

Theological education in the context of persecution and economic hardship

Focus on TEE in Central Asia

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Abstract

This article examines the issue of theological education in the context of persecution and economic hardship. The author focuses on theological education by extension (TEE) as a key tool for the theological education of the persecuted and economically poor believers in the Central Asian countries that were once part of the USSR. The traditional TEE components suit the needs of the churches in that region allowing to flexibly provide continuous theological education in a difficult and challenging persecution context. The low cost of producing TEE study materials makes them a good solution for the churches experiencing economic difficulties.

Keywords Theological education, persecution, economic hardship, theological education by extension, TEE, Central Asia.

1. The responsibility of the church for the theological education of all believers

God gave his written word, the Bible, through his prophets to his church to instruct the believers of all generations in his truth. It is very important for every believer to know and study the word of God, to be able to interpret it in a theologically correct way and to also apply it in all areas of daily life (2 Tim 3:16, 17). Therefore, one of the major responsibilities and tasks of the church, which helps to ensure the preservation of sound Christian teaching both now and in the future, is to provide appropriate theological education to all church members from new believers to church leaders.

The leaders of the global evangelical community see the crucial role of theological education in strengthening and accompanying the mission of the church. This was expressed in the Cape Town Commitment of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization of 2010 affirmed by 4,000 church leaders from 198 countries.

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For this reason, theological education should work in partnership with evangelism and church planting fulfilling two important tasks: 1. Training those who lead the church as pastor-teachers equipping them to teach the truth of God's Word with faithfulness, relevance and clarity; and 2. equipping all God's people for the missional task of understanding and relevantly communicating God's truth in every cultural context (The Cape Town Commitment, 2F4).

Fulfilling this commitment is an important task for the whole global evangelical community in the twenty-first century. However, some contexts make it more difficult to achieve especially when we look at the countries with continuous persecution and chronic economic hardship. The bigger the need for training new leaders, the more challenging and difficult it becomes because of the constant risk and poverty of the churches.

2. Theological education for the suffering church

Throughout the centuries of church history, even in times of most severe persecution, the church has made special efforts to pass on sound doctrine to believers and instruct them in the good knowledge of Christ's teaching. The apostle Paul showed a good example of commitment to this task by spending years of his life studying God's word and later passing his knowledge on to the believers in the Early Church despite continuous opposition and even being imprisoned for his faith.

In our day, the number of Christians around the world continues to grow with the majority of these new believers living in economically poor countries and often facing different forms of religious restriction and persecution. According to the statement made by an expert consultation on the theology of persecution in September 2009 in Bad Urach, Germany: "Due to the massive rise in population and the explosion in the numbers of Christians, never before in the history of the church have so many of Christ's followers experienced persecution as they do in today's contemporary world!" (Bad Urach Statement 2010:4).

Providing theological education in the context of persecution in many cases becomes an extremely difficult task because all kinds of religious instruction from teaching children in Sunday School to theological training of new church leaders often become a target for opposition from both government and society. Religious legislation in such countries may include different kinds of restrictions up to the level of a complete ban on the religious education of believers.

In addition to this, persecution for Christians is often accompanied by economic hardship caused not only by the generally poor economic situation in the country, but also aggravated by discrimination. In this situation of poverty, getting a good theological education from an established theological institution is very difficult and sometimes even impossible for many church leaders. This, in its turn, affects all the believers in their churches.

There is, therefore, a need to look for such forms of theological education that can be successfully and safely used in the context of persecution of the church and economic hardship.

3. Christianity in Central Asia: Past and present

The Central Asian region is a vast territory including five countries once part of the USSR: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The total population of Central Asia exceeds 60 million, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims, and includes over 100 ethnic groups. According to legend, Christianity came to Central Asia from Persia in the first century through the Apostles Thomas and Andrew. Ancient documents confirm that Christianity was well established in Central Asia by the fourth century. There were Christian churches in that region and Christianity spread mainly through Nestorian Christians. However, starting around the fourteenth century Christianity was wiped out by Islam and Buddhism, and practically disappeared. A new stage of Christianity started about the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian farmer migrants. At the end of the nineteenth century many evangelical Christians also moved to that region from Russia, often as a result of persecution. Although the local population was quite tolerant of both Orthodox and evangelical Christians, during that period Christianity was still considered the religion of the non-ethnic people.

In the Soviet period all religions were controlled and persecuted by the state authorities and several generations grew up as atheists. The end of the Soviet regime brought various new freedoms including the freedom of religion. It opened the doors for missionaries from different countries and resulted in many new churches of different denominations. Multitudes of people were attracted to the churches. However, very soon the resurgence of traditional national religions led to restrictions on missionary activities. Islam became more active. Religious freedom and openness were gradually replaced by legal restrictions and the community became more closed and intolerant, especially in rural areas. Governments supported certain religions and denominations while resisting the activities of others, especially foreign missionaries and “non-traditional” religions. This was an attempt partly to use certain religious teaching as an ideological basis for the whole population and partly to reduce the threat of destabilization and ethnic conflicts in their countries. The next step was to amend existing laws to impose the legislative restrictions on sharing faith with other people, children’s work, religious literature and religious education of church members.

According to the Open Doors World Watch List 2012, all five Central Asian countries are included in the 50 countries where Christians experience different forms of persecution. Uzbekistan occupies the 7th place in that list, Turkmenistan 18th, Tajikistan 34th, Kazakhstan 45th, and Kyrgyzstan 48th.² The overall picture in Cen-

² <http://blog.opendoorsusa.org/Portals/106293/docs/WorldWatchList2012-sm.pdf>.

tral Asia is that the church has to survive and grow in the context of increasing persecution, economic hardship and sometimes ethnic conflict.

The restrictions on religious freedom generally in Central Asia are constantly growing. There is, in particular, a growing aversion to religious education of both adults and children, including evangelical Christians. It is getting more difficult to print, store and distribute religious literature. In Uzbekistan in particular it is considered a crime to keep “prohibited” books which may include even Bibles for personal use. Christian homes and church offices are regularly raided by police in search of Christian literature, Christian books, DVDs and other resources. These are confiscated and destroyed, and believers are made to pay large fines far beyond their financial capabilities.

To get detailed information about what exactly is happening in that region is an extremely difficult task because often such information is shared only within very closed circles of prayer supporters and partners. However, the overall picture of growing persecution is quite obvious. Some information on the situation in that region can be found in research and analysis reports of the WEA Religious Liberty Commission, Forum 18 and on websites of various Christian organizations like Open Doors, Barnabas Fund, and others.³

4. The educational needs of the churches in Central Asia

During the 70 years of the communist regime in the Soviet Union, Christianity together with other religions was under tremendous persecution from the atheistic society. This affected religious education. The number of religious educational institutions and students was very strictly limited by the Committee on Religious Affairs. Believers who wanted to study had to obtain a letter of approval from the Communist authorities in order to become students, and often experienced pressure from the KGB to act as “secret informants.” In the Protestant churches, discipleship and leadership training was mainly conducted by more experienced church leaders who had not received any theological training and who had hardly any study resources. Even the Bible was prohibited, not to mention other Christian literature. During that period Christian resources were secretly copied manually on typewriters or even by hand. The people who did it were in danger of long-term imprisonment. In such circumstances it would be impossible to expect a large-scale production of Christian study materials.

The spiritual revival of the early 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in a massive church growth. However, theological education was not available or was not sufficient during that period. Only small numbers of church leaders could receive theological education in a limited number of theological institutions. Often the church

³ www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/rlc/, www.forum18.org, <http://barnabasfund.org>, www.opendoors.org.

leaders in these new churches had a leadership charisma but lacked any theological training. They had to learn from God's word on their own, and from their own experience. God was calling people to ministry from all layers of the society and not many of them had even a good secular academic background. Sometimes young believers without much training were sent to plant village churches. Much zeal without knowledge often resulted in cult-like situations and heresies. Groups of foreign missionaries and churches of different denominations did their best to train new church leaders by starting seminaries and Bible colleges or by sending believers to study in other countries. However, the majority of church leaders received their theological training "on the job" by means of short-term seminars or correspondence courses. Some received their training by making regular monthly or weekly trips to bigger cities to attend intensive blocks of lectures. The situation still remains the same for Central Asia. Some church leaders have to travel to other countries to receive theological education from recognized theological institutions.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the common trends in Central Asia has been the migration of the Russian population, including Russian church leaders, out of Central Asia to Russia, Germany, USA, Israel and other countries. At the same time, the number of the ethnic believers and church leaders is increasing. The forms of fellowship and the worship styles of the churches are changing towards forms more traditional in Central Asian culture, that is, towards smaller and less formal house churches. Under such circumstances, there is a growing need for a way for training more national church leaders and other believers in God's truth "on the job" based on study materials in their native languages. At present, Christian study materials in the local languages are often lacking or insufficient, which is a real hindrance to discipleship, especially in remote places. The educational background of the national believers in the rural areas in many cases is not as good as that of their fellow Russian-speaking believers in the big cities, which results in a need for more academically simple and clearly presented study materials in the local languages, especially at the basic level.

Now, twenty years later, in a context of growing restrictions on religious freedom and continuing economic hardship, the issue of theological education still remains of high importance in Central Asia. There is a need for finding the methods which would fit the context of that region and allow all church members to grow spiritually in a safer, more affordable and more flexible way. One of the well-proven ways to provide theological education to church leaders and other believers in such circumstances is by using theological education by extension (TEE).

5. Theological Education by Extension as an answer

Dr. Patricia Harrison in her article "Forty years on: The evolution of theological education by extension" gives an overview of TEE development from the early stages to the

early 2000s. TEE began in the early 1960s by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala as an attempt to provide theological education to untrained church leaders in rural areas. This attempt turned out to be so successful that the number of extension students far outnumbered those in residential programmes, and those being trained by extension showed a real commitment to ministry. The Guatemalan model soon spread throughout Latin America and to other parts of the world (Harrison 2004:315-316).

TEE combines three main components: self-study materials based on principles of active learning, a weekly group discussion led by a facilitator, and practical assignments for the student's life and ministry. All three components are equally important and their combination not only gives good knowledge of Christian doctrines to the students but also produces changes in their thinking and behaviour. Students not only learn the theory, but also discuss it in groups and are encouraged to apply what they have learnt in their everyday life. They grow both academically and spiritually which benefits the whole church.

One of the pioneers of TEE, Dr. Ross Kinsler, speaks about the way that TEE as a movement has given access to theological education to large numbers of people, especially natural leaders, regardless of their gender, age, previous academic background and financial circumstances. Many who had previously been, in the main, excluded from formal theological education, responded to the TEE challenge and pursued serious theological studies, largely at their own expense and often under difficult circumstances (Kinsler 2008:25).

TEE spread rapidly across the world and across denominational borders. Much work was done by the WEA (WEF) Theological Commission and other Christian organizations to promote TEE across the world. TEE became popular especially in non-western countries and retained its popularity during the 1970s to the 1990s. Many new courses were produced in different languages at different levels. The number of TEE students continued to grow rapidly in some countries, though not uniformly. National TEE associations and teams were formed, some of which continue to flourish and impact the churches today. Within the last decade a new wave of TEE national programmes has sprung up to support the growth of first-generation churches.

At present, TEE is used in many countries of the world where Christian churches experience persecution and/or economic hardships. In Asia these include Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Nepal, Philippines, China, Mongolia, etcetera .

In October 2010, over 70 leaders of TEE programmes equipping around 100,000 active students in nearly thirty countries of Asia met for a training conference entitled, "21st century TEE in Asia: Challenges and opportunities" held in Kathmandu, Nepal.⁴ Dr. Thomas Schirmacher, representing both the WEA Theo-

⁴ www.increasenet.org/about-increase/kathmandu-2010-press-release.

logical Commission and the Religious Liberty Commission at the conference, said in his special address: “The WEA sees TEE training as an integral part of the evangelical world. Imagine what would have happened without the work of TEE starting in the late 1960s and 1970s! We would miss thousands of evangelical leaders today.” He mentioned that the majority of evangelical students worldwide live where there is persecution or at least discrimination. As TEE is not so visible and not so high profile, it is suitable for difficult situations. In his opinion, TEE is a much-needed answer for theological training under persecution (Schirmmacher 2010:1).

Dr. Graham Aylett in a recent publication on TEE in the Asia Theological Association bulletin agrees with Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher when speaking about TEE as “learning on location.” In his opinion, “learning on location opens up an enormous range of possibilities, depending on the level of the programme and the group of people it is designed to reach.” One of the important advantages that TEE provides is that “leaders can learn on location in small groups and ‘remain under the radar’ in places where a visible theological college would attract attention” (Aylett 2012:1).

Among the proven advantages of TEE are: 1) it can provide a solid and practical theological education to believers in their natural environment without interrupting their ministry, work and family life; 2) it is aimed at all church members regardless of their previous academic background; 3) it is based on small groups and can be easily moved to different places, not attracting attention, which allows it to be safely used by the churches in the context of persecution; 4) it is low-cost and affordable to believers who live in situations of economic hardship.

These advantages make TEE one of the most valuable tools for providing theological education to believers suffering persecution and poverty.

6. TEE in Central Asia

While TEE has been used in Central Asia for almost 20 years, there is hardly any published information available on it. The information given in this article is mainly based on the oral stories and correspondence with some of the first pioneers of TEE in Central Asia and other countries of the former USSR.

The first attempts to introduce TEE to the churches in Central Asia were made in the early 1990s on the initiative of different missionaries and Christian organizations who used the well-recognized TEE courses developed by SEAN (Study by Extension for All Nations, www.seaninternational.com) for this purpose.⁵

⁵ Around the world, national TEE programmes are self-governing so they decide their own curricula. Either they use and contextualise courses originally developed elsewhere (the most widespread being from SEAN and Text Africa), or else they write their own courses (as with TAFTEE in India and PTEE in the Arab world). In this article the author focuses on the SEAN courses as they are the ones mainly used in Central Asia till now.

The first SEAN courses were translated into some central Asian languages, contextualized and field tested at that time. A CAR (Central Asian Russian) version of the first of the SEAN courses was also produced, in Russian, but contextualized for Central Asian culture. Unfortunately, the further development of TEE in Central Asia stopped for different reasons, one of which consisted of growing restrictions on missionary activity and religious freedom in the region. While the missionaries were gradually (and sometimes very rapidly) driven out of the region, the young national churches were learning to take on the responsibility for further development of the churches in their countries, including the religious education of their members.

However, no national workers were able to continue TEE work. There can be many possible explanations for this, however, one of the main reasons could be the *lack of proper training and understanding of how to use TEE*. In some cases only the student books were translated without tutor manuals. Even when tutor manuals were available, the group leaders did not know how to use them. The church leaders who were not familiar with TEE would soon lose interest in it, considering TEE materials just one of the numerous study resources. Another reason could be that although TEE study materials are low cost, the development of the new courses and translation of the existing ones into local languages still required considerable initial investment of time and money, which the local church leaders could not afford. The missionaries who were once involved in those translation projects are now retired or working in other parts of the world. The translations that were made into local languages are now not easy to find as they were stored in databases of missionary organizations and churches of different countries for years and sometimes completely lost.

From 2004 onwards, new attempts were made to bring TEE to Central Asia, this time using TEE materials in the Russian language. During the Soviet period, Russian people comprised about 25% of the population of Central Asia. After the collapse of the USSR many Russians moved out of Central Asia. Russian still remains the main language for international communication for the Central Asian people, especially in the cities. In terms of theological education and other church activities, Russian is also the key language for the churches in Central Asia.

Therefore, speaking about the development of TEE in Central Asia it is impossible not to mention TEE development in Russia. The translation of SEAN courses into Russian was started in the early 1990s in St. Petersburg Christian University (Logos). The original vision was to translate SEAN courses and to equip all SPbCU graduates with them so that after graduation they could use TEE courses in their churches in all parts of the former USSR. Later, the new leadership of SPbCU closed this project because of the lack of funds for this work and other priorities. The work did not stop completely, however, and a new approach was developed for reintroducing SEAN starting from the Far East of Russia. In 2004, after an intensive

training done by a group of international TEE experts, a new TEE organization was started, run by the Russian Christians, named the Open Russian Theological Academy (ORTA) with a vision to develop a high-quality TEE programme in the Russian language to be used by churches in Russia and elsewhere. The team translated and printed study materials and trained new tutors to lead TEE groups in the Russian Far East, Central Siberia, Moscow, St Petersburg and other parts of the Russian Federation. From 2006, ORTA's ministry started to spread to Central Asia and Russian-speaking communities in other countries. It is now an active national TEE team with a growing national and international reputation.⁶

In Central Asia, TEE is now being restored by the joint efforts of national church leaders and expatriate workers. The roles, however, now changed: the national Christians play the leading role in the production of the courses and training new tutors, while the expatriates provide consultancy and assistance to the national TEE teams.

A good example of a strong and successful TEE team in one of the Central Asian countries can be given without the names of the team and country for the sake of security. The team consists of several believers who received a good theological education in a recognized theological institution and a special training in how to use the TEE method. They now translate, contextualize and field-test TEE materials for their country, print study materials, run tutor-training seminars for the churches of different denominations and visit TEE groups. They combine TEE ministry with community development projects encouraging TEE students to apply biblical principles practically in their daily lives. A couple of years ago in cooperation with ORTA they started to run joint tutor-training seminars in other Central Asian countries.

In another Central Asian country, the translation of the first two SEAN courses "Abundant Life" and "Abundant Light" into the local language has been done and now churches of different denominations use TEE courses in both Russian and the local language. The translation, contextualization and field testing are still in progress. The good news about TEE is quickly spreading and more churches are now showing an interest in TEE, especially those who are actively involved in evangelism and church-planting, with many daughter churches in remote areas. Such circumstances make the church leadership aware of their need for a systematic discipleship and leadership training programme which meets the educational needs of all the churches of their denomination. In the past, churches with a charismatic background used a whole variety of training materials produced by different denominations. Now teachers are showing an interest in more Bible-based educational programmes for their believers. A leader of one of the largest churches in that country confessed at a big conference in

⁶ For some detailed information on TEE development in Russia and ORTA's history see Huggins M. (2008:269-294).

early 2012: “We have huge gaps in basic theological education. This is our desperate need.” Now more and more church leaders realize this need and are looking for an answer to meet this need. TEE is one of the best-proven answers to it and the number of TEE groups in that country is gradually growing.

In other Central Asian countries, still, only individual churches or individual denominations are familiar with TEE and use TEE materials in Russian. However, there is a need for further development of this work and especially for good-quality TEE materials in the local languages, which, in its turn, speaks about a need to establish national TEE teams in those countries which would take on the responsibility for translation, printing and training new TEE tutors.

Some comments from the church leaders in Central Asia on TEE:

I thank God for this wonderful programme through which I saw an opportunity for a deeper study of God’s word. This programme helped me to see the gaps in my knowledge, gave me hope for further spiritual growth and the desire to share this knowledge with others. (V., church pastor)

This programme can be used for studies in home groups in small kishlaks (villages) and big cities across all Tajikistan. (church leader)

I want this course to spread all over Kyrgyzstan and be available especially to those believers who live in remote villages and who have no churches. My vision is to train God’s servants in the villages. (M, director of national TEE team)

An example of TEE in a Central Asian country: One of the churches of the biggest and oldest church denomination in that country experiences a problem with the lack of trained church leaders. The church members are active evangelists but there was no discipleship programme in the church. The theological education of believers was traditionally limited to pastors’ Sunday sermons. There were no home group meetings. After a tutor-training seminar the church started home groups using SEAN courses. The pastor immediately noticed the good changes and spiritual growth in church members. As a result, the church started more SEAN groups in different locations. Some of the church leaders received more training in TEE and are planning to be involved in the TEE national teamwork.

7. Laying a good foundation – a new stage of TEE development in Central Asia

In order to help establish national TEE teams in all Central Asian countries, a training conference was held in autumn 2012 in Central Asia. The participants of the conference received intensive training in different aspects of running a national TEE

team: from translation and training new tutors to team work and administration issues. The training was provided by a group of experienced TEE workers including national TEE team members from Russia and Central Asia. The conference helped to lay a good foundation for the ministry of the national teams in their countries and also for future partnership of these national teams who live and serve God's people under the pressure of persecution and economic hardship.

At present TEE is mainly presented in Central Asia by SEAN courses, although individual courses from other TEE providers were translated into local languages. As the national TEE work continues to be better established, more courses could be obtained from other TEE producers and translated into local languages. More new courses could be developed in response to the country's needs by the national teams when they get more experience and training.

The TEE work in Central Asia is growing with a vision of strong partnership for national TEE teams, which is especially relevant in the context of Central Asia where different ethnic groups speaking the same language live in different Central Asian countries and the exchange of training resources is important. The work is now done and run by national Christians and has a potential to be more successful this time in contrast to the early 1990s when the translation work was mainly organized by foreign missionaries and stopped when they had to move out of Central Asia either because of religious restrictions or other reasons.

The needs related to further development of TEE in Central Asian countries include:

- establishing adequately trained national TEE teams in all Central Asian countries;
- providing further training to national TEE teams through conferences and seminars;
- translation of well-proved TEE courses into local languages, their contextualization and field-testing;
- promoting partnership and unity among national TEE teams;
- development of new courses relevant to Central Asian context (peacemaking, how to deal with poverty, health issues, Christian family, etc.).

Meanwhile, the awareness and interest of the national church leaders in Central Asia regarding TEE is growing and more churches start using this proven, effective, powerful and affordable instrument every year. The national TEE teams in Russia and Central Asia are learning to work in cooperation and partnership by discussing and planning work together, training new national TEE workers and exchanging study resources in different languages.

8. Conclusions

In this article the focus has been on showing how TEE can be effectively used to meet the needs of the poor and persecuted churches in theological education in

Central Asia when running the TEE programme becomes a responsibility of national church leaders. TEE well suits the need for good theological education of all church members in Central Asia. It allows the provision of continuous theological education in the local churches to all church members, to train and equip new church leaders for ministry in a flexible way. TEE study materials are low cost and affordable to all believers. Because of its effectiveness there, the same approach could be applied to other regions and countries of the world where Christians suffer from persecution and economical hardships and have similar needs in theological education.

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