

The History of ATFE *A Living Document*

It's beginnings . . .

In the mid 1940's, a small group of seminary educators began meeting to address the many problems besetting field work programs in their seminaries and to share insights in a common search for solutions. The years 1946 through 1957 saw five such gatherings or "field work conferences". Even in those earliest years, key questions for theological educators emerged.

In addition to the many practicalities related to field work programs, lengthy exchanges occurred over the purpose of the theological school in postwar era described as one of complacency and conformity. The question became: for what kind of ministry and church should the students be directed, prophetic or traditional...¹

Robert Treese, one of the ATFE pioneers, remembers those early years.

I remember that in 1956, when I joined the faculty of Boston University School of Theology as associate Director of "Field Work", Sam Hedrick and I had the task of trying to develop an educational model out of the given situation of students employed in churches to do works of ministry, either as student pastors or as assistants to pastors. Very few persons, least of all the students, looked upon the theology students working in "the field" as "learners of ministry". It took ten years, through many trials and errors and many conferences with pastors and students, before a concept of "Field Education" could evolve and theological education could be looked upon as a joint venture between parish and seminary.

One of the formative experiences for me occurred when I attended a meeting of Field Work Directors at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1957 or 1958 (my notes are gone). It may now be considered, by historians of the movement, as the 4th meeting of what was to become ATFE. Present were John Casteel of Union, John Oliver Nelson of Yale, Christy Wilson of Princeton, and others whom I can't now identify. Our conversation over two days centered around the primordial question of how "to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," that is, how to take the essential fact of students employed in ministry for self-support and make it into an experience of learning, in an environment which was both the "real world" and a place self-consciously conducive to learning. How comforting to discover we were all in the same boat.

¹Egan, Maureen, "The History of ATFE: A Struggle for Identity". A seminar paper for the Nineteenth Biennial Consultation of the Association for Theological Field Education, Louisville, Kentucky, January, 1987, p.130-145.

1959-1969 - The Transition Years

Chicago, 1959 - a major turning point: "Biennial Consultations" were established by a group of directors from many parts of the United States. Also present were two directors from Canada. By this time, acceptance of field work programs in most theological schools had become fact. In the turbulent sixties, field work directors faced continued skepticism about the educational nature and value of their programs. Yet, perceptions were changing. The use of the term "field education" in place of "field work" became noticeable even before the mid-sixties as perceptions changed within and beyond the organization.

Tjaard G. Hommes, an early field educator who, after serving schools in the United States, became deeply involved in "action-reflection" education and "contextual theology" in South East Asia, captures the flavor of that period...

When I think back over the years of ATFE, I remember 25 years of history: educational, pastoral and theological - events, ideas, and persons. The story of ATFE was (and I assume still is) a barometer of what is happening in theological education in North America. A few vignettes: Around 1963, Dr. L. Burkholder goes downtown to pass the hat among friends of Harvard Divinity School to be able to pioneer **Field Education** (not Field Work); New York 1969, the "touchy-feely-happening" Annual ATFE Meeting, counterculture consciousness and "in-situ" educational experiments; San Francisco 1971, the post-Vatican II ecumenical Field Education era rung in: Fr. Francis O'Hare of St. John's Seminary, Boston feels his way around ATFE as the first Catholic participant ever.

A familiar person in ATFE circles, Don Beisswenger, who served as Field Education Director at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee, also recalls those days...

I remember my first Biennial meeting at San Francisco during the winter of 1968. I had just arrived at Vanderbilt and was asked to share our design for field education, another effort at action/reflection during those heady times. (It was reflection then, not theological reflection, a sign of those days in which the "world wrote the agenda.") Martin Luther King had just been killed that spring in Memphis, and the Vietnam War was in full throttle. Yet the hopes for justice moved us all into deep concern for the city, for global consciousness and just public action. The people there were an exciting bunch!

I remember a meeting in the living room of Tjaard Hommes. Doran McCarty, Tjaard and I were discussing field education within theological education. Tjaard had a creative and probing mind which provoked our thinking. He pushed us to see the need for theological reflection, not just reflection. The change in the name to Association for **Theological** Field Education was an important move. It moved field education, in our minds at least, from an administrative matter to being a moment in theological study wherein God and the work of

God in church and world was to be discerned and interpreted in order to move to embodiment within the individual or social existence. Tenure track faculty appointments were our goal for field educators.

The developing identity and self-consciousness of field education as a significant discipline in theological education was evidenced in the naming that took place during the consultations in the 1960's. The title, "Biennial Consultation on Field Work" was changed to "Biennial Consultation of Seminary Field Educators I 1965 and to Association of Field Education Directors in 1969. Research and publication of significant field education literature also marked the closing of this period.

George Hunter, author and long-time director of Field Education at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, remembers...

As I reflect upon some 25 years of association with the ATFE, some "Giants" come to mind. Charles F. Fielding in his "Education for Ministry" of 1966 was a watershed for the field dimension of theological education. Thomas W. Klink raised "supervision as a routine process" in 1968 to that which is basic to theological field education. Other persons who have contributed to the research and literature of ATFE would include: John Minter, James Glasse, William Close, Tjaard Hommes, Doran McCarty, Kenneth Pohly, Jack Seymour, Evelyn and James Whitehead, Donald Beisswenger, Shelley Finson, Ellis Larsen and Lynn Rhodes.

1969-1979 - A Time of Ferment

The first consultation of the new decade was held at Union Theological Seminary in 1971. It proved to be an ideal setting for the inclusion of a broader constituency including faculty other than field education personnel, students, field supervisors, an increasing number of Catholics, and several women. The tone for the seventies was set by James Bergland, the Association Chairperson, who challenged field educators to "reconstruct their traditional understandings of supervision, theological reflection, spirituality and the professional education model from the context of a liberation, praxis-oriented perspective directed to the needs of society."²

In 1973, the biennial consultation was held at Notre Dame, Indiana. The significance of that event is captured in the recollections of Ken Pohly, retiring field education director at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

I remember the first ATFE meeting that I attended. It was the Twelfth Biennial Consultation held at Notre Dame. I went as a novice in field education. Although I had been a director for three-and-one-half years, I had not attended any previous meetings of the Association or its predecessors. Therefore, I was entering a new world of people and ideas, and I was rather apprehensive about it. As if that were not enough, I had innocently accepted the invitation to lead a workshop on

²Egan, Maureen, p.138.

supervisory training! How naive must one be to assume that one so new in the job has something to teach those who have had considerable experience?

Two things stand out for me as lasting impressions of that meeting. One was the quality of openness among my new colleagues. Here were people who were caught up in a common mission, eager to engage in mutual teaching and learning, quick to enter conversation about ideas and processes, sensitive to each other because of a deep commitment to this theological discipline. Through the years, I have learned that this first impression was no fluke; ATFE is a company of genuine colleagues. The second lasting impression growing out of the Twelfth Biennial was the realization that I was becoming a part of a creative movement that was breaking new ground. That biennial was the one when we changed our name to "The Association of Theological Field Education." The struggle over that decision was intense because it represented our identity. We were coming of age as a theological discipline. That was an exciting time. And it remains so!

The spirit of collegiality was fastened not only by serious reflection upon identity issues, but also by colleagues simply having fun. The stories of lighter moments amid the more serious deliberations at ATFE gatherings abound. A recollection by Don Beisswenger, followed by another by George Hunter, gives evidence of this.

I remember the Institute for Theological Reflection at Notre Dame. The event deepened my sense of theological method as it related to our work. It also acquainted me with other people in the field. One memorable event was the closing party. Groups convened to put on skits, sing, or dance. Several of us including Carolyn Dawson, Ethel Johnson, and Ron Choqal, then Dean of a seminary, teamed up to be cheer leaders, mimicking the junior high teams all about the campus for a week of training. It was a hilarious sight with our various shapes and sizes hooting "2-4-6-8, who do we appreciate..."

The Thirteenth Biennial in Forth Worth, Texas (1975), found the Boston contingent unable to purchase tickets to the rodeo, which had been sold out. But, we were welcomed in the "Back-Door" by the rodeo professionals and performers and got a "Behind-the-Scenes" view of rodeo life, which was very special for "City Slickers" from Bean-Town.

The late seventies proved in many ways to be a turning point for AFTE. In 1977, the most representative Steering Committee to date in terms of denominational, ethnic, international, and female presence was elected. The issue of establishing standards for the accreditation of field education programs and certification of personnel was "hotly" debated at the Fifteenth Biennial held in Washington, D.C. in 1979. George Hunter remembers...

At the Fifteenth Biennial in Washington, D.C. (1979) when I served as chairperson, the proposal was presented by Ellis Larsen and Ronald Gariboldi on "criteria for accrediting programs of theological education." This proved to be a positive turning point in ATFE's relationship with ATS as institutions serving as colleagues in a common enterprise.

Another development of importance for the organization was the publication of the first two volumes in the series, Key Resources in Theological Field Education. In addition, three active members of the Association, George Hunter, Kenneth Pohly, and Doran McCarty published books on theological field education and on supervision.

The “coming of age” of ATFE was also seen in the development of two major continuing education programs in supervision and theological reflection which took place at the Boston Theological Institute and the University of Notre Dame. While not directly sponsored by ATFE, both events involved ATFE membership in planning, implementation, and participation.

1979-1989 - Searching for the Deeper Meaning

The theme of the Seventeenth Biennial at San Antonio in 1983 set the tone for the 80's. Ellis Larsen, in his Presidential Address reflected upon the theme *In Search of Paradigms: Power, Pain and Promise*. He posed the question: By which image of the future shall we operate? The Association had soared beyond the question of professional identity and turned its attention to the question of relevancy and to the challenge of theological reflection.

The Canadian connection was strengthened by the convocation of the Eighteenth Biennial in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1985, and with the election of James McCullun from the Vancouver School of Theology as Chairperson for the Steering Committee, 1985-87. At Vancouver, ATFE finally adopted guidelines concerning inclusive language. The challenge to be inclusive and to respond to issues of globalization and to the needs of a pluralistic society emerged as major concerns by the mid-eighties.

Reflecting these concerns, Lynn Rhodes addressed the membership in Louisville in 1987.

We are “bridge people”, which, as the poet Marge Piercy reminds us, is a fine place to walk over, but very difficult to live on. We are the connectors between the academies and the churches; between those who think theory and practice can be separate entities and those who demand relevance out of any and everything we do. We try to honor the wisdom of the past while preparing women and men for futures yet undreamed. We sometimes found ourselves on the boundaries of every group and institution, seminary, church and college “where the action is” in the world. As chaotic, un-focused, and diffused as that can be, I do believe it is also our strength: never having a place of stability; never quite legitimate. When someone presents a new issue, a new constituency, another perspective, we ignore that at our peril What we are trying to seek at this time in history is not uniformity, nor even a general sense of unity, but a truthful examination of our real differences as well as what we share in order not to become like each other, but to find out if and how our different experiences, visions, skills, and perspectives might connect and not dissolve – into each

other. What we hope for are connections between us that honor difference and expand our understanding and insight.³

1989-93 - More Questions than Answers

The questions and challenges that lay ahead for theological education and for field educators were forecast by the theme and experience of the Twentieth ATFE Consultation held in Toronto, Canada, in 1989, *Field Education as Parable: Transforming Images of Ministry*. Key note speaker, Maria Harris, noted author and religious educator, challenged the membership to ask “scratchy” questions, questions that get under the skin. Noting that persons who are faithful do ask questions, she stated:

The faithful question the routinization of charisms, the absolutizing of dogma. The faithful question the established wisdom of systems and structures. Indeed the faithful are not actually faithful if they do not (question).⁴

As an organization, ATFE benefited from advances in computer technology and communications. Computerization enabled more efficient approaches to financial and membership record keeping. Task groups functioning between biennial gatherings were able to work on issues of importance to the Association. Two such groups were set up at the Toronto consultation – one “to formulate a resource document which sets forth the Association’s experience of quality programs in field/contextual education” and the other “to study the structure and financial support system for the Association.” Another important decision made by the ATFE Steering Committee shortly after the Toronto Consultation was the establishment of permanent ATFE archives at the Union Theological Seminary Library in Richmond, Virginia.

Even as the Association developed greater and greater stability and continuity organizationally, the questions concerning the relevancy of the disciplines of field education and the professional self-identity of field educators that shaped the 80’s persisted. However, the scope of these questions broadened as ATFE entered the decade of the 90’s. The landscape that formed the backdrop against which field educators asked their questions was rapidly changing. The theme chosen for the 1991 biennial consultation expressed awareness of this shift – *Landscape of the*

³Rhodes, Lynn, “Opening Address” in The Report of the Proceedings of Nineteenth Biennial Consultation of the Association for Theological Field Education (Louisville, Kentucky, Hyatt Regency, January 14-17, 1987), p.4.

⁴Harris, Maria, “Field Education as Parable” in The Report of the Proceedings of Nineteenth Biennial Consultation of the Association for Theological Field Education (Toronto, Ontario, Park Plaza, January 11-14, 1989), p. 21

90's: Tensions, Visions and Hope. Addressing the participants of the 21st consultation held in Denver in January 1991, Russell Seabright offered an insightful summary of the tensions and hopes that were part of the emerging landscape:

I am not naive about the tensions. They are the tensions which ministry itself faces: pluralism, a brewing sense in the believing community of the contradictions of wealth and poverty, power, oppression, espoused belief and effective consequence. For field education, there is the tension of its place in the theological curriculum, awareness both of the fit that it has to offer and the position of relative powerlessness from which it speaks. In the landscape of the 90's, though, there are seeds of hope – resources that we have not fully mined: methods of understanding that help ministering persons face the contradictions, educational methods and theory, the alliance of colleagues in other parts of the faculty who share our practical interests. We must shape our own vision.⁵

The challenge of shaping that vision gave focus to the work of the Steering Committee elected in Denver. It was their task to prepare for the 22nd biennial consultation to be held in Austin, Texas, in 1993. The theme, *Weaving New Patterns*, was chosen with the understanding that while basic approaches needed to be brought forward, new patterns needed to be developed to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and to prepare persons for the growing complexity of the contexts for ministry. Making connections, holding together both unity and diversity, became one of the ideas examined when ATFE met in Austin. Anne Reissner addressing the assembly reflected upon the theme.

We weave. As field educators, we constantly weave the threads of the lives of students and the lives of those to whom they minister into the living tradition of the Church. We weave. We make connections. An aspect of that weaving that I find challenging is the recognition that creativity can only take place within a basic framework. The edges cannot exist without the center. Conversely, the center is conditioned by the edges. There must be a connection. The role of field education in the theological curriculum is to make sure the connections are not lost.⁶

And the future...

What will the next chapter of ATFE's history be? The theme, *Vocation: Meditating, Meaning, Manifesting*, will be explored at the Association's 23rd biennial gathering at Minneapolis in January, 1995. Those attending will wrestle with the meaning of vocation and probe how it will be made manifest in ways that are faithful to the God who calls. We believe that the theme offers a way for us in Field Education, to engage in three distinct but developmental ways of response to a vocation we can claim and affirm. Certainly, it is a vocation to ministry for which we have been individually and severally gifted. We must continue to wrestle with the meaning of this vocation, and continually explore ways of manifesting this call. By living with the questions and discovering unanticipated answers about faithfulness, those participating will contribute to this living history.

Much of the content of this historical overview is based on the research of Maureen Egan and also taken from letters written by persons named in the paper. For a more complete review of the history of ATFE, see The History of the Association for Theological Field Education in the United States, 1946-1979 by Maureen Egan available from ATFE Publications. This historical overview was prepared by Anne Reissner, D. Min.