

8-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Pilli, Toivo (2006) "Finding a Balance between Church and Academia: Baptist Theological Education in Estonia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol26/iss3/2>

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## **Finding a Balance between Church and Academia: Baptist Theological Education in Estonia**

Toivo Pilli

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### Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, Estonian Baptists were convinced that theological education should directly serve the church's mission work. After Estonia had received its political independence in 1918, Baptists began to dream of their own theological seminary, which existed – with substantial help from American and British Baptists – from 1922-1940. In the 1930s, attempts were made to raise the academic level of the seminary training. However, Baptist theological training was not self-evident or guaranteed. During the Soviet years, all formal avenues of offering theological education were prohibited. In spite of this, the leaders of Estonian Evangelical Christians-Baptists found informal ways of organising and encouraging pastoral training: semi-illegal distance courses, informal study groups, and self-instruction. Only in 1989, during the period of political and religious liberation in the Soviet Union, was the Baptist theological seminary re-established in Estonia, and a goal was set to offer a four-year theological programme. Estonian Baptists continue to make efforts to keep in balance the academic and ecclesial demands on theological education.

### **Introduction**

Both the church and academia have demands on Christian education in the wider sense and on theological education in particular. The Estonian Baptist experience, from its early years in the 1880s to the present day, is no exception. The story of the educational efforts of Estonian Baptists will be told in this paper with these two demands in mind. On the one hand, the church's expectation for motivated and well trained ministers has influenced both the methods and content of theological training in Estonia. On the other hand, Estonian Baptists have become increasingly aware of the need to meet the academic requirements established in society and to benefit from the best thinking and research offered by scholars. These two demands have sometimes been regarded as contradictory, or at least as infused with the potential for tension. However, there have been serious efforts in Estonian Baptist theological education to listen to the voice of both the church and academia. This article focuses mostly on theological and pastoral training, though other forms of Baptist educational efforts are also touched upon.

## Early Stage: Education as Preparation for Evangelism and Mission Work

The first Baptist church in Estonia was established in 1884 in the town of Haapsalu in the western part of the country. During that year, the Baptist mission spread to Tallinn, Pärnu and other locations.<sup>1</sup> By 1900, the number of Estonian Baptists had grown to 1434, and by 1915 there were 3122 Baptist church members in Estonia.<sup>2</sup> Interest in education was a part of Estonian Baptist life from the beginning, though there were no established patterns for theological studies in these early years. Self-learning and reading on theological issues, sharing theological reflections with others, raising theological questions at Baptist conferences, and organising some short-term training courses were the methods typical of this time. The focus of theological reflection was on 'primary theology', theology of the church community rather than the theology of academia.<sup>3</sup> From 1904 the Baptist publication '*Teekäija*' (The Pilgrim) began to fulfill its role as a tool for Baptist popular theological education and spiritual edification. However, education was not a goal in itself. Rather, it was seen as a means which helped preachers and pastors to better understand and apply the Bible, and equipped them for practical church ministry. The emphasis was especially on preaching, mission work and evangelism.

An important impact on motivating Estonians to value education, though primarily practical in focus, came from Germany. Adam Reinhold Schiewe, a German Baptist pastor from St Petersburg, who supervised Estonian Baptist churches at the end of the nineteenth century, had briefly studied at the Baptist seminary in Hamburg-Horn.<sup>4</sup> Another German Baptist, Julius Herrmann from Riga, who was involved in establishing the first Baptist church in Pärnu, South-West Estonia, had studied theology at Königsberg University.<sup>5</sup> Both Herrmann's and Sciewe's personal example helped create a model for Estonian preachers. It is possible that they suggested some literature in German for Estonians to read. At least Jüri Mill and Andres Tetermann, early Estonian Baptist leaders, read German books and collected

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<sup>1</sup> Toivo Pilli, 'Eesti baptistid ja nende teoloogilise mõtte kajastumine ajakirjas "Teekäija" kuni 1940' [Estonian Baptists and Their Theology as Reflected in the Publication "Teekäija" until 1940], ThM thesis (Tartu University, 1996), 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Harald Victor Dahl, 'Ülevaade Liidust' [A Survey of the Union], in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel 1884-1934* [50 Years in the Ways of the Apostles] (Keila: E.B.K. Liidu Kirjastus), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Astley has used the term 'ordinary theology' which he defines as 'the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind.' Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Ashgate, 2002), 56.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Kaups, 'Kojuhüütud ustavaid sulaseid' [Faithful Servants Who Have Been Called Home], in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Kaups, 'Kojuhüütud ustavaid sulaseid,' in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 115.

personal libraries. Mill had studied ‘foreign languages’ by self-study.<sup>6</sup> Tetermann ‘studied the Greek language’ and ‘read Spurgeon extensively’.<sup>7</sup> These early Estonian Baptist leaders, coming from a modest educational background, significantly developed their intellectual potential, due to their interest in theological issues and commitment to the pastoral task. It is only logical that religious education for children also began to be offered in several local churches. Children’s Sunday School existed already in 1884 in Kärkla, Hiiumaa Island.<sup>8</sup> In 1887, in Haapsalu a Sunday School was established by Friedrich Baedecker, who visited Estonia the same year, and by Eduard Magnus Jakobson,<sup>9</sup> a brother of Carl Robert Jakobson, who was a famous figure in the Estonian national awakening in the nineteenth century.

Education had a role in Baptist apologetics, too. ‘Book-knowledge’ enabled the young Baptist movement to become involved in theological discussions with its critics. In his debate with his Lutheran opponents about baptism, Jüri Mill referred to Augustus Rauschenbush and Johann August Neander, to *Calwer Kirchenlexikon* and to the *Glaubensbekenntnis der Baptisten* (probably the 1847 German Baptist Confession of Faith).<sup>10</sup> The views of pietistically minded Lutheran theologians and church historians, such as those of Gottfried Arnold, were also used to support the Baptist case.<sup>11</sup> If the educational process includes not only formal studies, but also informal attempts to solve problems and to think theologically – then Estonian Baptists were involved in theological education from their beginning stages.

Some training courses for Estonian Baptist preachers were organised as early as the 1890s. These events were often mission-oriented, combining learning and evangelism. Adam Reinhold Schiewe organised a six-week training course in Haapsalu, in 1891. The studies included four weeks of lectures and two weeks of prayer ‘for revivals’. In the evenings, the students preached the sermons they had prepared as a part of their assignment. New knowledge and skills were to be applied, and ‘learning outcomes’ were to be evaluated

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Kaups, ‘Kojuhüütud ustavaid sulaseid,’ in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Schmidt, ‘Eesti Baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse ajaloost’ [The History of Theological Education of Estonian Baptist Preachers], in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 174.

<sup>8</sup> T. Korjus, ‘Pühapäevakoolitöö areng baptisti kogudustes 50 a. jooksul’ [50 Years of Development of Sunday School Work in Baptist Churches], in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 155.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Eesti Baptist koguduste ajaloolik Album 25 Juubeli aasta mälestuseks’ [In Commemoration of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: A Historical Album of Estonian Baptist Churches] (Tallinn: J. Felsbergi ja A. Tetermanni trükk, 1911), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Toivo Pilli, ‘Eesti baptistid ja nende teoloogilise mõtte kajastumine ajakirjas “Teekäija” kuni 1940’, 67-68.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see a translated article, Gottfried Arnold, ‘Ristimine esimeste ristiinimeste juures’ [Baptism Among the First Christians], *Teekäija*, no. 17-20 (1908).

immediately! Schiewe had encouraged the students to pray that one hundred persons would be converted. By the end of the course, 'seventy persons had been saved and the majority of them joined the local church'.<sup>12</sup> This training event was not an exception, others followed. Two Baltic-German noblemen, Woldemar von Üxküll and Manfred von Glehn, who had both been converted to the Baptist faith, helped to organise a training course at the manor house in Laitse at the beginning of the twentieth century. The training concentrated on 'explaining the difficult passages of the Bible', on 'instructive speeches' and on 'God's times (eons)'. Üxküll continued with a small Bible school, which was probably not a very systematic educational enterprise. However, it motivated young preachers to improve their knowledge of the Bible and their pastoral skills. The missionary emphasis was so important that a couple of Estonians later continued their studies in a Missionary Training Home in London.<sup>13</sup> Short-term courses, sometimes specifically dealing with Sunday School work or with Biblical interpretation, became a part of Estonian Baptist life, and were organised, for example, in 1919, in 1921, in 1935, and in 1936.<sup>14</sup>

The German Baptist Seminary in Hamburg-Horn offered a more systematic theological education for a number of Estonians. The German Baptists had organised theological training since 1849, but '*eine permanente Predigerschule*' was established in 1880.<sup>15</sup> Between 1893 and 1922 at least ten Estonian Baptists studied in Hamburg, usually for one or two years, in some cases for a longer period. Among the students were preachers who were or who became outstanding Baptist leaders in Estonia, such as August Johannson, Karl Kaups, Johannes Lipstok and Daniel Matson.<sup>16</sup> The latter two also studied in Lodz Seminary, which in spite of its short existence from 1907-1910, was an important attempt at meeting the needs for theological education of both Russian and German speaking Baptists in Poland, the

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Schmidt, 'Eesti Baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse ajaloost', in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Schmidt, 'Eesti Baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse ajaloost', in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Einike Pilli and Daily Valk, 'Eesti EKB Liidu haridustöö evangeliseerimise ja eluaegse õppimise dünaamikas' [The Educational Work of the Union of ECB Churches of Estonia in the Dynamics of Evangelism and Life-Long Learning], in Toivo Pilli, ed., *Teekond teiseveas ajas: peatükke Eesti vabakogudste ajaloost* [A Journey in Changing Times: Some Chapters from the History of Estonian Free Churches] (Tartu: Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar ja Sõnasepp OÜ, 2005), 63.

<sup>15</sup> *Festschrift für Feier des 50 Jährigen Jubiläums des Predigerseminars der Deutschen Baptisten zu Hamburg-Horn vom 1. bis 3. Juni 1930* (n. p., n.d. [1930?]), 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> *Festschrift für Feier des 50 Jährigen Jubiläums des Predigerseminars*, 69-91.

Baltics and Tsarist Russia.<sup>17</sup> Also, Karl Leopold Marley, who later became a leader for the Estonian Evangelical Christian Free Church, studied at Hamburg Seminary.

A change in vision for Baptist theological education gradually began to take shape after the First World War. Not only did Estonia become politically independent, but the Estonian Baptist Union also became an independent entity in 1920, following official registration according to Estonian laws.<sup>18</sup> A goal was set to establish an Estonian Baptist theological seminary. Adam Podin, one of the key figures in this process, had even wider horizons in mind. In 1923 he optimistically stated at the Baptist World Alliance Congress in Stockholm that there was a plan to ‘establish some high schools, which in connection with our seminary, would lift up our whole nation’.<sup>19</sup> Not all of Podin’s dreams came true,<sup>20</sup> but the seminary, moving slowly from practical emphasis towards more academic standards, came to be an important factor in Estonian Baptist life – preparing future preachers and pastors, as well as facilitating modest steps towards theological research and functioning as a door to the wider theological world.

### **Between the Two Wars: From Preachers’ School to Theological Seminary**

Baptists were the only free church in Estonia before the Second World War that offered a systematic training for ministry on the seminary level. The first meeting of the so called ‘seminary committee’ took place in 1920,<sup>21</sup> but it took almost two years before actual classes began. Financial, organisational, and academic issues needed to be solved first. ‘Preparations took more time than was first thought.’<sup>22</sup> According to Richard Kaups, a student and later a member of the seminary committee, the seminary, officially called Estonian Baptist Preachers’ Seminary, began to offer classes on 6 February 1922 in Keila (Kegel),<sup>23</sup> not far from Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. However, it must have been a slow start. Osvald

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<sup>17</sup> Eduard Kupsch, *Geschichte der Baptisten in Polen, 1852-1932* (Lodz: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, n.d. [1932?]), 468-469.

<sup>18</sup> Toivo Pilli, ‘Eesti baptistid ja nende teoloogilise mõttekajastumine ajakirjas “Teekäija” kuni 1940’, 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Third Baptist World Congress, Stockholm, July 21-27, 1923. Records of Proceedings* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1923), 21.

<sup>20</sup> Podin’s words came partly true. In 1926, as a joint effort, Estonian free churches established a 6-year private elementary school in Tallinn. In 1937, the school expanded its programme and became a ‘Pro-Gymnasium’. Harald Victor Dahl, ‘Usklikkude progümnaasium’ [The Believers’ Pro-Gymnasium], *Teekäija*, no. 9 (1937), 142-143.

<sup>21</sup> Minutes, no. 1 (18.06.1920). Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminari Protokolliraamat 1920-[1940] (SemProt) [The Book of Minutes of the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary 1920-[1940]], Baptist Theological Seminary Archives, Tartu, Estonia.

<sup>22</sup> Osvald Tärk, ‘Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminar’ [Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary], in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 181.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Kaups, *Hea Sõnum ja Eesti Baptisti Kogudused* [Good News and Estonian Baptist Churches] (Santa Barbara, 1974), 107.

Tärk stated that on 6 February the first ‘brothers and sisters’ arrived, and the main teacher, Martin Schmidt came to Keila even some days later.<sup>24</sup> The festive opening ceremony took place on 5 March 1922.<sup>25</sup> Adam Podin, an internationally known Estonian Baptist pastor (ethnically from Latvian background), became the first director of the seminary. He worked in this capacity until 1938, when Osvald Tärk took over this task.<sup>26</sup> This theological seminary, though struggling initially to establish educational standards and having difficulties finding well trained teachers, helped strengthen the identity of Estonian Baptists in the 1920s and 1930s.

The establishment of a seminary in Estonia was part of the wider Baptist picture in Europe after the First World War. The London conference in 1920 brought together seventy-two Baptist delegates from Britain, North-America, Australia and Continental Europe. This meeting, ‘a watershed event in modern Baptist history’<sup>27</sup>, made the crucially important suggestion that Baptists should provide seminaries in Continental Europe.<sup>28</sup> James H. Rushbrooke, an internationally known British Baptist, was chosen to be the Commissioner who would coordinate the work and act as ‘a Baptist ambassador, able to approach national rulers and governments with the weight of Baptist world opinion behind him’.<sup>29</sup> New theological schools were started in Spain, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and other places, including Estonia.<sup>30</sup> Latvian Baptists also opened their seminary in 1922.<sup>31</sup>

Adam Podin said in 1923: ‘At our seminary we are anxious to teach the pure theology of Calvary, and believe our school will be a mighty turning point in the religious and political life of Esthonia. Establishing and supporting in Europe a great number of theological institutions, our noble Anglo-Saxon Brotherhood is doing a greater work of reformation than all the reformers of the sixteenth century.’<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the second part of Podin’s quotation suffers from a tendency to exaggerate a little (after all, he was both a good preacher and an excellent fundraiser!), but he was correct in pointing out the crucial role of

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<sup>24</sup>Osvald Tärk, ‘Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminar’, in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 181-182.

<sup>25</sup>Minutes, no. 9 (22.02.1922). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>26</sup>Minutes, no. 79 (24.08.1938). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>27</sup>‘London Conference of 1920’, in William H. Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists* (Lanham, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Green, *Tomorrow’s Man: A Biography of James Henry Rushbrooke* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1997), 80-82.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Green, *Tomorrow’s Man: A Biography of James Henry Rushbrooke*, 82.

<sup>30</sup>‘London Conference of 1920’, in William H. Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists*.

<sup>31</sup> See *Latveeschu Baptistu Seminara gada grahmata. Otrais gads, 1923* [Latvian Baptist Seminary Yearbook. Second Year, 1923] (Riga: Seminara apgahdiba, [1923?]).

<sup>32</sup>*Third Baptist World Congress, Stockholm, July 21-27, 1923. Records of Proceedings*, 109.

the 'Anglo-Saxon Brotherhood' in the process of establishing and supporting a Baptist seminary in Estonia.<sup>33</sup>

Before the 1920s, the model for Baptist theological education in Estonia was mostly derived from the German context. After Estonia became a politically independent country in 1918, the situation gradually changed. Anglo-american influences increased, not only through financial aid for Baptist education but also through personal contacts. James H. Rushbrooke, from Britain, and Walter O. Lewis, from the USA, became key-persons in giving advice and coordinating support for the newly founded seminary in Keila. In the 1920s and 1930s, Lewis and Rushbrooke paid several visits to Estonia, giving advice and discussing the development of the new school.

While Rushbrooke believed passionately that 'evangelisation must be a primary aim' for European Baptist work,<sup>34</sup> he also reminded Estonians of the need to pursue academic excellence. During his visit to Tallinn in November 1921, Rushbrooke emphasised that teachers must have a university level education, the seminary committee 'should not choose [to the seminary teacher's position] one or another brother who may have clear articulation but who lacks knowledge and education'.<sup>35</sup> In 1929, Rushbrooke suggested that the Seminary should be led by a committee which would be elected by the annual conference of the Baptist Union, and was larger than the Baptist Union board, to ensure the Seminary's independence in selecting teachers and in organising academic life.<sup>36</sup> As to the candidates for teaching posts, especially during the first years, there were few choices – the committee decided to invite Martin Schmidt to teach theological subjects, probably taking into account Rushbrooke's support of Schmidt. Schmidt had studied theology in Hamburg Seminary and in Königsberg University.<sup>37</sup>

Rushbrooke's advice was obviously needed, as the major, if not the only, measure for the 'quality of education' in the seminary was preaching. In 1922, the seminary committee

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<sup>33</sup> In Estonian Baptist literature there is a tendency to overemphasise the role of Podin's personal eloquence in convincing British and American Baptists to support the Seminary-project in Estonia. No doubt, Podin was a 'charismatic' person. He participated at the London Conference of 1920, and (according to Podin's information given to Osvald Tärk) after his speech which asked not for humanitarian aid but help for education, John Clifford, who chaired the meeting, had 'exclaimed through tears': 'Everything Podin has asked, he must get!' See Osvald Tärk, 'Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminar', in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 180. However, it would be incorrect to neglect the wider context that influenced the decisions made at London Conference and the role of the Conference itself, which, at least partly, determined the future of Estonian Baptist theological education.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Green, *Tomorrow's Man: A Biography of James Henry Rushbrooke*, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes, no. 5 (15.11.1921). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>36</sup> Minutes, no. 42 (19.02.1929). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Schmidt, 'Eesti Baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse ajaloost', in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 179. Later, Schmidt studied theology at Chicago University and at Riga University.

stated that '[oral] exams are remnants of old-time schools' and a decision was made to evaluate students' progress during the first semester exclusively by a 'work of writing' by Christmas-time. The second semester would end with a worship service where the students would preach. Emphasis was to be placed on the revision of study material not on grinding the information.<sup>38</sup> However, these ideas, some of them relatively progressive and reflecting a Baptist critique of knowledge-only-oriented education, were difficult to apply. In May 1923, the seminary committee suggested that the students should be graded throughout the semester, so that there would be a 'proper overview' of their progress.<sup>39</sup> The seminary was struggling to find adequate academic procedures, and at the same time to follow Baptist ecclesiological identity: emphasis on fellowship, experienced faith, and evangelism. It was not clear whether the Baptist understanding of church should shape the way of teaching, learning and doing at seminary, or if a theological school should take its patterns predominantly from the secular academic world. The lack of theoretical reflection on educational processes in the theological seminary was obvious.

As to the relationships of the Estonian Baptists and their Anglo-American partners, these were not entirely without clouds. In a meeting in 1929, Rushbrooke gave a warning to the seminary committee: 'How is it possible to support an educational institution if they do not take into consideration our instructions and do not report to us – only use our money?'<sup>40</sup> The quotation reveals a deeper issue. Though it is probably true that the sponsors wanted to exercise some control over the project they supported, it is also clear that after some years of existence the seminary's cooperation with the sponsors and the local Baptist union had become weaker. By the second half of the 1920s, the seminary's work was 'caught by a whirlwind of misunderstandings and criticism'.<sup>41</sup> However, the partnership with Rushbrooke and Lewis (respectively British and American Baptists) continued, and a potential conflict was avoided.

Estonian Baptist educational efforts were enhanced by opportunities to send some students abroad. Instead of Germany, the destinations were now mostly Britain and the United States of America. It was probably due to Rushbrooke's initiative that two promising students, Johannes Wühner (in 1925) and Arthur Proos (in 1936), were sent to Bristol Baptist

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<sup>38</sup> Minutes, no. 19 (04.12.1922), no. 20 (07.04.1923). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Minutes, no. 21 (25.05.1923). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Minutes, no. 42 (19.02.1929). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>41</sup> Einike Pilli and Daily Valk, 'Eesti EKB Liidu haridustöö evangeliseerimise ja eluaegse õppimise dünaamikas', in Toivo Pilli, ed., *Teekond teisenevas ajas*, 66.

College to continue their theological education.<sup>42</sup> Wühner, a son of a Lutheran pastor in Valga, on the Estonian-Latvian border, had to terminate his studies because of his illness. Proos, in September 1939, got a letter from Arthur Dakin, the Principal, suggesting that he not return from his summer holidays in Estonia, 'because of the war'.<sup>43</sup> Another Estonian, C. Z. Korjus (Corjus) studied at Manchester College, and had a brief ministry at Rawtonstall Baptist Church.<sup>44</sup> Edgar Kilimit, later a church leader and seminary teacher in Estonia, also studied in England, graduating from Rawdon Baptist College.<sup>45</sup> During the inter-war years, Rawdon College had a significant academic reputation.

Osvald Tärk (in 1925), as well as Evald Mänd and Ehrenfried Veski (in 1930), after their studies in the Estonian Seminary, were sent to study at Newton Theological Institute, near Boston, the USA. In 1929, Osvald Tärk got his master of theology degree from the Union Theological Seminary in New York, and returned to Estonia. He accepted a pastor's job in Tallinn 'Allika' Baptist Church, became involved in the work of the Estonian Baptist Union and taught at the Seminary.<sup>46</sup> Evald Mänd received a master's degree from Newton in 1935. At least one Estonian also studied in Stockholm. This was J. Rönberg (Römberg), who in 1932 began his ministry in Vormsi Baptist Church,<sup>47</sup> which still had its roots in the Swedish cultural background and in revivalist tendencies of the nineteenth century. Studies overseas widened the spiritual, theological and educational horizons of the students, and their input later, when back at home, enriched Estonian Baptist life. In 1934, Walter O. Lewis also pointed out that the students that he had recommended for study in American seminaries, in their turn, 'have made a real contribution to the spiritual lives of the schools where they have studied'.<sup>48</sup>

With the increasing educational level of Estonian Baptist pastors in the 1930s, some aspects of the life of the seminary and the content of its educational offerings were re-evaluated. A new generation of seminary teachers, such as O. Tärk, E. Mänd and E. Kilimit,

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<sup>42</sup> Norman Moon, *Education for Ministry, Bristol Baptist College 1679-1979* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1979), 77.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur Proos to Toivo Pilli, interview notes (20.08.2002). T. Pilli's personal archive.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Sheperd, *The Making of a Northern Baptist College* (Northern Baptist College, 2004), 179.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Schmidt, 'Eesti Baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse ajaloo', in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 179.

<sup>46</sup> Ruudi Leinus, comp. and ed., *Osvald Tärk – uskuge Jumalasse* [Osvald Tärk - Believe in God] (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Liit, 1999), 16-17, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Kaups, 'Kogudused' [Churches], and Martin Schmidt, 'Eesti Baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse ajaloo', in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 66, 178.

<sup>48</sup> Walter O. Lewis to Osvald Tärk, private letter (07.05.1934). Folder 'Isiklik' [Personal]. Heli Toom's personal archive.

emerged; they tried to apply their study experiences acquired abroad, to the Estonian context. The curriculum in the 1920s, besides theological subjects which were taught by Martin Schmidt,<sup>49</sup> had given much space to general subjects such as mathematics,<sup>50</sup> Estonian language and literature, as well as German. The Seminary Minute Book refers to James Rushbrooke who extended a wish ‘on the behalf of England’ that all students should study English.<sup>51</sup> In 1925, a suggestion was made to teach ‘natural sciences in the light of the Bible’.<sup>52</sup> This was a small echo of a big Bible-and-science-discussion which was going on in the wider European scene.

In the 1930s, after the seminary had moved from Keila to Tallinn, into a building bought with the help of American Baptists and as a result of Walter O. Lewis’s diligent efforts in fundraising,<sup>53</sup> several changes took place. The new academic year began with all new teachers, except for Adam Podin, who continued as a teacher and seminary director. Theological subjects gained more weight in the study programme. In 1932 the seminary’s name, Estonian Baptist Preachers’ Seminary, was changed into Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary, which, it was hoped, would better reflect ‘the actual situation, as not every seminary graduate is a preacher’.<sup>54</sup> By the end of the 1930s several students had to do extra studies in the summer in order to keep their academic level and pass their exams. Also, the seminary offered a scholarship to Robert Võsu to continue his studies in the philosophy department of Tartu (Dorpat) University.<sup>55</sup> Võsu’s master thesis, which he was never able to defend because of the outbreak of the Second World War, analysed the role of Halle pietism in Estonia in the eighteenth century.<sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless, the seminary repeatedly stated that its main task was to prepare ministers for local Baptist churches. In this process, God’s calling was emphasised. Both seminary and the union leaders hoped to avoid the dangers of ‘merely’ professional theological training. They probably would have agreed with a statement made in a different context and several decades later: ‘Whenever in the history of the church ministry has

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<sup>49</sup> Osvald Tärk, ‘Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminar’ [Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary], in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 182.

<sup>50</sup> Minutes, no. 11 (29.03.1922). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>51</sup> Minutes, no. 20 (07.04.1923). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>52</sup> Minutes, no. 28 (10.09.1925). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>53</sup> Osvald Tärk, ‘Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminar’, in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 184.

<sup>54</sup> Minutes, no. 54 (28.06.1932). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>55</sup> Minutes, no. 64 (19.03.1935), no. 78 (09.06.1938), no. 79 (24.08.1938). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Võsu, ‘Halle pietism Eestimaal XVIII sajandil’ [Halle Pietism in Estonia in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century], handwritten manuscript (1943). Original manuscript in the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu.

become more of a career than a calling, the mission of God has suffered and stagnated.<sup>57</sup> In 1938, the students signed a 'promise' that they would work in the Baptist Union for five years after graduation.<sup>58</sup> In his inauguration speech as the seminary director in 1938, Osvald Tärk declared that the seminary was 'not just an educational institution' teaching cultural values, nor was it 'a means of career towards a better salary or higher respect'. Its task was to develop these 'good and beneficial gifts that God has given to us'. He emphasised spiritual and moral values that the seminary should help to develop: centrality of prayer, commitment and love to serve God and their fellow-man as well as moral purity. Tärk warned against the scepticism caused by liberal theology and human-centered religion.<sup>59</sup> Both in his personal life and in the life of the seminary, Tärk tried to combine academic credibility, sincere piety and moral responsibility.

Despite awareness of the need to motivate students for spiritual growth and ministry, while strengthening academic demands, there was a group of students who were neglected. These were female students. The seminary began its work in 1922 with fourteen students, including four women. However, the seminary committee was confused regarding these women's calling and the nature of their future ministry. On 12 September 1922 a decision was made that women students should learn needlework instead of Greek, music instead of the theory of homiletics and domestic economy and medical skills instead of 'deeper exegesis'.<sup>60</sup> In 1931, no women were enrolled, because 'suitable rooms were lacking'.<sup>61</sup> Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary had become a male educational institution, which it remained until its closure in 1940.

Though Tärk criticised the attempts to use education as a means for gaining personal respect, Estonian Baptists were aware that education would help them corporately to become better accepted in a predominantly Lutheran context. Perhaps a wish to reach the status of a respected denomination in the society was one reason why Karl Kaups, the President of the Estonian Baptist union from 1933-1944,<sup>62</sup> agreed to become a candidate for Parliamentary

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<sup>57</sup>Donald E. Messer, *Calling Church and Seminary into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 28.

<sup>58</sup>Minutes, no. 80 (13.09.1938). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>59</sup>Osvald Tärk, 'Meie ülesandeid ja ohtusi' [Our Tasks and Dangers], notes of Tärk's speech at his seminary director's inauguration ceremony, 15 September 1938. Osvald Tärki materjalid [Materials of Osvald Tärk], Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia, Tallinn/Tartu. The union's archive was moved from Tallinn to Tartu in 2004.

<sup>60</sup>Minutes, no. 17 (12.09.1922). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>61</sup>Osvald Tärk, 'Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminar', in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 184.

<sup>62</sup>Riho Saard, 'Eesti kirikute juhtivvaimulikud läbi aegade' [Estonian Church Leaders Through Centuries], *Akadeemia*, no. 3 (1998), 612.

elections; he was Member of the Estonian Parliament from 1938-1940.<sup>63</sup> Also, educational structures added to this – conscious or subconscious – striving for stepping out from the shadow of being a ‘sect’, a derogatory statement that was often voiced by the majority churches. With satisfaction Osvald Tärk reported to the seminary committee that the representatives of the Ministry of Education were pleased with the work of the seminary after they had visited the school in 1938 and 1940.<sup>64</sup>

However, there was another side to this coin. Kaups warned in 1934 that with social acceptance there was a danger ‘to become similar to the world’.<sup>65</sup> Theological education was a means to prepare better church workers rather than better citizens. It was to serve the church, which was seen as clearly separate from the rest of society. It was hoped that the ‘general- and theological education’ of preachers would promote ‘deeper and clearer proclamation of the word for the growth [of believers] and for awakening of the sinners’ as well as to protect churches from ‘confusing teachings’.<sup>66</sup> In this sense, Estonian Baptists were in accordance with the wider European Baptist vision for education, expressed in 1923 by W. E. Blomfield, who said that the need in Europe was for ‘Bible schools adapted to furnish a large number of Evangelists and also some fuller training for pastors and teachers’. Blomfield added that it was essential to the healthy development of the Baptist movement that the preachers in each country should concentrate on ‘the centralities of our faith’ to avoid the peril of religious revivals when ‘the enthusiasm of the ill-educated may beget fanaticism and schism’.<sup>67</sup>

The Baptist seminary in Estonia, until it was closed by communist political powers in 1940, slowly developed towards better defined academic standards, but always emphasised its mission to provide church leaders and evangelists. Already before the Second World War a new generation of Baptist leaders had received their training in the seminary. Later, many of the seminary graduates provided leadership in the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists of Estonia during the Soviet years. Osvald Tärk and Robert Võsu became leading Baptist theologians not only in Estonia, but throughout the Soviet Union. However, the

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<sup>63</sup> Toivo Pilli, ‘Karl Kaups – ühe baptisti jutlustaja elukäigust’ [Karl Kaups – About the Life-span of a Baptist Preacher], unpublished paper. A copy in T. Pilli’s personal archive.

<sup>64</sup> Minutes, no. 81 (09.12.1938), no. 87 (19.03.1940). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>65</sup> Karl Kaups, ‘Ennustav tulevikuvaade’ [A Prophetic Look into the Future], *Teekäija*, no. 9 (1934), 154-155.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Schmidt, ‘Eesti Baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse ajaloo’, in Richard Kaups, ed., *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, 180.

<sup>67</sup> *Third Baptist World Congress, Stockholm, July 21-27, 1923. Records of Proceedings*, 104-105.

Estonian Baptist vision that the task of the church was mainly a verbal (male dominated) proclamation of the Gospel, put limits on the seminary-project in the pre-war period.

### **The Soviet Period: Education As A Means to Maintain Baptist Identity**

The beginning of the Soviet occupation in the 1940s brought a total change for Estonian society as a whole. The new political authorities put restrictions on every aspect of religious work. The department of theology at the University of Tartu was closed down, as well as the Russian Orthodox seminary and other theological schools, 'thus ending the formal preparation of the clergy in various churches'.<sup>68</sup> Baptists were no exception; their seminary was closed. In addition to directly political reasons, the school faced financial difficulties, as support from the USA and Britain was now impossible. The seminary committee advised the students to find jobs.<sup>69</sup> Without structures for theological education, the churches not only encountered problems in finding trained ministers for local churches, but they were also given a clear message that the society did not need theologians. Christians in general, and church workers in particular had become second-class citizens. Churches, struggling to survive, made efforts to maintain theological unity and spiritual identity, and to promote theological reflection.

In this situation, the Estonian Baptists (Evangelical Christians-Baptists)<sup>70</sup> actively sought both formal and informal ways to offer theological (ministerial) training. In 1950, the Senior Presbyter<sup>71</sup> asked permission from the commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) to organise a 10-day training course for presbyters (pastors).<sup>72</sup> The

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<sup>68</sup>Michael G. Viise, 'The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church During the Soviet Period 1940-1991', PhD dissertation (University of Virginia, 1995), 89.

<sup>69</sup>Minutes, no. 89 (02.08.1940). SemProt, Baptist Theological Seminary Archives.

<sup>70</sup>In 1945 Estonian Pentecostals, Evangelical Christian Free Churches, Baptists and Revivalist Free Churches (Est. *priikogudused*) were forcefully joined into one union, the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Estonia, which was formally a part of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) in the Soviet Union. This article uses expressions such as 'Estonian Baptists' and 'Estonian Baptist churches' (parallel with 'Evangelical Christians-Baptists') to denote the Estonian ECB union believers and churches in the Soviet period. However, the author is aware of the merger. Theologically the Baptist views gradually became predominant in this new Evangelical Christian-Baptist (ECB) union, though some differences in the local churches, for example in worship style, remained.

<sup>71</sup>The regional leaders of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ECB) were now called Senior Presbyters. For further information about the formation of the ECB union in Estonia, see Toivo Pilli, 'The Forced Blessing of Unity: Formation of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Estonia', *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* [Finnish Journal of Theology], no. 6 (2003), 548-562.

<sup>72</sup>The Senior Presbyter to the Commissioner of the CARC (13.01.1950). Vanempresbüteri ja uuaasjade voliniku kirjavahetus 1945-1966 [Correspondence between the Senior Presbyter and the Commissioner of the CARC], Archives of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia. - In the Soviet years, the term 'presbyter' was preferred to denote a Baptist church leader. In this article 'presbyter' and 'pastor' are used as synonyms.

plan was to teach pastoral and preaching skills, church administration, worship service organisation, some exegesis, church history and a history of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists in the Soviet Union. Four hours were planned for studying the Soviet Constitution, that according to the prepared programme was to be taught by Nikolai Levindanto, the Evangelical Christians-Baptists All-Union Council supervisor for Estonia.<sup>73</sup> There is no evidence that permission was ever given to hold the training. But the fact that Estonian Baptists were testing the walls of the atheistic system, hoping to find ‘a small door’, is meaningful in itself. Education was valued among Estonian Baptists, and as the coming years showed, sometimes it was even idealised as a solution to almost every problem that Baptists faced during these years.

Extraordinary conditions create extraordinary measures. Estonian Baptists had to re-interpret the role and methods of education. Learning takes place not only in a classroom, but often in practical situations that require problem-solving skills, in a community of Christian friends and fellow ministers. The value of self-learning, which had been an important element in the early days of the Estonian Baptist movement, was re-discovered. Regional meetings for church leaders came to be used as learning events: lectures, seminars and discussions on different theological topics were more important than business (such as, for example, extending the dates of the presbyter’s licences or receiving instructions related to the Soviet religious laws). Baptist theological education went ‘underground’, changed its methods, but did not cease. The growing role of spiritual mentoring was a part of this process. Osvald Tärk, a Baptist pastor and theologian, and Oskar Olvik, an Evangelical Christian who had studied theology at Tartu University, became famous for their pastoral counselling and mentoring. This was also a form of learning through person-to-person relationships. Tärk especially devoted much time to young pastors,<sup>74</sup> discussing ethical and theological issues. Some church leaders (presbyters) turned their sermons into teaching events, dealing with central theological issues – a method which offered advantages during these years, but which has certain drawbacks in today’s climate of religious freedom when a sermon is generally expected to be something different from an instructive lecture.

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<sup>73</sup> Schedule for the presbyters’ courses of the ECB churches in Tallinn, 1-10 March 1950. Vanempresbüteri ja usuasjade voliniku kirjavahetus 1945-1966, Archives of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>74</sup> Tähti Lehtsaar, ‘Osvald Tärk hingehoidjana’ [Osvald Tärk as a Pastoral Counsellor], an essay in Estonian Church History, manuscript (Tartu: Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 1999), 6.

As soon as ‘Khrushchev’s thaw’ allowed in the mid-1950s, the Estonian Baptists asked for permission to open Theological Distance Courses for younger presbyters and preachers. Surprisingly, oral permission was given,<sup>75</sup> and on 14 October 1956 the courses started in Tallinn with 40 students.<sup>76</sup> This was a precedent for the entire post-war Soviet Union. The courses were organised around lecture blocks and study sessions, but a great deal of work had to be done independently by students. The amount of study material produced during these years was remarkable. Within four years, Oskar Olvik, Osvald Tärk, Robert Võsu and some other authors wrote approximately 30 theological textbooks, each about 100-150 pages of A4 format, single space, typewritten text.<sup>77</sup> Some textbooks were translated or compiled, relying heavily on theological literature in English or in German; for example, Gerhard Füllkrug’s ‘*Seelesorge*’, John S. Bonnell’s ‘*Pastoral Psychiatry*’, as well as Phillips Brooks’ lectures about preaching and F. L. Anderson’s analysis of the Gospel of John, were used as a ‘source material’ for these Estonian textbooks.<sup>78</sup>

Obviously, the academic standards of these courses were too high for presbyters, who often had secular jobs besides their church work. Was the whole enterprise an attempt to return the ‘lost paradise’ of the pre-war seminary? But there was no way back to the past. Perhaps, a more practical, problem-based rather than theory-based approach would have been more appropriate in this situation. The context demanded more attention to the immediate needs of the church. Only one person, Paul Himma, was able to complete the requirements of the four-year programme,<sup>79</sup> though others, no doubt, benefited from their studies. Ülo Meriloo, who took part in the distance courses as a student, emphasised the spiritual growth which he experienced during his studies: ‘During the four years not only our heads, but also our hearts were being educated’.<sup>80</sup> The distance courses were closed in 1960, after the

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<sup>75</sup> Evangeeliumi Kristlaste-Baptistide Üleliidulise Nõukogu Vanempresbüteri Eesti NSV-s käskkiri nr. 186 [A Decree of the Senior Presbyter in Estonia of the AUCECB, no. 186] (01.06.1956). EKB Vanempresbüteri juures asuva Presbüterite Katsekomisjoni protokolliraamat [Minute Book of the Presbyters’ Testing Committee at the Senior Presbyter of ECB], Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>76</sup> Decree of the Senior Presbyter, no. 187 (30.10.1956). Vanempresbüteri ja usuasjade voliniku kirjavahetus 1945-1966, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia; Ülo Meriloo, *Ränduri päevik* [A Diary of A Pilgrim] (Tallinn, 2001), 77-78.

<sup>77</sup> The themes covered Church History, Biblical Theology, Christian Ethics, Introduction to both New and Old Testament, History of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, History of Religions, Geography of Bible Lands, Homiletics, Pastoral Counselling, and Church Music. In addition, several exegetical volumes on both New and Old Testament books were prepared.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Võsu materjalid [Materials of Robert Võsu], Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>79</sup> Uudu Rips, comp., *Issanda aednik. Märkmeid Paul Himma elust* [A Gardener of the Lord. Notes from the Life of Paul Himma] (Tartu: Saalemi Baptisti Kogudus, 2000), 25.

<sup>80</sup> Ülo Meriloo, *Ränduri päevik*, 78.

commissioner of the CARC had given new oral orders. Distance courses for choir conductors, which had begun in 1957, had already been closed in 1959.<sup>81</sup> Some students continued to educate themselves by self-study. By the end of the 1950s, the intensifying atheistic campaign began to show its fruits. However, the stories about these theological courses became legendary, adding to Estonian Baptists' self-confidence: 'In spite of all, we did it!'

In some other places in Eastern Europe, such as in the Novi Sad seminary in Yugoslavia for example, theological education helped to create "unity and better understanding among the various language conferences".<sup>82</sup> In Estonia, where the majority of Baptist churches were Estonian-speaking, theological education efforts contributed primarily towards theological unity and stronger fellowship between church leaders and local churches.<sup>83</sup> However, there was an 'educational meeting place' for Baptist students from Estonia and from other parts of the Soviet Union – the so called Moscow Bible Courses.

The Moscow Bible Courses, based on the distance learning principle, started in 1968. Making some concessions to legally existing churches and trying to weaken the underground Reform Baptist movement, the Soviet authorities gave permission to the AUCECB to organise the courses. Osvald Tärk, then probably the only Baptist with a master of theology degree in the whole Soviet Union, was consulted by the AUCECB leadership in the process of preparation for the courses in 1967. Tärk also met with the teachers and gave them advice from his experience as a theological educator.<sup>84</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, more than twenty preachers from Estonia, including some Russian speaking ministers, studied at these courses. In 1986, the AUCECB leadership expressed its concern that many graduates, who came from different republics of the Soviet Union, later did not become involved in church ministry.<sup>85</sup> This was not the case with students from Estonia, who had usually proved their pastoral abilities before their studies. However, one of the Estonian graduates was critical of the courses, evaluating it 24 years after his graduation as too primitive and academically un-

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<sup>81</sup> Minutes no. 26 (21.05.1959). EKB Vanempresbüteri juures asuva Presbüterite Katsekomisjoni protokolliraamat, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>82</sup> John David Hopper, 'A History of Baptists in Yugoslavia: 1862-1962', PhD dissertation (Fort Worth, Texas: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977), 162-163.

<sup>83</sup> The number of Russian-speaking Baptists in Estonia grew slightly in the 1960s and 1970s, but usually these Russian-speaking churches or groups remained comparatively autonomous, even if formally belonging to the Estonian ECB Union.

<sup>84</sup> *Istorija evangel'skih hristijan-baptistov v SSSR* [A History of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in the USSR] (Moscow: VSEHB, 1989), 269.

<sup>85</sup> Minutes, no. 128 (12.01.1987). Juhatuses koosolekute protokollid koos lisadega 11.01.1988-02.03.1992 [Minutes of the Executive Board with appendixes, 11.01.1988-02.03.1992], Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

challenging.<sup>86</sup> But it was better than nothing... Besides studies, valuable personal contacts developed with students from other parts of the Soviet Union, which helped Estonians to understand Baptist life more broadly.

In the 1970s and 1980s, in some exceptional cases, permission was given to some Estonian Baptists to study abroad. In 1973, Tiit Niilo from Valkla Baptist Church studied in Finland for a year.<sup>87</sup> From 1978-1981, Ants Rebane studied at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüschnikon. Later he planned to continue his studies. In May 1982, the presbyters' council of the Estonian ECB union was reluctant to support this idea, as Rebane wanted to continue his research in the field of practical theology instead of church history, which the union would have preferred. The council stated that the research topic did not 'meet the needs of our brotherhood'.<sup>88</sup> However, the presbyters' council gave its support in 1983.<sup>89</sup> But only later, in 1988-1990, Rebane continued his studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the USA and graduated with the Doctor of Ministry degree.<sup>90</sup> There were other links to North America, too. For a short period in 1980, Jüri Puusaag studied at McMaster Divinity School in Canada. This study experience was expanded by his becoming actively involved in youth work in the Toronto Estonian Baptist Church.<sup>91</sup> Puusaag would have expected a more conservative approach in his theological studies, but observing the practical church work in Canada gave him new courage and new ideas for his pastoral work. He realised that Estonian Baptist life had become 'quite stagnated'. Back in Estonia, he motivated as many church members as possible to become involved in personal evangelism, instead of, as he put it, 'Christian propaganda activities'<sup>92</sup>, such as traditional revival weeks. Puusaag's study experience helped him better to face immediate evangelism and pastoral needs.

Yet, a more far-reaching, and academically more demanding, vision for theological education was not lacking among Estonian Baptists. The role of German Baptists for

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<sup>86</sup> Dimitri Lipping to Toivo Pilli, oral information (17.07.2004).

<sup>87</sup> Minutes, no. 25 (10.10.1973). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985 [Minutes of the Presbyters' Council, 1969-1985], Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>88</sup> Minutes, no. 87 (12.05.1982). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>89</sup> Minutes, no. 96 (11.04.1983). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>90</sup> Ants Rebane to Toivo Pilli, e-mail message (22.08.2004). Rebane's project thesis 'A Relational Life-Style Evangelism. A Program for Christian Churches' dealt with a topic which was relevant for evangelical churches in the Soviet Union.

<sup>91</sup> Minutes, no. 71 (15.09.1980). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>92</sup> Jüri Puusaag to Toivo Pilli, personal letter (16.08.2002). T. Pilli's personal archive.

Estonian theological education emerged again in the 1970s. In 1979, three Estonian pastors – Ermo Jürma, Peeter Roosimaa and Joosep Tammo – got permission from state authorities to study at Buckow Theological Seminary in the German Democratic Republic. In 1982, they successfully defended their graduation theses. Tammo and Jürma continued for one year at Halle University.<sup>93</sup> All three, acquainted with academic theological discourse, were later actively involved in re-establishing a seminary in Estonia, and used their German experience for establishing patterns for theological education back at home. That some of these patterns, related to curriculum design, teaching methods and ‘ecclesia-academia’ relationships, were later questioned, is another chapter in the story. This should not diminish the value of the German Baptist investment into theological education in the Baltics. Education served wider goals than just passing on theological knowledge. It was a means for mutual encouragement and offered a deeper sense of unity. In 1981, the presbyters’ council stated that by having three Estonians in Buckow, ‘the contacts between the brotherhoods of the two countries have become significantly deeper’.<sup>94</sup>

However, a seminary with an undergraduate programme in theology, such as in Buckow, Germany, or in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia,<sup>95</sup> was, until 1989, only a dream for Estonians. Ministerial training continued to be restricted. Study opportunities abroad or in Moscow could not satisfy the need for theological training. The Evangelical Christian-Baptist leaders in Estonia made efforts to offer some basic training which would take into account the local challenges and needs. They supported the idea of creating informal study groups in three or four different towns in Estonia. Already in 1955, Robert Võsu gathered a group of Baptist youth in Tallinn and taught them how to witness and preach. Later ‘Võsu’s seminars’ took place in Tallinn ‘Kalju’ Baptist church on a regular basis on Saturdays.<sup>96</sup> In the 1970s, Võsu, then in the capacity of the Senior Presbyter, diligently visited local churches and organised regional meetings for presbyters and preachers. These meetings often had the character of a short study course or seminar.<sup>97</sup> In the beginning of the 1980s, short-term semi-

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<sup>93</sup> Minutes, no. 87 (12.05.1982). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>94</sup> Minutes no. 78 (30.06.1981). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>95</sup> Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour: Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Glasgow: Collins Fonatana Books, 1974), 259.

<sup>96</sup> Jüri Puusaag to Toivo Pilli, personal letter (16.08.2002). T. Pilli’s personal archive.

<sup>97</sup> In September 1974 the ECB Presbyters’ Council stated that ‘interest towards studies has increased’ and in 5 places ‘brothers’ meetings’ for self-learning and training had taken place. Minutes, no. 32 (17.09.1974). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia. In June 1975 the Presbyters’ Council minutes stated that during the last two and a half months five similar

illegal training courses for choir conductors, church musicians and youth leaders were organised. In the course of these training events, the union leaders were able to find persons who had potential to become pastors or to serve in the music ministry.

Võsu's example in organising informal study groups was later followed by others. At the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s, the younger generation began to gather in friendship-groups, which could also be called fellowship-circles. These 'circles' gathered in Pärnu, Tartu and Tallinn.<sup>98</sup> The group members discussed theological and philosophical issues, and the relationship between Christian faith and the wider culture. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's use of the language of 'evolution' in theological thinking inspired the participants, especially as atheistic propaganda used evolution theory as an anti-religious argument. Also, Hans Küng's *Does God Exist?* helped to find arguments for Christian faith in God in a godless society. Typewritten semi-illegal and illegal literature circulated in these fellowships, and there was a certain degree of criticism towards suppressive atheistic government policies. In a society that often depicted believers as uneducated and unintelligent, these Baptist educational efforts had a character of a non-violent protest against this distorted picture.

Some other creative attempts were made to encourage theological reading and discussion. From 1981-1987, so called 'consultation days' for presbyters and active church members took place regularly (as a rule, once a month) in Tallinn. The first consultation day was held 13 October 1981.<sup>99</sup> These meetings deepened the union's identity through sharing information, having fellowship, as well as learning and praying together. Today, this type of study would probably be called 'continuing theological education'. The topics included evangelism, Christian ethics, homiletics, the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit, pastoral counselling and psychology, religious movements in Estonia, local church issues, and difficult passages of the Bible.<sup>100</sup>

From 1983-1987, the so called 'Bible courses' took place. The method was well-proven: occasional regional meetings and seminars in bigger towns, such as in Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu and Kuressaare, in support of the self-learning of younger preachers. The students were

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meetings had taken place in three locations. Minutes, no. 37 (23.06.1975). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>98</sup> In Tallinn one of these groups was called 'Club Areopagus' (Est. *Areopaagi klubi*), in Pärnu it was named 'Haraka Institute' (Est. *Haraka instituut*), according to the Haraka Street where the group met.

<sup>99</sup> Minutes, no. 79 (09.09.1981). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>100</sup> Konsultatsioonide lindistusi 1981-1987. Nimistu. [Recordings of the consultation days 1981-1987. A list of topics]. Baptist Theological Seminary Archives, Tartu, Estonia.

expected to study approximately seven hours per week. In addition, the students came together for exams. The approach to studies was theoretical rather than practical, though the latter aspect was added to the students' experience by interaction with teachers in comparatively small study groups. The plan was to use the textbooks prepared at the end of the 1950s. The basic theological knowledge of students was uneven. The organisers reported that in the field of the work of the Holy Spirit the students' knowledge was good, but in soteriology and even in 'theology of baptism' it was much weaker.<sup>101</sup> The report reflects the general interest in the charismatic movement among Estonian Baptists in the 1970s and 1980s. Besides Robert Võsu, other pastors who had been able to study abroad were also involved as teachers.<sup>102</sup> In 1983, approximately 60-70 students, including 17-18 presbyters, were involved in this type of supervised self-study.<sup>103</sup>

These 'Bible courses', at least partly, served as an attempt to standardize the educational requirements for pastors. However, in the Soviet context, flexibility was necessary in ministerial training. It was suggested that all 'young brothers' should get elementary theological training, [lay] preachers should pass ten exams and the educational work should continue only with those 'who are ready to go out as spiritual workers'.<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, students were often not persistent in their studies. Also, the lack of opportunities to multiply study materials caused problems.<sup>105</sup> Estonian Baptists were aware of the ministerial and practical needs of the churches. They also believed that academic requirements should be followed as much as possible. However, in an atheistic setting, structures were lacking which would bring these two aspects – church and academia – together in a systematic way in a process of theological studies.

In 1985, the educational efforts became more clearly reflected in the organisational structures of the union: an 'educational sector' was established.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, this was not a formal department of the union, but a strand of Estonian Baptist work supervised by Joosep

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<sup>101</sup> Minutes, no. 101 (21.11.1983), no. 102 (16.01.1984). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archives of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>102</sup> Minutes, no. 99 (12.09.1983). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>103</sup> Minutes, no. 100 (10.10.1983). Presbüterite nõukogu protokollid 1969-1985, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>104</sup> Minutes, no. 130 (09.03.1987). Juhatus koosolekute protokollid 30.10.1981-12.12.1987 [Minutes of the Executive Board, 30.10.1981-12.12.1987], Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>105</sup> Minutes, no. 114 (16.09.1985). Juhatus koosolekute protokollid 30.10.1981-12.12.1987, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>106</sup> Minutes, no. 111 (01.04.1985). Juhatus koosolekute protokollid 30.10.1981-12.12.1987, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

Tammo. Until 1987, the so called ‘consultation days’ and ‘Bible courses’ remained the two main methods of promoting theological education, and strengthening the union’s theological unity and identity. The situation changed with *perestroika* and the new religious freedom at the end of the 1980s.

### **Reopened Seminary – New Hopes And New Challenges**

Some overseas organisations offering Bible studies and evangelism training arrived in Estonia as soon as doors opened for religious work. Campus Crusade for Christ had already organised semi-legal training events for small groups in the mid-1980s. Later, Bible Education by Extension offered study materials and organised seminars for pastors and lay leaders in churches. Nevertheless, a coherent vision and planning for the future was lacking in this field. In spring 1989, a member of the presbyters’ council, Dimitri Lipping, mentioned that there were several Bible courses taking place in Estonia. Most of them were organised from abroad. Lipping critically stated that an education offered by teachers who only visit Estonia and organise short conference-type sessions can not fully meet the needs in the field of ‘preparing the spiritual cadres’. He added: ‘We need to quickly establish our own seminary.’<sup>107</sup> His words came true.

In spite of some hesitation, the Estonian Baptist theological seminary was re-established on 16 October 1989 with a modest opening ceremony that took place in the union office in Tallinn. The work began with five students, one of them female. Peeter Roosimaa was appointed as director of the seminary.<sup>108</sup> By that time, three Estonians were studying abroad with recommendations from the Estonian ECB union, one of them, Mehis Metsala, in Sweden, and two, Toivo Pilli and Riho Saard, in the Finnish Free Church Theological Seminary.<sup>109</sup> On 4 December 1989 the presbyters’ council entrusted the faculty of the newly re-opened seminary with the task of preparing a plan to move the school to Tartu.<sup>110</sup> The plan

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<sup>107</sup> Minutes no. 149 (13.03.1989). Juhatus koosolekute protokollid koos lisadega 11.01.1988-02.03.1992, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>108</sup> Minutes, no. 154 (16.10.1989). Juhatus koosolekute protokollid koos lisadega 11.01.1988-02.03.1992, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia. The first students were Eduard Kakko, Erki Tamm, Andres Jõgar, Ülo Niinemägi and Einike Tammo. Niinemägi did not continue. A little later, Allan Lilleorg and Andres Saumets joined the course. This only shows how hectic was the beginning stage of the re-opened seminary.

<sup>109</sup> With growing political freedom, new overseas study opportunities were opened for Estonian Baptists. For example, in 1992-1994, Tarmo Toom studied at Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüschnikon. He continued his studies in the USA, graduating with a PhD degree from the Catholic University of America (Washington D.C.) in 2001. Tarmo Toom to Toivo Pilli, e-mail message (14.07.2004). Toivo Pilli’s personal archive.

<sup>110</sup> Minutes, no. 156 (04.12.2004). Juhatus koosolekute protokollid koos lisadega 11.01.1988-02.03.1992, Archive of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

was implemented in 1990. It was hoped that by locating the school closer to Tartu University, the students would benefit from the University library. Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary was the first Baptist school in the former Soviet Union offering a full 4-year residential programme. There are other schools in the Former Soviet Union region which 'can date their origins before the nineties'<sup>111</sup>, but in these early years of their existence their study scheme was based on distance learning or short-term courses.

After the re-opening of Tartu University Theological Department in 1991, the seminary developed close relationships with the department: some teachers worked for both institutions. There was a lack of theologically trained teachers, and the department was open to accept the contribution of Baptist theologians. In the 1990s the seminary tried to keep its curriculum development in line with that of the department. Academia was attractive. Indeed, the Baptist theological education was academically well-grounded – several seminary graduates successfully continued their master studies at the university. Also, the Baptist churches realised that the seminary 'had won acceptance in an open society and in an academic field'.<sup>112</sup>

However, some tensions could not be avoided. The Union and local churches placed high expectations on the seminary. The Seminary was a dream that had been cherished all through the Soviet years. Gradually, the dream had become a myth: if there would only be a seminary, the churches would have enthusiastic and well trained leaders, the evangelism and mission work would flourish and many other problems would be solved effectively. Reality was more complicated. In the 1990s, all of Estonian society was in turmoil. New religious movements made their way into the post-socialist culture. Churches, including Evangelical Christians-Baptists, were struggling to adjust to these new challenges. The ECB union membership numbers became stable, but the expected significant growth did not happen.<sup>113</sup> The Estonian interest in religion, which was evident at the beginning of the 1990s, soon changed to indifference.

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<sup>111</sup>Peter Penner, 'Critical evaluation of recent developments in the Commonwealth of Independent States', *Transformation*, vol. 20, no. 1 (January 2003), 21.

<sup>112</sup>Ain Riistan, 'Theological Education in Estonia – A Survival of the Fittest Game or an Opportunity for the Future?', unpublished conference paper (Pancrac Teologicky Forum, 12 July 2002, Siroky Dul, Czech Republic), 7. A copy in T. Pilli's personal archive.

<sup>113</sup>In 1989 the Estonian ECB Union had 5891 members in 81 congregations, in 1996 the union had 6328 members in 86 congregations and in 2003 there were 5963 members in 86 congregations. *Kui kristlik on Eestimaa?* [How Christian is Estonia?], Church Growth Conference II (Estonian Evangelisation Alliance, 1997), 22-23; *Eesti EKB Liidu aruanded 1989* [Reports of the ECB Union 1989], Archives of the Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia; *Aastaraamat 2003. Eesti Evangeeliumi Kristlaste ja Baptistide Koguduste Liit* [Yearbook 2003. The Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia] (Tallinn, 2003).

The seminary was itself in the process of development. Indeed, a number of graduates went into church work, while some of them began to work as teachers of religious education in public schools, went to mission fields or became involved in politics. But churches had expected more: more graduates who would become pastors, more mature spiritual leaders, more enthusiasm and effectiveness. And more quickly! Already in 1923, Rushbrooke commented: 'High hopes are centered in the seminary [at Kegel]...'.<sup>114</sup> The same high hopes appeared approximately seven decades later. There were high expectations in the air. These high expectations, when not fully met, caused feelings of disappointment among the local churches.

In the second half of the 1990s, for perhaps the first time in Estonian Baptist history, the union leaders sharply criticised the seminary's academic ambitions. There was a growing tendency to see 'faith' and 'knowledge' as contradictory terms. The churches, interested in evangelism and growth, saw the task of the seminary predominantly as a ministerial training 'laboratory', forgetting the long-term impact which theological education has in the culture at large. On the other hand, the seminary, at least partly, failed to help the union to theologially interpret the social, political and religious changes in Estonian society. It was preoccupied with offering courses and teaching subjects, but had less energy for its prophetic task – for contextually relevant theological reflection and for offering 'tools' for the church to fulfil its mission in the society. Though a slight exaggeration, there is a grain of truth in Donald Messer's comparison: church and seminary relationships are sometimes like a 'rocky' marriage, these partners 'cannot seem to live with each other but also cannot seem to endure without each other'.<sup>115</sup> By today, both 'honeymoon' and 'first family crises' of the union and the seminary are over in Estonia. It is time to find ways that both 'partners' can serve not only each other, but rather the goals that are beyond them: the goals of God's Kingdom.

The new challenges for the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary can be summarised in three key-words: contextualisation, cooperation and credibility. Many new seminaries which have been mushrooming in the post-socialist Europe followed 'western

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<sup>114</sup> James H. Rushbrooke, *The Baptist Movement in the Continent of Europe* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1923), 123.

<sup>115</sup> Donald E. Messer, *Calling Church and Seminary into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 16.

models'.<sup>116</sup> In Estonia, though the seminary received much help from the west,<sup>117</sup> it was never a 'western 'transplant'. From the beginning, the Estonians themselves taught most of the courses and attempts were made to get at least some financial support from local churches. However, the seminary did not develop in a vacuum. Patterns of German academic theology in shaping the curriculum can not be denied. Teaching methods were inherited from Soviet-era universities: lecturing was the main way of supporting the learning and students were diligently taking notes. The content of studies was often defined by the literature which was available. It was soon realised that some visiting professors were totally unaware of the local situation, importing their cultural and theological values instead of helping the students to find their own answers which would take into account the local context. Being aware of these issues in the wider post-socialist region, Cheryl and Wesley Brown have stated: 'Many educators in Central and Eastern Europe are taking up the challenge, reflecting more intentionally and strategically about the ways to tailor theological education to their specific contexts and needs. A crucial aspect of contextualisation is the integration of theological education and the life of the churches it seeks to serve.'<sup>118</sup> This quotation reflects well the developments that have also taken place in Estonia since the end of the 1990s.

Alister E. McGrath has pointed out: 'The growing gap between academic theology and the church has led to much theology focusing on issues which appear to be an utter irrelevance to the life, worship and mission of the church.'<sup>119</sup> Though McGrath is speaking from a British Anglican context, his words resonate with the situation among Estonian Baptists. 'Theology must learn to address issues which are of real concern to ordinary Christians and to the church at large...'<sup>120</sup> At the beginning of the new millennium, the Estonian seminary, within the framework of a joint project with Örebro Theological Seminary, Sweden, sought ways to focus on 'church based theological education'. This approach includes closer cooperation with churches, listening to their concerns and positions, and putting more emphasis on spiritual formation and on the transformative task of theological education. This is an effort to 'maintain the strengths of both *paideia* and

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<sup>116</sup> Cheryl Brown and Wesley Brown, 'Progress and Challenge in Theological Education in Central and Eastern Europe', *Transformation*, vol. 20, no. 1 (January 2003), 1.

<sup>117</sup> In these early stages, several visiting professors came to teach in Tartu, and the new seminary building, erected in 1994, was an 'international project', as much financial support came from sister churches and from sister unions abroad.

<sup>118</sup> Cheryl Brown and Wesley Brown, 'Progress and Challenge in Theological Education in Central and Eastern Europe', 2.

<sup>119</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Renewal of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1994), 152.

<sup>120</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Renewal of Anglicanism*, 154.

*Wissenschaft*,<sup>121</sup> but to move towards what Robert Banks has called a ‘missional model’ of theological education. This model values field based learning experience, with ‘the emphasis on theological mission’ and on ‘partnership in ministry’ which is ‘based on interpreting the tradition and reflecting on practice with a strong spiritual and communal dimension’.<sup>122</sup> However, there is still a long way to go before a proper balance can be found.

Ecumenical cooperation in theological training is also a challenge in Estonia. In the course of history, theological education has become closely linked with denominational identity. The idea of offering theological education together with other evangelical churches is likely to be quickly rejected. However, if theological arguments for ecumenical cooperation prove to be unconvincing, it may well be that financial arguments – ‘the spirit of capitalism’ making its way into Estonians’ minds<sup>123</sup> – may force evangelical seminaries to find modes for working together with others. Questions, such as ‘How to ensure the continuity of denominational identity?’ or ‘How to deal with dogmatic differences?’ must certainly be addressed. At the same time closer relationships with other theological traditions can enrich theological discussion and add to the weight of evangelical influence in the society. In the Bulgarian Evangelical Theological Institute, in Sofia, the ‘ecumenical educational experiment’ has successfully been started: under one ‘administrative umbrella’ several denominations (Baptists, Pentecostals and others) offer theological education. Until now, this type of experiment has not been possible in Estonia, partly because the proper reflection and analysis is lacking, and partly because Estonian churches tend to see theological education as an exclusively denominational task.

Finding a balance between the demands of the church and academia – without playing one against other – is one of the present-day tasks for Estonian Baptist theological education.<sup>124</sup> This is a process of keeping and developing the credibility of theological education, credibility both for the church and for the academic world. The demands for academic credibility from the Baptist seminary in Tartu cause constant efforts to meet accreditation standards, and to focus on library and faculty development. Ecclesiastical credibility challenges the seminary to seek ways to work closely with the Evangelical

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<sup>121</sup> Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), 46.

<sup>122</sup> Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 142, 144.

<sup>123</sup> Ain Riistan, ‘Theological Education in Estonia – A Survival of the Fittest Game or an Opportunity for the Future?’, 10-11.

<sup>124</sup> Einike Pilli and Daily Valk, ‘Eesti EKB Liidu haridustöö evangeliseerimise ja eluaegse õppimise dünaamikas’, in Toivo Pilli, ed., *Teekond teiseveas ajas*, 86.

Christian and Baptist union<sup>125</sup> and the local churches, and to value not only interpretation but also transformation as a result of theological learning. Nevertheless, the balance for theological education is best found outside the immediate goals of local churches, denominational interests or academic requirements. They should not be ignored, but they must be measured against the eschatological perspective for the church. “No one of our traditions is the true church. The true church is something we have yet to become and we need each other’s assistance for it to become a reality.”<sup>126</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From the beginning, Estonian Baptists valued theological education highly, even though the realities did not always meet the ideals and formal educational structures developed slowly. Short-term training courses took place with the aim of giving tools for preaching and mission work. Some Estonians studied in the Baptist seminary in Hamburg. A new phase in Baptist theological education in Estonia began in 1922 when a seminary was established with help from American and British Baptists. The earlier German influences in Baptist theological education were gradually replaced by an increasing Anglo-American influence. The theological seminary, first located in Keila and later in Tallinn, emphasized ministerial training with a focus on preaching and Biblical knowledge. In the 1930s, however, when some Estonian Baptists returned home after their theological studies in Britain and the USA, more attention was paid to academic standards. A new generation of seminary teachers emerged, led by Osvald Tärk who became director of the seminary in 1938 after Adam Podin.

In Soviet times, when Baptist schools were not allowed to exist in the Soviet Union, the Estonian Evangelical Christian-Baptist leaders made considerable efforts to offer study opportunities for church leaders and lay preachers. Self-learning became popular again, as in the early phases of the Baptist movement in Estonia. Informal distance courses, ‘consultation days’ with seminars and lectures for presbyters, and semi-illegal study groups were organised. Theological education and ministerial training gradually became inseparable from the identity of Estonian Baptists. Theological studies helped to find and prepare future church leaders and to maintain theological unity in the union. In addition, Estonian Baptists, having a high view of education in general, were speaking the ‘same language’ as the wider society,

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<sup>125</sup> From 1989 the official name of the union was The Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches in Estonia.

<sup>126</sup> Nigel Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 49.

where education was generally valued. Through their existence, Baptist educational efforts criticised atheistic propaganda, which often tried to show believers as uneducated and unintellectual. However, the Baptist vision for theological education tended to be shaped by past memories of the pre-war seminary, which vision was now impossible to fulfil.

New opportunities and new challenges faced Estonian Baptists after 1989, when in the atmosphere of political changes, the seminary was re-opened. In a rapidly changing context the church had to re-define its role and find adequate ways of communicating its message in post-communist society. High expectations were concentrated on the seminary. However, the seminary was itself in a process of development. It had to define its relationship with the academic world, trying to find educational models and shape its curriculum. But the expectations of the church could not be neglected. Closer and more meaningful cooperation between the seminary and the local churches had to be found. Increasing the elements of field training in the curriculum, organising short-term trainings to meet the needs of churches and improving communications with the church leadership were only some steps in this direction. The goal of Baptist theological education in Estonia should not be seen only as giving training for church workers, as important as that may be. The task is more far-reaching, though not easy to accomplish: to facilitate contextually relevant theological thinking and work in partnership with the churches and the Evangelical Christian and Baptist union to fulfill the mission of Christ's church in this Baltic country.