

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Theological education for the global church

I FIRST MET SIMON two years ago during a visit to Kenya. In addition to running a small business, Simon had recently accepted a call to ordination in his small Mennonite congregation. He read the Bible every day, but he knew he needed more theological training. His Seventh-Day Adventist friends were clear about their theological foundations. How, he asked, could I help him know more about Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and practice? Simon's question was urgent, and it deserved an answer.

During the past 40 years, Anabaptist-Mennonite churches around the world have undergone phenomenal growth, from 600,000 to 2.2 million. Among the groups related to MWC, 92 percent of the growth has come from Africa, Asia or Latin America. Where new leaders in these emerging congregations will receive theological education is perhaps the single biggest challenge that our global fellowship faces.

Any effective solution to that challenge will need to meet at least three basic criteria. Theological education in the global church needs to be affordable, accessible and appropriate to the context.

The traditional approach of bringing gifted students to North America for two or three years of training has some advantages; not least, it enriches our seminaries with international perspectives.

But the model often disrupts family life, requires young students to contextualize what they are learning far from

their pastoral settings and is expensive—accessible only to a few, gifted elites.

A cheaper alternative has been to fly North American professors to various international settings for short-term seminars or courses. The relationships forged in these encounters can be wonderful, but teaching often happens in translation, without a deep sense of the local cultural

Theological education in the global church needs to be affordable, accessible and appropriate to the context.

context; and the impact tends to be fleeting.

In some settings, local Bible schools or seminaries have emerged, often as a legacy of the missionary presence. Several of these schools have been quite successful; many, however, continue to face enormous financial and administrative challenges and struggle to find teachers rooted in Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives.

Increased accessibility to the internet and improvements in educational technology have opened new doors to distance education. Online courses tend to be more affordable, and they are increasingly accessible. But they require a great deal of individual discipline to complete and often

lack the face-to-face relational component so crucial to Christian formation.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is not technical but one of content: What is the most helpful curriculum for each specific setting? How important is a formal degree? What is an “appropriate” theological education? For centuries, Western theologians have assumed the core curriculum of theological education is self-evident. Once students have mastered this core, theology can then be “contextualized” into the new cultural realities of a mission setting. What we often fail to recognize, however, is just how deeply “classical” theology itself is contextualized within the Western tradition.

How can we reconceptualize theological education in ways that are truly relevant to emerging Anabaptist-Mennonite leaders around the world—ways that encourage them to translate the biblical message and the wisdom of a tradition into their own settings?

Traditions are sustained and renewed only as they are reformulated in new cultural contexts. The future of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church hangs in the balance.



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.