

History of Philippines' Reformed Seminary

One of the institutions of higher learning in Bacolod City, the capital of Negros Occidental, Philippines, is the Christian Reformed Seminary and Bible College. It is a small but growing institution. And as a church-related school, it is operated jointly by the Christian Reformed Church of the Philippines and the Board of World Missions. Why did the World Missions Board get involved in this expensive and personnel-demanding ministry? Shouldn't missionaries be preaching the gospel in villages and cities, establishing congregations with the newly won converts? Of course, missionaries are needed for the planting of churches. But new converts cannot be left untaught. And in our apocalyptic age, no mission in any country can be assured of its continued presence.

Churches need trained leadership to face the six major factors affecting Asian Christians:

1. National independence from political colonialism. Nations are asserting their independence and express a strong desire to be free from Western political and ideological influences.
2. As a result, Asian countries are undergoing a resurgence of nationalism and a return to traditional values.
3. A political vacuum has been created by the withdrawal of Western troops from many parts of Asia. New political alignments are sought by non-communist nations to withstand communism.
4. The spread of communism is very real. Communism has made great gains in Asia.
5. Secularism, imported from the West, is making strong inroads in colleges and universities.
6. Asia is witnessing a revival of ancient religions. Buddhism and Islam are expanding through their own "missionary" enterprises.

In Asia there are now some 500 different theological institutions offering a variety of levels of training. Our own CRSBC is affiliated with PABATS (Philippine Association of Bible and Theological Schools) and is seeking membership in the larger ATA (Asia Theological Association). The level of education for pastors and "lay" church workers is still on the average at the Bible School level. But Asian Christians are realizing more and more that this type of education cannot meet their needs.

Rev. Salvador D. Eduarte of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, minister in charge of the National City Church, Quezon City, remarked: "Our people are getting highly educated more and more. The average congregation, especially in towns and suburban areas, can count on many professionals and college educated people. This means that the minister occupying the pulpit must be able to communicate the Gospel at their level. Simplistic moralism and ethical and pietistic approaches to questions they

ask will not do. This calls for an educated, dedicated and born again minister. Thus the need for our ministers and church workers is at least ... a college level course."

The development of seminaries and bible colleges is filled with complex problems. The Church in Asia, by and large, received its theology from the West. There has been often an uncritical use of the curricula of Western schools. The saying was: "What works in North America should also work in Asia." But in many instances a Western style of education has not met the needs of the Asians.

Students who come out of a mission setting and who have always lived in a sea of poverty, will ask different questions than students brought up in the secular and wealthy West. Our students are asking questions about the aswang, witchcraft, evil spirits, fairies. They are concerned about the desperate material and social poverty they have all around them. They don't have the spiritual maturity and knowledge of the Bible that normally comes from a Christian upbringing. The students also lack a basic grounding in Christian living.

From the very start of its mission operation in the Philippines, the Christian Reformed Board of World Missions has realized the need of trained indigenous leadership. Where to train these people? A study was made of existing schools. They were found to be either of poor educational quality or fundamentalistic-dispensational, or liberal in their outlook. There was no place in the Philippines where the future leaders of emerging church could receive Reformed training at a responsible level.

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So in 1969, the Reformed Institute of Theology (R.I.T.) was established to provide "a systematic training for the position of pastors, evangelists and Bible workers." On January 29, 1970, the opening dedication service of R.I.T. was held. Fifteen men and women were enrolled in classes that met on Tuesday and Thursday nights in a rented room in Bago, a small town near Bacolod. In the third year of operation, classes were increased from two evenings to four mornings each week. The location of the school was moved to Bacolod. There were now enough students for three classes: freshmen, juniors and seniors. The success of R.I.T. proved that there was, among the church members, a strong interest in the type of education that it offered. It also provided missionaries with trained evangelists, assistants and Bible teachers.

Shortly after R.I.T. started its operation, it was felt that more than a Bible school level of education for pastors was needed. Since no existing seminary in the Philippines could provide a Reformed theological training, it was decided to begin with seminary training in the school year 1975-76 in order to enable the first class of R.I.T. to enroll into the Seminary program. The object of this change was "to train men to become pastors of the Christian Reformed Church of the Philippines. Graduates should be well versed in the Reformed faith."

Why have a seminary in Bacolod, a provincial city, since Manila is the cultural, educational and commercial center of the Philippines? Bacolod had no Protestant seminary and the core of the young Philippine church was located in Negros Occidental. To provide the seminary with property, the mission board had a special fundraising drive for the construction of a campus. In the meantime, quarters were rented at Carousel, a former night club and gambling casino that had been closed down since the declaration of martial law in 1972. On June 17, 1975 the convocation was held at the new Genevan Reformed Seminary (the name was chosen by the national church).

The students received not only an academic training but participated also in practical work. They assisted in all the Bacolod area churches and preaching stations, by leading Bible classes, preaching, teaching and visiting.

Last year, the location of the seminary was changed again. A compound with warehouses, an apartment and a house was purchased from a local Chinese Christian businessman. Some renovations have been made to accommodate the library, students and classrooms. One of the warehouses is now used by the Bacolod Christian Reformed Church for its worship center and is being renovated to make it functional not only for regular worship services but also for daily activities. This year, the seminary compound will undergo some more remodeling in order to be able to accommodate more students.

Since the arrival of three new missionaries for seminary involvement, a new curriculum has been developed. Also the old R.I.T. concept has been revived to help the lay leaders in the church. A wide variety of academic programs is now offered, ranging from the B.D. level in the seminary to yearly certificates in the Bible college. A special Certificate in Theological Studies is now offered to college students. This one year C.T.S. program includes a series of regular seminary courses selected for their usefulness to Christian leaders in other fields than theology.

Students enrolled in the Bible college department can study subjects ranging from Bible Knowledge, Doctrinal Standards to Health and Hygiene and Philippine Church History. In order to get the seminary and Bible college "under one roof", the name of the school had to be changed. So the national church chose Christian Reformed Seminary and Bible College as the new name.

This brief history of a theological school in the Far East is more than a history for the people involved. It represents years of hard work, frustrations, Westerns and Asians learning how to work together for the Lord's sake, the realization of dreams, the fulfillment of needs and new problems to be faced in rapidly changing Asia. May we be given the courage and the vision to view the problems as God given opportunities. We covet your prayers for the Christian Reformed Seminary and Bible College, its faculty, students and staff.

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