Theological Education and Mission in Estonia: Dialogue in Theory and Practice

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Abstract
Estonian baptistic communities face a missiological problem. They lack the ability for a meaningful dialogue with the rapidly changing society. As a result, churches tend to distance themselves from the wider community and create Christian echo-chambers in the midst of a 'hostile' world, becoming alienated from their culture and society. This results in a missional disability as far as touching the lives of people and serving the society goes in a highly secularised and hyper-modernised Estonia. This article presents an attempt by the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary to face this missional challenge by creating a master's programme 'Theology and Society', using dialogical and problem-based learning methods in the educational process, to prepare future Christian leaders.

Keywords
Dialogue; theological education; mission; problem-based learning; Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary

Introduction

Estonian baptistic communities lack the ability for a meaningful dialogue with the rapidly changing society. 'Today, the importance of the congregation has been marginalised,' said one of the Estonian municipal leaders, in answer to the question of how meaningful the local church is within their community.[1] The churches tend to distance themselves from the wider community and create exclusive Christian 'bubbles' and echo-chambers in the midst of the world that they tend to

[1] Urmas Metsamaa, *Eesti EKB Koguduste Liidu väikekoguduste koostöö koguduste liidu ja kogukonnaga läbi tegevusvaldkondade prisma* (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2015), p. 44.

see as 'hostile' and dangerous.[2] This alienates them even more from their culture and society.[3] The end result is a missional disability as far as loving, serving, and touching the lives of people and society is concerned.[4] The question is how to overcome this problem and develop leaders and churches who embody a Jesus-like touchable presence[5] and understandable communication in the contemporary society of Estonia.

While struggling with this question as a theological school, the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary (hereafter Seminary) started researching and searching for what might be the way forward. How can theological education help to develop churches and church leaders who aim to embody the reality and presence of the kingdom of God?

Out of a deep dissatisfaction regarding the missional disability of the churches, grew the idea of developing a master's programme called 'Theology and Society'.[6] This step was based on understanding that 'theological education is mission and is included in the mission mandate to promote the Kingdom of God'.[7] A dialogical approach in theological education becomes dialogue lived in everyday church life, including missions, thus helping to solve the problem described. This article explores what this dialogical approach means and how it helps to overcome the missional limitations the Estonian free churches face. The process will be explained from three interconnected perspectives — educational, philosophical, and theological — which have all influenced decisions in the preparation and delivery of the master's programme. These perspectives are reflected in the educational practices of the

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2 Metsamaa, *Eesti EKB*, p. 39.

3 Laura Jaanhold, *Suhtumine religiooni Eestis – kuidas tunnevad end Eestis kristlike konfessioonide esindajad* (Tartu Ülikool, 2022).

4 Metsamaa, *Eesti EKB*, p. 37.

5 The idea of 'a touchable church' in Estonian society is more developed in the following article: Meego Remmel, 'Toward Integrity and Integration of the Church(es) Relating to the State in the Secularized Cultural Context of Estonian Society', *Religions*, 14.3 (2023), pp. 398–416 (p. 398), doi:10.3390/rel14030398.

6 See for the whole programme, 'MA in Theology and Society', Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, n.d. <https://kus.kogudused.ee/en/ma> [accessed 9 January 2024].

7 Peter Penner, 'Guidelines for the Mission of Theological Education in the Former Soviet Union', in *Theological Education as Mission*, ed. by P. Penner (Neufeld-Verlag, 2005), pp. 343–371 (pp. 364–365).

Seminary. Students' feedback demonstrates that they have benefitted from the dialogical method of learning and are convinced of being better prepared to face the problems met in their missional activities.

Three Perspectives of Dialogue

Dialogue is an important way of communicating between secular society and evangelical churches (namely, mission) and thus needs to be learned as part of theological education. The following sections argue from three perspectives as to what dialogue means and why it is a key element in theological education and enhancing churches' missional relevance. These perspectives may also initiate dialogue between the article and its readers.

Educational Perspective

Education in general and theological education in particular is formed by, and in turn forms, philosophical and psychological understandings.[8] When the general and scientific understanding of life changes, the practice of education should change as well. For example, new findings in psychology, especially Self-Determination Theory,[9] have added new challenges to how we think of and execute the educational process. One might say that the old way of educating has come to an epistemological crisis. This is described by Alasdair MacIntyre as follows: 'I have suggested that the epistemological process consists in the construction and reconstruction of more adequate narratives and forms of narrative and that epistemological crises are occasions for such reconstruction.'[10]

At the heart of this epistemological change is the understanding that the learner has to be an active participant in the educational process

[8] For example, Perry Shaw writes that it is quite difficult to compare different programmes 'because the philosophical roots differ'. See Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education* (Langham Global Library, 2014), p. 7.

[9] Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, 'Self-Determination and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development and Well-Being', *American Psychologist*, 55.1 (2000), pp. 68–78.

[10] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 138–157 (p. 142).

and construct their understanding by themselves.[11] The following concentrates on some of the issues that need to be reconsidered according to this change of focus from teacher to learner, or from proclamation to dialogue if missiological language is preferred. Several authors combine education and missions, just as this article does.[12]

Lecturing has been the most common method in education in general and theological education in particular. While recognising the many positive reasons for using this method, especially during the times when knowledge was not easily accessible, the method also poses a problem. Classical lecturing as a method implies understanding that there is someone who knows and others who do not know and therefore need to learn. Lecturing is mostly monological.

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator Paolo Freire criticises 'narrative' forms of education: 'Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education.'[13] Freire connects this way of teaching with the ideology of oppression and calls it necrophilic, saying that 'it is nourished by love of death, not life', as it 'transforms students into receiving objects'.[14] In his other book, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire describes two types of consciousness — critical and magical. He is convinced that it is only dialogue that truly communicates and helps people to move from naive to critical, reality-based consciousness.[15]

When the 'narrative' (in this context, monological and lecture-centred) form is used in theological education, this may become the thinking pattern of future church leaders, pastors, and evangelists: they

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11 Howard Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future* (Harvard Business School Press, 2006); John Biggs and Catherine Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Society for Research into Higher Education and the Open University Press, 2007).

12 See Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Eerdmans, 1999); Darren Cronshaw, 'Reenvisioning Theological Education and Missional Spirituality', *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 9.1 (April 2012), pp. 9–27.

13 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 1970), p. 75.

14 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 73.

15 Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Continuum, 2010), pp. 38–40.

readily imply that they are the ones who have the truth, and others have to learn it from them. The only task of learners is to listen and internalise. This understanding, if present, is not only practically ineffective for psychological reasons,[16] but also carries a deeply problematic view of other humans, who happen to be learners. This will be discussed in more depth below.

However, the problem starts earlier than application of actual teaching methods — in many cases the curriculum development is done only by the teaching faculty. Linda Cannell challenges several areas which need to be changed in theological education. She points out the limits of a discipline-based approach to curriculum and suggests a need for an interdisciplinary approach; she also argues for taking educational understanding seriously in theological education.[17]

In the case of the Seminary in Estonia, the only stakeholder group legally required to confirm the new curriculum is the board of elders of the owner, in this case the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia.[18] Most probably, the same is true in many other contexts. Curriculum is planned and executed by those 'who know' for those 'who need to know', thus implying a monological way of thinking. At the same time, contemporary curriculum theory offers the whole spectrum of aspects that need to be taken into consideration when creating or re-designing the curriculum: future competencies, needs of the employers and field of work, expectations and needs of learners, and the profile of the higher education institution.[19] When linking to missional practice, a crucial element of meaningful dialogue is that the needs and questions of the other person or group of people are taken into consideration by listening, asking questions, and offering

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16 As Peter Brown, Henry Roediger III, and Mark McDaniel comment, 'Learning is deeper and more durable when it is effortful […] Learning that's easy is like writing in sand, here today and gone tomorrow' (Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel, *Make it Stick* (Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 3). If connections are not built, long-term learning does not happen.

17 Linda Cannell, 'Opportunities for 21st Century Theological Education', in *Theological Education as Mission*, ed. by Peter F. Penner, pp. 153–170.

18 'Statutes of the Seminary', Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2019 <https://kus.kogudused.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/KUS_Pohikiri.pdf> [accessed 7 March 2024] (Part VI, § 43, p. 7).

19 Siret Rutiku, Aune Valk, Einike Pilli, and Kätlin Vanari, *Õppekava arendamise juhendmaterjal* (Archimedes, 2009), pp. 22–24.

possible solutions. If students were to have an experience of being listened to and acknowledged, they might have different approaches in mission too.

The third educational topic grows out of the understanding of the learning effectiveness and takes form in the ways of assessment. Often classical university-level education measures performance, not learning. Nicholas Soderstrom and Robert Bjork claim that learning, which refers to durable and flexible skills and knowledge in a long-term time frame, needs to be distinguished 'from performance, which refers to the temporary fluctuations in behavior or knowledge that can be observed and measured during or immediately after the acquisition process'.[20] While learning is measured by long-term retention or transfer and performance during the acquisition, one would agree that in the longer run, learning is far more important than performance, as it makes the results durable and flexible.

This requires students to access knowledge and skills in 'various contexts in which they are relevant, not simply in contexts that match those experienced during instruction'.[21] This correspondingly requires a different approach to assessment. Performance-centeredness is even more unsuitable, knowing that 'conditions that produce the most errors during acquisition are often the very conditions that produce the most learning'.[22] Assessing the immediate and best possible results of learning tends to cut off the best possibilities of learning. People learn by making mistakes and evaluating the process.

Peter Brown, Henry Roediger, and Mark McDaniel claim, based on research findings, that rereading the textbooks is often 'labour in vain', because it is time consuming, does not result in durable memory, and often involves a kind of unwitting self-deception, as growing familiarity with the text comes to feel like mastery of the content. The truth is that more exposure to information does not automatically lead to learning.[23] It becomes paradoxical that 'the most effective learning

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[20] Nicholas C. Soderstrom and Robert A. Bjork, 'Learning versus Performance: An Integrative Review', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10.2 (2015), pp. 176–199 (p. 176).
[21] Soderstrom and Bjork, 'Learning versus Performance', p. 176.
[22] Soderstrom and Bjork, 'Learning versus Performance', p. 176.
[23] Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel, *Make it Stick*, p. 10.

strategies are not intuitive'.[24] However, there are better ways to be involved in a learning process.

Richard Deci and Edward Ryan describe the preconditions for motivation in their theory of self-determination (SDT), an approach to human motivation and personality. This theory identifies three innate psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.[25] People with authentic motivation 'have more interest, confidence and excitement, manifesting in enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity',[26] compared to merely externally controlled people. This in turn results in more effective and long-term learning experiences.

Thus, it is important to support the autonomous nature of the learner. Christopher Niemiec, Edward Ryan, and Richard Deci[27] explain that autonomy involves people's full and deep commitment to continually reevaluating their behaviours to ensure that they are autonomous.[28] One might think that autonomy is the antithesis of relatedness, but according to SDT, the opposite is the case — there is research that indicates positive correlation between these two aspects.[29] When the need for autonomy is fulfilled, people feel competent and related at the same time.

Creating an educational environment which supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness is important for several reasons. Firstly, it makes learning much more effective — intrinsically motivated people get better results.[30] Secondly, it enables learners to acquire knowledge and skills in contextualised and long-term form. Finally, it teaches the attitude and way of thinking where the other person is valuable with all his or her thinking, experiences, and autonomy. This creates an

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24 Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel, *Make it Stick*, p. 9.

25 Ryan and Deci, 'Self-Determination and the Facilitation', p. 68.

26 Ryan and Deci, 'Self-Determination and the Facilitation', p. 69.

27 Christopher P. Niemiec, Richard M. Ryan, and Edward L. Deci, 'Self-Determination Theory and the Relation of Autonomy to Self-Regulatory Process and Personality Development', in *Handbook of Personality and Self-Regulation*, ed. by Rick E. Hoyle (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 169–191.

28 Niemiec, Ryan, and Deci, 'Self-Determination Theory', p. 172.

29 Ryan and Deci, 'Self-Determination and the Facilitation', p. 74.

30 Ryan and Deci, 'Self-Determination and the Facilitation', p. 70. These authors describe three conditions attached to intrinsic motivation: optimal challenges, effectance-promoting feedback, and freedom from demeaning evaluations.

atmosphere of respect, interest, and motivation to listen and to learn. This approach has the potential to spread from the context of theological education to the whole church life, including mission.

Let us consider one more aspect. Paolo Freire[31] sees respect for the autonomy of the learner as an ethical question. He writes, 'Education never was, is not and never can be neutral or indifferent in regard to the reproduction of the dominant ideology or the interrogation of it.'[32] In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire criticised Brazilian education, saying that it 'has not been to exchange ideas, but to dictate them; not to debate or discuss themes, but to give lectures; not to work with the student, but to work on him, imposing an order to which she has had to accommodate.'[33]

Even though Freire writes from a very different context than contemporary European baptistic theological education and church tradition, the point is still valid: education, to be ethical, has to be dialogical and respectful for both sides of the process. Interestingly, his interest in educating illiterate Brazilians parallels well with the need to address 'illiteracy' regarding Christianity in our times, at least in secular Estonia. Freire's approach, which can be applied in the Estonian context, is clearly dialogical: 'Only dialogue truly communicates.'[34]

In summary, in the discussion about the educational aspect of changing the way of doing theological education and thus changing the way of being missional, three areas of possible problems and two reasons why dialogue is important have been considered. The possible problems are connected to the changed epistemology, underlying anthropology, and the effectiveness of learning. The two reasons for dialogue are methodological and ethical. Now it is time to explore a philosophical perspective, after which we try to envision a theological perspective.

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31 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).
32 Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, p. 91.
33 Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 33.
34 Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 40.

Philosophical Perspective

From the philosophical perspective, three questions should be considered: why?, what?, and how? First, why does the world seem 'worldly' to free church Christians to begin with? Second, what does a personal encounter require? And third, how should dialogical beings relate to each other? In looking for the answers, three authors guided the Seminary team on their way to better dialogue. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer provided some helpful insights to reflect upon regarding the world in its 'worldliness'. It seemed applicable also in the context of Estonian churches relating to the contemporary secular society. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber has described the nature of personal encounters and what is required for them. It provided some guidelines for finding an answer to the question concerning possible requirements for real personal encounters between Estonian churches and secular society. In addition, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has developed a specific concept of dialogue, called dialogism, explaining how human beings as dialogical beings relate to each other. These ideas were also helpful in both the Estonian educational and missiological contexts.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer bequeathed to the contemporary world at least two significant legacies: firstly, his book on the cost of discipleship,[35] and secondly, his prison letters, full of reflections on how to live out an appropriate discipleship and Christology in a 'godless world coming of age'.[36] In both writings, Bonhoeffer underlined the way of Jesus. It is not to communicate with the world in a top-down manner but rather in a dialogue of equals:

> The attack by Christian apologetic on the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian. Pointless, because it seems to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is, in fact, no longer dependent, and thrusting him into problems that are, in fact, no longer problems to him. Ignoble, because it amounts to an attempt to exploit man's weakness for purposes that are alien to him and

[35] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Touchtone, 1995; first published in German in 1937).

[36] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (Macmillan, 1971), pp. 325–329.

> to which he has not freely assented. Unchristian, because it confuses Christ with one particular stage in man's religiousness, i.e. with a human law.[37]

Bonhoeffer's concept of the 'world coming of age' is a metaphorical image in his theological reflections during his imprisonment by the Nazi regime which ultimately sentenced him to death just a month before the fall of Hitler. At the same time, Bonhoeffer was pointing to possible future developments and referring to a perspective on the contemporary state of the world, particularly in relation to the role of the church and its engagement with a secular society.[38] Bonhoeffer stated, 'The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age.'[39]

In his reflections, the 'world coming of age' suggests a maturation or reaching a level of maturity in the world's development. Bonhoeffer argues that the time and type of hierarchical relationship between the church and the world has expired. Instead of the church speaking from a position of authority and superiority to a less enlightened world, Bonhoeffer envisions a more equal and dialogical relationship. In this context, the church is called to engage with the world as equals, recognising the autonomy and maturity of the world. The church is no longer the authoritative voice speaking down to the world but participates in a mutual conversation with the world, acknowledging its complexities and challenges.

Bonhoeffer's idea of the 'world coming of age' emphasises the need for the church to adapt its approach to a changing world, fostering a more egalitarian and inclusive dialogue that considers the world's experiences, questions, and concerns on equal terms with theological perspectives. It signifies a shift from a paternalistic view of the church

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[37] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 328.

[38] 'Even though there has been surrender on all secular problems, there still remain the so-called "ultimate questions" — death, guilt — to which only "God" can give an answer, and because of which we need God and the Church and the pastor. So we live, in some degree, on these so-called ultimate questions of humanity. But what if one day they no longer exist as such, if they too can be answered "without God"?' (Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 325.) See also, Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Brazos Press, 2004), pp. 43–48; Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Time*s (T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 45–161.

[39] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, p. 362.

towards a more cooperative and participatory relationship with the world. Since the followers of Jesus need to be in touch and dialogue with the world, it should be applicable also in the contemporary secular world.[40]

Bonhoeffer was not able to develop his treatise in its fullest sense. He does not give us an answer to the question of how could a genuine dialogue and personal encounter with the 'world coming of age' really happen? Now, Martin Buber offers some insights. Buber remains known globally for his work on dialogical philosophy. Despite his critics from different angles (like Emmanuel Levinas,[41] Hannah Arendt,[42] Martin Heidegger,[43] and Gershom Scholem[44]), Buber's 'I and Thou'[45] still stands as an outstanding classic, emphasising the importance of genuine, reciprocal dialogue in human relationships and spirituality. Hune Margulies observes, 'Buber's distinction between an I and a You is not a *dualistic* dichotomy, for the *between* of *I and Thou* is the *non-dual* realm of relationship. Buber said, "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them." In other words, God emerges from within the relationship.'[46]

While every genuine relationship has potential to lead to God, Buber's central idea is the distinction between two types of relationships: the 'I–Thou' (or 'I–You') relationship and the 'I–It'

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40 See, for example, Pierre-André Duchemin, *Bonhoeffer's Concept of the Weakness of God and Religionless Christianity in a World Come of Age*, (master's thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 2009), pp. 71–75.

41 Levinas emphasised that dialogue did not go far enough in recognising the ethical demands that the Other places upon us. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Duquesne University Press, 1969); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Nijhoff, 1974).

42 Arendt argues that focusing solely on interpersonal relationships could lead to a neglect of the broader political and social issues that require collective action. Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 31–33.

43 Heidegger found Buber's understanding of dialogue still retained elements of subject-object dualism which he sought to overcome in his own philosophy of Being. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (Harper & Row, 1971), p. 41.

44 Scholem criticised Buber's interpretation of Hasidism. Gershom Scholem, 'Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism', in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, by Gershom Scholem (Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 228–250.

45 Martin Buber, *I And Thou,* with prologue, notes, and translation by Walter Kaufmann (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

46 Hune Margulies, 'Martin Buber and Social Justice', *Religions*, 14 (24 October 2023), pp. 1342–1356 (p. 1342), doi:10.3390/rel14111342.

relationship. The 'I–Thou' relationship is characterised by a direct, immediate encounter between two beings, where each fully acknowledges and engages with the other as a unique and sacred Thou. This type of relationship involves a deeper connection, presence, and openness. Buber suggested that in every authentic 'I–Thou' encounter, there is a transcendent dimension that connects individuals to a higher reality, which he refers to as the Eternal Thou or the divine. In these moments of genuine encounter, individuals can experience a sense of the sacred and a connection to something beyond the immediate physical or material reality.

For Buber, the essence of the 'I–Thou' relationship is its potential to lead individuals to a deeper understanding of God. In the authentic encounter with another person, one can catch a glimpse of the divine. The relationship becomes a pathway to the sacred, and through these encounters, individuals may come to recognise the presence of God in the world, even in the 'godless world', the 'world coming of age'. So, Buber's theology is deeply relational and interpersonal. He emphasises that the encounter with God is not through some abstract concepts or distant observation but through direct, personal relationships. Each 'I–Thou' encounter with another human being becomes a sacred meeting point with the divine. He suggests that God is not distant or abstract but is encountered in the immediacy of personal relationships and in the present moment. The sacred is not confined to religious rituals or specific places; rather, it permeates the fabric of everyday human interactions.

Now, it seems clear that the church cannot relate to the world as 'It'. The world, even 'the world coming of age' is 'Thou', and relating to the world, even to the 'world coming of age' as 'Thou' may give to 'the godless world' a sense of divine presence, a sense of present and eternal fullness of meaning, a sense of good news, if you wish. Jesus was not presenting but representing the good news. He related his very presence to the people in dialogue: 'I who speak to you am He.'[47]

[47] John 4:26 (RSV).

The phenomenon and power of dialogue as such has been reflected by many philosophers, like Jürgen Habermas,[48] Hans-Georg Gadamer,[49] and Kenneth Burke,[50] or the previously mentioned educationalist Paolo Freire[51] and ethicist Emmanuel Levinas.[52] The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth discussion of these authors. Nevertheless, Mikhail Bakhtin deserves a closer look. This Russian scholar, working on his literary theory, ethics, and philosophy of language a century ago, developed a concept of dialogism.[53] He posits that all language is inherently dialogic, a conversation involving multiple voices.[54] Language does not represent a monolithic, static system but rather a dynamic, living entity shaped by diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. Meaning is shaped by the interaction between

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48 Jürgen Habermas developed the theory of communicative action, which highlights the role of rational discourse and dialogue in democratic societies. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Beacon Press, 1984).

49 Hans-Georg Gadamer explains the 'hermeneutics of dialogue', focusing on the interpretation of texts and understanding in the context of dialogical encounters between readers and texts. Gadamer uses the German term *Gespräch* which can be translated as either 'dialogue' or 'conversation'. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn. (Crossroad, 1989); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. and ed. by P. Christopher Smith (Yale University Press, 1980).

50 Kenneth Burke interprets the nature of language and rhetoric as 'dramatism' which 'invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action' (Kenneth Burke, *Grammar of Motives* (University of California Press, 1945), p. 22). He emphasises the dialogical aspects of communication, where individuals engage in persuasive exchanges or identification, meaning the process by which the communicator associates his/her own self with a certain group, such as a target audience. See Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (University of California Press, 1961); Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (University of California Press, 1969).

51 Paulo Freire focuses on dialogical education, where teachers and learners engage in mutual dialogue and reflection to promote critical thinking and social transformation. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

52 Emmanuel Levinas developed his ethics of the 'face-to-face' encounter, emphasising the ethical importance of the Other in dialogical relationships. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Duquesne University Press, 1987). A subject approached by the Other engages in an act that opens the possibility of dialogue. The unfolding of dialogue expands the social relationship, and that social life preserves a residuum of the initial 'ethical' encounter with the face. Intersubjective dialogue entails conversation, teaching, and at a more general level, literary or philosophical-theological discourse. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Kluwer Academic, 1991), pp. 51–57, 251–252, 295.

53 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Valitud töid,* ed. by Peeter Torop (Eesti Raamat, 1987), pp. 44–184, 212–284.

54 Mikhail Bakhtin, Michael Holquist, and Caryl Emerson, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (University of Texas Press, 1981).

different voices and perspectives, both oral and written, in a specific spatiotemporal setting. Dialogism has implications for understanding all forms of communication and human interaction. Bakhtin believed that every individual has a dialogical self, formed through internal dialogues with various social and cultural voices. The self is never static but continuously evolving; it is not an isolated entity but is intricately connected to others through dialogue, fostering mutual understanding and social interaction.

Dialogism is inherently subversive and can challenge monologic and authoritarian discourses, promoting a more democratic and open exchange of ideas. As Bakhtin's dialogism emphasises the interplay of voices, the diversity of perspectives, and the continuous evolution of meaning in our linguistic and cultural expressions, it is applicable to further reflection in other fields, be it semiotics[55] or contemporary theological education concerning the current missiological issues described in this article.

Based on Bonhoeffer, Buber, Bakhtin, and others dealing with dialogue, one may derive the following conclusions concerning the three questions mentioned in the beginning of this subsection: why?, what?, and how? The reason why the world seems 'worldly' for numerous Christians possibly lies in the reality of the world's 'coming of age' and the expectation for Christians to talk with society, not just to society. Second, a personal encounter requires existential openness to the other's otherness. And third, as dialogical beings, humans are to relate to each other in a dynamic interplay of different voices. If this account is adequate, different questions arise from the theological aspect, too. The following seeks to envision a theological perspective.

Theological Perspective

The followers of Jesus are invited to reflect theologically and missiologically on what it means to the people of God and to mission that the triune God himself has chosen to communicate in a dialogical

[55] Estonian semiotician Juri Lotman has extended Bakhtin's dialogical ideas to the field of semiotics, exploring how cultural and semiotic systems interact in a dialogical manner. See Juri Lotman, *Kultuurisemiootika* (Olion, 1990); Juri Lotman, *Semiosfäärist* (Vagabund, 1999); Juri Lotman, *Kultuur ja plahvatus* (Varrak, 2001).

manner with our world and with us in the world, even in the 'world coming of age'. Jesus is a living Logos 'among us'[56] as well as his Spirit 'coming alongside' as a divine dialogue partner, the *Parakletos*, in our world.[57] Some baptistic scholars have argued theologically that the relational God is modelling to us how we should relate to him, to each other, and to the world around us. The British scholar Paul S. Fiddes develops the ancient understanding of the *perichōrēsis* as a 'divine dance'. The Estonian church historian Toivo Pilli has pointed out the way Estonian baptistic theology and practice has created a 'conceptual space' for dialoguing with the free church tradition. And the American 'small "b" baptist' James William McClendon has argued that a church cannot have baptistic convictions if they are not lived out from inside, as a community of faith witnessing to the world.

Paul Fiddes has described God through the ancient understanding of *perichōrēsis*[58] in which the all-creative triune divine Being cannot be a Neoplatonic 'Unmoving Mover', but is a personal 'Participation' in 'an event of relationships'. Fiddes states,

> Identifying the divine persons as relations brings together a way of understanding the nature of *being* (ontology) with a way of *knowing* (epistemology). The being of God is understood as event and relationship, but only through an epistemology of participation; each only makes sense in the context of the other. We cannot observe, even in our mind's eye, being which is relationship; it can only be known through the mode of participation.[59]

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[56] John 1:14.

[57] John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1 and elsewhere.

[58] Fiddes developed the figure used by C. S. Lewis in his *Mere Christianity*. Lewis writes, 'In Christianity God is not a static thing — not even a person — but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irrelevant, a kind of dance […] The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us: or (putting it the other way round) each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance.' See Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1983), pp. 148–150.

[59] Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), p. 38. See also: Paul S. Fiddes, '"For the Dance All Things Were Made": The Great Dance in C. S. Lewis's Perelandra', in *C. S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*, ed. by Judith Wolfe and Brendan Wolfe (The Kent State University Press, 2013), pp. 33–49; Paul S. Fiddes, 'Relational Trinity: Radical Perspective', in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. by Jason S. Sexton (Zondervan, 2014), pp. 159–185.

Now, should the church of Christ, the communal embodiment of his people, act differently in the world of communication? If not dialogical, what else could be the method of communicating God in the midst of and to the 'godless world'? Pope Francis has expressed a similar conclusion: 'Evangelizing culture and inculturation shows that evangelization and culture are closely connected. You cannot preach an abstract, distilled Gospel. No, the Gospel must be inculturated and it is also an expression of culture.'[60]

A baptistic ecclesiology has been described by three main characteristics.[61] The first characteristic is a non-hierarchical ecclesiology with democratic practices. Second, is the emphasis on the personal responsibility of every Christian for his or her relationship with God and living the Christian life as a disciple of Jesus. At the same time, the community of faith has an important role in discipleship. And third, the collective interpretation of biblical teachings. Stephen R. Holmes emphasises that it is the communal interpretation of the Bible by which a baptistic understanding of life under the lordship of Jesus is formed in a discussion and shared (re)search.[62]

In the Estonian context, the questions concerning baptistic identity negotiating its way in communication with theological convictions and with wider society have been primarily addressed by Toivo Pilli. He expresses the identity of local free churches as dynamic tensions between Word and Spirit, salvation and sanctification, tradition and context, individual faith and communal responsibility, verbal proclamation and societal service, and the autonomy of churches and

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[60] Matthew Santucci, 'Pope Francis: To evangelize, "faith must be inculturated"', *Catholic News Agency,* 25 October 2023 <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/255802/pope-francis-to-evangelize-faith-must-be-inculturated> [accessed 6 February 2024].

[61] See Peder A. Eidberg, *The People Called Baptis*t (The Baptist Seminary of Norway, 1999), pp. 153–154; Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 49; Paul S. Fiddes, 'Theology and a Baptist Way of Community', in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Whitley Publications, 2000), pp. 19–38 (p. 19); Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 21–47. Cf. Curtis Freeman, 'Framing Baptist Identity', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 22.1 (2022), pp. 1–21.

[62] Stephen R. Holmes, 'Baptist Identity, Once More', *Journal of Baptist Theology in Context*, 3 (2021), pp. 4–28.

cooperation.[63] The self-understanding of free churches is not a phenomenon with clear and fixed characteristics, but rather a conceptual space where personal relationship with God as well as missional presence in society is constant movement, is in dialogical tension.

However, we might ask, What makes baptistic people and their mission in this world different from others who are trying to deal with the 'world coming of age'? McClendon, in his 'baptist vision',[64] is seeing and showing that the church in her authenticity is to be a communicative community — not monologic, but dialogic in nature:

> My claim is that for Christians the connecting link between body ethics and social ethics, between the moral self and the morals of society, is to be found in the body of Christ that is the gathered church. The place where conscience comes to light in a baptist ethic is not in solitary or Kierkegaardian introspection, nor is it in the social concerns of individual private citizens who happen to be Christian as well (not even in their widely held and in that sense "common" concerns). Rather the link is found in congregational reflection, discernment, discipline, and action, whose model is nearer to the Wesleyan class meeting or the Anabaptist Gemeinde than to the denominational social action lobby agency or the mass membership churches of today's suburban society. It is such gathering sharing (so goes my thesis)

[63] Toivo Pilli, *Usu värvid ja varjundid: Eesti vabakirikute ajaloost ja identiteedist* (Allika, 2007), pp. 81–85; Toivo Pilli, 'Baptist Identities in Eastern Europe', in *Baptist Identities: International Studies from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Ian Randall, Toivo Pilli, and Anthony Cross (Paternoster Press, 2006), pp. 92–108 (p. 92).

[64] In an interview with Ched Myers, McClendon explains his idea of baptists with a small 'b' as follows: 'This refers not just to those who label themselves as Baptist, but Christians of any sort (including Episcopalians) who see the radicals of the 16th century — the so-called Anabaptists —- as their spiritual forebears, even if not direct progenitors.' Ched Myers, 'Embodying the "Great Story": An interview with James W. McClendon', *The Witness*, 14 (2000) <https://inquiries2015.files.wordpress.com/2000/12/00-1-f-interview-with-jim-mcclendon-the-witness-p.pdf> [accessed 14 January 2024]. In his *Ethics* volume of the *Systematic Theology* series, McClendon describes the 'baptist vision' as an attempt not only to generate a theology but also to shape a shared life in Christ Jesus: 'Scripture in this vision effects a link between the church of the apostles and our own. So the vision can be expressed as a hermeneutical principle: *shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community*. In a motto, the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day.' James William McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, 2nd edn (Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 30, emphasis original.

> that issues in directives for the pilgrimage of each and issues in a shared witness to the outside world.[65]

As McClendon concludes, the very essence of (at least a baptistic) church is to be a witnessing body, a communicative community 'to the outside world'.[66] As far as the inner life of a baptistic church is concerned, it is to be a learning community, a discipling body of *mathetes* following Jesus. Stanley Hauerwas confirms, 'McClendon candidly acknowledges that he must claim his theology to be an exemplification of the practice called teaching, which is integral to the church's very being.'[67] But the McClendonian teaching is not a top-down type, but a communal type — the type following Jesus and his learning community of *mathetes*. McClendon argues that

> certain aspects of the general structure of language may provide us with a way to understand the structure of convictions generally, and the intellectual tools with which we analyze language are or correspond to those with which we discover the shape of particular human character and particular human community.[68]

In a sense a church cannot have baptistic convictions if they are not lived out from inside as a dialogically communicative community of faith.[69]

The Estonian Context

After arguing for the dialogical nature of mission from educational, philosophical, and theological perspectives, it is time to turn back to the Estonian context. Estonian society is highly secularised and pluralised as well as increasingly hyper-modernised and agnostic. In this culture,

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[65] James William McClendon, 'The Practice of Community Formation', in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre,* ed. by N. C. Murphy (Trinity Press, 1997), pp. 85–110 (pp. 87–88).

[66] McClendon, 'The Practice of Community Formation', pp. 87–88.

[67] Stanley Hauerwas, 'Reading James McClendon Takes Practice: Lessons in the Craft of Theology', in *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy,* ed. by Stanley Hauerwas (SCM Press, 2001), pp. 171–187 (p. 172).

[68] James William McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology,* 2nd edn (Trinity Press, 1990), p. 195.

[69] See for example, Mart Oksa, *Uskumise, kuulumise ja käitumise vaheline dünaamika Eesti Evangeeliumi Kristlaste ja Baptistide koguduste Liidus* (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2016), p. 82.

no church or mission can be meaningful to the wider public without having a dialogue and interaction together.[70] In recent years, most of the newly planted and growing baptistic churches in Estonia are the ones using and developing a more dialogical approach while leaving a monological, pulpit-centred type of church life, if not fully behind, then as secondary.[71] The newer and growing churches are focusing on the capability of smaller, missionally active and flexible learning communities of faith and dialogue, or small, group-based cluster structures of congregations. They continue to serve their fellow citizens while building relationships and to integrate both their members and new people into their relational and dialogical networks in physical gatherings as well as in digital communication platforms.[72]

These dynamics seem to be relevant and significant also for shaping theological and missiological perspectives for future developments, both in the existing baptistic congregations in the landscape of Estonian free churches as well as in the process of planting new baptistic churches in Estonia. Kaarel Väljamäe, a Seminary graduate and pastor at Tallinn Allika Baptist Church, concluded his research in offering insights into future church perspectives with the following words: 'In general, it can be inferred that a missional community is an effective way of establishing a congregation in Tallinn in the 21st century.'[73]

At the same time, there are only a few growing churches showing clear signs of openness and dialogical practices both within

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[70] Compare, for instance, Eerik Jõks and Kuhu Lähed, *Maarjamaa? Quo Vadis, Terra Mariana?* (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu, 2016); Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times* (Polity Press, 2005).

[71] See, for example, Mart Pöör, *Kogudus kui liikumine* (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2018); Herkis Roosimaa, *Mida on traditsioonilistel kogudustel õppida 3D koguduselt* (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2020); Jakob Remmel and Meego Remmel, 'Koroonakriisi eelse ja järgse (vaba)kogudusliku elu arengukohtadest Eestis', *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri*, 1 (2021), pp. 78–124.

[72] In contemporary social sciences, Manuel Castells has engaged more with the social, cultural, and political origins of the emerging social movements, examining their inventive methods of self-organisation and evaluating the specific impact of technology in the network society on their dynamics, exploring the factors contributing to their widespread societal backing, and investigating their potential to drive a transformation in society through influencing people's minds. See Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, 2nd edn (Polity Press, 2015).

[73] Kaarel Väljamäe, *Juhi areng koguduse loomise protsessis Viimsi ning Kalamaja kogukondade näitel* (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2016).

congregational life as well as in their relationships with and witness to the wider society in Estonia.[74] Ago Lilleorg, an army chaplain from a Pentecostal background, concludes his qualitative study concerning the growing evangelical churches in Estonia as follows: 'It may be said that for these churches, mission is manifested in active societal presence, the development of good relations and cooperation.'[75] Churches that are typically experiencing plateauing may face a totally different reality both among the members and on the leadership level. The leaders who are uncomfortable dialoguing with the other may lead their churches in similar ways, ending up feeling lonely. 'Even in an apparently vibrant congregation, the pastor can feel like a lone fighter.'[76] It is with the aim to change the overall situation for the Estonian baptistic churches that has motivated the Seminary to envision and carry out its newly opened master's programme 'Theology and Society'. This programme offers the Seminary in general an environment for creating a learning community and the opportunity for practising dialogue in the process of studying.[77] The following describes how the curriculum was constructed so that both learners and teachers were involved in the process of dialogue. And in genuine conversation, the roles of teacher and learner are interchangeable.

A Problem-based Master's Programme as Dialogism

Dialogism, as Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualised it, refers to the dynamic interplay of multiple voices, perspectives, and meanings within a discourse. It is an interactive process involving an ongoing exchange of

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[74] See more in Ago Lilleorg, Kaido Soom, and Tõnu Lehtsaar, 'Characteristics of Growing Churches in Estonia: A Qualitative Study', *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 41.5 (June 2021), pp. 1–26; Elina Kivinukk, *Traditsiooniliste koguduste kasvu positiivselt mõjutavad tegurid Eesti EKB Koguduste Liidu näitel* (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2018); Väljamäe, *Juhi areng koguduse loomise protsessis Viimsi ning Kalamaja kogukondade näitel; Roosimaa, Mida on traditsioonilistel kogudustel õppida 3D koguduselt*; Pöör, *Kogudus kui liikumine*.

[75] Lilleorg, Soom, and Lehtsaar, 'Characteristics of Growing Churches in Estonia', pp. 20, 22.

[76] Lev Bannikov, *Koguduse juhtimine ja juhtivorganite koostoimimine Eesti Evangeeliumi Kristlaste ja Baptistide Koguduste Liidu kogudustes* (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, 2021), p. 59.

[77] For more about the programme itself, see 'Master's Programme in Theology and Society', Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar, n.d. <https://kus.kogudused.ee/en/ma> [accessed 6 February 2024].

viewpoints and perspectives.[78] The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary has applied openness to conversation to the process of curriculum development, the curriculum structure, and mentoring. These could be seen as three ways of dialogising.

Before having a closer look at these three ways, we first pay attention to a teaching and learning method, problem-based learning (PLB), that gives voice to learners and their context. The Seminary has made a deliberate attempt to use PBL both in the classroom as well as in the process of curriculum development. Terry Barret and Sarah Moore have defined PBL as 'a pedagogical approach that has the capacity to create vibrant and active learning environments in higher education'.[79] PBL is one form of the flipped classroom,[80] where real life problems, defined or chosen by teachers, become the tools of learning.[81]

The classical model of PBL is called the 'seven jump' model, indicating seven phases of the methodology.[82] These seven steps are divided into three phases: together in the classroom – independent study – together in the classroom.[83] These are divided correspondingly as follows: the first phase includes reading the problem (1), defining the kernel of the problem (2), brainstorming (3), discussion and syntheses (4), and formulating learning goals (5); the second phase, or step 6, is independent study, and the last phase is academic debate (7).[84]

One of the 'jumps', brainstorming the problem, is characterised by a strategy where all (creative) mistakes are allowed, and nobody is allowed to criticise. Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel write, 'Trying to

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78 Bahtin, *Valituid töid*, pp. 44–184, 212–284.

79 Terry Barrett and Sarah Moore, *New Approaches to Problem-Based Learning* (Routledge, 2011).

80 The concept of the 'flipped classroom' has been used more extensively during the last 15 years. See Fezile Ozdamli and GulsumAsiksoy, 'Flipped Classroom Approach', *World Journal of Educational Technology*, *Current Issues*, 8.2 (2016), pp. 98–105. Radical change in the responsibility of learners is explained in Einike Pilli and Taavi Vaikjärv, 'Ümberpööratud klassiruumi meetod kui õppija vastutuse kujundaja', *KVÜÕA toimetised*, 20 (2015), pp. 165–175. All the basic qualities of the flipped classroom are also true about PBL.

81 Einike Pilli, *Probleemipõhine õpe kõrgkoolis* (Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2014) <https://sisu.ut.ee/pbl/avalehtl>.

82 Gino Camp, Angelique Kaar, Henk Molen, and Henk Schmidt, *PBL: Step by Step: A Guide for Students and Tutors* (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2014).

83 E. Pilli, *Probleemipõhine õpe kõrgkoolis*, chp. 5.

84 Barrett, *New Approaches to Problem-Based Learning*, p. 77.

solve a problem before being taught the solution leads to better learning, even when errors are made in the attempt.' They continue, 'When you're adept at extracting the underlying principles or "rules" that differentiate types of problems, you're more successful at picking the right solutions in unfamiliar situations.'[85] O'Connor adds,

> Learning is a matter of attention — of choice, and most important to the dynamic of learning is the *what* — the target; rather than the *how* — the path. The frontal lobes of the brain focus attention on what is to be learned while the subconscious mind, in part located in a deeper brain structure called the midbrain, delivers the drive to achieve it. […] PBL is a good example of a social learning environment that capitalizes on using the drive to solve a problem to create a learning target in our brains. This is the golden key to accelerated learning, for without a target the brain is not involved in deep learning.[86]

Thus, PBL follows the best patterns of our brain and enhances long-term learning.

Another helpful characteristic of PBL is that it uses problems which are interdisciplinary (life always is) and ideally are derived from the learners' context and thus motivate them.[87] A group setting teaches learners to cooperate and listen to each other;[88] individual study in between the two group discussions requires each student to do their own reading and then bring the answers, conclusions, or even some new questions into the group again. There are several combinations and variations of PBL. For example, Aalborg University in Denmark combines it with case study.[89] Their emphasis on problem solving is in assessment — students have to solve problems to prove their learning. Thus, problems are helpful at all stages — whether in the beginning or at the end of the educational journey.

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[85] Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel, *Make it Stick*, p. 4.

[86] William T. O'Connor, 'What Can Brain Science Teach Us About Cybernetics?', *The 11th IEEE International Conference on Cybernetics* (Limerick, Ireland, August 2012) (CIS, 2012), pp. 36–40 (pp. 38–39).

[87] E. Pilli, *Probleemipõhine õpe kõrgkoolis*, chp. 8.

[88] The brainstorming part is not always easy for learners because they have not been used to listening to others without arguing against what is being said. However, the format of brainstorming teaches that in this phase all ideas are equally valid.

[89] Kerdo Koppel, *Probleemipõhine õpe Taltech logistika magistriõppes* (Tallinna Tehnikaülikool, 2021), p. 14.

PBL as a method can be found on the curriculum level as well. Anette Kolmos[90] identifies three strategies for applying PBL to the curriculum:

1. Complementing the curriculum. This is the simplest strategy, where the use of PBL is limited to one subject.
2. Integrating different competencies into one bigger problem-project, which unites different subjects. To solve the problem, students have to use knowledge from all subjects taught during the current semester.
3. The strategy of restructuring includes looking differently at the whole curriculum and the role of the university itself. In this approach, students select the project problem first, and subjects are planned according to it. This strategy is not yet widely used.

Terry Barrett is convinced that PBL promotes deep learning and dialogic knowing. Barret continues, 'From this perspective dialogue is much more than a technique, it is a position or stance that sees knowledge as not something possessed by the teacher and static but something that is made and remade dynamically by students in tutorials through dialogue.'[91] Paolo Freire confirms a similar approach: 'Dialogue unites subjects together in the cognition of the object that mediates them.'[92]

Curriculum Development

Having introduced the method of PBL, it is time to turn to a description of using it in the format of theological education. The following sets out how dialogism was used in curriculum planning, in the curriculum structure, and in mentoring. At the end, the article briefly outlines the feedback from the Seminary's master's students.

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[90] Anette Kolmos, 'Curriculum Strategies: From Course Based PBL to Systemic PBL Approach', in *PBL in Engineering Education: International Perspectives in Curriculum Change,* ed. by A. Guerra, R. Ulseth, and A. Kolmos (Sense Publishers, 2017), pp. 1–12.
[91] Terry Barrett, *A New Model of Problem-Based Learning: Inspiring Concepts, Practice Strategies and Case Studies from Higher Education* (AISHE, 2017), p. 83.
[92] Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 49.

In the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary, the process of curriculum development of the MA programme 'Theology and Society' was the first step towards an experience of meaningful dialogue in an educational context. The idea of opening a master's programme as a second level of university studies had appeared repeatedly in the school's development plans,[93] yet the time had not been right for several reasons, including Estonian legislation. However, in the autumn of 2022, the Seminary had the support of legal regulations,[94] and the question was more whether the school was ready to go for this. In the following pages, the article uses 'we' to denote not only the authors of the article but the whole Seminary team, including student representatives and other participants who worked together in the process.

The first dialogical element was that we consulted one young person from our team who had an analytical mind to ask what he thought of the idea. 'You do not have enough faculty to open the programme,' was his honest opinion. And he was right. We decided that if we were able to recruit four more faculty members with doctorates, we would start the programme. And then it happened — there was one highly qualified theologian returning to Estonia from abroad; two other colleagues with the necessary qualifications expressed their willingness to contribute to our school; and finally, a well-known professor became a Christian, joined a Christian community, and was motivated to contribute to the planned master's education in the Seminary.

Then we turned to the school advisory board. We discussed the aims and focus of the possible programme. One idea that emerged from these discussions was that we needed to learn to have better dialogue with society.[95] We looked at different MA-level programmes from other schools. One idea was clear from the beginning — we wanted to do it

[93] The aim of starting a master's programme already appeared in the 2002–2007 Development Plan for the Seminary, p. 3. However, it took more than 20 years to fulfil the plan.

[94] Legal permission is given in 'Law of Higher Education', §21, point 3: 'Applied University may have a master's programme in the same area of study.' The law became official on 1 September 2019.

[95] The Advisory Board noted, 'We live in the society, where people have different MA degrees. We need to keep the ability to have dialogue between these people and church leaders.' Minutes of the Seminary Advisory Board, 13 October 2022.

in a creative way, using PBL as an organising principle, and as a helpful environment for exchanging, formulating, and evaluating ideas.

The next step was to ask for feedback from several experienced specialists in theology and higher education. At the same time, we consulted with potential and existing students. Not all the feedback was overlapping, and we had to decide what to take and what to leave. But there was a strong confirmation that the relationship between church and society was important. In a far-reaching perspective it was a question about the missional relevance and meaning of the Seminary education and the ministry of Estonian free churches. It was keeping this perspective in view that helped us to make decisions.

After working out the details of the curriculum, the document was taken to the Board of Elders of the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (UFEBCE), as representatives of the owner and as those who have to confirm all programmes of the Seminary that are longer than one year. We offered the Board four different names for the curriculum, all previously discussed in the Seminary team.[96] There was an uneasy feeling that others were deciding what we must implement later. However, this open discussion was a crucial part of the process. It was also important that many members of the Board of Elders had been part of the previous formal and informal conversations and preparatory meetings. At the end of the meeting, the curriculum was given the title 'Theology and Society'. This name indicated the dialogical nature of the studies and corresponded well with the aim of the programme. The first students were enrolled in the autumn of 2022. The government accreditation agency visited the Seminary in the spring of 2023, giving the plan a green light, and the MA programme 'Theology and Society' was officially opened in autumn 2023.

Structure of the Curriculum

When developing the curriculum, we decided to build four broad 'studios', which integrated in themselves different areas and subjects. 'Studio' is like a module, a group of subjects which fit under one topic.

[96] The four titles were 'Theology and Society', 'Church and Context', 'Applied Theology', and 'Bible, Church, and Context'. Minutes of Union Elders' Board meeting, 7 December 2021.

Studios have leaders from the faculty. The names of the studios were dialogical themselves, including 'Bible and Society', 'Theology and Identity', 'Communication and Leadership', and 'Creativity and Execution'. In addition, there were two more module-type parts: electives and a master's dissertation. When compared to Kolmos's three strategies for a PBL curriculum, the Seminary's model is a combination of the second and third strategy — it both integrates different topics and competencies into bigger entities (studios) and the whole curriculum is built around the problems, which are defined by students in the second year, and which lead to the master's work.[97] The structure of the curriculum unites and integrates various subjects and invites students to become dialogue partners and creators of their own studies.

Taking into account the Estonian situation, we decided to also open the programme for students who did not have a bachelor's degree in theology. This made the planning more difficult: the pre-knowledge of students was not the same. Therefore, during the first year, we gave them problems to brainstorm and solve in order to cover the first three modules. Certainly, a fruitful discussion requires both input and preparation. But as said before, the focus was on the learning that took place in a dialogical environment, and students as well as teachers were responsible for creating this environment by bringing reading results, analysis, and experiences into the learning community. The descriptions of the problems that gave guidance to the learning process were prepared by the faculty. The problematic cases were formulated in a way that allowed learning within the borders of the 'dialogue partners' indicated in the name of the studio. For example, in the studio 'Bible and Society', the group analysed the theme of the Russian–Ukrainian war, the biblical understanding of church and state relations, the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church to the war, and other aspects within the topical definition of the studio. Students had the brainstorming part and posing of learning questions during the first semester, and then returned to the same studios with answers, further discussion, and possible solutions to what they had learned while dealing with the problem.

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[97] Compare Kolmos, 'Curriculum Strategies', pp. 1–12.

The second year of the master's programme was organised differently: the 'subject' of 'hot topics of theology' was introduced, where students had to find by themselves the burning problems in the crossroads of theology and society. Then, they had to choose one, describe its 'root problem', and discuss it with others, listening to their opinions. Additionally, reading had to be done and possible solutions offered. Ideally, this module was a preparatory step for students into writing their master's dissertations, giving them a wider discussion background that they then needed to refine and narrow for their final written work.

Another 'subject' or 'module' was 'Contextual Research on the Thesis Theme', where the students were required to interact with the context of their area of research interest. This could be done in the format of observation, action research, interviews, or research in archives — in dialogue with the context of their interest area. This exercise also helped the students to move towards their final research work in being a tool for collecting material that focused on their specific academic interest area. Additionally, the dialogue between 'hot topics' and 'internship' was allowed and advised.

Mentoring as Dialogue

The third area where the Seminary as a learning community used dialogue was in mentoring. There is a dual system of mentoring: all students are expected to have a personal mentor, chosen by themselves, and in addition mentoring groups are formed — separate for men and women. While personal mentors mainly deal with personal growth and issues related to studies, group mentoring is designed to enhance dialogue between participants and faculty. The format of the group mentoring allows students to share their struggles and joys with each other, listen, support their fellow learners, and pray for each other. It also offers a good platform for the school leadership to ask for feedback. For example, at the end of the first academic year, the master's students complained that the study load was too heavy for them. As a result, the length of studies was extended from two years to three.

Feedback from the Students

In the middle of the second year of the programme, we asked our students (11 in number)[98] how the theological dialogues of their studies had developed them. The answers included the following responses: 'I have been encouraged that I am not the only one who struggles with these problems.' 'My thinking has become broader, more analytical and I see more connections. Sometimes I would like even more time, because my course mates have such interesting thoughts and there is so much to learn from everyone.' 'I have got practical advice for my spiritual role from these dialogues.' 'Very much, because the questions have been well posed. Others' thoughts have challenged my thinking patterns.' 'These dialogues have helped me to understand others' opinions and form these by myself. During the discussions we learn new perspectives, that we never thought of.' 'My religious thinking has broadened, and understanding has grown. The followers of Christ are more heterogeneous and there are more of them than I thought before.' 'I certainly see more broadly now and analyse topics of church and society.' 'I have understood and created connections in the context of situations and events more than reading the Bible alone.'

When asked what they consider to be the strengths of the master's programme, students mentioned keywords such as learner-centeredness, dynamic, flexible, practical by nature, good balance between practical and theological subjects, challenging, logical in structure, actual topics in the society, and an up-to-date approach. They also said that the programme motivates them to really learn, not just pass the subject. 'The studios help to think of the master's research from the beginning. In addition, these help to develop practical thinking and discussion skills.' One student added, 'The strength of the curriculum is problem-centeredness which means that an environment is created to find answers together to the complicated questions.'

There are several ways the Seminary's master's programme is dialogical. It was created dialogically, methods of problem-based learning approach were used which encouraged dialogues, the

[98] A questionnaire was sent to students in an anonymous online environment at the beginning of February 2024; 11 students out of 17 replied.

curriculum was designed to include the integrating studios, and mentoring was implemented to build a dialogue between the students, faculty, and the school leadership. Also, the feedback concerning the curriculum and the whole process of study has been reflected upon dialogically. In brief, the overall design and methodical approach of the Seminary's master's programme follows a (dia)logic of educational, philosophical, and theological understanding, and practises empowering the students, staff, and the institution all together to be better prepared for relating to 'the world coming of age'. Communicating the good news in this type of world requires mature relationships, not dictating some top-down universal truths monologically. The key is dialoguing with the interplay of different voices, fostering mutual understanding and social interaction for solving the problem(s) that people, whether Christians or not, face in our world together.

Conclusions

The Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary has initiated and developed a master's level curriculum 'Theology and Society', with an aim of helping to solve the overall problems facing the baptistic churches in this highly secular Baltic country. The missional problems the churches are struggling with are numerous but mostly related to the lack of communication with wider culture. The situation can be described as follows: the inability for a meaningful dialogue with the rapidly changing society; churches tending to distance themselves from the wider community and instead creating Christian 'bubbles' and echo-chambers in the midst of a 'hostile' world; alienation from the culture; missional disability as far as loving, serving, and touching the lives of people and the life of society is concerned. This article has discussed why and how dialogue is a crucial part of the solution to this problem.

The dialogical approach was helpful for the programme's planning and development, as the Seminary team began to see the task as a problem-based learning laboratory. Being dialogical better prepared the students and staff to ask the question of how to overcome missional hindrances and support the emergence of leaders and churches who embody a Jesus-like touchable presence and accessible communication

in contemporary Estonian society. Educational, philosophical, and theological (dia)logic pointed the whole process toward an approach which could be called dialogistic.

Developing such a programme, curriculum, learning community, methodological process of studies and research, along with feedback and reflection by students, expanded the participants' understanding and assisted in realising the relevance of the chosen approach. As a result of their learning experience, the Estonian baptistic students in facing missiological questions are more enabled and empowered to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the rapidly changing secular society. According to their own evaluation, they are more 'dialogue-able' persons due to their participation in the process and through using dialogue and problem-based learning methods. Hopefully, the churches they will serve and lead may also become missionally more mature and relevant, relating to and communicating in dialogue with the 'world coming of age'. Some of the perspectives and practices may start a dialogue with theological educators from other contexts and thus have a wider impact than in just one country. Dialogue — in missions and in education — is a universal human need.