through November, January through March, and May through July, the month interval between terms would provide time for a visit home. It would seem feasible that a married student could teach his wife some Christian education course during that time if she needed more than she could receive through her home congregation. Also this moving of students back and forth between school and the village three times a year would seem to be a more natural way of discovering which students do not really care to enter the ministry. At present students who come to the LBI sometimes continue there only because the life is more comfortable at school than it is in the village. It has happened that students have become very discouraged and unhappy when they left the school setting after two years on campus and returned to living in a village as an Evangelist. The 'shock' of moving from the school to the village is a great one even though the students expect it. This shock might be lessened if the student had become accustomed to making the change, having done it five times in two years, and if his family would not need to make any adjustment at all. More could be said both pro and con about this suggestion, but since this applies to only one mission field, I will not go into it any further, but I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on what has been said.

The classroom part of the LBI is like most classrooms anywhere. It is well-lighted, and equipped with desks, blackboards, and a small but growing library. We hope to develop the library so that it can serve as a resource center not only for our students, but also for our pastors. Currently we have about 200 volumes. The

classroom building also includes a working/meeting area for the staff, a storeroom for student food rations, and a lavatory area. Unlike other places of the world where travel by night is more common, we in Africa do not teach LBI classes at night, but we do have a supervised evening study period in the classroom.

3. The Courses and Their Aims

Graduates of the LBI are expected to have several practical and theological skills, and our curriculum, though it is not complicated, is designed to develop those skills.

The first skill might be called the ability to consult the Bible like a familiar friend for preaching and teaching preparation and for personal use. In the first year of the LBI we spend four hours a week on an introduction to the Bible's books, noting the author, setting, purpose; giving an outline; and doing some underlining in the Bible of each book's chief thoughts. At the same time the students are encouraged to read each book in its entirety either in English or in their own tongue outside of class. In the second year a few selected books, possibly Job and I & II Corinthians will be studied in greater detail.

Coupled with this a history class meets with the same frequency in order to cover Bible history from Adam to the Apostle Paul in the first year. The emphasis is on God's grace toward sinful man. In this class certain map reading skills are taught, the sequence of historical events is emphasized by means of time lines and, hopefully, the students learn where to look in their Bibles for certain people and events. In the second year in this class we will deal with church history from Paul to the present and include some study of African church history.

Since LBI graduates are expected to teach instruction classes for children and adults, a large part of the curriculum is devoted to developing the teaching skill also. For example, four hours a week each year are spent on the study of doctrine, explaining and memorizing the six chief parts of the Catechism and learning to use the Catechism for personal preparation. Also, two hours per week each year are given to a study of the Lutheran Confessions. The first year emphasizes the historical background and general content of the confessions, and in the second year the Augsburg Congession and Luther's Large Catechism will be examined more closely. In addition, for two hours a week the students are taught the structure and use of the Sunday school and adult course lesson material, and they gain experience in teaching both through class presentations and through weekend work in village congregations located about 30 miles from the school.

To aid in developing skills for conducting a worship service, the LBI offers the students three hours a week on sermon study and one hour on liturgics. The sermon class includes homiletical theory, text study, and class presentation of prepared sermons. In addition there are preaching opportunities on weekends, and the students prepare and present their own evening devotions during the week.

An Evangelist should know how to use his gifts well and how to share his faith with other people. Therefore one hour a week is devoted to the basics of stewardship and evangelism during the first year. Right now, that is during these first two weeks of June while I am away, our first year students are doing some canvass-witness work in Lilongwe under the supervision of Pastor Ntambo, a member of our staff. In the second year the subject of practical theology is broadened to include not only stewardship and evangelism, but a number of other items related to the work of an evangelist as well.

Finally, the students are given a twice-a-week course on English grammar since English is the language used in the classroom, in the textbooks, and in the library's books. Because English is a second language for the students, we who teach them must beware of using the lecture method too much. We try to encourage student participation through questions and answers, both to make sure they understand what is taught, and to give them practice in using the English language.

Something which is not on the Prospectus is the training that comes from living at the school and learning to deal with one another's problems in a Christian way. There are many practical opportunities to teach via the instructor's example and through the advice that is given when problems arise. Also a certain amount of respect for property and financial responsibility is taught through the school's work program which has to do with maintaining the school grounds and buildings.

Are there alternatives to the curriculum outlined above? I think that more emphasis could be given to sermon theory, including some practice in outlining sermons during the second LBI year. Also I think that the second year students should be given some practice in preparing simple Bible studies for use in the village. Additional homiletical practice would help to pave the way for more meaningful learning in the seminary and development of simple Bible studies would help the men provide the kind of spiritual information which is earnestly being sought by lay people in the villages. An English course seems to be a necessary part of the curriculum as long as the seminary continues to operate with the English language. Also our theological libraries here in Africa probably will continue to feature English rather than Bantu language books for many years, if not indefinitely. Because of the wide variety of tribal languages in Central Africa it is reasonable to assume that future pastors of the UCCA will want to have a working knowledge of English as a common language.

If the LBI is to serve as a path to the seminary I would not change the curriculum except to add to or upgrade what we already have. However, if our purpose were to produce educated laymen who only need to read a sermon, teach a Sunday school lesson, and invite people to church, I would drastically shorten the length of the schooling and drop some of the present courses. I know that other church bodies have institutes for lay leaders, and I think the course length is from about five to 15 weeks.

4. Recruiting Students

Where do we find the students to study at the LBI? Here in Africa the best recruiting arm seems to be the expatriate missionary or the national pastor. These are the men who supervise the congregations and who know the people. They know which ones show potential and have an interest in the work of the church. In order to aid in uncovering and encouraging this potential, a series of workbooks were written a number of years ago by Pastor E.H. Wendland. The books have a Theological Education by Extension format which enables accurate and fairly rapid self study by one layperson, with a minimum of guidance from a supervising pastor. The subjects covered are: Bible overview, Doctrine, Teaching theory, and Preaching skills. In actual practice, laymen who have leadership abilities tend to come to the surface in a congregation. In working with these men, the supervising pastor discovers which one or ones are candidates for the ministry. He then starts them on the TEE books which are available from the Lutheran Press in Zambia, The LBI provides application forms and Prospectus books for distribution to potential enrollees. When the time comes to enroll a class in the LBI, an invitation is sent via the supervising pastors to all students who have studied the TEE books, submitted applications, and supplied letters of recommendation from their pastors and congregations. On a given day some months prior to the start of classes, these applicants travel to the school for testing and interviews. The information gained from this is shared with a panel of pastors who serve as an admission committee for the school and who determine which men will enter the next class.

In all of this we are seeking a certain caliber of students one who, like Timothy, comes highly recommended, one who has already shown a love for the ministry in a practical way, one who has recognizable potential and a good reputation. We would like to be sure of the motives that a student has for coming to the schools but of course this is difficult since we cannot look into the heart. In Africa the question often is asked, "Is he coming because he wants to step up out of the village and a life of poverty?" Probably so, in some cases, even if it is not admitted. But as I see it, one objective of the LBI and its Bible study is to sanctify the motives of the students. I wonder how often this has not happened in American students who attend our Stateside schools. I am confident that the Holy Spirit wants to do similar work in the LCCA schools and elsewhere on our mission fields. We depend on Him to do this.

5. Use of National Pastors on the Staff

First let me say something about staff responsibilities. Present policy in Malawi is that the faculty of the LBI should not be given so many responsibilities outside the school that the teaching work becomes secondary, or that additional staff must be sought to do the teaching that a few could do. So far the system is working, although as time goes on, all of us are becoming responsible for more and more duties beyond the school. Two of our faculty members have several congregations which they supervise in addition to teaching, and that supervisory work tends to grow. One congregation leads to another. Our three-man faculty has decided to divide the teaching work on approximately a 60%, 30%, 10% basis.

Two of us are expatriates and one is a mature national pastor with over five years of experience in the ministry. I would like to see at least 50% of the teaching work being done by a national pastor. The work is not difficult for an ordained man. The difficulty is finding the man. We have only one national pastor in Malawi right now. He is doing 10% of the teaching normally, except for the present temporary period while our other expatriate is on furlough. During this period he is taking about 30 % of the teaching load. However his other responsibilities do not permit him to consider this his primary call.

It is by the grace of God that the LCCA has some national pastors, and that some of those pastors are teaching future pastors. A good beginning has been made toward establishing an indigenous church in Africa. I do not expect that our third world sister churches like the LCCA ever will stand on their own financially. But I do hope the day may hasten when they will have enough God-guided national pastors so that they can stand on their own theologically.

6. Continued Training Through Short Courses

Our school here in Malawi has not been in existence long enough to provide any continued training through short courses, but I feel there is a great need for this. Scheduling the special classes requires taking local circumstances into consideration. Night classes do not seem to be possible here and weekend classes would tend to be overly brief, widely-spaced, and to interfere with other weekend responsibilities that the staff and the prospective students have. The alternative seems to be the scheduling of such classes during the break between school terms or between school years. Practical circumstances would have to determine where the classes should be held whether in a village area where several congregations are clustered or at the school. In the latter cases housing would need to be available for the people who wish to receive the classes.

I can see a need for classes on three levels. One would be geared for pastors another for evangelists and a third for lay leaders and church elders. In the latter case it would be necessary to teach in the vernacular, and it might be possible to use evangelists or LBI students as instructors of such classes. The LBI could supply the teaching materials and advice. Perhaps one or the other of the four pre-LBI TEE books could be used as texts. This work with laymen and elders of course would be done in cooperation with the pastors who supervise those particular congregations. The above suggestion about using either evangelists or competent LBI students as instructors would result in a double benefit. Not only would the lay person grow in Christian knowledge but the one who teaches would receive a very beneficial review of a certain subject.

Short courses of one or two weeks could be held for evangelists or pastors. The courses could either be an abbreviated repetition or an extension of what they had learned in school. Such classes would help the evangelists prepare for entrance into the seminary and would encourage them to serve faithfully in their present call. I am sure that refresher classes would be welcomed, because both the seminary and the evangelists admit that much is forgotten during the years of service as an evangelist. The same holds true for a pastor.

7. Summary

The role of the LBI in training evangelists almost has to become specialized as a mission field matures. At first it serves to produce educated laymen who can help expatriates establish and serve congregations. But later, and perhaps not very much later, the LBI's primary role must be seen as a path to the seminary if the church is to become indigenous.

In some situations, like the rural setting of Africa, an LBI must serve as a home away from home for its students. But it must not become a semi-permanent island of civilization for the students and their families which they later are reluctant to leave behind them. The BI is chiefly a learning center whose courses are designed to strengthen faith and to develop certain skills for the work of the church. The school assists in recruiting students, though most of this work is done through pastors in the field.

This type of school is the natural place to introduce national pastors to the responsibility of training their own future pastors. The sooner a large percentage of this work can be done by national pastors, the better for the future of the church, I feel. The LBI should plan to serve its graduates and others with short courses outside of the normal teaching schedule.

8. Alternatives

Several alternatives to the present system come to mind as far as our situation in Africa is concerned. You will need to judge their value for your own situation.

One is to introduce a completely non-residential program for training evangelists. In Africa that would mean that instead of bringing the student to the school, the books would be sent to the student. It would be like a correspondence course. However, some of the responsibility for training the student would rest on the shoulders of the supervising pastor who lives near him or else the school staff would need to travel at no small expense to various places in order to meet with the students periodically. Probably both would be necessary. This suggestion has its limitations, especially in Africa. First, the supervising pastors already tend to be overloaded with responsibilities. Second, the distances and travel conditions would mean that not only money but a great deal of time would be spent simply getting the teaches and students together. Third, the rate of learning would be extremely slow compared with that in the classroom. Fourth, I do not feel that a book can be understood by itself as well as a book plus a teacher who is at hand and always able to explain. After all, each student is different and has different attitudes and abilities which affect the learning process. Also, it might be noted again that the LCCA already is doing some non-residential teaching under the supervision of the pastors in order to get prospective students ready for school in the first place. I would not be in favor, however, of introducing a completely nonresidential, or a TEE, format as a substitution for the LBI concept in Africa. But I do see TEE as a possible way to upgrade the knowledge of church lay leaders and elders.

A second alternative is a modified residential program. This suggestion of having only men at the school for six three-month periods over the course of two years has already been explained above.

A third alternative would be to make a greater adaptation to the local scene by using the vernacular language in class and by calling national pastors to do the teaching if and as soon as this is feasible. This too has been discussed earlier.

A fourth alternative might be to upgrade the curriculum at the LBI in order to develop better homiletical skills and to provide some experience in writing simple Bible class materials.

A final suggestion would be to shorten the gap that lies between the LBI and seminary from two or more years to one year. I think this would reduce some of the need for re-teaching LBI subjects during the first seminary year. The effect it would have on the attrition rate is debatable. I question the need for a much longer gap than one year since the students already have had some experience in congregational work before coming to the LBI, and they have gained additional experience through weekend field work during their two years in school. It might be said that the years between the LBI and seminary are like a proving ground that helps to weed out or eliminate evangelists who are not fit for the ministry. Perhaps, so I but I wonder if very often the

evangelists have problems during those two years because it is too early in their training to be left so much alone for so long a time with such large congregational responsibility. In the rainy season months can pass between the visits a supervising pastor makes to his evangelists. Even when the weather is good it can be several weeks between visits and the visits tend to be quite brief if the supervising pastor has many congregations over a wide area. Shortening the gap between the training received in the LBI and that received in the seminary would not improve all of the problems just listed, but it would tend to reduce the pressure on a man who is treated virtually like a pastor by his people, but who has not yet been fully equipped for the work. What we presently ask of the evangelists is more than we would ask of pre-seminary students in the States. In fact it is more than we would expect of a vicar, not in respect to the work load, but in respect to the responsibility and the amount of supervision that can be provided. Once again, I would suggest enriching the gap year or years with short courses provided by the LBI in some way.