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## Caring for the Graduates of our Theological Colleges

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Rodney Pell is a former principal of the Theological College of Central Africa in Ndola, Zambia. This college, sponsored by the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, is one of the principal evangelical theological colleges on the continent. ACTEA-accredited since 1986, it has been specifically commended by ACTEA for the creative way in which it has sought to maintain supportive ministries for its graduates. The following report, prepared at ACTEA's request, explains why such a ministry is needed and suggests how it could be implemented or enhanced.

This report may be read in light of the statement in *the ACTEA Standards* "The institution is encouraged to provide placement counselling, organised contacts, and continuing education opportunities for its graduates" (4i); as well as the affirmation in the *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education*:

Our programmes of theological education need urgently to re-focus their patterns of training towards encouraging and facilitating self-directed learning, . . . equipping the student for a lifetime of ongoing learning and development and growth. To this end we must also . . . experiment in ways of maintaining ongoing supportive links and services with [our students] after graduation (*Article 11*).

Theological education is not primarily about courses, staffing, facilities and finances, important as these may be. Theological education is

about training men and women to follow Christ, fulfilling His command to make disciples of all nations, and equipping others in turn for the work of ministry.

Our desire for students to grow in their relationships—with God, themselves and others; to be involved in the continuing mission of God in the world; and to perpetuate that mission by equipping others, does not end with graduation. In many respects the initial three or four years of training are but an opportunity to establish relationships and initiate patterns which will continue to instruct and guide ministry for the rest of life. They are a foundation for ongoing development, much of which takes place after rather than before graduation, even when appropriate field education and internship programmes are in place.

Given that each graduate represents a three or four year investment of scarce resources, and that the departure of anyone from ministry usually has significant consequences for a number of believers in addition to the impact on the individual concerned, ministry to graduates should be a high priority for all teaching staff in our theological colleges, noting the example of Jesus in following up Peter after his failure, and Paul's pattern of correspondence, visitation, instruction and prayer.

In some self-evaluation reports of ACTEA-accredited theological colleges one is distressed to read comments to the effect that "we have too many graduates to know where they are or what they're doing." Surely the ministries of our graduates are our very reason for being, our "letter of recommendation", the measure of the effectiveness of our programmes, and a vital component of our ongoing prayer life. In an important respect the future of any college rests with its graduates. To neglect our graduated students or dismiss them from our attention because they are no longer on campus is to fail in our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Teaching is much more than just what happens in class; it is modelling by our lives over many years.

Consequently, we need to develop our work with graduates not simply for our college's survival, but more importantly, in active recognition of the fact that making disciples is our core task and a

lifelong process. As evidenced in ministries of Jesus and Paul, this is rarely easy or convenient. It requires ongoing commitment, but always begins where we are. Here are several ways of getting started in such a ministry, perhaps beginning with the current year's graduates.

## **GETTING STARTED**

### **1. Correspondence**

By its nature Christian ministry is difficult, spiritually taxing, diverse, uncertain and, sadly enough, often competitive. In most situations our graduates will be scattered over a considerable area. A few may be isolated, with minimal support from others, or even viewed as something of a threat by denominational leaders who haven't had the same educational opportunities.

A letter of encouragement, personalised with a handwritten note related to their ministry situation, has a tremendous capacity to strengthen and re-focus. This is minimal maintenance.

### **2. Visitation**

In order to inform our prayer life and correspondence, visits to graduates in their ministry situations are invaluable. Quite apart from the encouragement such visits bring to graduates and their families, these visits also help us to keep in touch with the real needs and opportunities in the communities for which we are preparing our students. One can also meet formally or informally with church leaders and with members with whom the graduate is ministering, enabling feedback and interaction of mutual benefit, especially in the ongoing process of curriculum development. In this regard it is best if all the teaching staff are involved, rather than just one or two or an Alumni Office.

### **3. Hospitality**

When graduates call at the College, an invitation to a lecturer's home for a meal or to spend the night will afford the opportunity to strengthen relationships, get feedback from the field and share in prayer. Graduates might also be encouraged to spend a week of their annual leave on campus, reading in the library, sharing in chapels and sitting in on classes, as a means of stimulation, reflection and renewal.

#### **4. Graduate Enrichment Seminars**

In light of the significance of peer support in ministry, the College should facilitate and encourage opportunities for graduates to share together. This may take the form of seminars, workshops, prayer retreats and reunions, either on campus or in regional locations. In addition to the benefits of any structured input or in-service training, such opportunities allow informal networks to be established between older and more recent graduates, and for lessons learned from one situation to be applied in another.

#### **5. Alumni Association**

While staff/college based initiatives are important, there is value in graduates establishing their own association/identity, linked with but independent of the institution. As the number of alumni grow, regional groupings of graduates can increase contact/interaction, so that peer pastoral support is strengthened between them as well as by links with the College—for example by staff visits to the group once or twice a year.

### **PRACTICAL EXAMPLES**

Over the last ten years at the Theological College of Central Africa (TCCA) the following patterns have proven helpful, and may serve as useful prompts for others wishing to think out how best to begin implementing such a programme, or how best to enhance one already in operation.

*(i) Correspondence*

The distribution of the College newsletter three times a year provides a regular opportunity to write to graduates without adding significantly to postage costs. While some of this correspondence deals with routine matters, for example regarding seminars, staff changes, and graduation services, wherever possible a personal note is added relating to the particular individual's ministry situation or family needs. These have been appreciated, and wherever appropriate the replies are shared for prayer at staff meetings and with current students in chapels and pastoral care groups, strengthening the links within the TCCA family.

*(ii) Graduate Enrichment Seminars*

Each year since 1988 a Graduate Enrichment Seminar has been held over three or four days at the College, to which all TCCA graduates are invited. Where possible graduates are billeted in faculty homes, and folk are rotated around at meal times so that there is an opportunity for people to get to know new members of staff as well as to catch up with each other.

The format of the days varies slightly from year to year, but usually involves an outside speaker following an inspirational theme for the morning sessions, with workshops on other subjects requested by the graduates in the afternoons, for example:

Theme: *Holiness under Stress*

*Speaker:* Dr Lazarus Seruyange, Principal, Nairobi International  
School of Theology

*Workshops:*

Mediation and Life After Death—Francis Manana  
Ministry Pressures on Marriage and Family Life—Lawrence  
Temfwe  
Women in Christian Ministry—Caroline Kangwa  
Youth Ministry—George Mahachi

Spiritual Formation and Social Concern—Gerry Schoberg  
Preaching and Politics—Lazarus Seruyange  
Children in the Church—Mary Mumo  
Crime: The Church's Response—Enocent Silwamba

Theme: *The Place of Love in Ministry*

*Speaker:* Rev. Joe Imakando, Executive Director, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia

*Workshops:*

Christian Marriage and Ministry—Rod Pell  
Dealing with AIDS—Elizabeth Halale  
Following Jesus in a Pluralistic Society—Lawrence Temfwe and Paul Bupe  
A Biblical Psychology of Learning—Rae Masterton  
Personality Profile and Ministry—Pat Bennett  
Parenting—Rich and Kathy Stuebing

Theme: *A Vision for Mission*

*Speakers:* Rev. Joe Simfukwe, Public Relations Officer, TCCA  
Professor Willem Saayman, Head of the Department of Missiology, University of South Africa

*Workshops:*

The Human Factor in Ministry: mobilising the laity—Bart Chabi  
Care of Widows—Paul Bupe  
Workshop for Ladies on Pressures in Ministry—Odiah Chanda and Jennifer Silwamba  
The Integration of Traditional Healers into the Public Health System—Israel Simbaya and Kathy Stuebing

Initially the Seminar was combined with a "Spiritual Emphasis Week" in the middle of second term, but this is now referred to simply as the Graduate Enrichment Seminar. Normal classes are not held (the middle term is a week longer) and current students participate as well, providing opportunities for them to hear first-hand from those who have gone before. Such sharing strengthens links between students and graduates as well as reinforcing staff input regarding the pressures of

Christian ministry. Moreover, in some years a two week intensive course for current students and graduates has been held before or after the Enrichment Seminar, enabling DipTh graduates to gain credit towards a BTh.

One of the positive trends over the last few years has been to see the number of graduates' wives attending, due partly to their sense of teamwork in ministry (in line with our Student Wives Programme), but also encouraged by an afternoon specifically for the ladies.

*(iii) Hospitality*

Apart from the Enrichment week, graduates are encouraged to call in at the College when they are passing through Ndola, the second largest city in Zambia and a major transport link. Usually they are invited to a staff member's home for a meal, to stay overnight, or whatever is needed. It is jokingly said that a TCCA graduate failing to call at the College when passing through Ndola will be forgiven once, but second offences carry a penalty of six months discipline!

*(iv) Visitation*

Whenever possible teaching staff visit graduates in their home and ministry situations during term breaks or over a long weekend each term. Priority is given to those unable to attend the Enrichment Seminar or who are particularly isolated in terms of their geographical location. This would include, for example, a couple in Botswana, three couples in Zimbabwe, and graduates within Zambia at Luampa, Mongu, Mansa, Kasama, Mbala, Katete and Chipata, all of which are 700 km or more from Ndola. With the growth of our internship programme and other faculty travel, 74% of our graduates have been visited in this way.

*(v) Alumni Association*

An important aspect of the foregoing as well as a significant

adjunct in its own right, is the TCCA Alumni Association, which was formed in June 1990. Administered by graduates based in or near Ndola, the Alumni Association provides peer support and encouragement to TCCA graduates, 84% of whom are in full-time ministry.

Obviously TCCA is helped in all this by its relative youth (fifteen years), comparatively small number of graduates (117) and its residential basis. In addition, because of the interdenominational nature of the College, staff rarely represent authority figures in a graduate's church tradition. As a result, graduates have a freedom to share tensions and concerns without these impacting on their standing within their respective denominations.

To an important degree the future of the College is in the hands of its graduates. This is evidenced in a practical way by the contributions of two of the graduates who are currently members of the TCCA Board of Governors. Their presence enables feedback and planning which is in touch with the four groups most concerned with the College's future, namely: staff, students, graduates and board.

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