Education for what mission?

by Philip Turner in the February 2, 2000 issue

Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models, by Robert Banks

Toward the end of this critique of the theory and practice of theological education Robert Banks provides his readers with an extended quotation from Karl Barth. In a speech, Barth said this of theological institutions:

> Everything is in order, but everything is also in the greatest disorder. All the sails are hoisted, but no wind fills them to drive the ship. . . . What appears to take place there does not really take place. For what happens is that God, who is supposedly involved in all theological work, maintains silence . . .

Yet again time has proved Barth prescient. The sheer volume of literature addressing one or another "crisis" in theological education confirms his foresight. As its title suggests, *Reenvisioning Theological Education* is both a critical review of a portion of this literature and yet another attempt to generate a wind to fill the sails and drive the ship.

One can only admire the tenacity and thoroughness with which Banks has waded through the more recent discussions. New presidents and deans can save countless hours simply by reading the first third of this book. There one will find excellent summaries (and criticisms) of the various contemporary attempts to revivify theological education by reconstituting it as a form of paideia or by refocusing its "vocational" aspects or by finding some creative synthesis between the two. Banks provides his readers with critical reviews (all arranged in a helpful typology) of the proposals of Edward Farley, Richard John Neuhaus, the Mud Flower Collective, Joseph Hough, John Cobb, Max Stackhouse, David Kelsey and Rebecca Chopp.

Banks's summaries are accurate and fair and his criticisms often on the mark, but throughout he is guided by his own "missional approach." His conversion of the noun "mission" into the neologism "missional" gives one pause from the outset. Why is

the creation of a new word necessary? Is something being said that has not been said before? Whether said before or not, Banks contends that to address the problems now endemic to the practice of theological education one must go behind the contemporary discussion and look once more at what the Bible has to say about "ministry formation." If one does, mission will appear as both the purpose and context for this enterprise.

What does Banks mean? Quite simply that a review of what both the Old and New Testaments say about "ministry formation" produces a fairly consistent picture. This formation takes place not as a preparation for something that will happen when the disciple is ready but in the midst of the very activity for which one is being prepared. He concludes his review of Holy Scripture by noting a number of the implications of its witness for the practice of theological education. The most fundamental are that (a) ideally, theological education should take place through "in service" ministry activities, "within which intellectual, spiritual, and practical concerns from a seamless whole," and (b) formation should take place in partnership with "an experienced person who, for different periods of time, offers his or her whole self" to the people being formed in and for ministry.

The heart of this proposal is to place the focus of theological education outside the classroom, and, though Banks in no way advocates closing institutions devoted to the teaching of theology, he does want to drive their inhabitants (and their pedagogy) outside the walls of academe so that they might learn of God's mission and their ministry in the very places people live, work and worship. As one might imagine, it is this "missional approach" that provides Banks a basis for evaluating the literature under review in the first third of the book. No matter what their other strengths may be, all, to one degree or another, fall short because they are not based on the sort of reenvisioning (and relocation) that "missional" theological education calls for.

On first reading, there is something attractive about Banks's approach. So many of his observations seem to hit the mark. Theological institutions are indeed often cut off from the real life of the churches they supposedly serve. The theological "guild" is frequently consumed with its own (often esoteric) concerns. Theological students, generally speaking, are not sufficiently formed as Christians. The ecclesiastical bodies from which they come are more often than not "collectives rather than communities" that demand managers, directors, counselors or therapists rather than "leading servants" within a "body" set upon a divinely given mission. Banks is fully

aware that no real change is possible apart from fairly extensive changes in what he calls "key institutional cultures."

With all these observations one can easily agree, yet one leaves this book more than a little frustrated. There are a number of factors that contribute to this frustration. For example, Banks's study of scripture convincingly shows that formation in biblical times took place not in a classroom but right in the middle of things under the aegis of a mentor to whom one was personally related. No one doubts that this form of education has much to recommend it, but what gives this biblical picture the authority of revelation? How can it plausibly be claimed that a form of education generally present in all societies before the institution of the school is divinely inspired and thus normative for the ages?

The only possible answer is that this form of education is authoritative because it is necessary for carrying out the divinely given mission of the church. At this point frustration may well find a companion in simple disagreement. Though he advocates a "missional approach," Banks never actually says clearly what he understands the mission of the church to be. Such a silence is frustrating. Still, with a little work, one can infer from his numerous examples that he considers it the church's mission to engage in a social transformation that produces justice and inclusion.

It is at this point that one may find oneself in simple disagreement. Though Banks notes that he has discussed the purpose and role of the church in other writings, he does not discuss them in this treatment of theological education. It is, however, precisely a view of the mission of the church and its centrality that requires both statement and defense if his proposals are to have the sort of credibility that might end the silence of which Barth spoke.

If, for example, the mission of the church is not in the first instance social transformation but, say, as in the Epistle to the Ephesians, the formation of a community that allows all creation to "see" God's reconciling work in its common life, then formation for the Christian ministry might be conceived as resembling not the praxis of a social critic but the wisdom of the rabbi who is learned enough to pass on the tradition of a people and sagacious enough to preside over the internal life of a community. In short, Banks's proposal depends upon an assumption about the nature of the churches' mission which he fails to defend, and in consequence, despite his useful and insightful summary and critique of our present circumstances, his own proposal becomes but a note in another key that simply adds to the cacophony of voices now touting one or another view of theological education.