

**Doing theology for life:
radical evangelical theological formation for integral mission in Latin America**
a paper presented by Ruth Padilla DeBorst in the Seminar
Contributions of the church from the global south:
an INFEMIT perspective
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Abstract

Thanks to the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies (CETI), Rodolfo looked behind the imposing wall and discovered hundreds of scared and violent young people in need of hope. Meanwhile, Lilibeth for the first time connected her love for journalism with her sense of mission. This paper explores the model of theological/missiological formation that opened Rodolfo's eyes and propelled Lilibeth into a recognized career of investigative journalism committed to exposing the social issues of her country, El Salvador. The birth, growth and impact of CETI are outlined: from modest beginnings with a handful of members of the Latin American Theological Fellowship connected to the Kairos Foundation in Argentina, through the formation of over a thousand leaders in El Salvador, to its current reach into Eastern Europe and beyond under the auspices of the International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation (INFEMIT). CETI is portrayed as both a natural outgrowth of the maturing self-theologizing on the part of a movement identified as "radical evangelical" and also as a form of biblical-theological, interdisciplinary lay formation that is generating fresh expressions of integral mission and discipleship in family, society, church and work.

They are immediately recognizable if you have eyes to see. The only baggage they have to claim is the heavy burden of rejection. They are being sent “back” to a place that has never been home and expected to speak a language they never inherited. Like Carlos. His were some of the most intricate and colorful tattoos I have ever seen. “Can we please speak in English?” he pleaded as we sat down to chat in a Salvadoran coffee shop. At my surprised look he responded, “I grew up on peanut butter and jelly”. He proceeded to tell me how he was sent to LA with a coyote when he was 4, how he grew up with his aunt, and went to school with his cousins. How one evening, on his way home from work, he was stopped by the police after a burglary in the neighborhood. How, when he was unable to produce documents, he was detained, and put on a plane to El Salvador, a country of which he had no memories. And how grateful he had been when someone beckoned to him upon arrival, invited him to become a *homie*, gave him a place to live, and announced he was now one of them!

While hundreds of Salvadoran’s embark daily on a life-threatening journey North, dozens are being deported like Carlos. Many end up engrossing the lines of warring gangs that hold families, businesses, neighborhoods, and entire countries hostage as they link into and are used by more established networks of organized crime, drug trafficking, and the global weapon industry.

How, in the midst of this reality, does the Salvadoran church understand its mission? For many Salvadoran Christians, church is a safe-haven, and mission is limited to bringing people in and holding them securely until they are whisked off to heaven. This paper presents *Faith and Life*, a theological-missiological formation process that has generated a contrasting view and propelled pastors, catechists, and lay people alike into fresh expressions of Christian presence, witness, and engagement with the tough issues of their context. The birth, growth and impact of the program are outlined: from modest beginnings with a handful of members of the Latin American Theological Fellowship connected to the Kairos Foundation in Argentina, through the formation of over a thousand leaders in El Salvador, to its current reach into Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia under the auspices of the International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation (INFEMIT). Finally, a response is offered to the question: What about this program explains its potential for lay theological formation for integral mission in such diverse contexts?

A brief history of CETI

The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies was originally generated in the mid-1980s in Argentina. In the aftermath of an oppressive dictatorship, dark years of official kidnappings, and secret torture, and in sight of the social and economic challenges of the country and the region, a handful of members of the Latin American Theological Fellowship (FTL)¹, and the Kairos Foundation,² psychologists, philosophers, theologians, Bible scholars, sociologists and educators, began asking together: What, in the midst of

¹ More on FTL at www.ftl-al.org

² More on Kairos Foundation at www.kairos.org.ar

such pain and change, is the mission of the Christian church? How prepared are evangelical pastors and church leaders to guide their people in appropriate response to the social, economic and political concerns of a land that is bleeding to death with civil wars, dirty wars, revolutions and repressions, contras and invasions, growing inequality and poverty? How can the church nourish the needed change and contribute to the building of democratic societies? What forms of theological education will empower all God's people as agents of God's transforming mission in God's world? As they talked, they grew in their conviction that new theological formation models were needed that affirmed the priesthood of all believers and prepared Christians from all walks of life for integral mission in their context. Together they conceived and established the Center for Interdisciplinary Theological Studies (CETI).

Under the leadership of Dean Catherine Feser Padilla, CETI organized to gain the approval of the *Asociación de Seminarios e Instituciones Teológicas* (ASIT), the body that regulates theological institutions in Latin America's Southern Cone. The Master's and Bachelor levels were carried out by extension. Students worked on their own, receiving steady input from faculty and attending occasional retreats for fellowship and intensive teaching.

As demand grew, CETI's board recognized the need for and created a more accessible study level for people without the credentials for Master's or Bachelor level studies. The program was taken up by churches and individuals from different denominations within Argentina, including a large Korean congregation in Buenos Aires. While Master's students from around Latin America continued studying by extension, certificate students gathered at different sites and studied in community. In time, and given the growth of the programs beyond Argentina, particularly through missionaries serving with Christian Reformed World Mission in El Salvador, the Kairos Foundation handed administration of the program over to this mission agency. Today, CETI certificate cohorts are running in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. CETI's certificate level program has expanded most significantly in El Salvador. Through a local ministry, Seeds of New Creation, over 1,000 pastors and lay leaders have become involved in CETI and grown in their understanding and practice of God's mission. Three stories will illustrate the fruits of CETI.

Some fruits of the program

Lilibeth is a journalist who worked in the radio of Elim Christian Mission. Along with a capable team, she ran the programming, which consisted of sermons and Pentecostal music that catered to the members of this Pentecostal mega church. Once they had walked together through the four units of CETI, however, the team gained a completely new understanding of the vocation of a Christian radio. Lilibeth was freed up to do responsible journalistic work, for which she was awarded national prizes. The radio forum she runs today includes topics like immigration, human rights, violence prevention, care of creation, and others related to the contextual challenges of El Salvador, all from a biblical perspective. "If the good news does not speak into these issues, she asks, is it really good news?"

Rodolfo told me one day: “CETI taught me to look behind the wall”. What do you mean, I asked. “Well, he replied, I am a pastor and I did all the pastors’ things. I preached, visited the sick, baptized, married and buried people. And every day I walked along this long stretch of street lined by a very tall wall. But I never looked behind that wall. Until CETI opened my eyes.” The Spirit opened Rodolfo’s eyes and he looked behind the imposing wall. He there discovered hundreds of scared and violent young people in need of hope. Behind that wall was the largest high school in the city, a place so violent the police does not even want to go there. And the wall grows every year because the young people from the rivaling, second largest high school in the city lob grenades over it into the playground. Once he saw, Rodolfo invited the partnership of groups concerned about youth like World Vision and Compassion and began a scholarship-mentorship program that supports young people so that they do not drop out of school and, instead, build healthy values, self-esteem and relationships and are empowered to envision a future rid of violence.

Pedro was pastored a middle-class church who, after studying CETI, requested a transfer into La Iberia, one of the most violent neighborhoods in El Salvador, a community so dominated by the gangs that the army posts itself at the entry its exit points but does not enter it. With the support of his church, Pedro began befriending the gang members, and opened a detergent factory and a bakery so they could be employed more meaningfully than through the gangs. The young people and their families now have the opportunity to belong to a productive and welcoming community and so to break the cycle of ruling violence.

These stories illustrate how God’s Spirit is spurring participants to engage their reality with the Good News of God’s love in Christ and how contextually appropriate theological formation at a basic level has contributed to that process.

CETI and Faith and Life today

Meanwhile, CETI’s Master’s program has been revamped to use digital media to its fullest capability. Cohorts include students from across the continent who interact regularly with faculty and each other online in addition to meeting in person for intensive courses, fellowship and spiritual renewal. A continental board oversees CETI’s development and expansion at certificate and Master’s levels within Latin America.

Aware of the value of the CETI curriculum, its transformative impact on pastors, church leaders and Christians in many professions, the International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation (INFEMIT) adopted it as one of its central programs. Through a tri-partite agreement between CETI, INFEMIT and World Vision International, the curriculum was translated into English, and regional Working Groups began adapting what has come to be called *Faith and Life*, using the original as a framework and drawing on local bibliography and case studies in order to address the issues of their particular context. *Faith and Life* is currently being used in Romania and Albania and will soon be launched in several African and Asian countries.

With very limited resources but visionary pioneers, highly committed staff, and willing volunteers, CETI-*Faith and Life* is proving to be a generative model of theological and missiological formation that transcends classic categories and frees church leadership and laity alike to engage fully in God’s mission around the world.

Digging under the surface

What about this program, we must ask, explains its potential for lay theological formation for integral mission in such diverse contexts? I will highlight two central strands that weave throughout the curriculum and, I propose, offer promise beyond its current use. I refer to:

1. The theological/missiological strand
2. The educational philosophy strand

1. *The theological/missiological strand*

It is the conviction of the creators and promoters of *Faith and Life* that Carlos' story of abandonment, discrimination, deportation, alienation and induction into violence is not part of God's good purposes for God's world and God's precious creatures. That God—the Community-of-love, Creator and Sustainer of all life—wants to grant full life to the entire creation and calls all God's people to be a part of that life-giving work. That unemployment and poverty, inequality and injustice, homelessness and abuse, fractured families and marginalized minorities, envy and greed, none of these are ingredients in God's agenda for the world. That Christian faith must affect all these dimensions of life. That Christian formation must contribute to establishing connections between God's good purposes and the every-day life of people. So rather than being designed around classic theological and conceptual categories, *Faith and Life* is organized, as its name well indicates, around life. The courses, then, are Family, Church, Society and Work. These areas are all addressed in an interdisciplinary manner, drawing on field work, Biblical study, theological input, and social analysis.

Participants are invited not simply to *learn* theology, but to actually *do* theology, to theologize, to build the bridges that will allow them to embody their faith in all the realms of their life and so witness to the Good News of God's love. And this theological work is not the solitary endeavor of an individual scholar; rather it is the work of community in mission under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Brazilian theologian, Valdir Steuernagel, beautifully portrays theology as an action performed in community for the sake of obedience:

Theology is done in the communion of the chosen ones living out the agony of the vocation experience. Theology is done in community, and experienced in community as well. In the sharing of stories and in the anguish of trying to understand and discern everything well. It's a shame that we have reduced theology to an individualistic speech, expressed in words accumulated in books and dissertations. Theology must recover its place in the gathering of the called ones.³

³ Steuernagel, Valdir. "Doing Theology Together with Mary" in *Journal of Latin American Theology: Christian Reflections from the Latino South*. 2013 Vol. 8, No. 2.

Faith and Life invites people to journey together in small groups that grapple together with the issues of their context and seek to discern ways in which their story ties into the creation and redemption story. This leads us into the second strand, which is tightly woven into the first.

2. The educational philosophy strand

Although the curriculum draws on sources from a broad range of historical and geographical Christian traditions, Faith and Life is not simply about receiving and reproducing concepts developed by other people in other times and other places. CETI is not banking education, to use Paulo Freire's term. The cohorts are led by a facilitator whose role is to awaken questions and invite dialogue and ample participation so participants can own their own learning and hold each other accountable for its outworking.

These two strands, the theological and the educational underpinnings are mutually reinforcing and constitute the backbone of the new adaptations and contextual versions being created around the world today.

Conclusion

In closing, let's go back to Carlos and my morning conversation with him in Mr Donut. He heard the gospel for the first time on one of Lilibeth's radio forums on the church and the plight of immigrants. He called the number listed at the end of the program and connected with Pedro, whose church was ministering in a neighborhood close to the gang home where he lived. He began working in the detergent factory and, through the daily whole life witness of members of Pedro's church, he came to know Christ. Eventually he met Rodolfo. Today he is one of the leaders of the gang-prevention program inside the most violent school in San Salvador. He still sports the most dramatic tattoos I've seen in my life. But he now speaks Spanish. His is no longer the life of a *homie* gang member. He now knows he has a home in God's loving embrace, made palpable by the Spirit through the community of followers of Jesus. That, I believe, is transformation!