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THE COLLECTIVE PASTORATES OF THE CONFESSING CHURCH: A MODEL FOR MINISTERIAL PREPARATION

In September 1937 the Confessing Church's seminary at Finkenwalde was closed by the Gestapo. By November, twenty seven pastors, all former students at Finkenwalde, had been arrested. In December, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other Confessing Church leaders were ready to try another model for the preparation of Confessing Church ordinands.

Although formal educational institutions like the *Predigerseminar* - preachers' seminary- had been declared illegal, there had been no legal challenges to apprenticeships. The plan was for a *Sammelvikariate*, a collective pastorate, in which ordinands were sent to established Confessing Church pastors to serve as apprentices. They would live together in one house. The students would be attached to various parishes while being kept in small groups and to continue teaching them as they had been taught at Finkenwalde (Bosanquet 1968, 192).

This paper examines the history of the *Sammelvikariate* in Pomerania, reviews its curricular approach, and compares them to similar approaches in Protestant church history, in mission work, and in contemporary American church models.

History of the Collective Pastorates in Köslin and Schlawe

The August 1937 decree issued by Heinrich Himmler restricting religious institutions which lay outside the control of the German Evangelical Church put pressure on the educational institutions of the Confessing Church. Concentration camp was threatened for both student and teacher. Heinrich Vogel, director of the *Kirchlicher Hochschule* in Berlin says that two approaches were discussed among Confessing Church leaders. He favored a continuation of the present approach (the preachers' seminary) regardless of the possible circumstances. Others argued that the education of future pastors should be changed to nothing but apprenticeships (Barnett 1992, 87). The approach adopted by Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church leaders in Pomerania actually appears to be somewhere between those options.

At this time in the struggle there had been no legal challenges to apprenticeships even among known opponents to the Nazis (Bethge 2000, 589). Earlier abuses of religious leaders held as prisoners had created some concern among Nazi political leaders regarding public perception so there was some laxity in prosecution in this area. That relative freedom allowed experimentation with the idea of apprenticeships that led to the development of the *Sammelvikariate*.

In Pomerania there were two collective pastorates. Between seven and ten ordinands lived in each vicarage. The conditions were similar to those in the earlier *Predigerseminar* in Finkenwalde. Ordinands could not claim to be enrolled in a seminary since such enrollment was then illegal. Each was to claim that he was apprentice vicar in a parish. However, many times they had little contact with that parish (Bethge 2000, 589).

One of the collective pastorates was located in Köslin, a city of about thirty thousand population. The Confessing Church parish in Köslin earlier had shown its support of ministerial education by the donation of chairs to the seminary at Finkenwalde (Bonhoeffer 1966, 34). Friedrich Onnasch, pastor of the parish, served as head of the collective pastorate. Eberhard Bethge reports that “the five Confessing pastors and a few in the villages were able to accept up to ten vicars or seminary candidates; all the candidates lived together in Superintendent Onnasch’s vicarage. . . . There was room in the house for classes, as well as a room for Bonhoeffer when he stayed in Köslin” (2000, 590). Friedrich Onnasch’s son Fritz served as inspector of studies for the group. Previously he had studied at the preachers’ seminary in Finkenwalde under Bonhoeffer.

A second collective pastorate was located near Schlawe a town of about ten thousand in population in Gross Schlönwitz (Bosanquet 1966, 193). The superintendent was Eduard Block. Both Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge had positions as assistant ministers and Bethge was inspector of studies. Bonhoeffer registered with the police in Schlawe (he had not registered in Köslin) and used Block’s address as his place of residence (Bethge 2000, 590).

Each ordinand was responsible for registering his location with the local police. They reported that they were working under the parish pastor and had to perform occasional parish duties. The ordinands were brought together for ongoing training. All lived in the same location (Bethge 2000, 589).

Bonhoeffer taught at both Köslin and Schlawe commuting between the two locations. Bethge reports that Bonhoeffer taught and wrote in this time period with no settled place and without his books which he had always had until then. In Schlawe, Superintendent Block kept a room ready for him and took care of police inquiries regarding Bonhoeffer. He was assisted by inspectors of study (Fritz Onnasch and Eberhard Bethge) who were familiar with the methods and goals of community life and had participated in the House of the Brethren in Finkenwalde. Continued contact with students from Finkenwalde was difficult so Bonhoeffer allowed the former students to send him their sermons which he returned to them with suggestions (Bethge 2000, 590-594).

The rise to power of the Nazis continued through the period. The German Evangelical Church, the *Reichskirche* attempted to consolidate power and ensure loyalty of all German religious leaders to Hitler. Although the Confessing Church maintained a level of independence, the majority of pastors even there took the oath of loyalty to Hitler. On November 9, 1938, *Kristallnacht* (“Crystal Night”) when Nazis and anti-semitic sympathizers burned and vandalized Jewish Synagogues, shops, and houses, the Confessing Church made no statement opposing the action (Bosanquet 1968, 197). Active

opposition to the Nazi regime and its activity was uncommon on the part of most in the Confessing Church.

In April 1939, the collective pastorate left Schlawe and went to nearby Sigurdshof in an empty house on the edge of the estate of a Confessing Church sympathizer. (Bethge, Bethge, and Gremmels 1986, 171). As political tensions continued to heighten and Hitler led Germany towards war, Bonhoeffer made plans to return to the United States on a lecture/teaching tour. Friends there had obtained invitations for him to teach and deliver lectures in various schools and seminaries. Bonhoeffer resigned his position with the collective pastorates. Anticipating his successor, Bonhoeffer described the situation at Köslin and Schlawe: "He will find one of the finest pieces of work in the Confessing Church. Two colleagues who have been in the work for the past year and a half have taken full responsibilities" (Bonhoeffer 1966, 212-213). That successor was Helmut Traub who assumed control for the pastorates.

Bonhoeffer left Germany for the United States in June 1939 traveling with his brother Karl Friedrich who was lecturing on chemistry in the United States. Although his American hosts had planned for Bonhoeffer to remain in the United States during the anticipated European war, Bonhoeffer made plans after a brief stay to return to Germany (Bosanquet 1968, 208; Bonhoeffer 1966, 27). By the end of July, Bonhoeffer was back in Berlin. He then resumed his role with the collective pastorates and continued ministry among earlier ordinands by sending circular letters as had been the pattern at Finkenwalde (Bonhoeffer 1973, 27).

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland and placed the continuing operation of the collective pastorate in doubt. The speed with which hostilities were settled in Poland, however, allowed the collective pastorate to resume operation quickly. (Bonhoeffer 1973, 27). The beginning of war did result in a higher number of individuals being called up for military service and, with no exceptions for ministers or ministerial students, this cut into the participation of young ordinands in the Confessing Church.

The collective pastorate at Köslin closed during the fall of 1939 (Bonhoeffer 1973, 28). Work continued at Sigurdshof until March 1940 when students were called up for service and the police came to shut down the operation (Bethge 2000, 589). Helmut Traub reported: "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge, and I tidied up, packed books, nailed up windows: leave-taking from the work of the seminaries of the Confessing Church" (Traub 1966, 161).

In the two and a half years of its operation, Bonhoeffer's collective pastorates added five more courses with between seven and ten students in each. This was in addition to the five larger classes which had passed through Finkenwalde. (Bethge 2000, 589).

Theological Curriculum in the Collective Pastorates

The approach applied in the collective pastorates did not differ significantly from the approach which had been employed in teaching at Finkenwalde. Participants were in smaller groups and the

program was disguised as collective pastorates or groups of apprentice ordinands. (Bethge, Bethge, and Gremmels 1986, 166). Bonhoeffer, with the assistance of Onnasch and Block, maintained the daily order, although they functioned without direct knowledge by the Confessing Church. The church knew training was happening, but it was best for them not to know details of that training (Bosanquet 1968, 193). Rumors continued to circulate, as they had during the operation of Finkenwalde, regarding the “legalism” and the “monasticism” which was the practice of those gathered in the two pastorates. Work, meditation, worship, preaching, and biblical study remained significant in the study of the collective pastorates. It was, perhaps, even more intense than in Finkenwalde since the class was smaller and the approaching war was imminent (Bethge 2000, 592).

As was the case throughout Europe, materials were scarce. Supplies of coal, kerosene, and food were usually slim. Bonhoeffer frequently went to Berlin to gather information and to gather provisions (Wind 1992, 132). The assistance provided to students at Finkenwalde by the House of Brethren, a group of students who remained after course completion and maintained a monastic lifestyle, was not available at Köslin or Schlawe since this was discontinued in the collective pastorate. This made the assistance of other supporters much more significant for the ongoing work of the collective pastorates (Bethge 2000, 593-595).

Meditation, an important innovation in the Finkenwalde curriculum, was retained in the collective pastorate. It was one of the important tasks for the student and centered on meditation on Scripture especially the Psalms. Hans-Werner Jensen, a student at Schlawe, remembered: “I was happy to learn this in the Preachers’ Seminary, for I was able to practice it later in a Gestapo prison” (Jensen 1966, 153).

The study of homiletics and the improvement of preaching was an emphasis in the ministerial preparation of the Confessing Church. (In fact, it appears to be largely the reason for the existence of preachers’ seminaries as the traditional theological schools had little interest in such practical application of theological scholarship.) Bonhoeffer emphasized the importance of the minister’s faithfulness to true proclamation while turmoil existed within the church. (Fant 1975, 20-21). His concern is further evidenced through his diary entries during his time in the United States in 1939 when he heard few sermons which he thought were appropriate. Bonhoeffer maintained preaching “. . . is not a matter of a man’s own choice and inner compulsion; he is commissioned to do it. Everything depends on the name, or the authorisation in which I preach. The most burning love for nation, for community, for the office of preaching can never replace this commission. Preaching is not meant to be my word about God, however honourable, however faithful, but God’s own Word. So there can be preaching only where there is a divine commission” (Bonhoeffer 1966, 186). Although personal contact with former students was difficult, the emphasis on preaching continued with them sending Bonhoeffer their sermons and his returning them with his suggestions (Bethge 2000, 593).

The study of Scripture and a high view of Scripture was retained from the days at Finkenwalde. The crisis in Germany made appropriate use of Scripture an ethical necessity. Bonhoeffer writes: “We expect Scripture to give us such clear instructions that it absolves us from acting in faith. We want to see the way before we go along it. . . . Scriptural proof does not free us from believing; it first takes us

to God's Word in the venture of faith and obedience and it strengthens us in it" (Bonhoeffer 1966, 176-177). It was especially relevant given the German church's embrace of Naziism. He warned: "A church government is inevitably heretical if it recognizes other demands on its ministry than those of the Gospel. It then becomes necessary to suppress those who are bound only by the Gospel, and as a result the church becomes a furtherer of false teaching and lies (Bonhoeffer 1966, 189).

Ministers who experienced both Finkenwalde and one of the collective pastorates draw little distinction between the experiences. Finkenwalde was marked by classes and preparation in an isolated school and service in area churches. The collective pastorates held classes and ministerial preparation in a local church and service was performed there as well. Former students hold both experiences in high esteem. Ordinand G. Lehne wrote to Bonhoeffer:

I found a world that embraced a great deal of what I love and need: straightforward theological work in a friendly community, where no unpleasant notice was taken of one's limitations, but where the work was made a pleasure; brotherhood under the Word irrespective of the person, and with it all, open-mindedness and love for everything that still makes this fallen creation lovable. . . . When I look back today, I have a clear picture before me: the brothers sitting down to their afternoon coffee and their bread and jam. The chief has come back after being away rather a long time. . . . Does it dull the objectivity of your theological view, when I write that it was the peripheral things that increased my delight in what is central? (Bethge 2000, 592-593).

Given the standards which Bonhoeffer displays in *Life Together*, Lehne's summary suggests that the collective pastorate was what Bonhoeffer had intended.

Historical Precedence for the Collective Pastorate

The pattern of ministerial preparation adopted by the Confessing Church in the *Sammelvikariate* bears a striking similarity to earlier models. Glenn Miller writes that the pattern in eighteenth century America was for prospective candidates to study with a senior minister after completing instruction in the liberal arts, a pattern which closely resembles the tutorial system in English universities (Miller 2004, 106). This apprenticeship was common throughout America in different Protestant denominations recognizing that professional preparation for ministry differed from traditional theological education.

The approach in the Methodist tradition used the pattern of circuit riding pastors in its approach to ministerial education. Russell Richey describes the "fraternal" approach to Methodist ministerial education (one of four distinct models from the Methodist-Episcopal tradition). He writes: "Bound in covenant to travel, to submit to the appointive power, to accept a common wage. . . , to suffer together, to preach the Word, this fraternal order educated and trained in the same way that it worked-together on the road" (Richey 1996, 47). In the American Methodist tradition, prospective ministers were invited to travel along and theological education and preparation for ministry was done on the road. The individual learned while doing, but was also supervised by an experienced minister. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the approach was common linking a young minister with a more experienced

minister. (Richey 1996, 47). The approach was so effective, that some Methodists were critical of formal schooling, encouraging their young ministers to receive their education and experience in the “Brush College” instead (Richey 1996, 50).

Theological Education by Extension

Some similarities between the collective pastorates and Theological Education by Extension (TEE) may also be noted. The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada recognizes the validity of such an approach and establishes standards for the practice of education by extension. Concern is expressed for the educational integrity of the study, that students receive academic support, that the formational components are present, and that attention be given to the general institutional standards of ATS. A main concern is that appropriate resources, faculty, and sufficient enrollment be present to provide a “community of inquiry” (ATS 2004, 80-85).

In addition, Theological Education by Extension has been employed on the mission field. Richard Sales describes a pioneering program in theological education by extension in Botswana. In that setting, traditional seminary education is cost-prohibitive for the churches of Botswana. The approach involves home study, work and life experience, and weekly discussion with peers. The home study consists of modules that encourage reflection as well as individual study. Life experience includes work in local parishes following set guidelines and set activities. The weekly discussion involves a small group of students from a geographical area meeting with a staff person to discuss what they are studying and doing. (Sales 1976, 117-118).

Frederick Wentz proposes a model for ministerial preparation which draws on patterns used traditionally within the Pentecostal tradition. Students for ordained ministry emerge from ministering laity who show evidence of potential for leadership. The congregation serves as the context for a candidate’s education. There is the recognition in this model that traditional seminary or graduate school study of theology often produces formal theologians but not as often produces pastors or Christian leaders. Wentz argues that it is more appropriate to take instruction to the minister-in-training who is immersed in a meaningful context for ministry than to put the student into a school and then seek ministerial situations for him or her. The educational approach would center on apprenticeship, supervision, and evaluation (Wentz 1975, 109-110).

Theological Education by Extension seems an appropriate parallel to the collective pastorate. Similarities between the mission field and pre-World War II Germany are found in the scarcity of provisions, active learning on the field, and limited support from a denomination or religious hierarchy.

Teaching Churches in the United States

Increasing numbers of ministers are bypassing more traditional theological education for ministerial preparation and returning to an approach similar to an apprenticeship or some other on-the-job preparation. Walter Wink describes several programs of on-site theological education from the 1970's. In Washington, D. C., the INTERMET program where students would live, work, and study

with clergy and lay people in their churches for three years was one such program. Another program was the Susquehanna Valley Project, a year-long program in which students combined study with practice in parishes in the Catskill Mountains. Such programs, Wink observes, are helpful in correcting seminarians' misconceptions about laity and provide much practical information (Wink 975, 123).

Some effective programs are informal. Bill Easum and Dave Travis describe one model for ministerial preparation in an African-American church. Each year the pastor selects a dozen 13 to 15 year olds based on his observation of their character and Christian commitment. During the school year, the pastor meets with his "club" for an hour each week. In that meeting, the pastor shares scripture and talks about what it is like to be a pastor. On occasion his wife joins him to talk about the life of a married couple in ministry. He stresses the importance of actions. He makes assignments of pastoral ministry activities such as hospital visitation. The club members construct talks and assemble sermons. As the group grows older, the pastor continues to track the progress made by the participants on a one-to-one basis. Some are selected to serve as interns in specific ministries. Others fill part-time staff roles. Some are directed towards higher education and are given scholarships. Easum and Travis describe this type of approach as a "culture of equipping" (Easum and Travis 2003, 45-48).

Fellowship Bible Church of Little Rock, Arkansas has a "residency" for candidates who have completed seminary and shown signs of strong leadership ability. It is designed to produce church planters. Program material stresses: "The Residents are not here to make copies or do research or be 'gophers' for a year. Much like medical students after they graduate from medical school, Residents are here to explore the practical 'how-to's' of church leadership before launching out to plant a new church of their own" (<http://www.fellowshipassociates.com/HTML/FAResidency.shtml>). The program is divided into two semesters work focusing on philosophy and leadership development in the first semester and church planting and practical tools in the second semester. Over twenty churches planted by graduates of the residency program are listed on Fellowship Associates web site.

Church Multiplication Associates of Signal Hill, California uses an intensive process to train network leaders. The "Greenhouse" curriculum consists of modules and is somewhat peer led. The modules present material from a number of resources, often in conflict with one another, and allows the peer group to work through that in a fashion similar to a colloquium. In addition, an intensive weekend conference which teach major principles of church planting provide a starting point. A leadership seminar follows. The educational aim is to produce individuals who plant house churches (<http://www.cmaresources.org/greenhouse/details.asp>). This approach allows students to stay in a particular geographical location where other interested participants may be found.

Another model is the Vineyard Leadership Institute of Columbus, Ohio which was established by John Wimber. Vineyard Leadership Institute is a two-year, part-time academic program in biblical studies and theology. Courses include more traditional theological academic courses and work in the practice of ministry. A class usually consists of at least five students. Classes meet weekly throughout the course of study and use some distance learning techniques. At present there are over one hundred sites and seven hundred students. The purpose of the approach is to bring growth to students and

strengthen their churches enabling it to expand its ministries and plant new churches. While rigid preparation is required, VLI clearly states that it is not a seminary and is not accredited (<http://www.vli.org/index.asp>). Graduates of the program show a great understanding of the interplay between theology and practical application. Upon completion of the Leadership Institute, some graduates enter seminary because of their academic ability and perform well in that setting as well.

Other programs exist as well. A central facet of programs of this type is the recognition that training is more than academics. The goal of approaches like this is not to make seminary students like seminary faculties, but to support them in becoming Christian intellectuals in the practice of ministry.

Concluding Remarks

In times of conflict, often great ideas emerge. This was the case in the theological education provided by the Confessing Church in Germany. Beginning with the preachers' seminaries like Finkenwalde and moving toward the collective pastorates when that became necessary, Bonhoeffer and other church leaders took steps to provide an adequate foundation for ministers. The idea of a preachers seminary preceded the necessity experienced by the Confessing Church. It came about because of inadequate preparation of ministers for the tasks of ministry by the theological schools. Bonhoeffer adapted the approach to fit the needs of the day.

Apprenticeships, theological education by extension, and teaching churches have emerged alongside existing seminaries and theological schools because of a perceived inadequacy in the preparation of students for service in the church. This seems to be an area which will demand the attention of those in traditional theological education to provide more adequate preparation for students.

On a personal note, I had expected to find a greater distinction between theological education at Finkenwalde and in the Collective Pastorates. Indeed, even participants in both settings saw little distinction between the settings. While there is a level of disappointment on my part, there is also the recognition that the innovation of Finkenwalde was such that it was quite effective in the preparation of students for ministry. I hoped to find descriptions of students working together in the collective pastorate doing ministry in ways that could only be done in that setting. In fact, the tasks of ministry are mentioned as a necessity for preventing the suspicion of the Gestapo rather than being an integral part of the curriculum.

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