

THE CURRENT CRISIS IN PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Mark R. Elliott

Mark R. Elliott is editor of the *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, Asbury University, Wilmore, KY. A member of CAREE's Advisory Editorial Board for many years, Elliott presented this paper at CAREE's annual meeting in New York in February 2009, then up-dated it through use of sources as late as October 2010, making it a major review of the scholarship so far. Editor's note: Portions of this article were previously published in the *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 18 (Winter 2010), 16, 14-15; 18 (Spring 2010), 5-7; and 18 (Summer 2010), 13-15.

Declining Enrollment...

From 1993 to 2007 New Life Bible College in Moscow graduated more than 200 students in a program focused on evangelism, missions, and pastoral ministry. However, this Campus Crusade-sponsored seminary closed its doors following its May 2007 commencement.¹

In 2009 two other Moscow seminaries of Korean origin, one headed by Gennady Sergienko and another headed by Vladimir Lee, closed their doors.² Across the former Soviet Union many residential seminary buildings, built at great expense, are now nearly bereft of full-time students. Missiologist and Russian church historian Walter Sawatsky notes, "Beautiful campuses built largely with largesse from the West, including many thousands of sweat hours by volunteers from America, are standing nearly empty" because of "the near total disappearance of the full-time student."³ From the Baltic to the Pacific one finds Protestant schools struggling with an enrollment shortfall that threatens their survival. Making matters worse, beleaguered Protestant seminaries from Moscow to Siberia report increasing pressures from local authorities, the mafia, and Russian Orthodox.⁴ Because conditions are so difficult for Bible colleges in Central Asia, several are contemplating closure or a move to a less hostile environment.⁵

. . . Following Dramatic Growth

The current phenomenon of Protestant seminaries under siege stands in stark contrast to the earlier dramatic flowering of formal pastoral training programs as the Soviet regime tottered and then collapsed. Programs grew from not a single Protestant residential seminary in 1986 to 42 programs by 1992, to well over 100 by the end of the 1990s.⁶ A 1999 directory of theological

¹ Matt Miller, email to author, 29 November 2009.

² William Yoder, "The Future of Theological Education in Euro-Asia," news release, Department for External Church Relations of Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, 22 August 2009; Ekaterina Smyslova, meeting, 5 December 2009; Gennady Sergienko, meeting, 26 May 2010.

³ Walter Sawatsky, "Reflections on the Urgency of Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union—After 20 Years," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 30 (May 2010), 25.

⁴ Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009; Anthony Rybarczk, phone interview, 3 November 2009; Harold Brown, phone interview, 17 November 2009.

⁵ Insur Shamgunov, "Listening to the Voice of the Graduate: An Analysis of Professional Practice and Training for Ministry in Central Asia," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 2009, pp. 19, 29, 34, and 36.

⁶ Mark R. Elliott, "Protestant Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18 (January 1994), 14; Mark R. Elliott, "Theological Education after Communism: The Mixed Blessing of Western Assistance," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 50 (Spring 1995), 67-73.

institutions listed 137 Protestant, 57 Orthodox, and 4 Catholic schools, while in 2001 Overseas Council International identified 230 Protestant, 117 Orthodox, and 31 Catholic theological training programs.⁷ Growth appears to have continued into the new century. Even today, the Assemblies of God report 135 Pentecostal Bible schools in Russia and Ukraine⁸ and the Evangelical Christian-Baptist (ECB) press service estimates 150 ECB-related seminaries and Bible schools across the former Soviet Union.⁹

Overbuilding

In accounting for the current troubles in theological education, however, the large number of Protestant institutions looms large. "Over-saturation of evangelical schools," as David Hoehner, former academic dean at Donetsk Christian University, calls it,¹⁰ stems from many decades of pent-up demand, a "time is short" mentality, willing Western donors, and the preference of myriads of Western churches and ministries for "their own independent training programs."¹¹ Duplication and overbuilding would appear to be the consequence. For example, can Donetsk, Ukraine, with a predominantly secular or Orthodox population, sustain five evangelical pastoral training programs?¹²

The Waning of Church Growth

Initially, new Protestant seminaries benefitted from growing numbers of converts and new churches opening their doors. But denominational reports and mission newsletters have been better at counting those coming in through front doors than in counting those leaving through back doors. Perhaps a half million Evangelicals have emigrated to the West from the former Soviet Union; in addition, some worshippers only darkened church doors temporarily out of short-lived curiosity.¹³ With overall church growth waning, enrollments naturally suffer.¹⁴ On the other hand, where church growth continues, as with Pentecostals in Ukraine, Siberia, and the Russian Far East, seminary enrollments have not declined as much, or they continue to rise.¹⁵ Another exception to

⁷ Alla Tikhonova, ed., *Spravochnik bogoslovskie uchebnye zavedeniya v stranakh SNG i Baltii* (Moscow: Assotsiatsiya Dukhovnoe Vozrozhdenie, 1999); Jason E. Ferenczi, "Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union: Some Recent Developments," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 21 (December 2001), 2.

⁸ Anthony Rybarczk, phone interview, 3 November 2009.

⁹ Yoder, "Future," 1.

¹⁰ David Hoehner, "Letter to the Editor," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 15 (Winter 2007), 6.

¹¹ Mark Harris, "Needed: A Revolution in Pastoral Training; Pitfalls of Western-Created Leadership Training in Russia," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 20 (Fall 2003), 82. See also Taras Dyatlik, "What Expectations Do Pastors and Local Churches in the Former Soviet Union Have of Higher Theological Education at the Beginning of the 21st Century?," *Bogoslovskie razmyshleniya/Theological Reflections* No. 10 (2009), 101, 103, and 115; Mark R. Elliott, "Protestant Missions in Russia Today," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 13 (Fall 2005), 1; Ferenczi, "Theological Education," 7; Sawatsky, "Reflections," 22.

¹² Peter Mitskevich, "Problems I See with Theological Education," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 12 (Fall 2004), 6.

¹³ Wally C. Schoon, "The Lure of the West," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 4 (Spring 1996), 1-2; Susan W. Hardwick, *Russian Refuge: Religion, Migration, and Settlement on the North American Pacific Rim* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Shamgunov, "Listening," 23, 26, 29, 31, and 35; Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009; Dyatlik, "Expectations," 115; Peter F. Penner, "Western Missionaries in Central and Eastern Europe," *Acta Missiologicae—Journal for Reflection on Missiological Issues and Mission Practice in Central and Eastern Europe* 1 (2008), 51.

¹⁵ Anthony Rybarczk, phone interview, 3 November 2009; Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009; Yoder, "Future," 2. Also, Polish Catholic seminary enrollments remain quite strong. Peter Penner and Anne Marie Kool, "Theological Education in Eastern and Central Europe" in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, ed. by Dietrich Werner *et al.* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 542.

the rule is Zaporozhe Bible School, which has maintained its enrollment and currently is engaged in a building campaign.¹⁶ Also weathering the crisis well is Moscow Evangelical Christian Seminary, sponsored by U.S.-based OMS International. It enjoyed its largest enrollment of 103 students in fall 2009. This Wesleyan school owns its own property; it has benefitted from strong indigenous and Western leadership and faculty; and it accepts Pentecostal students—41 percent in 2008. Still, fall 2010 enrollment included only 36 residential students, more than other Protestant programs in Moscow, but hardly sustainable as a residential program without enrollment improvements in the future.¹⁷

Shortcomings in Seminary Candidates

Charley Warner, advisor to the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (E-AAA), traces the origin of the current enrollment crisis as far back as 1993. At fault, at least in part, he argues, has been competition for students undermining the ability of programs to graduate mature, capable pastors.¹⁸ Peter Mitskevich, now president of the Moscow ECB Theological Seminary, and former Western missionary Mark Harris have noted various shortcomings in seminary candidates that they have observed firsthand. Some students:

1. are too young to fully absorb instruction;
2. are too inexperienced to apply their learning;
3. lack a clear call to ministry and lack direction in their lives;
4. require elementary discipleship;
5. lack vital connections with home churches;
6. are less concerned with an education than with a diploma;
7. are fascinated with the West, seek to practice English, obtain scholarships to study abroad, and/or emigrate to the West; and
8. have no interest in pastoring, aspiring instead to careers in teaching.¹⁹

Metropolitan Hilarion, now head of the Moscow Patriarchate Department of External Relations, noted questionable qualifications among some Orthodox seminarians as well. One student, when quizzed on the number of Persons in the Holy Trinity, answered, "One Person." "My next question was, 'Why, then, do we believe in the Trinity if there is only One person in it?' He said, 'Father, I asked you not to ask me any difficult questions, for I am a novice and I have no time to study.' And this is not a made-up funny story; it is a case out of my own teaching practice."²⁰

Unfortunately, the strongest potential candidates frequently are pastors too deeply enmeshed in family and ministry responsibilities and too far afield to enroll in full-time, residential programs.²¹ With all the pitfalls in student selection, it nevertheless should be emphasized that many godly students have enrolled, have taken their studies to heart, have learned, have been faithfully mentored by their teachers, and have gone on to labor successfully in the Lord's vineyard.

¹⁶ Greg Nichols, email, 13 November 2009.

¹⁷ Harold Brown, phone interview, 17 November 2009, and Theological Education Conference, College Church, Wheaton, IL, 28 February 2008; Alexander Tsutserov, meeting, 27 May 2010; <http://moscowseminary.ru/chart/chart/php>.

¹⁸ Charley Warner, email, 27 October 2009. See also Harris, "Needed," 83.

¹⁹ Mitskevich, "Problems," 5-6; Harris, "Needed," 83; See also Sergei Golovin, "On Hopping Caterpillars, Spiritual Gastarbeiter, and Theological Education in Former Soviet Union Countries, 28 October 2009; <http://www.scienceandapologetics.com/eng/g15.html>; Mark R. Elliott, "Recent Research on Evangelical Theological Education in Post-Soviet Societies," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 19 (February 1999), 33 and 35; Dyatlik, "Expectations," 107 and 109; Sawatsky, "Reflections," 24.

²⁰ Hieromonk Hilarion (Alfeyev), "The Problems Facing Orthodox Theological Education in Russia," *Sourozh, A Journal of Orthodox Life and Thought* 71 (1998), 3.

²¹ Mitskevich, "Problems," 5-6.

The Church-School Divide

However, with so many students uncertain of their call to ministry and lacking strong ties with a local church, it is no wonder that a seminary-church disconnect exists. Theological educator Taras Dyatlik's survey of 70 pastors found that almost all complained of poor church-seminary relations.²² Evgeni Bakhmutsky, newly elected ECB deputy chairman, stated back in 2005 that "most of these schools are not really church-oriented" and that pastors "see many difficulties and divisions that are caused by graduates" who have no heart for "sacrificed ministry."²³

For Walter Sawatsky it is a case of "free floating" schools lacking substantive relationships with the churches they seek to serve.²⁴ Sergei Golovin, director of the Christian Center for Science and Apologetics, flatly states, a "theological school with no connection with local churches is meaningless. Local churches also do not realize that they have no future without theological education" because they easily can fall prey to distortions of the gospel. "As a result, neither our schools view themselves as a part of church, nor local churches see the need for the schools."²⁵ At a Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (E-AAA) meeting in 1998, one participant warned, "We don't want to have seminaries and churches going in different directions and criticizing each other (as in the West)."²⁶

A Lack of Practical Emphasis

The church-school divide has been especially pronounced in those seminaries that have emphasized, or have been perceived to emphasize, academics over practical, pastoral training. Thus, Jason Ferenczi, vice-president of Overseas Council International (OCI), links the enrollment crisis, in part, to inappropriate curricula lacking relevance to ministerial practice.²⁷ Likewise, Anatoly Prokopchuk (Kyiv Evangelical Christian-Baptist Seminary) speaks of the danger of "the exclusively academic approach" to theological education.²⁸

Too often in Orthodox seminaries as well, a tragic "divorce between Christian theory and praxis" prevails, according to Metropolitan Hilarion.²⁹ A 2007 study of four Ukrainian seminaries edited by E-AAA Executive Director Sergei Sannikov and funded by OCI underscores the point. Twenty percent of surveyed graduates felt their ministerial preparation had been inadequate. Nineteen percent cited "the great difference between what they received [in school] and what is necessary in the local church in ministry." Fourteen percent felt unprepared "to deal with such contemporary issues as abortion, divorce, multiple marriages, homosexuality [and] women's ministry."³⁰

Similar shortcomings came to light in Insur Shamgunov's 2008 dissertation based on interviews and surveys of graduates and administrators of four Protestant schools in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Respondents "gave generally positive appraisals of their training, but they noted

²² Dyatlik, "Expectations," 100.

²³ Elliott, "Protestant Missions," 5.

²⁴ Walter Sawatsky, phone interview, 26 October 2009. See also Sawatsky, "Reflections," 22 and 26.

²⁵ Golovin, "Caterpillars." See also Mark R. Elliott, "Theological Education after Communism," 71.

²⁶ Mitskevich, "Problems," 6. See also Elliott, "Recent Research," 35.

²⁷ Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009.

²⁸ Mitskevich, "Problems," 6.

²⁹ Metropolitan Hilarion Alveyev, "Theological Education in the 21st Century," <http://en.hilarion.orthodoxia.org/print>, p. 4.

³⁰ Sergei Sannikov, ed., *The Effectiveness of Theological Education in Ukraine* (Odessa: Euro-Asian Accrediting Association, 2007), 78-79. See also Euro-Asian Accrediting Association, "The Effectiveness of Theological Education in Ukraine: A Research Project," *Bogoslovskie razmyshleniya/ Theological Reflections* No. 7 (2006), 149-205.

little connection between their studies and the capabilities needed to succeed in ministry."³¹ Central Asian church leaders as well noted "a disconnect between current theological training and real-life vocational skills...need[ed] in church ministry."³² Anyone involved in theological training in the post-Soviet context would do well to note several key findings from Shamgunov's thought-provoking research.

1. "In many cases training failed to equip students to integrate classroom studies with practical ministry, it lacked spiritual mentoring, and it placed a disproportionate emphasis upon subjects that had few obvious links to practice."³³
2. "One of my most surprising findings was that only a quarter of graduates interviewed pointed to cross-cultural issues as bearing any significance for effective learning. Rather, the majority were more concerned with the practical application of what their teachers taught, which in turn was linked not to their teachers' cultural background, but primarily to their practical experience, personal spiritual maturity, and teaching expertise."³⁴
3. "The majority of criticisms from graduates were directed not at culturally un-contextualized theological training, but at the larger issue of the theory-practice divide, which is relevant not only to Central Asia, but to theological education everywhere....The challenge seems to be not so much contextualizing theological education for Central Asia, but contextualizing theological education to real-life ministerial practice, regardless of the locale."³⁵

Church Distrust of Graduates

Lax admission standards and tenuous church-school ties thus have produced many graduates whom churches and church leaders often deem too young, too inexperienced, too headstrong, and too uncertain of their ministerial call to be trusted in the pulpit. Exacerbating the generation gap and the problem of placement has been an often deep-seated wariness of theological education among pastors and denominational leaders who typically had no chance for formal training in the Soviet era.³⁶ In addition, some tradition-minded church folk and their shepherds have struggled with resentment and jealousy toward those receiving educational opportunities they never could have imagined. Especially where seminarians have exhibited an "air of superiority" and have studied in residential programs in large cities, they have refused to pastor out-of-the-way, rural congregations.³⁷

Alienating seminary graduates from those they are trained to serve has been the suspicion of churches and church leaders that the new seminaries harbor the pox of theological liberalism and

³¹ Shamgunov, "Protestant Theological Education in Central Asia: Embattled but Resilient," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 17 (Fall 2009), 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

³³ Shamgunov, "Listening," 171-72, 211, 276, and 284.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25, 149-50, and 152; Elliott, "Protestant," 19; Cheryl and Wes Brown, "Progress and Challenge in Theological Education in Central and Eastern Europe," *Transformation* 20 (January 2003), 2; Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009; I.P., email to author, 8 September 2005; Mark Harris, "Proposal for a Contextualized Educational Program for the Training of Russian Spiritual Leaders," www.markharris.us; Dyatlik, "Expectations," 103-04, 112, and 115.

³⁷ Brown, "Progress," 2. See also Elliott, "Recent Research," 35; Donald Marsden, "Does Post-Soviet Theological Training Need to be Revamped?," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 14 (Fall 2006), 1-3; and Dyatlik, "Expectations," 112.

Calvinism.³⁸ The fear has been that graduates might infect mostly conservative Arminian congregations with one or the other contagion of Western origin. Taras Dyatlik's survey of pastors revealed that many equate Calvinism and liberalism and "refuse to send students even to those schools which have only one or two professors who openly espouse Reformed doctrines."³⁹

The Disadvantages of Western Funding

Protestant church leaders also frequently distrust seminaries because the schools have been financed overwhelmingly from Western sources. Paradoxically, Western funding has increased the church-school gap, resulting in fewer church placements for graduates, which has meant fewer students enrolling in programs that may not lead to employment.

Except for some small, church-based Bible schools, the vast majority of residential training facilities have been underwritten by Western and Korean denominations and missions. Likewise, operating budgets have been heavily dependent upon outside funding. In 2001 Jason Ferenczi of Overseas Council wrote that in the case of 10 schools for which budget data were available, average local funding amounted to 14 percent, "well below averages for other parts of the world."⁴⁰ Similarly, Ray Prigodich, former academic dean at Donetsk Christian University, estimated in early 2008 that local funding accounted for some 12 percent of the operating budget at the Moscow Evangelical Christian-Baptist Theological Seminary, 30 percent at Donetsk Christian University, and over 50 percent at Zaoksky Adventist University.⁴¹ Nevertheless, despite some progress, to this day the great majority of Protestant seminaries in the former Soviet Union would quickly close if shorn of Western or Korean support.⁴²

Sadly, with outside dependency comes outside control, even if the language of partnership is employed by funders. Theological educators Cheryl and Wesley Brown cite the case of an American mission that finances a post-Soviet seminary on the explicit condition that the funders appoint all indigenous and Western faculty.⁴³ In another case, a Western mission withdrew its funds and faculty from a fledgling East European seminary because the school could not in good faith subscribe to its benefactor's doctrinal position on eschatology. The Browns characterize such heavy-handed control as "Western theological imperialism."⁴⁴ But even outside funders who strive not to be overbearing still exercise a quiet, sometimes even unconscious, check on the prerogatives of indigenous seminary leaders. Unfortunately, what might be termed missiological, rather than Marxist, economic determinism is at work. One East European church leader, observing the power

³⁸Shamgunov, "Listening," 28, 150, and 286; Linda Eilers, "When Calvinist and Arminian Beliefs Collide: Facilitating Communication between North American Professors and Russian Bible Students," master's thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1998; Nicholas Holovaty, "A Moscow Case Study: Mixed Reviews for the Korean Pastor's School," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 8 (Fall 2000), 8; and Sawatsky, "Reflections," 24.

³⁹ Dyatlik, "Expectations," 102. See also *Ibid.*, 110-11 and 115.

⁴⁰ Jason Ferenczi, "Theological Education," 12. See also Sawatsky, "Reflections," 116; Dyatlik, "Expectations," 117.

⁴¹ Ray Prigodich, meeting, 2 February 2008.

⁴² Ted Rodgers, phone interview, 26 October 2009; Elliott, "Recent Research," 32, quoting David P. Bohn, "A Comparative Study of the Perspectives of Evangelical Church Leaders in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Russia on Theological Education," Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997, 193; Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009; Dieumeme Noelliste, "Theological Education in the Context of Socio-Economic Deprivation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* (29 October 2005), 276.

⁴³ Brown, "Progress," 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10. See also *Ibid.*, 8-9; Ferenczi, "Theological Education," 112; and Elliott, "Theological Education after Communism."

of Western aid in the wake of failed Soviet rule, called to mind a perversion of the Golden Rule: "He who holds the gold, makes the rules."⁴⁵

In sum, church distrust of seminaries jeopardizes their existence because it undermines their ability to recruit students. This distrust, in turn, is partially a function of seminaries answering ultimately to Western donors, rather than to the churches they exist to serve. Respected educational specialist Ted Ward writes,

When the program is treated as if it were property of the outsiders, local "ownership" and true contextualization become highly unlikely. Westerners in general and Americans in particular seem to prefer high-control management... But we must find ways to encourage those with whom we serve to share in the responsibilities and initiatives of decision-making. To do less is not Christian; it is colonial.⁴⁶

Dieumeme Noelliste, for many years president of the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology, could be speaking as easily for the post-Soviet context as for the global South when he writes, "Northern [or Western] input, though welcome, should be supportive, not determinative." The goal should be "the eventual self sufficiency of southern institutions."⁴⁷ To that end, "Real support by the local church which theological education serves is an essential nutrient for its eventual growth from the status of a sheltered garden of foreign dependency to that of a fully acclimatized tree with deep roots in the southern soil)."⁴⁸

Seminary Degrees and Unemployment

Protestant residential training programs, then, face an uncertain future because of their overabundance, declining church growth, and weak church-school ties exacerbated by lax admission policies, curricula that appear to be insufficiently practical, and church distrust and lack of ownership of seminaries.⁴⁹ Finally, schools are at risk because fewer and fewer prospective students and their parents see reason to invest years of study in programs that rarely lead to self-sustaining employment. More and more, those considering seminary are asking, "Why should I invest three to five years in full-time study so that I can remain poor?"⁵⁰ Oleg Turlac and Taras Dyatlik stress the need for graduate placement services, whereas until recently seminary programs gave such a concern little attention.⁵¹

As it is, the likelihood of low-paying positions, when they can be had, give pause to prospective students. Compounding the problem, years of study and increasing acquaintance with the common Western practice of full-time pastoral positions, have led seminary students to set their sights on full-time church appointments, which actually are quite rare.⁵² The malaise affects faculty

⁴⁵ Mark R. Elliott, "The New, Non-Western Chapter in Christian History," *Prism* 8 (November/December 2001), 10.

⁴⁶ Ted Ward, "Effective Development of Intercultural Leadership," Maclellan Foundation Policy and Position Document, 4 May 2003, 8. See also Oleg Turlac, "The Crisis in Evangelical Christian-Baptist Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 15 (Winter 2007), 19.

⁴⁷ Noelliste, "Theological Education," 282.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁹ Hoehner, "Letter," 6.

⁵⁰ Marsden, "Post-Soviet," 1-3. See also Penner, "Western Missionaries," 50; and Penner and Kool, "Theological Education," 541. A further disincentive for theological training is the fact that a seminary degree is not a requirement for ordination in Baptist and Pentecostal churches. Peter Sautov, meeting, 1 June 2010.

⁵¹ Turlac, "Crisis," 19; Dyatlik, "Expectations," 113.

⁵² Marsden, "Post-Soviet," 1-2; Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009.

as well as students. As one out-of-work theology teacher observed: "My children have a bad habit. They like to eat."⁵³

Reevaluating a School's Purpose

In coming to terms with the dire straits of most residential programs, E-AAA Executive Director Sergei Sannikov has noted, "There was no strategic plan when these schools were founded—they were spontaneous creations. People were enthusiastic, Western support was available, and so they began."⁵⁴ Lack of careful deliberation and forethought does appear to best characterize the launching of many schools. Thus, Moldovan professor Oleg Turlac's advice for a first step forward is for seminaries to "reevaluate their mission and vision. Each school should meet with its association or union of churches to discuss the purpose for the existence of the school and the issue of ministry placement."⁵⁵

Academic Versus Pastoral Training

In a sentence, should theological training be academic, pastoral, or both? Many church leaders in the former Soviet Union would second the conclusion of evangelical Anglican theologian Alister McGrath that "The growing gap between academic theology and the church has led to much theology focusing on issues which appear to be an utter irrelevance to the life, worship, and mission of the church."⁵⁶

Estonian Baptist theologian Toivo Pilli quotes McGrath approvingly, but he also sees a vital role for "academic" theology in "the prophetic task" of producing "contextually relevant theological reflection" on pressing social and cultural issues. Thus, he argues, seminaries "should not be seen only as giving training for church workers;" they are obligated as well to offer "'tools' for the church to fulfill its mission in society."⁵⁷

Budapest-based missiologist Anne Marie Kool recommends theological training that will "give direction" to Christians in how to "relate to the wider society in crucial issues like freedom and morality."⁵⁸ Likewise, Orthodox scholar and theological educator Alexander Bodrov insists that theological education must "answer the questions that the secular society, culture, and science pose.... We cannot and must not become isolated in our tradition, cut off from the rest of the world."⁵⁹

No doubt, some post-Soviet theological educators have become mesmerized with academic learning at the expense of pastoral training—as can happen in the West as well. Still, Toivo Pilli seems justified in rejecting the "growing tendency to see 'faith' and 'knowledge' as contradictory terms."⁶⁰ Whatever one concludes on the perennial question of the relationship of faith and knowledge, the point is: Each school and all its stakeholders must think through the question in order to champion a common vision and purpose for each institution.

⁵³ Marsden, "Post-Soviet," 2. See also Turlac, "Crisis," 19; and Dyatlik, "Expectations," 112.

⁵⁴ Yoder, "Future," 2.

⁵⁵ Turlac, "Crisis," 19.

⁵⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *The Renewal of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1994), 152.

⁵⁷ Toivo Pilli, "Finding a Balance between Church and Academia: Baptist Theological Education in Estonia," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 26 (August 2006), 39-41.

⁵⁸ Anne Marie Kool, "Leadership Issues in Central and Eastern Europe: Continuing Trends and Challenges in Mission and Missiology," *Acta Missiologiae* 1 (2008), 142.

⁵⁹ Alexei Bodrov, "Mission and Theological Education in Contemporary Russia" in *Postmodernity-Friend or Foe? Communicating the Gospel to Postmodern People: Theological and Practical Reflections from Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Alexander Neagoe and Heleen Zorgdrager (Utrecht: Kerk in Actie, 2009), 224-25. See also Sawatsky, "Reflections," 23.

⁶⁰ Toivo Pilli, "Finding," 39.

Responses to Declining Enrollment

As the enrollment crisis has deepened, theological schools have responded in a variety of ways. The most common adjustment to the disappearance of full-time residential students has been to expand non-formal programs— which presently is saving many institutions from closure. The subject of non-formal theological education in the post-Soviet context is so vast that it deserves its own paper or monograph. After enumerating other responses, I will return to this topic.

Closures and Mergers

Lacking students, some programs, as noted, have closed, and more will follow. Even Sergei Sannikov concedes, “The number of theological schools will and must decrease.”⁶¹ It would make sense for some schools to merge. Full-blown theological education is arguably the most expensive enterprise the church undertakes. The development of facilities, faculty, libraries, and textbooks is enormously costly and time-consuming. Given the modest number of Protestants in the former Soviet Union (perhaps one percent of the population), minimal indigenous funding, and the trailing off of Western interest, school mergers would seem a logical necessity.⁶² Beyond economic concerns, Dieumeme Noelliste rightly points out, “The merging of weak institutions boosts Christian witness. Clearly, it is much easier for society to ignore a multitude of struggling theological schools.”⁶³ However, tenacious allegiance to denominational and doctrinal distinctives works against such unions. It may be the sad case that some doctrinaire Western sponsors, determining the fate of “their” schools, will prefer closure to what they define as compromise. Still, even short of merger, much fruitful cooperation has occurred through E-AAA, with projects such as a proposed interlibrary loan system promising genuine cost savings.

For those in the former Soviet Union who dare to dream of the miracle of cooperation, the example of the Bulgarian Evangelical Theological Institute (BETI) deserves note. In 1999 in Sofia six denominational schools (Assemblies of God, Baptist, Church of God, Congregational, Methodist, and United Church of God) made common cause to develop a stronger program than any single denomination could manage. While less successful than one would desire, it nevertheless is a model worth consideration.⁶⁴

Finding a Niche

Another seminary survival stratagem will be to develop unique educational specializations.⁶⁵ A number of schools in Central and Eastern Europe prepare students to teach religion in public schools.⁶⁶ Unlike schools in the former Soviet Union, some seminaries in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Romania receive governmental and European Union support.⁶⁷ The Baptist theological faculty in Romania has secured an unusual niche in an Orthodox context as a department in Romania’s flagship University of Bucharest.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Yoder, “Future,” 1. See also Penner and Kool, “Theological Education,” 541.

⁶² Yoder, 2; Brown, “Progress,” 10-11; Noelliste, “Theological Education,” 10-11; Dyatlik, “Expectations,” 117; and Evgeni Bakhmutsky and Sharyl Corrado in Elliott, “Protestant Missions,” 5.

⁶³ Noelliste, “Theological Education,” 10.

⁶⁴ Gary Griffith, “New Bible Institute Registered in Bulgaria,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 8 (Winter 2000), 14; Jason Ferenczi, email, 4 March 2010.

⁶⁵ Yoder, “Future,” 2.

⁶⁶ Kool-Penner.

⁶⁷ Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Turning to the former U.S.S.R., the College of Theology and Education in Chisinau, Moldova, with a focus on outreach to Muslims, has more Central Asian than Moldovan students.⁶⁹ The Eurasian Missionary College in Kazan also has a Muslim studies emphasis. The school's former director, Insur Shamgunov, suggests seminaries offer a vocational tract, including such subjects as heating systems and welding.⁷⁰ Besides helping fill rosters and balance budgets, such programs could provide seminarians with essential survival skills in bi-vocational ministry.⁷¹

Some schools have expanded their English language programs to attract additional students. More ambitious has been widespread consideration for the introduction of liberal arts programs parallel to theological studies. Two Central Asian schools in Shamgunov's study were considering this option.⁷² In addition to theological education, the Greek Catholic University of Lviv (Ukraine) offers a wide variety of liberal arts programs.⁷³ Names of seminaries such as St. Petersburg Christian University (SPCU) and Donetsk Christian University (DCU) certainly indicate their intentions to offer non-theological courses of study. In recent years seminary administrators have frequently approached Moscow's Russian-American Institute, modeled on liberal arts programs in U.S. Christian colleges, seeking advice on the formulation of a liberal arts curriculum. Perhaps the institution with the most successful expansion beyond theological studies in the former Soviet Union has occurred at Zaoksky Adventist University. Housed in, arguably, the most impressive, non-Orthodox campus in Russia, Zaoksky offers degrees in theology, music, English, social work, economics, accounting, law, public health, and agriculture.⁷⁴ Whatever one thinks of Adventist theology, this institution deserves close study for its commendable strides toward self-sufficiency and for its exceptional breadth of program.⁷⁵

One niche a Protestant seminary might consider would be studies in Orthodoxy from an evangelical perspective. Perhaps such an undertaking could be developed in tandem with Orthodox institutions open to working with Protestants such as St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute headed by Andrei Bodrov and the Orthodox Research Institute of Missiology, Ecumenism, and New Religious Movements headed by Father Vladimir Fedorov.⁷⁶ One would hope that such a program would attract a critical mass of faculty and students intent on realizing two readily justifiable goals for seminary education, as articulated by Estonian theologian Toivo Pilli: "to facilitate contextually relevant theological thinking and work in partnership with the churches" and to "interpret social, political, and religious changes in...society."⁷⁷ If Protestant seminaries should disappear in droves, one explanation could be their failure to discern the times, as Pilli urges.

Strengthening Church-School Ties

Of course, to survive, seminaries must strengthen ties with the churches in which they hope to place graduates.⁷⁸ As far back as an E-AAA conference in 1998 theological educators were recommending correctives to the school-church divide. Alexander Karnaukh (Odessa Baptist

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Shamgunov, "Listening," 249 and 278.

⁷¹ Noelliste, "Theological Education," 11.

⁷² Shamgunov, "Listening," 277.

⁷³ Sawatsky, "Reflections," 24. See also Ferenczi, "Theological Education," 14-15.

⁷⁴ Gary Land, *Historical Dictionary of Seventh-day Adventists* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 336-37; "Zaoksky Adventist University," *Adventist Online Yearbook*, <http://www.adventistyearbook.org>.

⁷⁵ Elliott, "Protestant," 16.

⁷⁶ www.standrews.ru; <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd31-02.html>. See also Dyatlik, "Expectations," 104.

⁷⁷ Pilli, "Finding," 43 and 39.

⁷⁸ Shamgunov, "Listening," 286-87; Turlac, "Crisis," 19.

Theological Seminary) urged seminary professors to find teaching opportunities in churches. For his part, Rudolfo Giroi (Euro-Asian Theological Seminary of the Church of God Cleveland), at the same meeting, suggested "that students return to their churches in the middle of the [seminary] program."⁷⁹ In his thought-provoking dissertation on Protestant theological education in Central Asia, Insur Shamgunov warned that without close, vital links between school and church, "not only will the quality of training continue to suffer, but the very existence of the institutions will be in question."⁸⁰

Taras Dyatlik's survey of 70 pastors from Ukraine and southern Russia seconds the concerns and advice of Karnaukh, Giroi, and Shamgunov. To foster closer church-school ties those surveyed recommended seminary prayer leaflet mailings (not email) and local pastoral representation on admission and graduation committees to assist in discerning "true motives and objectives of applicants" and to award diplomas "based in part on students' participation in church life and ministry during their theological training."⁸¹ Over and over, pastors urged that students be required to "engage in practical education" back in their home churches during their formal studies. Maintaining such close ties might also forestall a seminary in a big city serving "as a kind of ski jump" enticing rural students to relocate in urban centers.⁸²

Pastors surveyed also recognized that instructors actively involved in local ministry would more likely produce graduates aspiring to local ministry. The reverse, "cubbyhole professors" begetting "cubbyhole graduates of theology" would not nourish the church nor close church-school ties.⁸³ Pastors surveyed stressed the importance of "the spiritual lives of professors" for the successful mentoring of students:

Regardless of the subject area in which professors teach, it is expected that their first priority should be to help their students become more mature Christians; providing them with academic knowledge should be second in priority.⁸⁴

Taras Dyatlik believes schools that take these pastoral concerns to heart can expect growing local church support.⁸⁵

Overcoming Western Dependency

To deepen the bonds between seminaries and churches, schools will have to decrease their dependence upon Western funding. To that end, enthusiastically or not, seminary administrators are having to become increasingly entrepreneurial because budgets have to start balancing. This is beginning to mean, and increasingly will mean, some combination of administrative and faculty cuts; sharing faculty with other institutions; charging students "meaningful" tuition;⁸⁶ selling some buildings; and leasing some space.⁸⁷

More and more seminaries are designating space or retrofitting facilities to generate income from all manner of undertakings: an auto repair workshop (Donetsk),⁸⁸ weddings (St. Petersburg

⁷⁹ Mitskevich, "Problems," 6. See also Elliott, "Recent Research," 35.

⁸⁰ Shamgunov, "Listening," 286.

⁸¹ Dyatlik, "Expectations," 100, 107, and 113.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 109 and 111.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 114. See also Peter F. Penner, ed., *Theological Education as Mission* (Schwarzenfeld, Germany: Neufeld Verlag, 2005), 344.

⁸⁴ Dyatlik, "Expectations," 113.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 117-18.

⁸⁶ Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009.

⁸⁷ Ted Rodgers, phone interview, 26 October 2009.

⁸⁸ Ray Prigodich, meeting, 27 February 2008.

Christian University),⁸⁹ dorm rentals for tourists (SPCU), and hotel and conference centers (DCU, International Baptist Theological Seminary, and SPCU).⁹⁰ Donetsk, as an example, has hosted revenue-generating conferences for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the New Horizons English program, Eastern-Rite Catholics, and the East European Summit for Children at Risk.⁹¹ In the past, seminaries sometimes turned down Western offers to help establish profit-making enterprises to help underwrite expenses—but no more. Donetsk raises its own vegetables and at Zaoksky students not only grow the food served in their cafeteria, they can vegetables and fruits and help staff a printing operation on campus.⁹²

In addition to creative uses of campus facilities, seminaries must teach stewardship and must teach churches to teach stewardship.⁹³ Sadly, congregational offerings capable of underwriting significant church outreach run counter to practice in the evangelical subculture in the former Soviet Union. Many times one hears that Christians in post-Soviet lands are too poor to support their churches, much less seminaries. It is true that decades of Soviet persecution and discrimination meant minimal education and low-paying, menial labor for most believers. But Christians in Slavic lands are not the world's poorest. Many believers in the global South who contend with economic plights as bad as or worse than those of the former Soviet Union, support churches and sometimes even seminaries without the level of Western support that frequently obtains in the post-Soviet context. Theological educator Dieumeme Noelliste, as a native of Haiti no stranger to poverty, nevertheless decries the curse of Western dependence. The way out, he argues, is to follow Old and New Testament examples.

The Scriptures make it clear that unfavorable socio-economic conditions are not necessary impediments to giving. Ancient Israel supplies an instructive example in this regard. While on the road to Canaan, the nomadic people built a splendid sanctuary to Yahweh with their own resources (Exodus 24-40). The "fundraising" drive that was conducted for that project brought in much more than was actually needed for the work. The biblical author took pain to emphasize that the success was not due to the people's abundant wealth, but to the willingness of their hearts (Exodus 35: 20, 26, 29.)

If we turn to the New Testament, we find similar examples. It is indisputable that, in the main, the early Christians were not well-to-do. In fact in I Corinthians 1: 26, Paul candidly reminded Corinthian believers of their low status when they came to Christ. Yet, this did not prevent him from challenging them to participate fully in the support of the Lord's work—whether relief for the poor, the missionary campaign, or his own support (II Corinthians 8: 1-15; Philippians 4: 10-20). Nor did Christians themselves use their plight to claim exemption from responding to the apostle's appeal. Indeed, some of those poor believers stunned Paul by their generous response. Out of the Macedonians' severe trial and extreme poverty came a rich generosity that far exceeded their economic ability (II Corinthians 8: 1-5).⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009.

⁹⁰ Walter Sawatsky, phone interview, 26 October 2009.

⁹¹ Donetsk Christian University, *On Campus Newsletter*, Fall 2009, 2.

⁹² Elliott, "Protestant," 16; <http://www.zau.ru>.

⁹³ Mark R. Elliott, "Post-Soviet Protestant Theological Education: Come of Age?," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 54 (Fall 1999), 38.

⁹⁴ Noelliste, "Theological Education," 276-77.

Expansion of Non-Formal Training Programs

As noted, the most concerted response to falling full-time residential enrollment has been the expansion of non-formal programs. Nomenclature in this arena can be confusing, so some definitions are in order.

1. An extension program typically caters to part-time students at a location some distance from a main campus, with adjunct faculty or faculty from a main campus.
2. A correspondence program typically provides instruction for part-time students some distance from a main campus via postal correspondence, and more recently, via the Internet.
3. An online program facilitates the instruction of students, usually part-time, but sometimes full-time, typically some distance from a main campus, but not necessarily, via the Internet.
4. Distance learning encompasses all the above, except main campus online courses.
5. Non-formal and extramural education encompasses all of the above including main campus online programs. It may employ a non-traditional schedule (evenings or weekends) and/or a non-traditional calendar (typically one- to five-week modular courses, rather than lengthier quarters or semesters.)

Even with a clarification of terms, confusion still often persists because the lines between various forms of educational “delivery” frequently blur. The history of Protestant theological education in the Soviet Union illustrates the point. After the closure of their last Bible school in 1929, Protestants for many decades had no choice but to rely upon clergy mentoring of aspiring pastors, an unmistakable example of non-formal education. Then beginning in 1968 Soviet authorities grudgingly conceded a correspondence program to the only recognized nationwide Protestant denomination, Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ECB). Pastors enrolled in correspondence courses were permitted to travel to Moscow and Tallinn for brief periods of fellowship and instruction. Over the years the length and importance of the on-site intervals steadily increased, so that by the end of the Soviet era, the on-site modules of correspondence programs had taken on much of the coloration of traditional residential seminary programs.⁹⁵ As another example today, students, East and West, increasingly mix and match components of traditional and non-formal education.

With definitions in mind, the next point to stress, as the ECB example underscores, is that non-formal theological education is nothing new in the Slavic context. It is being expanded, not invented, in response to the residential enrollment crisis. Another precedent was the consortium of visionary East European missions (Campus Crusade, Navigators, InterVarsity, and Slavic Gospel Association) that in 1979 launched Biblical Education by Extension (BEE), now known as Entrust, to provide pastoral training in Soviet-bloc countries.⁹⁶ In the last decades of the Soviet era sometimes even individual networkers managed to connect Western theological educators with churches desiring pastoral training, including Trevor Harris (SGA- United Kingdom) in Romania; Coach Don Church (Wheaton College) in Romania and Czechoslovakia; and Mark R. Elliott (Asbury College) in Estonia.⁹⁷ These Western extension efforts were well received because in the Soviet Bloc formal theological education for the vast majority of pastors was impossible.

⁹⁵ Elliott, “Protestant,” 14; Pilli, “Finding,” 42-44.

⁹⁶ Elliott, “Recent Research,” 29. See also <http://entrust4.org/423.ihtml>.

⁹⁷ Danut Manastireanu, “Western Assistance in Theological Training for Romanian Evangelicals since 1989,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 14 (Summer 2006), 1-4; Mark Elliott, “Methodism in the Soviet Union Since World War II,” *The Asbury Theological Journal* 46 (Spring 1991), 5-47.

Elusive Statistics

In the Soviet and post-Soviet cases reliable enrollment figures can be elusive. Nevertheless, as incomplete and debatable as statistics may be, they do underscore two indisputable points: 1) non-traditional theological instruction has long been significant; and 2) non-traditional programs and students account for the majority of pastors in training.

In 1992 the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Kyiv had 335 non-traditional students, compared to 214 full-time residential students. In 1993 Seventh-day Adventists instructed 500 extension course students at three sites.⁹⁸ In 1994 some 19 Protestant theological programs in the former Soviet Union enrolled 1,667 residential and 3,184 extension students.⁹⁹ In 1995 the Greek Catholic Theological Institute in Ivano-Frankiv's'k, Ukraine, enrolled 800 extramural students compared to 480 full-time residential students.¹⁰⁰ In 2001 residential enrollment in 103 Protestant programs in the former Soviet Union (for which Overseas Council had data) totaled 9,789 versus 10,865 extension students.¹⁰¹ As of 2004, St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Institute in Moscow, with a main campus and 13 branch sites, counted "up to 2,000 correspondence students."¹⁰² By 2005 in the former Soviet Union the Russian Orthodox Church enrolled 5,700 correspondence students, compared to 5,155 full-time residential students.¹⁰³ And in 2009-10, seven Protestant training programs sponsored by Slavic Gospel Association in six post-Soviet republics enrolled 65 fulltime (presumably residential) students, compared to 921 part time students.¹⁰⁴

For all practical purposes the Moscow Evangelical Christian-Baptist Theological Seminary (MTS) no longer operates a full-time residential program, while eight extension sites and online instruction account for 600 students.¹⁰⁵ The enrollment crisis became so acute at MTS that the school's trustees recruited consultants from the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (Sergei Sannikov, Peter Penner, and Charley Warner) to offer advice. The outcome was the appointment of ECB Russian Union Vice-President Peter Mitskevich as rector in 2007, followed by a radical shift in emphasis from residential to extension training.¹⁰⁶ A major boost in non-traditional MTS enrollment came in late 2009 with its incorporation of Bible Mission International (Frankfurt, Germany, and Wichita, Kansas), with another 700 Russian-language correspondence students.¹⁰⁷ Moscow Theological Institute (MTI), affiliated with the Assemblies of God, presently enrolls 700 extension and correspondence students. MTI also anticipates a significant increase in its non-traditional program following a request in 2009 from 22 unregistered Pentecostal bishops and senior pastors for four new extension sites to provide training for unregistered pastors.¹⁰⁸

⁹⁸ Elliott, "Protestant," 22.

⁹⁹ Ferenczi, "Theological Education," 2.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Sutton, *Traditions in New Freedom: Christianity and Higher Education in Russia and Ukraine Today* (Nottingham: Bramcote Press, 1996), 92.

¹⁰¹ Ferenczi, "Theological Education," 3.

¹⁰² Wil Van Den Bercken, "Theological Education for Laypeople in Russia, Belarus' and Ukraine: A Survey of Orthodox and Catholic Institutions," *Religion, State and Society* 32 (September 2004), 300.

¹⁰³ Vladimir Fedorov, "An Orthodox View on Theological Education as Mission," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 25 (August 2005), 25.

¹⁰⁴ Slavic Gospel Association (Rockford, IL) sponsors Almaty Bible Institute, Kazakhstan; Baku Bible Institute, Azerbaijan; Irpen Biblical Seminary, Ukraine; Minsk Theological Seminary, Belarus; Novosibirsk Biblical Theological Seminary, Russia; Odessa Theological Seminary, Ukraine; and Tajikistan Bible Institute, Dushanbe. Full time students in the seven schools stood at 74 in 2007-08 and 55 in 2008-09 compared to 960 part time students in 2007-08 and 814 in 2008-09. Robert Provost, email, 4 February 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Ted Rodgers, phone interview, 26 October 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Ian Chapman, Theological Education Conference, 28 February 2008; Turlac, "Crisis," 19.

¹⁰⁷ Ted Rodgers, phone interview, 26 October 2009; <http://www.BibleMission.org>.

¹⁰⁸ Anthony Rybarczk, phone interview, 3 November 2009.

Beyond denominational and mission-sponsored non-formal programs already noted, many other evangelical leadership training efforts serve additional thousands of students. With 750 enrolled, Training Christians for Ministry International (TCMI), based in Austria, probably has the largest number of Protestant correspondence students taking a master's level seminary course of study.¹⁰⁹ School Without Walls, organized by Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries (Association for Spiritual Renewal in the former Soviet Union), is providing pastoral extension courses in 62 sites in 49 regions reaching 1,813 students in 2008-09.¹¹⁰ Peter Penner, who recently moved from the International Baptist Theological Seminary (Prague) to TCMI, and Jason Ferenczi (Overseas Council) give School Without Walls positive commendation.¹¹¹ Additional non-formal evangelical programs include East-West Ministries, READ, Precept Ministries, Bibel Mission, Leadership Resources International, BEE World, Church Leadership Development International, American Baptist International Ministries, International Theological Education Ministries (ITEM), and Theologians without Borders.¹¹²

Formal/Non-Formal Training Pros and Cons

As regards a comparison of residential and non-formal theological education, the advantages appear to be in many respects the same in the former Soviet Union as in any other part of the world. Residential programs provide a Christian witness of presence and visibility that non-formal programs lack.¹¹³ In an historically Orthodox culture that places a premium on physicality in worship and majesty in architecture, visual presence and substantial construction cannot be discounted. Residential programs also offer the promise of spiritual formation in community that non-formal instruction cannot match. In addition, learning is enhanced when students can reflect and dialogue face-to-face with faculty and fellow students in hallways, cafeterias, and dorm rooms, as well as in classrooms. Finally, research on practical as well as academic topics is obviously facilitated with proximity to library resources.

In its favor, non-formal theological education, decentralized through extension centers, is typically closer to local churches than residential programs. Most pastors surveyed by Taras Dyatlik believe non-formal part time instruction works best "for the maintenance of students' relationships with local churches and their ministry."¹¹⁴ Frequently it also is more practical in content and more flexible in finding ways to accommodate the needs and schedules of those already in ministry. In spirit and in fact, non-formal training is better situated than residential seminaries to avoid ivory tower isolation.

David Bohn and Miriam Charter, both with firsthand BEE experience, coincidentally completed Ph.D. dissertations the same year (1997) at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois. Not coincidentally, under the guidance of their mentor, non-formal education advocate Ted Ward, both examined theological education in various post-Soviet countries, seeing

¹⁰⁹ Peter Penner, email, 9 November 2009.

¹¹⁰ www.russian-ministries.org.

¹¹¹ Peter Penner, email, 9 November 2009; Jason Ferenczi, phone interview, 27 October 2009.

¹¹² Duane Elmer, Theological Education Conference, 28 February 2008; Bill Arvan, Theological Education Conference, 28 February 2008; Joe Wall, Theological Education Conference, 28 February 2008; <http://www.eastwest.org>; <http://www.readministries.org>; <http://www.precept.org>; <http://www.russianleadership.org>; <http://www.bibel-mission.de/>; <http://www.leadershipresources.org>; <http://www.beeworld.org>; <http://www.cldi.org>; <http://www.internationalministries.org>; <http://christforrussia.org>; <http://theologianswithoutborders.blogspot.com>.

¹¹³ Walter Sawatsky, phone interview, 26 October 2009.

¹¹⁴ Dyatlik, "Expectations," 104.

greater promise in non-formal than in residential programs.¹¹⁵ More recently, theological educator Toivo Pilli from Estonia has noted that church-based leadership training fosters “closer cooperation with churches, listening to their concerns and positions.”¹¹⁶ Foundation officer and adjunct professor David Sveen has documented the success of Josiah Venture’s non-formal Leadership Internship Program in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.¹¹⁷ For his part Ovidiu Cristian Chivu surveyed eight formal and non-formal training programs in Romania in his 2007 dissertation, concluding with his own proposal for church-based leadership training.¹¹⁸

Non-formal education, for all its merits, still has its detractors. One group of Central Asian seminarians surveyed by Insur Shamgunov noted that their non-formal program “placed a significant level of responsibility on the learner, which is simply not to be taken for granted.” In the end, “many students dropped out of the course because they did not have enough diligence and skills for independent study.”¹¹⁹ In addition to low retention rates, non-formal programs are lengthier than formal programs (contributing to a higher dropout rate), less often lead to recognized degrees, and, especially in correspondence and online formats, lack adequate means of verification of students’ work.¹²⁰

The Need for Both Formal and Non-Formal Training

The contrasts between formal and non-formal theological education, however, need not, and should not, be drawn too sharply. In fact, as noted, many schools, for some time have provided both. As well, facing sparse residential enrollment, faculty in formal programs will increasingly staff still-growing, non-formal programs. In Romania, Danut Manastireanu bemoaned BEE and residential seminaries running “parallel courses with little cross fertilization.”¹²¹ In the former Soviet Union, by contrast, every residential school with an interest in surviving is launching or expanding some combination of extension, correspondence, and online delivery. As missionary Donald Marsden advised in 2006, “Theological educators in large cities, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kyiv, and Odessa, need to consider how they can be a part of the training process for those in isolated provincial and rural regions who desire further training. High quality theological education needs to be delivered far and wide where potential students are currently active in ministry.”¹²²

¹¹⁵ Bohn, “Comparative Study;” Miriam Charter, “Theological Education for New Protestant Churches of Russia: Indigenous Judgments on the Appropriateness of Educational Methods and Styles,” Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997. See also Elliott, “Recent Research,” 29 and 41; and Ferenczi, “Theological Education,” 6-7.

¹¹⁶ Pilli, “Finding a Balance,” 40.

¹¹⁷ David E. Sveen, “Leadership Development as a Non-formal Learning Experience in Central and Eastern Europe,” Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2004; and David E. Sveen with Mark R. Elliott, “Case Study of Evangelical, Non-Formal Leadership Development,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 16 (Spring 2008), 12-13.

¹¹⁸ Ovidiu Cristian Chivu, “Romanian Baptist Leadership Training,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 17 (Spring 2009), 8-10; Ovidiu Cristian Chivu, “A Strategy for Church-Based Leadership Training in Romania,” Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007.

¹¹⁹ Shamgunov, “Listening,” 281. See also *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁰ Elliott, “Recent Research,” 42; Walter Sawatsky, phone interview, 26 October 2009; Dyatlik, “Expectations,” 105. MTS President Walter Mitskevich notes 83 MTS students enrolled in online training by the end of 2009. However, one-quarter of students do not have their own computer and those in locations with under 100,000 residents lack reliable Internet access. Still, he observes, conditions are improving: “Russia is catching up.” Mitskevich, email, 4 January 2010.

¹²¹ Danut Manastireanu, “Western Assistance: Theological Training for Romanian Evangelicals Since 1989,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 15 (Winter 2007), 5.

¹²² Marsden, “Post-Soviet,” 3. See also Nicholas Holovaty, “An Ideal Theological Education: The Vision of Moscow’s Protestant Leaders,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 8 (Fall 2000), 6.

Revising the Curriculum

It could happen that Protestant non-formal leadership training programs in the former Soviet Union will eclipse full-time residential theological education. However, if residential programs do survive, they will require a thorough reworking of the traditional curriculum. Metropolitan Hilarion has said the same for Orthodox seminaries: "Radical reform...is essential." For a start, teaching methods require attention. "We need a new approach to certain aspects of the *educational process*," the metropolitan urges. "Certain educational methods [such as slavish mimicking of 19th century homiletic style and content] we need to get rid of as soon as possible."¹²³ Insur Shamgunov and Mark Harris both believe mentoring should be as central to Protestant programs as classroom work.¹²⁴ Shamgunov's survey of graduates found that seminarians favored role models who are "wiser, older experienced ministers, not their own peers who finished seminary only a few years before" who "cannot offer much practical wisdom."¹²⁵

In place of the traditional lecture format, Shamgunov advocates problem-based learning (PBL): Schools "could integrate the academic element of theological study with the development of students' skills in exegeting biblical texts, research, and preaching."¹²⁶ Shamgunov also stresses that theological training must constantly adapt to ever-changing political, religious, and economic conditions. While he has Central Asia in mind, flexibility would seem to be a prudent posture for seminaries throughout the former Soviet Union.¹²⁷

In calls for curricular reform, two tendencies emerge: 1) the favoring of courses with practical, ministry application; and 2) the favoring of courses that can motivate and equip students to contribute to the transformation of culture, as well as congregations. The 2007 Overseas Council study revealed that, at least in the minds of graduates surveyed, the least important subjects in their curriculum were systematic theology, Hebrew, philosophy, radio production, Greek, and Ukrainian history (32 to 21 percent). In contrast, graduates ranked as most important for their ministry hermeneutics, introduction to the New and Old Testaments, church history, apologetics, spiritual counseling, evangelism and discipleship, and Christian ethics (91 to 81 percent).¹²⁸ In the majority of cases, courses with immediate practical ministry application scored highest.

Shamgunov rejects the traditional "fourfold divisions of biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, and practical theology," seeing this framing of the curriculum as the "fragmented formula of a theological encyclopedia." Instead, what is needed, he contends, is "a more holistic model, centered on the actual ministry of the church."¹²⁹ For Shamgunov courses serving this purpose should include social work, "counseling, social psychology, leadership, management, organizational development, strategic planning, time management, financial planning, and starting a business."¹³⁰ Vladimir Fedorov notes that some 19th century Russian Orthodox seminaries, for all their shortcomings, justifiably offered such utilitarian courses as medicine and bee keeping. For today's Orthodox seminarians he recommends missiology,

¹²³ Hilarion, "Problems," 1.

¹²⁴ Harris, "Needed," 84; and Shamgunov, "Listening," 276 and 284.

¹²⁵ Shamgunov "Listening," 284. See also *Ibid.*, 246-47.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 280. See also Toivo Pilli, "Toward a Holistic View of Theological Education" in *Theological Education as Mission*, ed. by Peter Penner (Hagen: Neufeld Verlag Schwarzenfeld, 2005).

¹²⁷ Shamgunov, "Listening," 19 and 35. See also Harris, "Needed," 84.

¹²⁸ Sannikov, *Effectiveness*, 75.

¹²⁹ Shamgunov, "Listening," 279-80.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30, 241, 257, 265, and 278. See also Tiberius Rata, "Theological Education in Romania," *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 10 (Spring 2002), 6.

psychology, cultural studies, political science, finance, law, and ministry to drug addicts and HIV/AIDS patients.¹³¹

While the courses Shamgunov recommends are all utilitarian, they aim at reshaping culture as much as serving local congregations. Caribbean theologian Dieumeme Noelliste dreams of a theological curriculum which boldly transforms culture, allowing graduates “to straddle both church and world.” Courses must equip graduates with both “sound spiritual leadership” and a passion to deliver folk “from their fatalistic attitudes to take actions to alter their conditions.” The curriculum, then, must hone “skills in community mobilization, community organization, community development, and the ability to speak prophetically to the context with the view to steering in the direction of God’s ideal for societal life.”¹³² Similarly, Balkan Pentecostal theologian Peter Kuzmič argues that if seminary graduates are to engage the culture they will need courses in psychology, philosophy, and sociology.¹³³

Given the Slavic context, former missionary Donald Marsden urges course work in Orthodoxy, without which Evangelicals will be “doomed to a kind of intellectual vacuum in their own culture.”¹³⁴ It is striking that Metropolitan Hilarion offers essentially identical advice in reverse—Orthodox seminarians should study non-Orthodox traditions.

In my view, representatives of other confessions should be invited to meet with students and answer their questions. Someone may say, ‘How can it be that a Protestant pastor or a Baptist preacher will come to an Orthodox theological seminary?’ But then, in real life, our clergymen have to meet both with Protestant pastors and with Baptist preachers. Wouldn’t it be sensible to prepare them for such meetings well in advance?

Orthodox schools, the metropolitan contends, should educate

in a spirit of tolerance and openness towards other confessions. We are now living not in the Middle Ages and not even in the nineteenth century. It should be born in mind that many of the future clergymen of our Churches will have to live in a multi-confessional society. They will have to be able not only to see the differences, but also to clearly understand that Christians belonging to most varied denominations have a single dogmatic basis, common belief in the Holy Trinity, belief in Jesus Christ as God and Savior.¹³⁵

Courses in Counseling

As noted, Metropolitan Hilarion and a host of others recommend counseling and psychology for the seminary curriculum.¹³⁶ These subjects would serve good purpose based on needs in Central Asia. Pastors in this region surveyed by Insur Shamgunov convinced him that wounded hearts were commonplace in Central Asian churches and in the wider culture which had been “morally destroyed” in the Soviet era. Graduates face “alcoholism, drug abuse, occult practices, a high divorce rate, high unemployment, prostitution, and widespread domestic physical and sexual abuse!” Pastor Gulnora put it thus: “There is so much rejection in our society—women

¹³¹ Fedorov, “An Orthodox View,” 30.

¹³² Noelliste, “Theological Education,” 281-82. See also Pilli, *Dance or Die*, 116.

¹³³ Elliott, “Recent Research,” 3.

¹³⁴ Marsden, “Post-Soviet,” 3. See also Elliott, “Theological Education,” 71; and Dyatlik, “Expectations,” 104.

¹³⁵ Hilarion, “Problems,” 6.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 7; Fedorov, “Orthodox View,” 20; Shamgunov, “Listening,” 241; Dennis Bowen and D. Russell Bishop, “Training Pastoral Counselors in Russia,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 12 (Spring 2004), 3-5; Dennis Bowen, “Christian Counselor Training in Ukraine,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 16 (Summer 2008), 4-6.

are rejected by men, children by their parents. People were much wounded during Soviet times; but nowadays children are rejected because parents are busy making money."¹³⁷

The case for courses in pastoral counseling comes through clearly as well from the heart cry of a Lutheran pastor from Kazakhstan, put off by lengthy conference debates on academic qualifications for clergy. What is desperately needed, he argued, is "concentrated training in the basics for 'emergency preachers.'"

I am in full agreement with much of the programs that you have presented here. But much that was said by American and European specialists cannot be connected with the concrete, burning needs of the churches and the believers, such as ours in Kazakhstan. We too allow ourselves to dream sometimes about grand plans, as they were developed at this conference. But in all honesty, they are for us at present quite unreal futurism. We face a mountain of problems: We are surrounded by people who feel lost, who seek comfort, intimacy, calm and a way to God. They are hungry abandoned children, lonely pensioners without means, mothers ready to give up the daily struggle for bread, drug addicted youth, young women who are forced to turn to prostitution to survive, and disoriented hopeless intellectuals. The church may not pass over them carelessly.¹³⁸

Contextualization

The impassioned plea of this Lutheran pastor was that pastoral preparation take into account actual, contemporary social conditions as they exist in Kazakhstan. In other words, he was urging that the curriculum be contextualized. In the early 1990s, in the first panic to patch programs together posthaste, new Protestant seminaries emerged in the former Soviet Union that took little account of the social and cultural setting. "Western training programs were simply imported and installed."¹³⁹ Course texts were mostly translations from English; faculty, of necessity, to start with, were Western, Korean, or Western-trained; course offerings replicated those of schools abroad; and early on, even some seminary libraries held more English than Russian titles.¹⁴⁰

A West-Knows-Best Mentality

Professor Ted Ward outlines sobering cautions for North Americans involved in theological training abroad. One "very dangerous and costly assumption," he warns, is the "long-standing habit in the Western world to assume that what *we* like to hear or see, *others* will like to hear or see....What is good for *us* will be good for *them*."¹⁴¹ Sad to say, too many Protestant programs, launched, led, and funded by Americans, labored under the handicap of an ethnocentrism that "tended to assume that proper training would help the Russian to think like an American."¹⁴² Too often differences between Western and Slavic mentalities were not sufficiently taken into account.

Underscoring the East-West cultural divide, social scientist Geert Hofstede ranked Americans as the most individualistic of some 40 world cultures surveyed, whereas in his study Russians were among the most collectivist, typically deferring to majority preferences and

¹³⁷ Shamgunov, "Listening," 7.

¹³⁸ Gerd Stricker, "The Problems of Theological Education: The Experience of Lutheran Institutions in the CIS," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 21 (June 2001), 18.

¹³⁹ Harris, "Needed," 84.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; Elliott, "Theological Education," 69-71.

¹⁴¹ Ward, "Effective Development," 5.

¹⁴² Harris, "Needed," 84.

traditions over personal wishes.¹⁴³ Unquestionably, some of the tensions in seminary classrooms have derived from divergent Western and Slavic mindsets. Examples include students hesitating to engage in class discussion or reticent to question a teacher imparting “received wisdom” and students “sharing” answers on a test for the good of the class average.¹⁴⁴

St. Petersburg theological educator Sergei Nikolaev provides a startling illustration of an over-weaning, West-knows-best mentality among some seminary graduates:

Recently I visited a church where a very interesting young man of wide reading, a graduate of a Russian theological institute was preaching. People were very attentive and listened to him with enthusiasm. In his sermon the young pastor quoted Spurgeon and Moody, Lewis and Berghoff, Stevenson and Barth, and I was carried away by his vast knowledge. But he did not even mention Solovyev or Bulgakov, Prokhanov or Florensky, Dostoevsky or Kargel. How is it that he knows authors of foreign birth and does not know those of his motherland? Why does he think that Lewis and Barth have better answers to the hopes of his countrymen than do Solovyev and Alexander Men?¹⁴⁵

Undoubtedly, this example underscores the need for theological education that is properly contextualized, taking into account Russian history, including one thousand years of Orthodox tradition.¹⁴⁶ Caribbean theological educator Dieumeme Noelliste calls for a creative synthesizing of Western and indigenous cultures, rather than a jealous, blind attachment to either exclusively: “What is needed is a critical appropriation of the legacy, involving the endorsement of its useful features, the adaptation of others, the correction of those deemed faulty, and the creation of new ones as may be required by the peculiarities of each environment.”¹⁴⁷

Of course, Nikolaev notes, “It is impossible to fruitfully serve your own people if you do not know your culture!” Still, he seconds Noelliste’s call for the blending of the best of West and East: “To be able to communicate with people in comprehensible terms we have to find an effective way to combine the enormous experience of evangelical theology of the West with our native religious quest.”¹⁴⁸

Diverse developments, in fact, presently contribute to the contextualization of theological education in the former Soviet Union. The increase in national faculty with higher degrees is providing a major impetus to pastoral training appropriate to the context.¹⁴⁹ Also aiding the cause is a host of projects to identify, publish, reprint, and distribute books suitable for theological education: The Russian Protestant Theological Textbook Project; The Bible Pulpit Series of theological studies texts; the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (<http://e-aaa.info>) with its conferences, school site visits, and CDs of historical materials; Theology Online (<http://theologyonline.info>), a consortium of Russian and Ukrainian schools facilitating interactive

¹⁴³ Geert Hofstede, “Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10 (1986), 306-16.

¹⁴⁴ Steve Chapman, “Collectivism in the Russian World View and Its Implications for Christian Ministry,” *East-West Church and Ministry Report* 12 (Fall 1998), 12-14.

¹⁴⁵ Sergei Nikolaev, “The Problems of Euro-Asian Theology for the New Millennium,” *Religion in Eastern Europe* 20 (April 2000), 4.

¹⁴⁶ Harris, “Needed,” 84; Elliott, “Theological Education After Communism,” 71.

¹⁴⁷ Noelliste, “Theological Education,” 278.

¹⁴⁸ Nikolaev, “Problems,” 4. See Shamgunov, “Listening,” 274-75, for examples of Central Asian graduates successfully gleaning Christian texts from the West for their own purposes, rather than simply parroting them.

¹⁴⁹ Ferenczi, “Theological Education,” 13. Stricter visa regimes in Russia and Central Asia for visiting professors also underscore the necessity of national faculty. Mitskevich, email, 4 January 2010.

on line instruction; the emergence of Christian publishers such as MIRT and Bibles for All; and the founding of Christian bookstores.¹⁵⁰

As beneficial as contextualization can be, it bears noting that even the positive, taken to extremes, can sometimes prove harmful. For example, national and cultural pride can degenerate into chauvinism in some Ukrainian seminaries and churches as tensions flare over Russian versus Ukrainian instruction and preaching.¹⁵¹ Contextualization, then, cannot be allowed to serve as a cover for racially tinged nationalism which would trump the universality of the gospel and the common bond of love that sees “neither Greek nor Jew.” (Galations 3: 28).

In Summary

Protestant theological education currently faces serious challenges. Of course, in the Soviet era, state hostility led to many decades of no formal Protestant theological education at all. In contrast, the source of difficulties today stems primarily from an enrollment crisis¹⁵² precipitated by a panoply of mostly self-inflicted wounds. Since the fall of Communism Protestant schools too often have overbuilt, have depended too heavily upon Western money and models, and have admitted too many marginal students. In addition, they too often have failed to maintain sufficiently close ties with the church, have adopted a more classical than practical curricula, and as a result, have produced graduates who frequently are ill-equipped for pastoral duties or are not welcome in the churches they have been trained to serve.

Consequences have included, and will continue to include, school closures and mergers, a more entrepreneurial approach to the use of facilities and faculty, and decreasing dependence upon Western direction and funding. Additional responses include increasing curricular revisions relevant to a Slavic context and diversification into liberal arts, business, and/or vocational degrees. Above all, schools are scrambling to develop or expand their nontraditional programs through correspondence courses, distance learning sites, and online instruction.

It is hoped that, ultimately, theological educators and their Western and indigenous stakeholders will come to realize that both traditional, residential theological education and nontraditional programs have their place and should be seen as complimentary.¹⁵³ Formal training typically has the advantage of spiritual formation in community, face-to-face faculty-student interaction, greater library resources, and campuses that provide a witness of presence and permanence. Informal training typically has the advantage of more practical content, more flexible schedules, and closer church-school ties.

To its detriment, formal training can lead to ivory tower isolation from the local church and less focused concentration on pastoral preparation. To its detriment, non-formal training typically

¹⁵⁰ Ferenczi, “Theological Education,” 8; Sawatsky, “Reflections,” 25; Dyatlik, “Expectations,” 105. St. Andrew’s Biblical Theological Institute headed by Alexei Bodrov also sponsors the publication of many theological texts of value to Christians of all confessions. Bodrov, “Missions,” 228-29; and Sawatsky, “Reflections,” 24-25. For a description of a wide range of Central and East European associations assisting indigenous theological education therefore contextualization, see Penner-Kool.

¹⁵¹ Yoder, “Future,” 2; Nikolaev, “Problems,” 3.

¹⁵² In a May 2010 meeting with the author in Russia, one Russian seminary president objected to the use of the term *crisis* to describe the current status of Protestant theological education, seeing his school’s shift from a residential program to non-formal distance education as *change* rather than *crisis*. But the latter term has gained currency and is generally considered to be the state of affairs. This author first used the term and quoted indigenous sources using the term in print in 2005: Elliott, “Protestant Missions,” 1 and 5. Western, Moldovan, and Ukrainian sources characterizing the state of Protestant theological education today as a crisis are: Sawatsky, “Reflections,” 25; Turlac, “Crisis,” 19; and Dyatlik, “Expectations,” 97.

¹⁵³ Ferenczi, “Theological Education,” 7-8.

is lengthier with less instructional oversight close at hand, has lower retention rates, provides less adequate verification of student work, and offers fewer recognized degrees. Thus, formal and non-formal programs have their strengths and weaknesses; both have their place; but both also require adaptation to the unique complexities of the post-Soviet environment.

Communications Via Phone, E-mail, and Meetings

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Chapman, Ian (Russian Leadership Ministries) - 28 February 2008 meeting*;
Ferenczi, Jason (Overseas Council International) - 28 February 2008 meeting*, 4 March 2009 email, 27 October 2009 phone, 4 March 2010 email;
I., P. (missionary in Ukraine) - 9 August 2005 email;
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Provost, Robert (Slavic Gospel Association, Elgin IL) - 4 February 2010 email;
Rodgers, Ted (Russian Leadership Ministries) - 26 October 2009 phone;
Rybarczk, Anthony (Assemblies of God) - 3 November 2009 phone;
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Sawatsky, Walter (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary) - 26 October 2009 phone;
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Tsutserov, Alexander (Moscow Evangelical Christian Seminary) - 27 May 2010 meeting;
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* Theological Education Conference, College Church, Wheaton, IL, 28 February 2008