

**A Practical Theology**

**Of Inspetions**

Ministry Division  
Church House,  
Great Smith Street,  
London SW1P 3NZ

Published 2006 for the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council by  
Ministry Division

Copyright © The Archbishops' Council 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or stored or transmitted by any means or in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission which should be sought from the Copyright and Contracts Administrator, The Archbishops' Council, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ.

Tel: 020 7898 1594

Fax: 020 7898 1449

Email: [copyright@c-of-e.org.uk](mailto:copyright@c-of-e.org.uk)

Cover design by Visible Edge

## **Contents**

Preface	iv
A Practical Theology of Inspection	1
A Chronological Summary of Key Developments in Theological Education in England	2
An Introduction to the Inspection Process	6
A Systematic and Practical Theological Approach	7
Reporting and Accountability	12
Theological Education Today and from Three Perspectives	17
Conclusion	27

## **Preface**

I am delighted to commend this important and creative paper from Ian Bunting. It provides a worked example of the challenge from Archbishop Rowan Williams about integrity and credibility for Christian institutions being rooted in a process of discovery, discernment and holiness (p 27).

The aims and outcomes of our training institutions are evaluated within the perspectives of plurality, identity and integration, recognising the importance of accountability, consistency, and practicality. The obvious tools of discovery and discernment are linked to a commitment to holiness – ‘passionate attention’. This is the key formational framework within which theological education takes place – and the foundation for the evaluation and aspiration expressed by the Inspectorate. In this way the theology of inspection explored in the paper offers both a clear model of the skills and values required of our institutions, and a sign of the indispensable foundation of authorised ministry – private prayer and public worship as the source of that ‘passionate attention’ which roots discovery and discernment in the body of Christ. Academic rigour and pastoral effectiveness need to flow from the corporate discipline of prayerful hearts, inspired by the Spirit of Holiness.

Ian Bunting’s paper provides a challenging template for the critical evaluation of Christian institutions, and I trust that it can be a creative resource both for our colleges and courses, and for others concerned with the health of our structures within the Church.

**Bishop Alastair Redfern**

**Bishops Committee for Ministry**



# A Practical Theology of Inspection

Every five years the colleges, courses and schemes that train women and men for ordained and lay ministries in the sponsoring churches are inspected. The Inspections Working Party takes responsibility for planning and organising the inspections. It is an ecumenical body, embedded in the Church of England, but recognised by the sponsoring churches that appoint representatives to it<sup>1</sup>. The process is *interrogative*, seeking answers to set questions about the institution's rationale and methods, evidence of self-assessment, and the written views of significant others who either examine it or benefit from its students. It is a *dialogical* process in which the inspectors engage with the governing body, the staff and students during visits of observation. It is a *reporting* exercise in which significant findings and recommendations are released to those in the institutions and sponsoring churches who are judged to need to know.

**The purpose of this paper is to propose a practical theological approach to inspection that sees it as a process of checking the coherence and congruence of the operative and theoretical models of the inspected institution.**

-----

---

<sup>1</sup> The House of Bishops' Committee for Ministry; the Formation in Ministry Office, The Methodist Church; and the Training Committee, The United Reformed Church.

# 1. A Chronological Summary of Key Developments in Theological Education in England

1960. The churches were beginning to discern some weaknesses in theological training in the aftermath of the Second World War. The conventional wisdom about theological study was that it formed a preparation for active ministry. The movement of the training proceeded from theory to practice. The “practice” dimension amounted largely to experience-based advice given by college staff and other ordained clergy. Anthony Dyson, using some of the insights of the socio-linguist Basil Bernstein (1925-2000)<sup>2</sup>, described the curriculum of the colleges at this time as a “Collection Code”<sup>3</sup>. Principals and staff communicated experience-based learning brought alive by worship that was used as a powerful form of social control but was ill suited to face future change. In fact, he judged it as an unholy alliance against systematic thinking about practice.

1970. All the colleges, and the new part-time training courses that were in existence, recognised that the traditional pattern of theological training was deficient, particularly in the area of pastoral studies. The Behavioural Sciences were making an impact on training as theological educators recognised that the pastoral work of ministers needed to be supplemented by other practical insights, such as those of pastoral counselling, group dynamics and leadership training. These were now regarded as essential components of effective ministerial training.

---

<sup>2</sup> Basil Bernstein (1925-2000), *Class, Codes and Control*, 4 Vols. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971-1990.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Dyson, “Theology and the Education Principles in Ministerial Training: Problems of Collection Codes and Integrated Codes”, *Kairos*, No.6, Advent 1982, pp. 4-16. Also, *Experience and Authority*, “Issues Underlying Doing Theology”, ACCM Occasional Paper 19, London, Church House 1984, p.14.

Therefore, initiatives were taken to bring together the fruits of different academic and practical disciplines in lectures and seminars, for example on the “Use of the Bible” or “Church Growth”. Dyson described the curriculum in this period as the attempt to present an “Integrated Code”. The ordinand was to become a trained practitioner and communicator, theoretically informed, and willing to work with other professionals. However, in his judgement, students under this supposedly integrated code of practical ministry were fed by not very rigorous social analysis.

1980. Although in the previous two decades additions had been made to the curriculum, the core fourfold pattern of Biblical, Historical, Dogmatic and Pastoral studies remained unchanged; as did the conventional movement of the training from theological theory to ministerial practice. In 1982 Dyson suggested that, in effect theological education still adhered to past tradition or to a tenuous action-reflection characterised by scientific non-involvement or sentimental involvement, neither of which was adequate. Dyson called for ‘systematic theology’ as the organising principle<sup>4</sup>. In the same year, a conference on theological education recognised the changing cultural and ecclesiological context of the churches, and judged that this meant that the Christian faith required different forms and expressions in different contexts. Peter Baelz appealed for an ‘integrating theology’ that would bring wholeness to the separate theological disciplines, and to which they would each make their contribution<sup>5</sup>.

1987. Responding to the call of Archbishop Robert Runcie (1922-2000) for “a unifying purpose, content and style for ministerial training...”, and with Daniel Hardy as chair, a Church of England Working Party produced the Report, *Education for the*

---

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Dyson, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Peter Baelz, *An Integrating Theology*, ACCM Occasional Paper, Second Series, No. 15, London, Church House 1983, pp. 12-14.

*Church's Ministry*<sup>6</sup>. The Report envisaged an integrated programme, shaped by a primary vision or aim that expressed the institution's agreed understanding of the purpose of theological education, within which all the courses, modules and methods used cohered. Because there was no longer a core curriculum, it was now necessary for the training institutions to seek validation for their courses by answering three questions in a way that was judged by the validating committee to be congruent with an acceptably Anglican understanding of mission and ministry. The processes of validation and moderation came into being.

1998. The Church of England decided to co-ordinate the procedures for Bishops' Inspections, as they were then called, and those of educational validation; and to integrate the work of the Ministry Division Moderators with both. The purpose was to relieve some of the burdens falling on the institutions, particularly that of feeling over-inspected. In 1999 a Review of changes in the previous ten years was able to report only partial fulfilment of the 1987 vision for integration<sup>7</sup>. However, from this time the inspection process became an explicitly ecumenical exercise. Hitherto, the inspectors had reported to the House of Bishops.

2000. Although for some time the House of Bishops had approved guidelines for inspections, they now issued *Criteria for Inspections* that were included in the *Handbook for the Inspection of Theological Colleges, Courses and Schemes*<sup>8</sup>. The underlying principles of this document, that also had the endorsement of the other sponsoring churches, included the expectation that the institution would be:

- Engaged in an ongoing process of collecting evidence and self-assessment.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Education for the Church's Ministry*, "The Report of the Working Party on Assessment", ACCM Occasional Paper No. 22, London, Church House, January 1987.

<sup>7</sup> *Mission and Ministry*, "The Churches' Validation Framework for Theological Education", Report of the Advisory Board of Mission, London, Church House 1999, e.g. pp 20-31. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London, Church House Publishing 2003, pp. 19-29.

<sup>8</sup> Issued by The Inspectorate, Central Secretariat, Church House, London SW1P 3NZ, 2004.

- Aware of strengths and weaknesses.
- Addressing acknowledged needs for improvement.
- Prepared to enter into dialogue with the inspectors.
- Expecting the inspectors to address pertinent issues of concern not covered by the criteria.

2003. Following a decision by the Archbishops' Council, a Working Party with John Hind in the chair, published *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church*<sup>9</sup>. At a time when the number of small theological training institutions had multiplied, together with the number of universities providing or validating their courses, it set out a bold vision for the revitalisation of learning and training in the churches, now co-operating ecumenically. Among the guiding principles were the aims:

- To provide theological learning opportunities for lay people and formation for particular ministries, lay and ordained.
- To introduce structures to support lifelong learning.
- To reconfigure and realign institutional resources to deliver the vision.
- To set up an organisational framework in Regional Training Partnerships.

The Regional Training Partnerships are now in the process of being formed.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church*, "The Structure and Funding of Ordination Training", GS 1496, London, Church House Publishing 2003. See "Our Hopes for the Future", p.135-136.

## 2. An Introduction to the Inspection Process

Over the last 50 years the process of inspection, which antedated the introduction of validation and moderation, has developed in parallel with the changes in theological education and training outlined above. The procedures have become more rigorous. Inspectors nominated by church leaders, are now drawn from the different sponsoring denominations. They come to the inspection with a wide range of experiences both from within and without the churches. Most of them have had experience themselves of being inspected, many within a secular sphere of employment.

With the requirement of written submissions and the now generally accepted processes of self-assessment, the institutions produce more hard evidence both of their progress and awareness of needed improvements. The inspection team need not now depend as heavily as in the past on the verbal reports of third parties or impressions gained from interviews with individual members of the governing body, staff or students. Visits to observe the outworking of the curriculum of the institution are important checks, but brief in duration. The value of the visits lies mainly in the opportunity they provide for the dialogue that is now an important part of the whole exercise.

The inspection team works, and later reports, in relation to published criteria for inspections. From time to time these have been amended to meet current expectations of the churches, for example recently with regard to curriculum issues such as inter-faith awareness, and also to practical concerns such as governance and financial management. Before the sponsoring authorities consider the report it is possible, should they so wish, for the institutions to make comments on the inspectors' work. They have the opportunity and responsibility of responding fully later.

The follow-up visit, normally after about 12 months, expects action to have been already taken to implement the recommendations, or at least an action plan to be in place to address them. At present, the report is published on a need-to-know basis, but the Inspections Working Party has been moving towards much greater transparency, both as a way of reassuring the Christian public about the quality of the training, and as an opportunity to disseminate news of good practice.

The inspection process has met with criticism. Some of the particular complaints have derived from the fact that the churches, unlike most institutes of Higher Education, have no professionally supported Inspectorate. The inspectors are drawn from other parts of the church's life and are not 'professional inspectors'. They are appointed to a team according to their personal profiles and skills so as to be able to address a range of issues related to theological education in all its dimensions.

Inspectors are not peers of the trainers, nor are many themselves theological educators. By and large, they are senior lay and ordained Christians who bring with them wide experience both in secular fields and the churches. They are offered minimal training and no more than their expenses in fulfilling the task set them. They do, however, bring a grassroots appreciation of what the mission of the churches today requires. For their part, the institutions now have a formal and expected duty to evaluate both the inspection and the manner and work of its team members.

### 3. A Systematic and Practical Theological Approach

This paper sees the inspection process as an opportunity to test the theoretical models of the institution, as clarified through the validation

process, against the operational models perceived through the evidence submitted. This consists of answers to the questionnaire, reports such as those of the moderator and external examiner, observed practice and reported experience. The dialogue between the inspectors and others directly concerned with the training institution represents an important conversation with the wider church denominationally and, usually today, ecumenically. In this way, the call for the churches to be both co-operative and collaborative in fulfilling their mission is worked out in partnership with the training institutions.

From the key developments chronologically listed above, it is clear that during the last fifty years many educators, but not all, have been calling for a new theological approach to the work of ministerial training. Their aim has been to review and redesign the conventional fourfold subjects in their relation to each other, and to reconfigure the traditional movement from theory to practice. However, there has been no one normative organising principle that has informed such a change. As noted above, some of the pioneers have called for a new 'systematic theology'. Others have looked for a new organising principle in 'practical theology'. There are similarities between the two ways.

## Systematic Theology

Anthony Dyson believed that 'systematic theology' was missing<sup>10</sup>. Peter Baelz called for an 'integrating theology' by which he hoped that wholeness would be brought to the separate theological disciplines<sup>11</sup>.

Of course, this understanding of 'systematic theology' differs markedly from what had gone before. Most people think immediately of the classic systematic theologians; Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-74) and his *Summa Theologiae*, and John Calvin (1509-64) and his

---

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Dyson, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Peter Baelz, *op. cit.*

*Institutio Religionis Christianae*. Within the last hundred years Karl Barth (1886-1968) stands out as the leading systematic theologian. He started his detailed Protestant exposition of Christian doctrine in 1932, significantly calling it *Church Dogmatics*. A different interpretation again was given by, Paul Tillich (1886-1965). He called his major work, *Systematic Theology* (3 volumes, 1951-64). He described it as an answering theology<sup>12</sup>. None of these understandings are adequate to describe the kind of 'systematic theology' for which Dyson and Baelz were asking in the 1980s.

Charles M. Wood is one who in 1985 spelled out his understanding of just such a 'systematic theology',<sup>13</sup>. Believing that the goal of theological education is best conceived as the fostering of an aptitude for theological reflection, his most recent explanation of 'systematic theology' (2001) combines three dimensions of theological inquiry;

"Historical theology" is the name I have proposed for the discipline that pursues the question of authenticity, that is, of the fidelity of the Christian tradition(s) to the apostolic witness. "Philosophical theology" designates, in my scheme, the discipline devoted to the question of logic or intelligibility and truth of Christian witness. "Practical theology", long a name for a multiplicity of studies having to do with the tasks of church leadership, I propose to reassign to the discipline that inquires into the fittingness of Christian *praxis* to its context. None of these three disciplines can rightly be pursued in isolation from the others. I think of "systematic theology" as the effort to think these three things together<sup>14</sup>.

This approach illustrates the joined-up thinking that many, but not all, theological educators are now trying to foster in place of the

---

<sup>12</sup> "In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions". Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1, 1951, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment*, "An Orientation in Theological Study", Atlanta, Scholars Press 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Charles M. Wood, *Theological Education: Confessional and Public*, Resources for American Christianity <[www.resourcingchristianity.org/WhatsBeenLearned](http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/WhatsBeenLearned)>. 3 July 2001, p. 9.

conventional movement made between theology and ministry, seen as the application of theological theory to ministerial practice.

## Practical Theology

Karl Rahner (1904-84) argued that it would be possible to structure the whole of a theological training programme around a theology of practice. The subject matter was not simply to be the work of the clergy but rather it extended to everything with which the church had to do. The method was to include an exact scientific investigation into the concrete situation of the church, both interior and exterior. The findings of the secular sciences had to be brought into contribution and weighed from a theological point of view<sup>15</sup>.

At about the same time, in the United States in 1981, David Tracy was making his appeal for a *practical* theology that he described as 'transformative'. He argued that, "theological truth is grounded in the authentic and transformative praxis of an intellectually, morally and religiously transformed human subject". He also believed that social justice concretises Christian faith, hope and love and leads to strategies to authenticate truth. In short, Tracy, like Rahner, was focusing on Christian outcomes. To be sure, Tracy also issued a warning that all claims for the priority of *praxis* over theory must be checked by social analysis and be authenticated in the tradition. For him, *fundamental* theology (metaphysical), and *systematic* theology (the theology of disclosure) by which he understood, "the re-interpretation of the tradition for the present", were equally important. All three theologies need to be integrated<sup>16</sup>.

As with the new understanding of 'systematic theology', this illustrates the way that the *praxis* of the churches, or Christian outcomes, serves

---

<sup>15</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 11, "The New Claims which Pastoral Theology Makes upon Theology as a Whole", London, Darton Longman and Todd 1974, pp. 115-136.

<sup>16</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, "Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism", London, SCM Press 1981, pp. 62-82.

for some educators as a helpful focus around which to integrate the four traditional and still essential theological disciplines (Biblical, Historical, Dogmatic and Pastoral). Today, for instance, 'mission' often features as a focus for the curriculum.

The unfolding story of theological education in the United Kingdom is one of different approaches, and includes of course modern proponents of the more traditional way. Each attempts to develop theological training within its changing social and ecclesiological contexts. In short, theological education, along with its accompanying inspection process in its three dimensions (*interrogative*, *dialogical* and *reporting*), has an important modern history.

Inspection is *interrogative*; enquiring on the ground of hard evidence, into both in-put and outcomes. In every institution there is a theological purpose to the training that has been validated by the sponsoring churches. But there is also an implicit purpose either deliberately or sub-consciously appearing through the delivery of the curriculum. Whether or not it is stated, the learning and teaching methods of a training institution reveal an operative theology. For example, as noted above, Dyson thought, in his assessment of the post-war period, that theological education was hierarchical, controlling and restricted - and therefore theologically deficient.

Inspection is *dialogical*, rather than adversarial, in order, as far as it is possible, to achieve exactness. During the period of the inspection, the task of the inspectors is to initiate a conversation with all the subject matter, using all the hermeneutics of retrieval and suspicion. In this way, they will gain an accurate picture of the objectives of the institution, against which to judge the congruence of its theory, whatever that may be, and its operative performance.

It is to the church leadership within an historic community of faith and commitment that the team addresses itself in the *reporting* stage of an inspection. In doing this, the inspectors are bound to be mindful and

respectful of that community's nature, foundation and traditions in all their richness and diversity. More needs to be said about this.

## 4. Reporting and Accountability

The community in question is the global church, as expressed in and through the historic, denominational and interdenominational bodies of which the training institutions are a part. It has to be recognised, however, that people think differently about the 'church'. For some 'church' is a generic term, in effect meaning all the 'churches'. For others, it is the concrete and particular 'church' present locally in the congregation. For others, perhaps most, it is the historic 'church'. So, for instance in an increasingly post-denominational climate, Catholic ecclesiology reminds the rest that the 'church' it has in view is a visible, historic, institutional community; in other words, a concrete and political reality. Inspectors work in the midst of a range of differing and sometimes conflicting ecclesiological perspectives.

In all cases and in any case, however, to be 'church' involves a mutual responsibility and accountability within a body wider than an individual congregation. Ecclesiology and accountability go together. The inspection process, directed as it is to the churches' training institutions, is therefore to be seen as intrinsic to the "life together" of Christian institutions, both internally and externally. It is inspecting the way people and systems relate to each other within an institutional community of care and common purpose.

**A. Different authorities.** David Kelsey described theological schools in the United States, and not disparagingly, as 'crossroads hamlets'. According to his metaphor, they are found at the intersection of the Berlin Turnpike and Trent Road, Augsburg Road, Geneva Road, Northampton Road or Azusa Street. That is, they are shaped on the one hand by the traditions of higher education, symbolised by the

University of Berlin, and on the other by their relationship with some tradition of organized Christianity<sup>17</sup>.

The situation in England is not much different from that in the United States. Students train in a theological college, course or scheme that is answerable to the sponsoring church or churches. The curriculum is usually provided or validated by an Institute of Higher Education. Sometimes a tension can be detected between the claims of these two authorities with differing expectations and demands.

**B. Ecclesial authorities.** Most ordinands are identified with a denomination, and their trainers hold authority, responsibility and accountability delegated to them by the denominational churches that sponsor them. Yet the nature of these English theological training institutions, that were once denominational clerical training colleges, has altered radically over the last fifty years. Denominational loyalty and allegiance has been in steady decline. Nearly all the institutions now have ecumenical or inter-denominational links. Enrolment, particularly in the colleges and courses, includes at least some lay Christians, of any denomination or none, for whom congregational education has proved insufficient, but they are not training for specific authorised ministry.

There are therefore, among staff and students, different understandings of where authority lies within an institution. In the case of Methodist students, their trainers are able to keep in view a common understanding of what that church expects of preparation for authorised ministry. There is a published statement of what is required for the initial ministerial training of their candidates<sup>18</sup>. Additionally, in the case of Methodist ministerial candidates, students are individually directed to a recognised training institution.

---

<sup>17</sup> David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*, "What's Theological about a Theological School", Westminster, John Knox Press 1992, p.30.

<sup>18</sup> *Shaping the Future* (2006), "New Patterns of Training for Lay and Ordained", London, Church House Publishing 2006, Appendix 1, pp. 93-108.

For Anglicans however, it is less straightforward. The House of Bishops recognises all the inspected, validated and moderated Colleges, Courses and Schemes as fit for the purpose of training ordinands. There is therefore no one single acceptable Anglican tradition to the exclusion of others. In responding to the validating questions, the institutions are required to state their own institution's rationale in relation to the Church of England's mission and ministry. Since 1987 they have carefully done this, and gone on to explain how the vision is being implemented in the curriculum and assessment. But the question has been put, and still is; Are the answers the institutions give too self-referential?<sup>19</sup>

The Anglican report, *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (2003), draws attention to the need for greater clarity within the Church of England on the meaning, nature and purpose of the ordained ministry of the Church<sup>20</sup>. The succeeding report, *Shaping the Future* (2006), states the "Learning Outcomes for Ordained Ministry" in the Church of England<sup>21</sup>, but it does not resolve the questions raised by the Anglican understanding of dispersed authority. That the different recognised institutions are required to state their own rationale for Anglican mission and ministry, implies what is clear to any careful observer or inspector on the ground, and has been true for five centuries. Anglican comprehensiveness, today as in the past, does not involve the elimination of difference but the affirmation of strengths; one hopes within a climate of mutual respect. In short, as the Report states in relation to all the sponsoring churches, "there remain profoundly different ways of being church and significantly different dynamics in formation for ministry which cannot be easily collapsed into one another"<sup>22</sup>.

In spite of different understandings of where authority lies and how formation is to take place, one can however say with confidence that there is solid agreement across the denominations and different

---

<sup>19</sup> *Shaping the Future* (2006), p. 65. "We have not defined more precisely curriculum content or a syllabus, and we are aware that those who have urged us to do this will be disappointed...."

<sup>20</sup> *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (2003), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Shaping the Future* (2006), pp. 64-86.

<sup>22</sup> *Shaping the Future* (2006), p. 61.

Anglican traditions on some fundamental aspects of reporting. Trainers and inspectors of all traditions recognise today that theological education needs to be holistic and formative. It is to be directed towards preparing a leadership for enabling the ministry of the churches.

**C. Higher Education and Theological Training.** The inspection process should not be confused, as it sometimes is, with the inspection of either a school or an institute of Higher Education. Those inspections are concerned with the efficient delivery of a system of education. The churches have much to learn from them, not least from those cognitive and formative aspects that they have in common, but the reporting of the churches' inspectors is to church leaders who must judge the fitness of their students for another purpose. Although teachers in Higher Education and Theological Education look for both cognitive and formative development, there is a different understanding of the formative purpose that is likely to be an ongoing topic of debate.

In England, for instance, there may yet be the kind of change in university provision that has taken place in the United States over the last forty years. In the 1960s and 1970s, in fulfilling their desire for the objective examination of religious phenomena, Departments of Religion multiplied in the research-based universities. They began to replace or weaken the old Divinity Schools that had been largely devoted to the study of Christianity, oriented to an ecclesial vocation, and taught confessionally by the faculty. In many American universities, it was no longer to be education *in* religion, but *about* religion.

Reviewing these changes Conrad Cherry noted how, in the Departments of Religious Studies, it was expected that educators would approach their task with 'disinterested objectivity', 'personal detachment', 'disinterested irreverence' and even 'the perspective of

the outsider'.<sup>23</sup> In the view of Cherry, if historic Divinity Schools were to become Religious Studies institutions, it would put theological schools, such as church colleges and seminaries, under pressure to follow suit; which would be a tragedy for the church<sup>24</sup>.

Today in England, the churches still supply many of the students in the Departments of Theology and Religious Studies. Some such departments in England, particularly in the older universities, are confident in their role. They are aware of the ongoing public interest in the Christian religion and in what the churches are doing. However, for good reasons in an increasingly multi-faith culture, many may in the future prefer to become Departments of Religious Studies, as in the USA. In recent years, Christian theological educators have become increasingly vulnerable in the eyes of their colleagues in secular institutions. Their historic and traditional theological purpose, the study of the Christian religion largely oriented to an ecclesial vocation in ministry or education, could be further threatened - even in church foundations.

While, like all institutes of Higher Education, theological training institutions will be inspected in relation to the delivery of an efficient system of education, the formative and holistic intent of theological training continues to be distinctive. Edward Farley was making this point when he pointed out that whereas in the ancient world the object of education was to promote "virtue" (*paideia*), for Christians the object was to foster what he called *theologia*. By this he meant, "a sapiential knowledge engendered by grace and self-disclosure".<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Conrad Cherry, *Hurrying Toward Zion; Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1995, p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Thomas W. Gillespie (President of Princeton Theological Seminary) Convocation Address, Miller Chapel, 16 September 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia; The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1983, p.153.

## 5. Theological Education Today from Three Perspectives

As noted above, it is important to recognise that there is no one generally accepted and correct method of theological education and training in the churches. It is particularly important to hold to this when the academic, cultural, social, and religious context of training is changing so rapidly. In this section of the paper, the purpose is to offer three illustrative perspectives on inspecting theological education.

The first perspective is from the *plurality* within which all training must take place. The second perspective is from the *identity*, and especially the Christian and ecclesial identity, together with the identity of the minister, that an institution wants to preserve and develop. The third perspective is from the *integration* of theological learning, in a holistic and formative way. All church leaders and educators want to encourage this in both individuals and institutions; the integration of who I am (authentic being), what is true (intelligible belief), and the way it works out in practice (fitting discipleship)<sup>26</sup>.

### 1. Plurality

At present the institutes of theological education are, by their nature, plural in enrolment, purposes, church allegiance, and context; and very small compared with other institutes of higher education. Can there be a common purpose?

**A. A diverse student enrolment.** Historically, the residential theological colleges, some of them founded to foster a particular church tradition and others local to a diocese or region, were

---

<sup>26</sup> See Charles M. Wood; on the *validity* of the performance of Christian witness. *op. cit.* 3 July 2001, pp. 8-9.

supplemented from the 1960s by part-time non-residential training courses. Later in the last century, schemes for training ordained local self-supporting ministers were established in about half of the Anglican dioceses. Latterly, an even wider range of options makes it possible for candidates for both ordained and lay ministries to train together whole-time or part-time. At the same time, independent students now enrol alongside ministerial candidates.

**B. *Different purposes.*** The effect of such plurality has been to draw the attention of the inspectors more closely to ask; ‘What is the purpose of the theological education and training that is being inspected?’ The answer to the question is to be discerned as I have suggested above, not only in written documents, but by careful observation of what happens in practice; for example, Who is being trained for what? In what locality does the training take place? Who are the teachers and with what methods do they facilitate the learning process? With what presuppositions, theoretical and practical, does the institution go about its mission? What note, if any, is taken of the learning preferences of the students and the congregations or other groupings with which they will serve? All the English theological institutions now have a vocational dimension to them wider than their former purpose of clerical training. In this respect, they resemble the American theological schools that, for at least two generations but even more so recently, have seen their theological task as much broader than professional ministerial training. English Methodists in recent years have acted to endorse such a change of the focus of theological training to “vocation” in a broad sense.

**C. *Ecumenical or interdenominational.*** In fact, the increasingly plural forms of theological education over the last 50 years are indicative of the developing perspective of the churches over the same period. For example, as noted above, all the institutions now have strong ecumenical or inter-denominational links. They welcome students of different church traditions, and do not deliberately try to impose any inherited or alien historical viewpoint upon them. Nevertheless, each small institution, and all of them are small, with varying degrees of success tends to induct its students into a

characteristic disposition and critical awareness. This may even be the institution's subtext; but in a post-denominational climate and within current ecumenical concern or interdenominational alliances of one sort or another, plurality is the national reality.

**D. *Diverse settings and contexts.*** The same point could be made about the plurality of geographical locations in which theological education now takes place. Nearly all the institutions have, or are moving towards having, some kind of accreditation with institutes of Higher Education. However, the settings in which most of the learning is digested varies from the university, the college, and the course, to the congregation and even in some instances the individual learner's home. All of which settings have implications both for the nature of the world in view and the theology being absorbed.

**E. *In a plural society, a common purpose?*** David Tracy identified three essential audiences to be addressed by theologians if they are to portray what is required; a properly 'public theology'; (i) The *public* (outside the church's culture and language), (ii) The *academy* (calling for coherence and logic), (iii) The *church* (living a faith-centred engagement in the world). It was his belief that the Liberation theologians of the 1980s were successfully integrating the three forms of theology mentioned above (*practical, systematic and fundamental*) for these three identifiable audiences<sup>27</sup>. Certainly, Christian education and training today must be weighed for its public effectiveness within just such a plurality of audiences. However, that is not impossible within particular congregations and faith communities, as David Kelsey also has argued<sup>28</sup> It is his belief that the best way to understand the universal is through the concrete particular<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, pp. 397-398.

<sup>28</sup> "I will argue that the Christian thing is present in concrete reality in and as various Christian congregations or worshipping communities in all their radical pluralism". David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> "... the best way to understand the universal is through the concrete particular. This maxim has shaped the book in several ways. So far as the task of this book is concerned, it means that if one wants to understand truly the universal God, the "God of all", it is best to do it by going through the concrete particularities of communities of persons who describe themselves as engaged by and responding to the universal God." David Kelsey, *ibid.* p. 112.

Therefore, whatever the enrolment, purposes, church allegiance, context or setting of the theological learning, the common purpose is to address the plural audiences identified by David Tracy. And it becomes a concern for the inspectors of institutions, especially small ones, where and how they learn from and address plural audiences.

Consequently, for instance, inspectors note the strong emphasis many trainers put upon the value of the intentional learning community in ministerial 'formation' and how it works out in practice. How is that community conceived and how does it conceive itself? How is the looked for theological 'integration', considered below, to be found if, for instance, the learning community is small, the curriculum is locally delivered, and only restricted use is made of the geographical, social, academic or ecclesiological setting in which training takes place?

## 2. Identity

One of the current debates in theological education focuses on the nature of denominational identity, and how to strengthen it within the increasingly ecumenical or interdenominational climate of theological education and, even, the essentially non-denominational Christian allegiance of many students. The debate resonates with some of the wider debates underlying current national concerns in the United Kingdom about pluralism and multiculturalism; and also with the pressing discussion about inter-faith worship and the uniqueness of Christ.

For example, in the past some ecumenical institutions seemed to devalue denominational diversity by establishing an inclusive common rite that could be owned by all students. Sooner or later, the policy proved unsatisfactory, at least to some, and it fell out of general favour. More usually in recent years, institutions have tried to use authorised rites of different denominations and traditions represented within the student body. These have usually had an inherent integrity

such that the worshipper enters into the form, style, language and ethos of the authentic worship of a recognised Christian community. The identity of a group of students has thereby been strengthened, and others have experienced the best that a different tradition has to offer. But it has been a decision taken with considerable theological implications for inspectors concerned, for example, about both ecclesial identity on the one hand and ecumenism on the other.

**A. An identity is inescapable.** Every theology is contextual. Therefore, some sort of ecclesial identity is inescapable, and every theological training institution operates with inherent and discernible, if not always stated, ecclesiology or ecclesiologies. Moreover, church leaders of the sponsoring denominations have expectations on the subject, and about the way it is to be inculcated<sup>30</sup>. In the curriculum, this is largely achieved through the leading of and participation in public worship, together with instruction in denominational history, polity and practice.

**B. Community spirit.** It is through such institutional worship, denominationally focused modules and training in spirituality that most trainers foster the development of the 'community' spirit. Such inclusions in the timetable enable a certain distancing within the training institution as part of the core curriculum. Such distancing gives space to consider church traditions and their interpretation, to develop spiritual disciplines that cohere with those traditions, and to enrich a spiritual identity within the particular branch of the Christian church to which a student belongs. Moreover, life within the 'community' helps the student to recognise and own 'construable signs'<sup>31</sup>, and to build the 'stock of stories'<sup>32</sup>, by which a 'community of character'<sup>33</sup> tells the world it exists, who it is, and what it is for<sup>34</sup>.

---

<sup>30</sup> e.g. *Shaping the Future* (2006), for Anglicans pp. 64-86; for Methodists pp. 93-108.

<sup>31</sup> Clifford Geertz (1926- ), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books 1973, Chap. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-), *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press 1981, Chap. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Stanley Hauerwas (1940- ), *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press 1981, pp. 9-35.

<sup>34</sup> See also James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, London, SCM 1989, pp. 193-194.

To give one example of how things can go wrong; sometimes, as inspections have revealed, the marks of identifiable 'community', as outlined in the previous paragraph, are not how in practice the students live it. A notoriously slippery word, 'community', may be confused with the experience of feeling supported, or together, or united by a common purpose. Admirable and even essential as this may be, it falls short of the received Christian tradition, especially the traditions of the historic churches and denominations, and the insights of careful anthropological research and reflection. It may betray a weak ecclesial awareness of identity and is one area where collusion within an institution can become dangerous.

**C. Ministerial role.** There is another question of identity in theological training that can give rise to disagreement and maybe controversy; What is the role or identity of the Christian minister or priest? It has even been suggested that where, as we have just considered, there is a weak sense of ecclesial identity it may be accompanied by an over awareness of ministerial self-realisation in the role.

In some institutions training men and women for ordained ministry, emphasis is placed on the 'liminality' of the period in training, seeing it as the process in which a person alters their self-identity from what went before. In the period under review in this paper, there has been a considerable marginalization of the professional minister and priest, and a great reduction in the influence of the institutional churches in Britain. Consequently, the focus of the discussion of the clerical role within the church and society and ministerial identity has shifted.

**D. Ministerial identity.** Many have noticed the change of focus from leader-centred communities to community-centred leaders. Much of the discussion has moved from the clerical paradigm to the models of the church<sup>35</sup>. Consequently, ministerial identity has become the focus

---

<sup>35</sup> For example; Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, "A Critical Assessment of the Church in all its Aspects", Dublin, Gill and MacMillan 1976.

of attention rather than more specifically clerical roles. The title of the reformatory report, seeking a new understanding of integration and published in 1987, was; *Education for the Church's Ministry* (ACCM 22). A follow-up report in 1999 (second edition 2003) was entitled, *Mission and Ministry*. The report, *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (2003), is in the same vein. The focus is upon the church more than the minister.

In 1985 Joseph Hough and John Cobb recognised the danger in attempting to form clergy according to accepted roles, for example priest, preacher, teacher etc. Clergy have to fulfil so many tasks in different settings that none is exhaustive and many have to be combined. Instead, they proposed that clergy should be viewed not from their clerical activity but from their ministerial identity<sup>36</sup>. Here, as other research in the United Kingdom has uncovered, there is a large measure of agreement among theological trainers<sup>37</sup>. There is warm support for Hough and Cobb as they describe the ministerial identity required today in terms of becoming a 'reflective practitioner' or 'practical theologian'; and that within a church conceived by trainers more as a 'communion' than an 'institution'. In the United States in 1988, Max Stackhouse spelt out his understanding of ministerial identity;

The vocation of Christian theological education is to prepare women and men to be theologians and ethicists in residence and in mission among the people of God in the multiple contexts around the globe. The core of this preparation must be the cosmopolitan quest for truth and justice of God. In Christian theological education, these will be best treated by careful, critical and constructive concern for orthodoxy and praxiology, with the constant recognition that an 'apologia' is necessary at every juncture<sup>38</sup>.

---

<sup>36</sup> Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, Chico, Scholars Press, 1985, p. 93.

<sup>37</sup> Ian D. Bunting, *The Places to Train*, "A Survey of Theological Training in Britain", Eltham, MARC Europe 1990, p. 53-55.

<sup>38</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1988, p. 209.

In the intervening years, as the influence of the historic and denominational churches has further declined, the appeal of interdenominational or non-denominational Christianity has strengthened. Today, in exercising their responsibility as servants of the sponsoring churches, the inspectors discern through the handling of ecclesial and ministerial identity how an institution frames its mission and understanding of ministry. And, even more important, how it is framed not only within the vision and policy of the sponsoring churches but also in relation to a wider Christian union in the mission of God.

### 3. Integration

From the perspective of how the institution integrates the curriculum, as with its plurality and identity, it may be possible discern how successfully its operative models match its theoretical goals. First, how is the subject matter taught and learned; with what organising principle? Secondly, in what way is the formation of the student - the personal, theoretical and practical development – integrated? Thirdly, how is the stated institutional vision perceived and worked out within the community's life and practice?

**A. *Integrated training?*** It is a mistake to think that theological training at the beginning of the period under review was not integrated. It was. But it was integrated not in ministerial identity but clerical role. The theological colleges were training students to be competent priests, ministers, preachers, and pastors. Almost always the trainers brought to the task a pre-understanding. Consciously or unconsciously, it was informed by distinguished and recognised pastoral theologians.

However, as various new subjects and disciplines were added to the pastoral curriculum, theological educators became aware of a

problem. In the 1988 setting of the United States, Max Stackhouse identified it as follows;

(Theological education) ... allowed itself for a time to become trapped in the protest against all universalistic criteria. The nominal, the immediate, the direct, the subjective, the existential, the historically variant, the pietistic, and the particular became the focus and we are today reaping the whirlwind of a number of highly sophisticated contextualisms....<sup>39</sup>

**B. Poorly integrated training.** Edward Farley was more sweeping in his critique of a failure to integrate the outcomes of the new subject pluralism. He referred to the way theological educators handled the pressing issues around themes such as gender, sexual orientation, minority groups, and global and inter-religious pluralism; “The subject matter rarely came together to produce a useful powerful, distinctive and disciplined way of thinking that would pervade all aspects of ministry”<sup>40</sup>. In short, what happened was that subjects were added to the already crowded syllabus of pastoral and practical theology. It did not resolve the ongoing compartmentalising of theological studies. It did not resist the ongoing temptation to treat current pressing issues as additional challenges in which it was necessary to apply theological theory to practical problems.

**C. Formation.** For a generation, theological educators in England have been trying to co-ordinate means of training that draw together theoretical, personal and practical development in a coherent preparation for readiness to begin public ministry. Reviews have consistently recorded only partial progress in achieving the necessary integration. There are a number of reasons for this, not least the scope of the integration envisaged and the range of implications for

---

<sup>39</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, *ibid.* p.158.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Farley in an interview on “The state of theological education in the United States”, *Resources for American Christianity*, <[www.resourcingchristianity.org/WhatsBeenLearned](http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/WhatsBeenLearned)>. 5 July 2001.

institutions and churches used to a different understanding of the church and ministerial training<sup>41</sup>.

It is therefore significant that the Anglican report *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (2003) in its title fastened on the word 'formation'. In the past, many associated "formation" with 'spiritual' growth and development. The report wants to resist such a narrowly conceived connotation.

It is... important not to understand formation as being concerned solely with questions of spirituality and discipleship which is then added as a third element alongside 'education' (=academic study) and training (=learning skills for ministry). Rather 'formation' should be seen as the overarching concept that integrates the person, understanding and competence<sup>42</sup>.

**D. Institutional integrity and credibility.** As formation, understood as "the development of character within the context of the Church's life"<sup>43</sup>, is important for the individual student, so equally is "integration" for the corporate institution. How does the overarching aim, validated by the sponsoring churches, work out? With what institutional integrity and credibility does it operate in practice?

For example, Archbishop Rowan Williams (1950- ) brought a challenge to the Anglican Communion in 2004 to reveal its integrity and credibility in *discovery*, *discernment* and *holiness*. His lecture was a theological critique of the calling of a Christian institution, in this case the Anglican Church, to exemplify the body of Christ. The lecture could be applied, as it was intended, to any enterprise in theological education today.

---

<sup>41</sup> *Integration and Assessment* (1992), pp. 9-31, *Mission and Ministry* (2003), p. 25-26. *Shaping the Future* (2006), p. 79-80.

<sup>42</sup> *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (2003), p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> *Shaping the Future* (2006), p.64.

Addressing the Centre for Anglican Communion Studies, Williams interpreted theological education in the broadest possible sense as a discovery of the body of Christ. For him, this involves our *discovery* of one another as believers ecumenically and, in the case of the Anglican Communion, the discovery of itself as something, which exemplifies the body of Christ. This will in turn involve us in a process of *discernment* developed through the study of scripture, doctrine and church history, such as will deepen in us the skills we need in respect of our own calling and the calling of others. To this discovery and discernment must be added *holiness*, or obedience and discipline – “passionate intention”<sup>44</sup>. Such a renewed concern for discovery, discernment and holiness could, Williams believes, “save us from being simply an ecclesiastical organisation preoccupied with policing itself in various ways, which will perhaps make us a more effective servant of the world into which God calls us”<sup>45</sup>.

There is then an ongoing task within the changes currently being implemented for the regionalization of theological education. If education and training are to be both holistic and formative, as all trainers agree they should be, and if the institutions are to be credible expressions of the body of Christ, the way the training is integrated is a critical perspective from which to evaluate its effectiveness.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to present a theological approach to inspections, and validation and moderation, that is both historical and practical. At the heart of it lies a view of the work as the correlation of

---

<sup>44</sup> “I’d like to put in answer to the question, what is theological education: that element of an education in proper obedience, the passionate intention to what is there, to the extent that I am changed by that attention, and set free by it from other pressures to conformity.”

<sup>45</sup> Theological Education for the Anglican Communion, <[www.anglicancommunion.org/teac/cefacs3nov04.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/teac/cefacs3nov04.cfm)> Lecture 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2004.

theoretical and operative models of theological education and training. The method adopted involves careful attention to the hard evidence presented by the institution, then a dialogical exercise before and during the inspection period to check for accuracy, prior to insightful reporting, achievable recommendations and follow-up. The attitude is to be one of respectful, appreciative and critical review. The inspector's tools are the hermeneutics of retrieval and suspicion. It is understandable that these can lead sometimes to misunderstanding.

The published *Criteria for Inspections* (2004) cover most of the processes of the institution and its curriculum, and have been amended in the light of inspectors' reports in previous years. However, in theological education, as indeed in all Higher Education, there is an old and ongoing debate about the purpose of it; is it equipment for work, or the development of analytical thinking and reflection, or induction into a culture of ongoing and creative learning? Or, as this paper proposes, is it all three, and even more?<sup>46</sup>

In recent years, theological educators and trainers have tended to use a cluster of Greek and Latin words from a classical background to sum up their prime aims within theological training institutions; for instance – *theologia, paideia, scientia, habitus, stabilitas, sapientia, communitas, praxis, apologia*. They have done so because the obvious meaning of those words in English does not convey either the fullness of the original or the subtlety, breadth and depth of what they want to describe today.

If we see the Church as God's 'construable sign', then it is necessary for the churches to check their integrity and credibility, together with that of their ministers and people in training. For instance, How far may it be honestly said that this learning community (*communitas*) displays a wisdom that is congruent with belief in the one God and father, for one world (*theologia, sapientia, scientia*)? How does it practise a life that is coherent with a belief in God, incarnate in Jesus

---

<sup>46</sup> See above, *Higher Education and Theological Training*, pp 9-10.

Christ, who died and rose to save the created order both now and eternally (*paideia, praxis*)? How does it live within a disposition and critical awareness that is being constantly formed and reformed by God's renewing Spirit at work among his called witnesses (*habitus, stabilitas, apologia*)?

Large Regional Training Partnerships (RTPs) will certainly call for a different way of inspection, validation and moderation<sup>47</sup>. However, the purpose, approach and tools of the inspection will continue unchanged. The critical nature of the three perspectives, used in this paper as illustrations and from which we may view theological education today, *plurality, identity and integration*, will be undiminished. In fact, it will be considerably increased.

---

<sup>47</sup> *Shaping the Future* (2006), p. 81.