# THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE TRAINING IN THE CONTEXT OF A LIFETIME'S JOURNEY

During 1989-90 at St John's Theological College, Nottingham, we debated the possibility of moving the college to a more urban setting. The debate led us to decide not to take this question further, but it produced valuable discussion about the nature and development of ministerial training hi the college context and led me to reflect on the rationale of college training. That reflection was also furthered by a consultation of people involved hi post-ordination training, to which some of us involved hi pre-ordination training were also invited. Needless to say, in this paper I am not arguing for college training as the only way; many aspects of its rationale also apply to other forms of training. Further, while my perspective is Anglican, the issues arise in similar form in other churches.

## 1. The need to look at college training in the context of a lifetime's journey

Over the period of more than twenty years that I have been involved in ministerial training there has been a ferment of discussion of that training and experimentation with the forms it can take. Experimental forms often make a point of not requiring people to spend several years in a theological college, largely separate from the life of the world in which they formerly lived and from the ordinary life of the church in which they are training to serve. In the Church of England and elsewhere, the Ordination courses are of course now firmly established, and other experiments presuppose or suggest further distinctive philosophies of training, and alternative approaches to training. Among the possibilities are praxis-based training and/or training which takes the form of a thin sandwich (two or three days a week hi college, two or three days a week on the job)or a thick sandwich (e.g. a year or two in college, two or three years on the job, then another period in college).

One result of discussing radical changes, which cannot be effected within present structures, could be to inhibit the kind of gradual evolution of training which has gone on over the past twenty years and which needs to be encouraged to continue. Whatever might be desirable by way of revolution, pending any revolution we need to move on from where we are at the moment within the broad patterns which we presently have.

Another by-product of proliferating experiment and critique could be the impression that the present broad pattern has no rationale which could take into account contemporary insights regarding the nature of the world, theology, the church, and adult education. As long as most churches still give a prominent place to college training, at the very least ordinands whose training takes this form need some way of making sense of it, if only to help them avoid wasting excessive energy chafing that it is not something else. One aim of the present paper, then, is to restate something of that rationale, in case taken-for-granted perspectives should be forgotten, but in such a way as also to take some account of contemporary insight and experience.

One need is for a more coherent view of the training process as a whole. It is easy to fall into the trap of identifying people's time at college as their training (full stop). The training process of course neither begins nor ends at college.

## 2. What people bring to college

On one hand, people bring to college a lifetime of experience as human beings, some years of Christian experience, and some years of commitment to and involvement in mission and ministry (i.e. praxis). Both traditional forms of training and discussion of new forms of training can imply that that we need to provide people with experience and praxis to reflect on. Actually people bring to training considerable amounts of each, particularly now that ordinands average over thirty in age. It is both a matter of the experience which each individual brings, and a matter of the corporate experience which any course group (for instance) will embrace - that of different ages, classes, sexes, backgrounds, cultures, jobs, and other facets of human experience.

Training gives people the opportunity to reflect on that experience and activity. Colleges no doubt need further to develop the utilization of students' experience, in a way that the pattern once did not, and it is likely that students will have to help tutors to see how this development can take place. One aspect of it is reflecting theologically on the job or other occupation which they left in order to train. Examiners have commented on the fact that ordinands in colleges do this well. When they are no longer actually involved in the job in question, the distancing effect helps rather than hinders their reflection, especially in the context of having more substantial time for the study of Bible and Doctrine in the light of which to do their reflection, because of the nature of college training.

Admittedly the desire to bring as much of the past as possible into college raises some questions. It may suggest difficulty in letting go of the past and in facing up to the newness of training for a new vocation. It may reflect the deep pain brought to ordinands and their families by the (non-financial) sacrifice involved in training. The stress on people's experience as their key resource also raises theological questions about the relationship between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience which themselves deserve reflection. Nevertheless, the past is one important resource that people bring to college with them, and if they have some difficulty in letting go of it, then that is one of the experiences they will need to reflect on.

People's experience of God and their knowledge of the Bible and the Christian faith is a further resource they bring to college. It has apparently sometimes been reckoned that serious study of the Bible is best left until people enter theological study, so that they have less to unlearn when they come to study with the insights of the academic approach. On the other hand, it is now often asserted that, on the contrary, the academic approach has no privileged position over against study of scripture in the context of the faith of the worshipping community and its pursuit of its mission hi the world. There is a complementary relationship between confessional, committed study and the academic approach. Each can enrich and correct the other. It is therefore a regrettable fact that developments in church and society mean that people now arrive at college with much less knowledge of scripture than was once the case -though admittedly this also issues from the more joyous fact that quite a number of ordinands reach college having been converted in adulthood.

## 3. The training that goes on after college

As training does not begin at college, neither does it end there. There is, of course, a sense in which it goes on for ever. Nevertheless we can make a useful distinction between people's initial training and the ongoing training which will characterize their continuing ministry.' In the Church of England initial training continues until a person has completed a curacy (a "training post") and is reckoned "ready for responsibility" or "mature in ministry" - a state which those of us who are already in "responsibility posts" will perhaps view as itself an eschatological goal rather than one we have reached. A person's first curacy is part of their initial training and needs to be seen in close association with their pre-ordination training. There being fewer traditional second curacies and a high clergy retirement rate in the 1990s, most Anglicans being ordained nowadays will move to responsibility posts after one curacy, becoming incumbents or team vicars or (especially the women) chaplains hi sector ministries. That makes the training aspect of the first curacy the more significant.

This fact, too, is easily lost when we think about the aims of college training. Everyone acknowledges it in theory but joins in a conspiracy to forget it in practice. Churches want curates who "hit the ground running" - and consequently have another reason for wanting the college training to be more praxis-oriented than it is. Curates want to get on with the job, to be involved hi real ministry and not to feel that they are apprentices.

Over twenty years I have also been involved hi many conversations lamenting the variety in the aims and forms of post-ordination training in the Church of England. That variety makes it impossible for colleges and courses to know what aspects of training we can reasonably assume ordinands will have opportunity to undertake after then- ordination. Diocesan training officers feel a correlative frustration about diversity hi colleges courses. In recent years there has been more consultation among dioceses and between dioceses and colleges and courses about the aims of post-ordination training This holds out hope of progress hi mutual understanding regarding aims of pre- and post-ordination training, such as may also help to establish what part colleges and courses might usefully play hi building bridges between life before ordination and life after.

I have noted that people arrive at college with less knowledge of the Christian faith than earlier generations did. Trends in society and church over recent decades also mean that among ordinands the acquisition of knowledge is a rather unfashionable concern. Combined with the fact that college courses now give considerable prominence to pastoral studies, this means the shortfall is increased rather than reduced when people leave college. That heightens the importance of their developing hi the changing context of the ministry a pattern of private study (hi particular of relaxed but serious study of scripture) as well as a pattern of private prayer.

One major point of that study is to provide ministers with resources for their critical and creative reflection on their church and their ministry. In ministerial life policy questions requiring theological reflection are coming up all the tune. My parish is a third Muslim and the local Moslem community have asked if they could use our church community centre for prayers during Ramadan. What do you say? A black-led church wants not to come to our service but to use our church for their own

service at another time. What do you say? In our parish and in three parishes adjoining us over the past three or four years there have been sex scandals involving parish staff. What do you say? For each of these situations there is a knee-jerk reaction: but what happens when you look at them in the light of scripture, doctrine and history?

One of the most important skills of ministers is the ability to reflect theologically on the activities they are involved in, the experiences that come to them, and the situations they encounter. That is their wisdom. It is a key skill that trainee ministers need to develop. A church's staff meeting, then, might be expected regularly to include sessions of reflection in the light of scripture, doctrine, and history on some issue currently surfacing in the parish or the wider world. It might drive training ministers and trainee ministers back to these resources for our faith and obedience, able to see things there that they had not seen before, able to look at issues with more Christian eyes, and able to lead their people into living by scripture and by Christian faith.

If we grant that trainee ministers should hit the ground running but that they may still have much to learn before they fly solo, those training ministers have the additional responsibility of holding them back from thinking they can fly every aeroplane immediately and simultaneously, and also for holding them back from trying to master another aeroplane before they have begun to be at home in the previous one, while trainees will then feel grateful if responsibility for them is exercised that way.

## 4. The place of college training in the total process: of knowledge, experience, and skills for reflection

If we look at the seven to ten years that may pass between someone's first thoughts of ordination and their first responsibility post, this period is in fact a sandwich course training: some years in secular and local church life, some years in college, some years in a curacy. In the light of what comes before and what comes after, the role of people's college course is to build up their knowledge, provide them with further experience, and help them develop their skills for reflection. In addition, both their study and the broader nature of college training encourage them in discipleship towards maturity.

*Knowledge.* When people are made deacon in the Church of England, the bishop presents them to the congregation as men and women of sound life and godly learning. That suggests two bottom lines in our aims for training.

If it is the case that people come to college having generally had little chance to gain very broad or deep knowledge of scripture and the Christian tradition, any action they undertake is likely to issue from their own, the church's and the world's current prejudices as to reflect explicitly Christian thought. Any reflection on their action which they undertake will also inevitably have a thin basis in explicitly Christian thought. The biggest gift that college training gives people is tune. Once they are in college they are inclined to become appalled at the impossibility of ever getting to grips with the many aspects of scripture, the Christian tradition, ethics, and other areas of which they now become aware. All the more important is it, then, that at least they have two or three years to handle some of these and to gain knowledge which they will take into ordained ministry. Only during these two or three years do people have the tune for concentrated immersion in scripture and the Christian tradition which can provide them with a platform for deciding what to do and reflecting events and activities.

Further, the strengths and insights of their Christian experience are generally accompanied by beliefs and attitudes that at least need to be thought through (e.g. approaches to the Bible, expectations regarding miraculous healing, and theories of the atonement). College frees people to ask critical questions in a context where it does not matter if for a while they do not yet see the answers, even as they are on the move (we hope) towards a clearer and deeper faith.

*Experience.* It is to be expected that at college people will utilize their developing theological knowledge and skill in interpreting their previous human, Christian, and ministerial experience. They will also utilize them on their ongoing experience at college. Some of the latter is the manifold human experience which life at college cannot help providing: awareness of national and international events; friendship, courtship, marriage, birth, parenthood, separation, divorce, loss, sexism, racism, conflict, illness, death; worship, fellowship, healing, ministry. Some of it is the church-based and world-based experience provided by placements and missions. College thus provides people with further concrete experiences which give them raw material for facing and reflecting on theological issues. The college experience in itself provides people with a form of cross-cultural experience, a period spent in a concrete and particular alien cultural setting in which they can face and reflect on theological issues and seek to develop skill in thinking theologically about other concrete situations they will meet in mission and ministry.

*Skills for reflection*. The wisdom we covet for people is thus not merely a matter of knowledge. One of the gaps that now strikes us when we read the ordinal's description of ordinands as needing to be of godly life and sound learning is that capacity to practice what is often termed theological reflection. Even if people have a superb grounding in the content of the Christian tradition, that does not guarantee that they know how to use it. They need to be able to start from situations, questions, and policies that life and ministry confront them with, so that they can look at these in the light of scripture, history, and doctrine. Indeed, they may only come to a proper grasp of the significance of scripture when they do that. So college courses introduce people to theological reflection of this kind, beginning (as we have noted) with the invitation to think theologically about the job they did before they came to college, and about patterns of life and ministry in the churches they came from, to encourage them to develop the habit and skill of looking at questions in this way so that they may do so in the context of the ministry.

To put the point in the terms of another related topic of much discussion in ministerial training circles in the Church of England, theological education involves the ability to think in an integrative way. We inherit a tradition of the study of theology which separates critical study from application, Bible from doctrine, pastoral from theology. Subjects such as Old Testament or Ethics or Worship have long been studied as discrete areas with differing methodologies, whose interrelationship as part of one whole is thus unclear. This has brought benefits to the study of the parts, but deprivation in the loss of the whole. Working back from topics which require theological reflection on the broadest front provides a way of bypassing the barriers which seem to stand between subjects when one begins from the academic end.

Adopting a contextual approach will not in *itself* answer all the questions regarding integration. If we want to encourage the church and individuals to develop a coherent vision of the Christian whole, that will involve deductive as well as inductive thinking. But a contextual approach can provide starting points. There is a famous fable about four bund people seeking to describe an elephant and giving quite different accounts because they were in touch with different parts of its anatomy. If theology is a little like attempting to understand an elephant, starting from Old Testament study, Ethics, or Worship, is like analysing its blood, its nervous system, or its metabolism. Starting from a contextual question is like examining its trunk or its ears. Neither brings a grasp of this monumental whole, but they may together take us towards more of a grasp of aspects of the whole.

There is an even more obvious gap in the ordinal's description of the qualifications of a minister. If we were to ask prospective students what they thought training was about, I suspect they would soon suggest that it was about learning the skills of ministry. If we asked actual students what they thought placements, at least, were about, they might be likely to say they were contexts in which to learn those skills. It is natural and right that people want to be reassured that they can do the job and want to get over their first mistakes before they are ordained. In the Church of England nearly everyone now gets ordained hi June rather than September, and it is natural and right that they should want to be ready for the fact that just after they begin their ministry the vicar will go on holiday for three weeks and they need to be not too wet behind the ears. Nevertheless, if training for the ministry was mainly about learning skills, theological college would be a strange place to do it; the natural place for learning the skills of ministry is on the job, under the supervision of an experienced training minister. It is part of the training that goes on after college, to which we have alluded in section 3.

Teachers in pastoral studies are now inclined to see the main purpose of the placements and other practical experiences which they arrange as to provide people with raw material for reflection, with questions with which to come back to Bible, history, and theology. What understanding of God is suggested by the church's baptism policy, its worship pattern, its relationship with the community or what happens in the intercessions in services? The place of the learning of skills such as leading worship, preaching, evangelism, inter-faith dialogue, preparing people for baptism, or the running of youthwork, is quite secondary to that. In college we have an ongoing educational task to undertake in enabling ordinands to see that the learning of practical skills is of secondary significance during then- college course, and to feel at ease about the fact that pastoral studies elements in courses are not designed to provide them with the opportunity to develop all the skills they will need in the ministry (perhaps we need consciously, deliberately, and obviously to leave some essential skills out of the courses!) because ordination is not the end of training but the beginning of a new phase in it.

One ministerial instinct which college can foster is the inclination and the skill to work collaboratively. Some academic work can be done collaboratively, though it then tends to consume more time and ordinands tend not to opt for collaborative work in this context. But many other aspects of college life involve working together with other people, in worship, missions, and placements, and the process of working on these projects as well as the content of them thus contributes significantly to training.

## 5. Progress in discipleship

That phrase "of godly life and sound learning" suggests that ministerial training is at least as concerned with the shaping of people or what is often called ministerial formation as it is with the imparting of knowledge. We want ordinands to come to understand the elephant: but that will involve looking it in the eye, talking to it, and taking it for walks as well as examining parts of it and understanding its internal workings.

At college much growth in godliness comes about through pain. Perhaps any growth in godliness is like that. I have noted that people train for the ministry at considerable personal cost. They give up their job and the various rewards in money and opportunity for achievement and status that their job gave them, and in return receive a seat in the back of a lecture room, a particularly hard experience for ex-teachers who form the largest professional group among ordinands and who are used to running the educational process, not having it run for them. They give up their home and move to a strange town where their spouse may find himself or herself lonely and unmotivated to making new friendships in the community because of the knowledge that the family will be on the move again in eighteen months or so. Or if they are single they give up their home in exchange for a six by nine room, bondage to a group of flatmates they did not choose and cannot escape, and invasion every vacation by conferences which assume they have the right to treat college as their home now. They give up their church involvement and have no way of putting down the same roots in a new congregation, while the college community which acts as a substitute church is a threat as well as a resource, because they are no longer churchwarden or reader or housegroup leader but ordinary person threatened by all these apparently cleverer and more gifted people. They come from churches where it was tacitly assumed that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and Isaiah wrote all of Isaiah; we invite them to look at the evidence for other possibilities - which they may find easy, or may find threatening to their belief in the foundational significance and value of scripture as a resource for the church.

Coming to college means having much taken away; it involves stripping and deskilling. It is thus a formative experience. It shapes people. They are driven to face up to who they actually are, to what motivates them and gives them their significance, and to what Christian faith is really based on. They have the opportunity to find the real God meeting the real them.

I have sometimes been tempted to the view that college life seems to involve more than its fair share of suffering, pain, bereavement, and death. I had wondered whether I was just being morbid in formulating this as a possibility, when a chapel preacher made a similar observation and asked whether God might be seeking to raise up a generation of wounded healers out of such experience. College is about learning to be, to suffer, and to pray.

It would be nice to arrange for movement along the path of discipleship to take the form of gradual growth like the maturing of a plant nurtured by a caring gardener, but it seems inevitable that much of this movement is more tumultuous than that. The process of ongoing personal development involved in being human has been seen as a spiral one involving orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. Orientation means I know who God is, who I am, and how life works. Disorientation means having all that shattered by some experience of loss or bereavement, such as comes in concentrated form through various aspects of training for the ministry. Reorientation means coming out the other side of that experience into a new understanding of life and faith, and a new identity which does justice both to the truth of the old orientation and to the experience which has shattered it - not facing either set of facts, but glimpsing some way of honouring both of them. Today's new orientation, of course, is then tomorrow's old orientation due for this creative shattering.

Ordination can mean that the experience of stripping and deskilling is over. Ministers are now the people at the front with the prominence and the status. They are reverend. They need no longer think any uncomfortable thoughts. They need to be helped to have to continue living by cross and resurrection, living by grace and by faith. That may be easier for women, who in the Church of England, for instance, have had the ongoing need to come to terms with not being able to be priested with then- male contemporaries, not being able to become incumbents, and finding it harder to come by responsibility posts at all.

But I oversimplified the nature of college. Ordinands may feel that as an institution it is an agent of their oppression, but for many their fellow students and staff as people become a major personal resource. There are many fewer occasions of corporate worship than was once the case in theological colleges, partly because the vast majority of ordinands are married with families. Yet college remains much more of a "community" experience than parish Me is. The community experience shapes people and supports them through the experience of stripping and deskilling, the process of living with the pain of the transition from what they have been to what they will now be.

The fact that they will in due course have to make the transition to the more Individually-based life with God of the ordained minister is another of the reasons why we have only one obligatory chapel service each day. We want to encourage people to find time for their own prayer, and to learn how to use that time. College will put them in the way of all sorts of new insights in spirituality and worship, but it will not make any easier the discipline involved La finding the time for prayer than ministerial life does.

## 6. The advantages of separating reflection from action

The main focus of people's actual course at college, then, is their wrestling with the Christian faith and their attempting to use it for reflection on the many aspects of experience and praxis that life and college provide. Its assumption is that there needs to be a dialectical relationship between Bible and tradition on the one hand and the questions raised by contexts on the other.

There are disadvantages in the thick sandwich pattern we have which rather separates action from reflection, but there are also advantages. It may give Bible and tradition more scope to lead the agenda, even though we also have to acknowledge that our study of Bible and tradition needs to be suspected of ideological bias. We have to tread the delicate balance between being irrelevant and being slaves to relevance: we will not want to assume that all the right questions are the ones that have already arisen or can be expected naturally to arise, and that scripture and doctrine do not need to raise questions for us that contexts have not raised and will not raise.

As we have noted, there are forms of training that emphasize praxis and the relationship between action and reflection; in its own way college training works in that way, for ordinands come to college with lots of action to reflect on. While isolation from certain forms of current praxis has its disadvantages, distancing may make for better reflection. College gives people the time to begin to acquire the knowledge and the skills for this reflection, and to begin to undertake it. It frees people from the obligation to be doers for their time at college (and if they are uncomfortable ceasing to be doers for a while, it drives them to reflect on that). It invites them to view as a providential gift this period of time isolated from praxis and involvement in the community outside, a form of investment in a better future praxis, even though it brings the world no short-term rewards.

7. Theology: the people's work, the clergy's work, the ordinand's work, the academic's work

It is rightly being emphasized at present that "theology is the people's work". That poses the question, "What, then, is the rationale for academic theology?" The difficulty stems in large part from the broadness of the term "theology".

When people affirm that theology is the people's work, I take it they mean that it is not academic theologians as such who do, can, or should attempt to work out what "truth about God" needs to be recognized, affirmed, and put into practice in a particular situation. In this connection "theology" and "the gospel" amount to the same thing. It is the church, and not least the local Christian community, that must discover what the gospel is in their situation and then speak and live it out. "Base communities" are one way of their doing this.

In that work I presume that ordained ministers have a role to play, even though - indeed partly because - they probably come originally from outside this community and will not belong to it for ever. They act as teachers who seek to lead that Christian community into a deeper understanding of the gospel expounded in scripture and in the Christian tradition, as well as learning about this from that community. They act as resource people who help the community to spot aspects of what the gospel for them means, as well as being aided by the community itself to perceive these. They will play a particular role in the testing of the ideas that come to the Christian community, helping it to look critically at such ideas in the light of scripture and the tradition, as well as having then- own ideas tested by the community.

For ministers to be able to do that, they will need a background in "theology" in another sense from the one in which I have just been using it. As well as being the community's articulation of its gospel, "theology" is a systematic analytic discipline which seeks to articulate the nature of the gospel comprehensively as well as locally, critically as well as intuitively. Its trained ministers mediate the benefits of such theology to the local Christian community as it seeks to articulate its own theology. If they do not, the local community will lose out. Training which is designed to give the bulk of its time to enabling ordinands to get a grasp of Bible and tradition, and to learn to think critically, has the capacity to help them fulfil this ministry. We need to help ordinands catch the vision of the kind of task as theological resource people that the church is enabling them to fulfil, when it gives them the opportunity to study theology in the way that college training in particular provides.

In order for ministers to be able to function as theologians in then- particular way, they in turn need to be resourced by people involved in academic theology as then- own lifelong vocation. The kind of study undertaken by theological teachers in colleges and universities is thus another form of academic theology which relates to the work of the gospel. The church's encouraging the development of academic theologians (e.g. by enabling people to undertake research degrees) also contributes to that. This theology, too, needs to be refined and challenged by the theology which is the people's work. At the same time it needs to maintain its own integrity, and also to retain a degree of independence - so that for the sake of the gospel it is not constricted by present prejudices from some other source.