



# INVEST in WEST

## Developing true Partnership between Churches and College

It is obvious to all concerned with the wellbeing of WEST that our biggest problem in fulfilling our ministry to the churches is funding. All independent higher education institutions involved in theological training depend for their income on a combination of student fees and the support of the constituency they serve. There are, of course, no government grants.

Recently, I returned from the annual conference of the Association of Bible College Principals. It represents broad spectrum evangelicalism, with colleges serving varying needs. All were suffering to some extent from the present economic crisis, but it was very noticeable that virtually every institution there enjoyed the active support of the church constituencies they sought to serve, whether denominations or some other clearly identifiable grouping.

### **Pietism, protectionism, parochialism**

Unfortunately, we have never been able to make the same claim for WEST. I sometimes wish (though not for long) that WEST was a denominational college. The churches might not understand quite why they were paying their dues to support their training institution – but at least the finance would come in! However, when the constituency served consists largely of independent churches no such support can be relied on. We are extremely thankful for the handful of churches, almost exclusively in Wales, which have supported us generously for many years but they constitute an extremely small fraction of those who have benefitted directly from the men and women who have trained here.

The poor relationship between theological colleges and traditional UK independency can be traced back over a hundred years or more. Whereas American independency reacted vigorously to the doctrinal downgrade of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by founding new evangelical seminaries, UK independency merely severed its links with the academy and retreated into pietism, protectionism and parochialism. Only in very recent years, as part of a radical rethink of biblical ecclesiology as a whole, is the church-seminary relationship being revisited by essentially independent churches.

### **Who should be paying?**

Let me share a little of my present frustration! Three or four times a week, I receive requests from churches seeking a pastor, assistant minister, youth worker etc. Do we have anyone leaving at the end of the year that might be suitable? (Incidentally, how wonderful it would be if one day we were producing the 200 men a year to meet such a need. That's just within the UK, of course.) But the point is this. How many of the church leaders who make contact in this way will have seriously considered who has paid for the education and training of the man they would like to receive from us as a free gift? In my experience, the answer is very few. That leads to a wider question.

Who should be paying for the education and training of our future church leaders? How many churches that seek help from WEST have a budget for training, or are investing in preparation of men for ministry at the highest level? Some of our students have made huge personal sacrifices (selling houses etc.). WEST acknowledges that it exists to serve Bible-centred churches and must be responsive to their needs. Does it not therefore seem right to expect the support of such churches in return? And the responsibility surely rests primarily with the churches rather than the generosity of individual believers – especially in hard economic times.

Whether churches have benefitted, are benefitting, or imagine they may benefit in the future, is it not reasonable to suggest they should be contributing **now**? This would certainly spread the burden. For example, it seems somewhat unfair that churches which give a man for training should also at the same time feel

primarily responsible for his financial support. (This would be yet another way of fulfilling the radical and largely-ignored plea of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:13-15.)

### **The problem with donations**

It was a cause of some surprise to me when I first arrived to discover just how small the church support base of the College was, and I realised this was an area that would need to be worked on. However, I have never wanted to launch a mere appeal for funds, despite the ongoing fragility of our financial position. One-off gifts from churches are, naturally, very gratefully received but they do not in themselves indicate an understanding of the kind of relationship or level of mutual commitment that true gospel partnership should entail. In fact, appealing for 'donations' from churches merely reinforces the traditional view that we are just another para-church organisation seeking a hand-out.

Realising our own responsibility in promoting more biblical, church-centred thinking has meant we've delayed asking for help in this area. I have not wanted to seek the support of our natural constituency until I was confident that many churches would genuinely understand where we were coming from – and would be prepared to give it. Churches are only likely to spare us one serious glance, and if there is little evidence that we know what we are doing, and that we are doing what is required, we will not hold their attention for long. By now I hope that what we are already delivering, as well as what is clearly on the way, will be enough to convince many vibrant, gospel-focussed churches to consider partnering with us in a serious way.

### **Invest in WEST**

So, we are now in a position to encourage churches to 'Invest in WEST'. I believe the concept of investment in the preparation of future church leaders is in accord with biblical principles and will stimulate true gospel partnership – not only between the School and the churches but between the churches themselves, as they share in the provision of leaders for each other. But WEST will also provide interim benefits and privileges. Below is a sample of how the mutual commitment might be shaped.

An 'investing' church will commit itself to:

1. Budget £1k-£5k per annum for WEST. (This commitment might be helpfully resourced from the offerings of an annual 'WEST Week' involving personnel from the School.)
2. Incorporate news and prayer for WEST, its people and ministries, into the regular life of the church.
3. Suggest areas for the improvement and development of the School and the fulfilment of its mission.
4. Provide constructive feedback at all times.

In return, WEST will undertake to:

1. Provide generous bursaries for students, ranging from 10-50%, in proportion to a church's investment.
2. Offer free places for church members at WEST-sponsored conferences and events – such as the annual *Summer Season* – again in proportion to investment.
3. Permit church leaders free use of the School library and sabbatical facilities at subsistence rates.
4. Visit churches with WEST staff and students for training and ministry opportunities.

The concept is simple: true gospel partnership involves the exchange of resources. In this case, the School authentically serves the churches and the churches authentically support the School. Moreover, the stakes couldn't be higher: the very future of the kind of churches we believe to be most in tune with New Testament principles depends upon leadership of the highest calibre.

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