

Chapter One Research Methodology

The Research Situation

This dissertation deals with two subjects and their relationship with each other. One of these subjects is Theological Education. The other is Church Growth. Church, university, and bible school libraries are full of books on Church Growth. Classics have been written and an entire movement was started with this issue at the centre. Robert Logan, current specialist and professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, has written a number of books. The American Church Growth Movement of the 1960s spawned a huge number of volumes on this subject. The classic literature on church growth was written by Donald McGavran.¹ George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*,² gives the most definitive list of principles of church growth and is a very important work on this subject. There are also large numbers of books and articles on Theological Education and its different models.³ When Theological Education by Extension became popular, many more books were written on this subject.⁴ Traditional theological education is a well-researched and well-documented subject.

Theological education in Malawi has not been researched much, but some work has been done. Fauchelle wrote on the history of theological education in the classical denominations.⁵ An analysis of the theological education programmes of the evangelical (non-classical) denominations in Malawi is presented in my paper, "The Development of Theological Education in Non-Classical Denominations in Malawi,"⁶ and Kenneth Ross (ed.), *Church, University and Theological Education in Malawi*, which contains a report about theological education in Malawi in 1995.

Though much research deals with the development and growth of the church in Malawi,⁸ only one dissertation has church growth as its focus,⁹ dealing with church growth in both historical and contemporary perspective, but not using the tools provided by the "Church Growth Movement" for its inquiry. Outside Chiphangwi's dissertation, church growth in Malawi is not dealt with by systematic enquiry.

If, worldwide, both church growth and theological education are well researched, the opposite is true of the relationship between the two. I have not found any books written on the subject of theological education and its relationship to church growth. There are no known books or articles on this subject on file in Malawi. Dr. Ray Ellis, General Director for Evangelism and Church Growth of the Free Methodist Church of North America indicates that he knows of no studies nor books on this subject. Dr. Eddie Gibbs, Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary states "Thank you for your question on what is a very important topic. I am unaware of any research on this area." Is there a relationship between theological education and church growth? Can theological education be a contributory factor to church growth? Does a growing church need a theological education programme? How do the two inter-relate, or do they not relate?

Donald McGavran, the founder of the Church Growth Movement, decries the total lack of church growth training in major theological training institutions. He indicates that this aspect of leadership training is overlooked and apparently considered of little importance. Charles Van Engen, Professor of Biblical Theology of Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Missions writes extensively on the "specialization/integration in a three-arena approach to mission education." He discusses the arenas of Biblical text, faith community, and missional context.¹ His postulation agrees with the basic system of education employed by the Free Methodist programme in Malawi. However, his interest and application is only applied to schools teaching missiology. He does not deal with the content of church growth.

There are two interesting chapters in *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*. One of these deals with the contextualization of theological education and the other with "Education and Service: A Model for Praxis Education."¹⁴ Both of them are very supportive of the method used by the Free Methodists in Malawi, but neither deals with church growth in terms of content nor results.

If research has not been done in this area, then it needs to be. Malawi is an ideal place

to study this subject because most churches are growing and many schools of theological education are in operation.

The Research Issue

The Free Methodist Church in Malawi is growing at a faster rate than any other area of the Free Methodist Church world-wide. The Free Methodist Church in Malawi also has a unique theological education programme. It is my thesis that the specific type of theological education programme used by the Free Methodists in Malawi does impact the growth of the Free Methodist Church. My research is called upon to find out if there is a relationship between this Malawi model of theological education and the Free Methodist Church growth in Malawi.

The Malawi Free Methodist model will be called "*The Chilinde Approach*." This approach seems to be the catalyst in Free Methodist church growth. It is this approach which is explored in detail herewith.

During the research, it was noted that there are many factors that influence church growth. Some of these are political, social, financial, spiritual, and so forth. It must be discovered how the factors in the *Chilinde Approach* relate to the political, social, financial, and spiritual factors of Malawi. Does the *Chilinde Approach* take these factors into account? How does it use them in the effort to both train leaders and grow a church at the same time? These questions were researched in depth in order to determine whether or not the main thesis of the dissertation is correct.

The Research Methods

As noted above, there are very few written materials on the subject of the dissertation. In the earlier chapters of the dissertation, there are a number of historical facts regarding the Methodist Movement, the Free Methodist Movement, the Missionary Movement, and so forth. These are appropriately noted and footnoted. Most of these are from secondary sources of information. However, the bulk of the research for the main topic of the dissertation must by necessity be from primary sources. At the time of writing, all the mission-related persons involved in the work of the Free Methodist Church in Malawi were still living. I interviewed them, wrote letters to them and read their writings. All of the Malawians who were involved in the founding of the church and its development, on the leadership level, are also still living. So, there is a large body of available information from first-hand sources. This resource was used extensively. In addition, hundreds of personal interviews were conducted to get information and the viewpoint of lay leaders, lay men and women as well as youth in the church. Those interviewed were sixteen years of age or older, as sixteen is the minimum age for Free Methodists to be considered for "Full Adult Membership."¹⁵ I chose fifty-six different churches, more than a quarter of the Free Methodist Churches in Malawi. I chose churches in all three regions of the country. I chose a balance of churches which were new or young congregations, and churches which were established in the early days of Malawian Free Methodism. I chose churches with student pastors, experienced pastors, and those trained in Zimbabwe at the beginning of the work. It was announced by the pastor that I was studying the Free Methodist Church and on a particular day I would be visiting the church to ask questions of adult full members. Any who wished to be included were interviewed. The balance between lay men and women was almost exactly even, with two hundred and thirty-one males, and two hundred and twenty-five females. Over seventy-five percent of interviewees were married. I have found no evidence to indicate that these fifty-six churches do not provide a fair picture of the church as a whole. To further enhance my information, I interviewed every Free Methodist Pastor and Bible School student in the country, giving a slightly broader scope, but the findings were commensurate with those of the laity. I also wish to note that I am an "insider" in this project. I have been involved with this programme since its inception in 1982. I served as the principal of the Free Methodist theological education programme in Malawi for fifteen years. I am also in a position, then, to give observations on how the *Chilinde Approach* has operated. I have initiated some of its adjustments and have been its chief administrator.

The main advantage of being an "insider" in this situation is that it has given me access to information and knowledge of the subject. All files were open to me. I first visited Malawi in 1975, in the early days of development of the church. I was not involved in theological education at that time. I and my family spent six weeks living in villages with the Malawians that were among the first Free Methodists in the nation.¹⁶ I began to know them and they, me. When we returned in 1983 to open the school in Lilongwe, we spent a lot of time between school terms, or modules, visiting villages. We got to know the pastors and students in a very intimate and satisfying way. We became friends as well as co-workers. When I announced to the pastors that I wished to visit many of the churches in Malawi and interview their congregations with regard to this dissertation, I was warmly received. I did not have to pay anyone for interviews. People responded to me, because I was an "insider." They wanted to be interviewed. There were no unwilling participants. It was the relationship that had been built that made the difference.

Most interviews were conducted in Chichewa. In most cases the pastor sat with me for the first few interviews - partly, I think, to be sure what I was asking his people about and partly to be sure that I could ask my questions and understand the answers. Then, the pastor usually moved off and did other things and left me freely with his people. Plans for the interviews were made in advance, and nearly always a crowd turned out to welcome me and all wanted to be interviewed. Some were not members and when they were not chosen to "answer the questions" they were disappointed.

I was aware that my position in the church could potentially influence the results of my interviews. In a number of issues discussed, this danger was minimized by the fact that the people could not know my views ahead of time. Typical of such an area of inquiry was the question that had to do with women in ministry and church leadership. None of those being interviewed had any idea of my personal position on the subject. Therefore, I believe they were truly giving me their real feelings on the matter. When so many of them responded positively to the question, I began to wonder if I was asking it correctly. The first question was, "Should women be allowed to preach in the church?" The answer was almost a unanimous "yes." The second question was, "Should women be trained for ministry and allowed to be ordained and serve as ministers?" Again, the answer was so overwhelmingly positive that I candidly asked them, "Would you be willing to receive communion from the hand of a woman?" So, in light of the extended questioning and their inability to know my personal bias ahead of time, I felt they answered honestly.

Before "multi-party" came to Malawi, one might think the pastors would give the missionary the answers they thought he wanted to hear. However, after "multi-party" it became more obvious in meetings where missionaries and Malawians were participating that there was no sense of necessity to respond to the missionary in a way to please him. The pastors and church leader's all responded candidly to every situation, and frequently confronted the missionary if they felt a sense of disagreement. Because of this strong political factor, I felt the answers given by pastors were their own views.

There are also disadvantages, of course, to being an insider. There is the problem of "blind-spots" due to personal bias. I have tried to watch out for these, though undoubtedly some will creep in.

The perceived position of power that the principal of the school had could be a disadvantage if students felt their future might hinge on an answer given in an interview. In actual fact, the only power exercised by the principal of the school was that of influence and his voice on the denominational Board of Ministerial Education and Guidance. From this position he recommends to the Board those who have the gifts and character suitable for ministry, and who have met the educational requirements for both admission to the Conference as Ministerial Candidates and for ordination as Deacons. His word carried a great deal of weight with this important board. This position could give him a place of power that could influence the answers of questions asked students. However, in the case of the ordained pastors and lay people in the churches, the position of principal carried no weight at all.¹⁸

Another disadvantage of being an "insider" comes from my own experience. The *Chilinde Approach* is largely based on training and practical experience woven together in an

organized fashion. When I was training at an undergraduate level at Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington, I was also the pastor of a small church in West Seattle by the name of Delridge Chapel. I was young and untrained. I found that my note-taking at the university was more designed to help me lead a Bible study or preach a sermon than it was to pass the examination at the school. It was this practical application of my lessons that helped me learn. And my ministry in that place was effective.

Later, after being in Africa a couple of years, I returned to the ministry in the United States as a pastor in the Sacramento Free Methodist Church. I immediately found I was unprepared for modern urban ministry. The pastoral counseling load was heavy and I was not trained for it. At that particular time, the University of San Francisco, a Roman Catholic university, opened an extension programme on Marriage and Family Counseling in Sacramento at the Masters' level. It took one afternoon and evening each week for two years. I enrolled. And, as I proceeded towards my MA degree, I used the material in the lessons for counseling the people in my church. As I learned to administer tests, I administered them to the people in my church who needed help.

My PhD studies in the University of Malawi are also being done during the course of my missionary work and are an asset to that work. My reading has benefited me and helped **me to** understand the background of Christianity in Malawi. My research gave me opportunity to visit pastors in the context of their work and to greet their people and encourage them. So, my bias has been that education in the context of the job is more effective than theoretical education in the sterile environment of the classroom.

The Hypothesis

It is the hypothesis of this dissertation that the theological education programme of the Free Methodist Church in Malawi is a major and decisive factor affecting the growth of the church. In order to substantiate and possibly verify the findings in Malawi, comparative material from Zimbabwe will be used, where the traditional, fully residential approach to theological education was replaced by the *Chilinde Approach* in 1995.

Because the *Oviinde Approach* has had a major effect on the growth of the Free Methodist Church in Malawi, this dissertation is a contribution to the thinking of those interested in the relationship between Church Growth and Theological Education. In addition, it is a contribution to the history and development of the Free Methodist Church in Malawi, since its development and its educational approach are intimately interrelated.

1 The best known of McGavran's works which are the foundation for the modern church growth movement are: *Bridges of God*, Friendship Press, 1955; *How Churches Grow*, New York, Friendship Press, 1959; *Understanding Church Growth*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1970.

2 George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1981.

3 Among the huge number of books on theological education you may wish to consult Stephen B. Bevans and James A. Scherer, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1992; Harvey M. Conn and Samuel F. Rowen, eds., *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*, Farmington, Associates of Urbanus, 1984; Elie A. Buconyori, *The Educational Task of the Church*, Nairobi, CLMC, 1993; Kenneth R. Ross, *Church, University and Theological Education in Malawi*, Zomba, Kachere, 1995.

4 See Virgil Gerber, *Discipling Through Theological Education by Extension: A Fresh Approach to Theological Education in the 1980s*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1981; F. Ross Kinsler, *Ministry by the People: Theological Education by Extension*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books/Geneva: WOC 1983; Ralph Winter, *Theological Education by Extension*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1969.

5 "Classical denominations" in Malawi are the main-line denominations that first began mission work in the country. They are usually listed as the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (OCAP), The Anglican Church, and the Roman Catholics. These all began before the turn of the 20th century.

6 The non-classical, or evangelical programmes studied in this paper are, African Bible College, Africa Evangelical Church, Assemblies of God, The Baptist Convention, The Church of the Nazarene, Free Methodist Church, The Lutheran Church of Central Africa, Pentecostal Holiness Church, and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. This paper is on file with the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. I also have a copy in my files for those interested.

7 Kenneth R. Ross, *Church, University and Theological Education in Malawi*, Zomba, Kachere, 1995. See also articles on the development of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in *Religion in Malawi*, Nos. 2, 4,

6, and 7.

8 The most prominent writers of the growth and development of the church in Malawi are McCracken, Ross, Wilson, and Linden.

9 Saindi Chipangwi, *Why People Join the Christian Church*, xxxx

10 Letter from Dr. Ellis to Henry Church dated 18 June 1998.

11 Letter from Dr. Eddie Gibbs to Henry Church dated 19 June 1998. Dr. Gibbs also added in his letter, "I think it would be difficult to establish a direct causal relationship, although one might be able to demonstrate correlation. I suppose that one would have to investigate the content and style of the education received... The paucity of sources indicates the importance of your work. So much of church growth has focused simply on growing churches!"

12 Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism – A Theological Mandate*, Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988, 1,7,9,16-23,49-54,63-78,116-26,128.

13 For a complete treatment of this subject consult J. Dudley Woodberry, Charles Van Engen, and Edgar J. Elliston, (eds), *Missiological Education for the 21st Century*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1996, 208-231.

14 Harvie M. Conn and Samuel F. Rowen, (eds), *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*, Farmington, Associates of Urbanus, 1984. See Chapter 4, "The Contextualization of Theological Education" by Chung-choon Kim, and Chapter 13, "Case Study: Education and Service: A Model for Praxis Education" by Duane H. Elmer.

15 The various classifications of membership will be dealt with later in the dissertation.

16 We spent 5 weeks in June and July visiting Damba village, Qua, Nkhotakota; Salima town and Chipwete village; Bangwe, Limbe; Zomba town and Jali village. We visited every Free Methodist Church organized at that time.

17 Fuller treatment of the denominational structure of ministerial candidacy and ordination is given later in the dissertation.

18 Interestingly, after all the research for this dissertation was done, a new principal succeeded me at the Malawi Bible School and I moved to Zimbabwe in 1997. In 1998 I was asked by Bishop Gerald Bates to take his place at the annual conferences in Malawi, acting as chairman, literally sluing in the seat of the bishop. This position was the most powerful I had ever had in the conference. There was no way the pastors, nor I, could have anticipated this position during the time of the interviews.