

A Story of Estonian Baptist Theological Education, 1922–1989¹

Toivo Pilli and Merlin Kontus

Toivo Pilli is Director of Baptist Studies at IBTS Amsterdam.
toivo@kolmtalenti.ee

Merlin Kontus is a graduate of the Estonian Music and Theatre Academy, and has taken courses at the Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary.
merlinkontus@gmail.com

Abstract

The Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary was established in 1922 and renamed the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary in 1932. However, self-study, opportunities to study abroad, and local short-term Bible courses remained significant. Based on archival materials and published sources, this article argues that theological education remained an integral part of Estonian Baptist identity even during the Communist period, when the seminary was closed. Instead, Baptist leaders organised study groups, conducted correspondence courses between 1956 and 1960, published mimeographed study materials, and provided opportunities for individuals to take examinations independently. A number of former seminary graduates continued to serve faithfully in local churches despite external pressures. In addition, the article argues that informal friendship circles, such as the so-called Haraka Institute, functioned as contexts for theological learning. These circles were more flexible than the study groups led by the ECB Union leadership, and their agendas were determined by the participants themselves. Maintaining theological education during these years paved the way for the re-establishment of the seminary in 1989.

Keywords

Estonian Baptists; formal and informal theological education; Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary; Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary; informal friendship circles

Introduction

The Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary has borne different names over time, yet throughout the years, since its founding in 1922, it has fulfilled its primary mission: to prepare Christian workers capable of

¹ The Estonian version of this article was first published in *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri* [The Journal of Theology], 1 (2022), pp. 98–126.

fulfilling different roles in the church. To this main task one may add the promotion of independent theological thinking, focusing on free church identity while still preserving the capacity for dialogue with other traditions. Initially, however, the work of the seminary was orientated primarily towards the needs of Baptists.

During the Soviet period, theological education was potentially a form of silent protest against atheistic pressures. It was not possible to operate officially; short courses and study groups served the purpose of strengthening the identity of the diverse Union of Estonian Evangelical Christians and Baptists (ECB) that from 1945 onwards included, besides Baptists, also Pentecostals along with Evangelical Christian Free Church and Revivalist Free Church (Estonian: *priikogudus*) members. The training activities supported ministers in their duties, and it was there that leaders of the Union noticed young people who had a gift and calling for pastoral work.

The official reopening of the seminary in 1989 and the following years fall outside the scope of this article. Somewhat more than is customary, the present text pays attention to non-formal modes of learning during Communist times, such as gatherings of ministers, short courses, or circles of friends interested in theology. Theological exploration, connecting the Bible with everyday life, and acquiring practical pastoral care and mission skills were an inseparable part of the historical identity of Estonian Baptists.

Short Courses as a Flexible Form of Training

From their earliest years, Estonian Baptists have valued education — partly inspired by German models, and partly because they recognised that systematic knowledge supports apologetic argumentation and helps to interpret faith more deeply.² Theological discussions were taking place at Baptist conferences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These events were not just business meetings, but also environments for informal conversations. The first such conference was

² Toivo Pilli, 'Finding a Balance between Church and Academia: Baptist Theological Education in Estonia', *Religion in Eastern Europe*, 26.3 (2006), pp. 17–43 (pp. 18–19).

held in Haapsalu in 1886, and thereafter every few years, though not regularly. Harald Victor Dahl wrote, ‘These conferences were mainly intended to address various practical issues of religious life and to explain passages of the Bible.’³ Such exchanges helped to clarify how to interpret, in theological terms, the questions that arose in congregational life.

Theological topics were also addressed in Bible courses, which were likewise organised as early as the late nineteenth century. Here, the organisers determined the direction of instruction, although open discussions continued to play an important role. Adam Reinhold Schiewe, pastor of the German Baptist Church in St. Petersburg and overseer of the emerging congregations in Estonia, arranged a six-week course in Haapsalu in 1890.⁴ Lectures and prayer went hand in hand. Schiewe himself was the main teacher, with translation provided by an Estonian preacher, August Johannson. In the evenings, students preached in the Haapsalu prayer house, basing their message on independent study of biblical passages. Schiewe set revivalist goals for the course. Indeed, as a result of the students’ sermons, seventy people were said to have experienced religious conversion, ‘most of whom joined the congregation’.⁵

Training courses continued to be organised; for example in the early twentieth century at Laitse Manor under the initiative of Baron Woldemar von Üxküll, a Baltic German nobleman who had turned to the Baptist faith. After the First World War, the need for training appears only to have increased. In 1921, a larger course was held in Ridala, where subjects included the history of Baptists, children’s

³ Harald Victor Dahl, ‘Ülevaade Liidust’ [A Survey of the Union], in *50 aastat apostlite radadel* [50 Years in the Footsteps of the Apostles], ed. by Richard Kaups (E. B. K. Liidu Kirjastus, 1934), pp. 17–22 (p. 19).

⁴ Üllas Linder, *Adam Reinhold Schiewe: Esimese Eesti baptistikoguduse rajaja elulugu* [Adam Reinhold Schiewe: Biography of the Founder of the First Baptist Church in Estonia], *Dissertationes Theologiae Universitatis Tartuensis* 49 (Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus, 2024), p. 123.

⁵ Martin Schmidt, ‘Eesti baptisti jutlustajate usuteadusliku hariduse loost’ [About the Story of Estonian Baptist Preacher’s Theological Education], in *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, ed. by Richard Kaups (E. B. K. Liidu Kirjastus, 1934), pp. 174–180 (p. 175).

religious education, the history of missions, evangelism, and an introduction to the knowledge of the Bible. In addition, more specialised courses were arranged, and sometimes the training took place in local churches bringing together participants mostly from the host congregation.⁶ Between 1904 and 1940, the Baptist magazine *Teekäija* [The Wayfarer] was published, serving the purpose of spiritual education and fostering unity among congregations. Although not explicitly intended as a training tool, it published many instructional materials that helped to shape Estonian Baptist educational life and spirituality.⁷

Let us now look more closely at a training course held in Tallinn, 2–11 November 1919, the programme of which has been preserved in the archive of the Estonian ECB Union. The main venue for delivering lectures was the Filadelfia (historically Viladelfia) prayer house on Slobodka Street in Tallinn. The instruction was intended for ‘preaching brothers, workers in the Kingdom of God, and believers in general’. Participants were welcomed by the elder of the congregation (minister) Voldemar Korjus. The opening day was intended for a broader audience, with an address by Andres Tetermann, leader of the Baptist Union. A combined choir and string ensemble from Tallinn Baptist congregations also performed. On the following days, teaching was provided by Karl Kaups, Johannes Lipstok, Hendrik Tuttar, Ernst Mill, August Johansson, and others — all outstanding figures among Estonian Baptists of the time. The course was made into a special event with worship, music, and well-known teachers. It is also worth noting that innovative subjects were addressed. For example, participants were introduced to *pastorale theologie* or ‘the art of shepherding’. Ernst Mill taught *psychologie* or ‘the science of the soul’, and the programme also included ‘the teaching of how to teach’, that is, pedagogy or, more

⁶ Schmidt, ‘Eesti baptisti jutlustajate’, pp. 175–177.

⁷ Toivo Pilli, ‘Eesti Baptistid ja nende teoloogilise mõtte kajastumine ajakirjas “Teekäija” kuni 1940’ [Estonian Baptists and their Theology as Reflected in Teekäija until 1940] (unpublished master’s thesis, Tartu University, 1996), p. 68.

specifically, didactics. As expected, the curriculum also covered ‘the art of preaching’, the history of faith (likely meaning the history of Christianity), and subjects aimed at deepening knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.⁸

Methodologically, the instruction was not limited to lectures; discussions were also held. This actively engaged the participants and helped to reinforce what they had heard. Saturday evening prayer meetings and Sunday worship services took place in different Baptist churches (then usually called ‘prayer houses’ in Estonia). Monday, 10 November, was St. Martin’s Day, and a special meeting was held, where Martin Luther was introduced as a reformer and preacher who emphasised the authority of Scripture. Naturally, the topic of ‘the Reformation and infant baptism’ could not be avoided; here, Baptists had their own perspective, rejecting paedobaptism, which they considered important to explain. At this worship and lecture gathering, a choir performed, and brass instruments added to the atmosphere. On the final day of the Bible course, the guests included Karl Leopold Marley from the Evangelical Christian Free Church, and Adam Podin who was an ‘alliance-minded’ Baptist.⁹ Theological education thus crossed denominational boundaries. The course concluded once again with an address by Andres Tetermann at a worship service held on Uus-Kalamaja Street no. 23 (in the Kalju Baptist Church as it is known today), where brass music, choral singing, and string ensemble performances were again part of the programme. Baptists demonstrated sensitivity to context and a readiness to teach new subjects; they turned

⁸ Eesti Baptisti Ühenduse Piibli-Kursus 1919, Kava. [The Estonian Baptist Association Bible Course 1919, Schedule], Väiketrükised: 1945 ja varasemad, 2. The Archive of the Union of Estonian Evangelical Christians and Baptists (hereafter EEKBLA). The Archive is presently located in Tartu in the building of Salem Baptist Church.

⁹ For more about Podin and his pan-evangelical links, see Toivo Pilli, ‘Adam Podin: An Estonian Baptist with International Links and Pan-Evangelical Vision’, in *Grounded in Grace: Essays to Honour Ian M. Randall*, ed. by Pieter J. Lalleman, Peter J. Morden, and Anthony R. Cross (Spurgeon’s College and Baptist Historical Society, 2013), pp. 103–117.

the training into a major event that encouraged local congregations. The 1919 course shows that education has the ability to transcend confessional boundaries.¹⁰

These courses at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century provided a strong foundation for planning a more systematic form of education — the establishment of a seminary. For this, support and resources from outside Estonia, from the international Baptist community, were needed, but the readiness of Estonian Baptists themselves was also essential. This readiness was further strengthened by the fact that several Estonian Baptist preachers had studied theology abroad. Between 1893 and 1922, about a dozen Estonian Baptists studied at the seminary in Hamburg-Horn, usually for one or two years.¹¹ Among them were August Johannson, Martin Schmidt, Karl Kaups, Johannes Lipstok, and Daniel Matson. The latter two had also pursued further studies at the seminary in Łódź between 1908 and 1910.¹² Preachers who had studied in Germany undoubtedly gained a more systematic understanding of theology, as well as preparation — or at least the motivation — to pass on their knowledge. A vision emerged of what seminary education could offer, how it could be organised, and how it could support congregational work. There is no reason to doubt that this vision helped pave the way for the establishment of a theological seminary in Estonia.

The Baptist Seminary before the Second World War

Before 1940, Baptists were the only free church in Estonia to offer education at the seminary level. However, the establishment of a theological school had a broader background. In 1920, a pioneering conference took place in London with Baptist delegates from Britain, North America, and other countries. It was decided that in the aftermath

¹⁰ Short courses were organised in later years also; for example, in 1929–1930 a Bible course, in 1935 a training for preachers and other spiritual co-workers, and in 1936 a training for Sunday School teachers and choir conductors.

¹¹ *Festschrift für Feier des 50. Jährigen Jubiläums des Predigerseminars der Deutschen Baptisten zu Hamburg-Horn vom 1. bis 3. Juni 1930* (n. pub., n. d.), pp. 69–91.

¹² Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', pp. 177–178.

of the First World War context, not only humanitarian aid was needed but also support for founding theological seminaries in continental Europe.¹³ Concrete steps followed, including financial assistance, leading to the opening of seminaries in Spain, Romania, Latvia, and elsewhere. The Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary, in a country that only some years earlier had gained its independence, was opened with a festive worship service on 5 March 1922, in Keila. The sermon was delivered by Martin Schmidt, who called on listeners to make use of the newfound freedom in Estonia 'so that we might cover the land from end to end with the Word of God'. He urged prayer for God's grace upon the seminary and that all might be convinced, 'Yes, this school is needed!'¹⁴ Teaching began the very next day in a house belonging to Adam Podin, located next to the prayer house.¹⁵

The seminary committee had already been working — at varying intensity — since the summer of 1920 to prepare for the school's opening and to consider administrative and economic questions.¹⁶ Before the seminary was founded, Estonian Baptists had received the impetus for theological education mainly from Germany; now, the influence of Anglo-American Baptists increased.

The Baptist minister Adam Podin became the director of the newly established seminary. He had both international connections and the energy to organise school life.¹⁷ By nature, Podin was a preacher and organiser who could appeal to the hearts of sponsors. In 1923, speaking at the Baptist World Alliance Congress in Stockholm, he declared, 'In our seminary, we want to teach pure theology of Calvary, and we believe

¹³ Bernard Green, *Tomorrow's Man: A Biography of James Henry Rushbrooke* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1997), pp. 80–82.

¹⁴ Martin Schmidt, 'Jutustajate kool piibli ja kiriku ajaloo valgel' [Preachers' Bible School in the Light of the Bible and Church History], *Teekäija*, 6 (1922), pp. 82–83 (p. 83).

¹⁵ Before the Second World War, four cohorts studied at the seminary: the first from 1922 to 1925, the second from 1925 to 1929, the third from 1931 to 1935, and the fourth from 1937 to 1940. In the case of the final cohort, studies were left unfinished due to the school's closure by Soviet powers; however, Albert Tammo completed the curriculum in full, as he had previously attended as an external student.

¹⁶ Eesti Baptisti Usuteaduse Seminari Protokolliraamat, 1920–1940 [hereafter SP] [Minutes Book of the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary, 1920–1940], minutes no 1, 18 June 1920, EEKBLA.

¹⁷ See Pilli, 'Adam Podin', pp. 103–117.

that our school will become a powerful turning point in Estonia's political and religious life.¹⁸ His vision was ambitious, yet the seminary began modestly: it was necessary to develop a curriculum, define academic standards, find suitable teachers, and maintain contact with sponsors — mainly British and American Baptists. These were represented by James H. Rushbrooke and Walter O. Lewis, who visited Estonia repeatedly. According to the seminary's minutes book, during a visit to Tallinn in 1921, Rushbrooke emphasised that the seminary committee should not appoint teachers who might be eloquent speakers but lacked 'knowledge and education'.¹⁹ Faculty were expected to have university training — something that was very difficult to achieve for Baptists in Estonia at the time. Only Martin Schmidt met these criteria, having studied theology at the University of Königsberg.²⁰ In addition to Schmidt, teaching was carried out by Adam Podin, his wife Emilie Podin, and a few others.

Thanks to Podin's connections and initiative, steps were gradually taken to prepare teaching staff. In the 1920s and 30s, talented graduates were sent abroad for further study. At different times, Osvald Tärk and Evald Mänd studied at Newton Theological Institution near Boston. Tärk continued his studies in New York and earned a master's degree from Union Theological Seminary in 1929; Mänd completed a master's degree at Newton in 1935. Edgar Kilimit studied in England at Rawdon Baptist College, a well-known institution at the time. All of them later returned to Estonia and became seminary lecturers, with Tärk serving as director from 1938 onward.²¹ There were others who also studied abroad (Artur Proos for example) but those mentioned above became directly involved in the seminary's work. Mänd later earned a doctoral degree in exile after the Second World War. The seminary also supported Robert Võsu's further studies at the University of Tartu.²² Not all who studied abroad were seminary alumni; for instance, Tabea

¹⁸ *Third Baptist World Congress, Stockholm, July 21–27, 1923*, Records of Proceedings (London: Kingsgate Press, 1923), p. 109.

¹⁹ SP, minutes no 5, 15 November 1921, EEKBLA.

²⁰ Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', pp. 178–179.

²¹ Ruudi Leinus, ed., *Uskuge Jumalasse [Believe in God]* (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Liit, 1999), pp. 16–17; Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', p. 179.

²² SP, minutes no 72, 2 August 1937, EEKBLA.

Korjus studied at a mission school in England (1921–1924), and later she received a scholarship to attend the Teachers' College, Columbia University (1924–1925).

Lecture notes preserved in the Union of the ECB archives indicate that theological subjects were taught quite thoroughly. This became especially evident after 1931, when the seminary moved from Keila to Tallinn, was renamed the Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary (officially in 1932), and continued its work in a building on Paldiski Road 46b.²³ Funds for purchasing the building were raised by Walter O. Lewis.²⁴ The new name reflected the reality that 'not all who graduate from the seminary are preachers'.²⁵ Other changes followed, including renewal of the teaching staff. Students were encouraged to complete secondary education alongside seminary studies, as many entrants had gaps in their prior education. The seminary library — partially preserved to this day — contains not only theological works but also secondary school textbooks, general educational literature, and fiction. All this was considered necessary for future Baptist leaders.

In some respects, the seminary's vision appears to have narrowed. In 1931, Karl Leopold Marley requested that members of the Evangelical Christian Free Church be allowed to study at the seminary, but the committee 'did not find it possible to grant this request'.²⁶ Perhaps, therefore, an opportunity to bring two movements closer together was missed. The selection of students also became more restricted. In 1922, four women were admitted alongside men; among them was Amalie Tamm, who had previously studied in Germany, and Marie Schnell, who was recommended by Adam Podin.²⁷ In 1925, four women were again admitted, including Klaara Truskan.²⁸ Although it

²³ SP, minutes no 46, 13 May 1931, EEKBLA.

²⁴ Osvald Tärk, 'Eesti baptisti usuteaduse seminar' [Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary], in *50 aastat apostlite radadel*, ed. by Richard Kaups (E. B. K. Liidu Kirjastus, 1934), pp. 180–184 (p. 184).

²⁵ SP, minutes no 54, 28 July 1932, EEKBLA.

²⁶ SP, minutes no 48, 23 July 1931, EEKBLA.

²⁷ SP, minutes no 8, 3 February 1922, EEKBLA.

²⁸ SP, minutes no 27, 29 June 1925, EEKBLA.

had initially been decided in 1922 that women might substitute Greek with handicrafts and exegesis with housekeeping,²⁹ they were soon granted full rights to study all subjects if they wished. ‘Brothers Lipstok and Podin decided that sisters — together with brothers — should take the full 4-years course, and all who wanted could participate in every class.’³⁰ In June 1926, the committee decided to invite two more women for seminary studies.³¹ Women experienced the same sense of calling as men, feeling a ‘strong inner compulsion to work in the Kingdom of God’, yet recognised too the need for study and preparation so that ‘God might use us as capable workers, ready to do whatever He commands’.³² However, in the 1930s, there were no women among the students. The explanation given was a lack of suitable facilities,³³ though this seems unconvincing — conditions in Keila had been far more modest than in Tallinn. With good will, this problem would certainly have been solved. It is more likely that the issue lay in prevailing attitudes.

At the same time, higher academic standards were set in the 1930s. Maintaining close contact with congregations was not always easy, and some criticism of the seminary emerged in the late 1920s.³⁴ Nevertheless, major tensions were avoided. Trust was strengthened when students visited congregations, participated in services, and preached. In 1938, upon becoming director, Osvald Tärk emphasised that the seminary was not merely an educational institution but should also cultivate prayer and moral virtues, and a willingness to serve God

²⁹ SP, minutes no 17, 12 September 1922, EEKBLA.

³⁰ SP, minutes no 28, 10 September 1925, EEKBLA.

³¹ SP, minutes no 30, 15 June 1926, EEKBLA.

³² ‘Õdede tööst Keila seminaaris’ [About the Work of Sisters in the Keila Seminary], *Teekäija*, 10 (1924), p. 154.

³³ Tärk, ‘Eesti baptisti usuteaduse seminar’, p. 184.

³⁴ Einike Pilli and Daily Valk, ‘Eesti EKB liidu haridustöö evangeliseerimise ja eluaegse õppimise dünaamikas’ [The Educational Work of the Estonian ECB Union in the Dynamics of Evangelism and Lifelong Learning], in *Teekond teisenevas ajas* [A Journey Through Changing Times], ed. by Toivo Pilli (Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar: Tartu, 2005), pp. 51–88.

and fellow people.³⁵ He sought to combine academic credibility with piety and moral responsibility, both in his personal life and in the seminary.

In retrospect, discipline at the school may at times have been too strict. For example, Albert Tammo recalled that one student, Imant Ridaliste, was nearly expelled for composing a humorous, perhaps slightly ironic, verse. The pursuit of virtue also presented challenges: in the late 1930s, strict expectations were placed on students' behaviour and morality, yet when shipowners' meetings were held on the seminary premises with the participation of the school's leadership, the corridors reportedly smelled of tobacco smoke — something students perceived as hypocrisy — even if the Baptists themselves did not smoke.³⁶ Written records suggest that decisions were often made in committee meetings rather than through pastoral conversations or mentoring relationships with students.³⁷

The school also provided financial support for the students. In the first academic year, all students received free maintenance. Thereafter, free meals were granted to those whose 'Christian life was exemplary', whose academic progress was at least good, even if not

³⁵ Osvald Tärk, 'Meie ülesandeid ja ohtusi' [Our Tasks and Dangers], 15 September 1938. Notes of the speech at the inauguration service, Osvald Tärk materials, EEKBLA.

³⁶ Joosep Tammo, oral information, 18 January 2022. Albert Tammo was Joseph's father, and the information is based on Albert Tammo's memories. Albert Tammo was a former seminary student and later an ECB presbyter.

³⁷ The strictness that caused resistance among the students has been pointed out by Albert Tammo. For example, it was quite rigidly required that students must not be late for classes nor be absent. However, on Mondays, students often came from congregations where they had preached over the weekend, and transport conditions did not always allow them to reach Tallinn on time. The students expected more understanding from the school administration. Imant Ridaliste's humorous verse was inspired by a course in the history of religion taught by Evald Mänd. In his poem, Ridaliste included all sorts of names of gods that were mentioned during the course. Perhaps there was indeed a bit of youthful protest in the piece, but the school administration chose to deal with the matter administratively rather than pastorally. Ridaliste apparently acquired the reputation of a disobedient student, as he was reproached for absences and 'unacceptable' remarks during lessons. The school authorities disapproved of Ridaliste's plan to complete both the seminary and secondary school simultaneously, and then to study philology or medicine at the University of Tartu so that he could have additional income as a preacher. But perhaps this plan was actually sensible? Most Baptist preachers did in fact work in two roles, spiritual and secular. Tammo, oral information, 18 January 2022; SP, minutes no 88, 2 April 1940, EEKBLA.

excellent, and who actively participated in church work, by, for example, preaching at least two sermons per month. If academic performance declined, food costs were only partially covered. Students were also expected to keep a record of their service in congregations.³⁸ It seems that the seminary committee wanted to establish precise requirements, but life usually takes its own course, and when rules are pushed too much sometimes a favourable ground emerges not for virtues but for rule-based ethics. The requirements allowed for exceptions, which meant that in practice the seminary committee considered situations on a case-by-case basis. The students' daily schedule was quite structured. For example, in 1924 students had to be awake at 6 a.m. and lights-out was at 10 p.m. In between were prayers, classes, a lunch break, reading and the completion of home assignments.³⁹

In the long term, the seminary's work bore valuable fruit: it helped make spiritual ministry more reflective and gave Baptists a certain degree of social credibility. The seminary gradually moved toward a more academically robust education while remaining oriented toward the needs of local congregations and supporting evangelical work. Many graduates became church leaders or served in other roles, although limited financial resources meant that some took secular employment, for instance on the railways, for a stable income.⁴⁰ The seminary's development was disrupted by the Soviet occupation in 1940 which led to the closure of the school in the same summer. The seminary committee concluded that it was no longer economically possible to continue and advised students to find a job.⁴¹ The loss of foreign support was a consequence of political changes, and the closure itself resulted from the imposition of Soviet rule in the society. In August 1940, the building was nationalised.

As is often the case in education, the seminary's contribution to Estonian theological life and to the work of ECB congregations became evident only with some delay. Several graduates became influential

³⁸ SP, minutes no 70, 17 March 1937, EEKBLA.

³⁹ 'Õdede tööst', p. 154.

⁴⁰ Tammo, oral information, 18 January 2022.

⁴¹ SP, minutes no 89, 2 August 1941, EEKBLA.

figures in Estonian religious life. Osvald Tärk was both a pastor and theologian whose writings, though rooted in their time, have retained their relevance. Robert Võsu, who continued studies at the University of Tartu during the war, became a strong and stable leader in the ECB Union; his written legacy is also significant. He served as Senior Presbyterian (President in today's language) from 1970 to 1985. Many seminary graduates served congregations faithfully under the restrictive conditions of the Soviet period, including Albert Tammo, Rudolf Veevo, Imant Ridaliste, Kalju Raid, Osvald Tärk, Robert Võsu, and others. Their theological training supported their pastoral calling, providing a framework for self-development, ethical orientation, and the ability to carry out spiritual responsibilities under challenging circumstances in the Soviet atheistic context.

The Soviet Period and Theological Education

At the beginning of the Soviet era, the Union of Estonian ECB congregations sought to heal the wounds of war and adapt to new circumstances. Several leaders and seminary lecturers — such as Karl Kaups, Evald Mänd, and Leida Loo (Lund) — had fled abroad in 1944. The war and regime change also left deep marks on the students: theological studies were terminated, many emigrated, and at least one seminarian began to support the Soviet authorities. As formal theological education was stopped and the seminary closed, non-formal forms of learning became all the more important. Once again, the value of self-education came to the forefront.

Self-education had been significant for Estonian Baptists from early on, initially serving apologetic purposes. Early leaders, such as Jüri Mill, August Johansson, and Andres Tetermann learned German in order to read theological literature, and they built up substantial personal libraries. The study of Greek also helped them better understand the biblical text.⁴² Jüri Mill referred in his writings to pietistic Lutheran authors and to German Baptist literature. Through self-directed learning, the early Estonian Baptists clarified and defended their

⁴² Schmidt, 'Eesti baptisti jutlustajate', p. 174.

positions, and in the process, the identity of this movement became more clearly shaped and defined.

During the Soviet period, self-education again became important, and primarily served the aim of maintaining continuity with the seminary tradition and of strengthening pastoral work. A broad intellectual outlook was also useful in the potential debates within an increasingly atheistic culture. An example of lifelong learning was Robert Võsu, who followed developments in wider culture and in global Christian life, and shared information and ideas with colleagues. The pastor — or presbyter, as ministers were called in the Soviet setting — Arpad Arder represented a model of a free church intellectual: he knew many languages, had a wide intellectual horizon, and produced written works. His five-volume typewritten Bible dictionary, essentially a concordance, was a monumental undertaking.⁴³ Arder was also a popular preacher, known for engaging and narrative sermons. Besides words, he inspired others by his personality. Osvald Tärk was likewise known for continuous self-learning and extensive reading. The Union's leader Johannes Lipstok embodied a balanced theological wisdom until his death in 1961; his library, preserved now in the ECB archives in Tartu, consists mainly of German-language literature. Although self-study played a major role, it sometimes lacked the benefit of collective discussion and critical evaluation of ideas in the community of believers.

During times of pressure, efforts were made to organise more systematic, leadership-guided education. There was a need to equip new church workers. Probably there was hope that education would help to strengthen unity and doctrinal coherence within the Union. This was especially important after four free church groups were merged into one organisation in Estonia between 1945 and 1947, a process that was not as smooth as officially presented. The image of the pre-war seminary was sometimes idealised, and expectations for formal theological education could be overly optimistic: if only the seminary were restored, everything would be well! In reality, reopening the seminary was not possible. However, attempts were still made to promote education.

⁴³ Arpad Arder, *Piibli sõnaraamat* [Bible Dictionary], 5 volumes, typewritten manuscript (Rakvere, 1960).

During the time of Khrushchev's thaw, a short period of relaxation of ideological pressures, permission was sought to open theological correspondence courses, formally called, rather clumsily, 'The Examination Commission for Presbyters at the ECB Senior Presbyter's Office'. Verbal, although not written, approval for this project was granted by the Commissioner for Religious Affairs, and the courses operated from 1956 to 1960.⁴⁴

These theological correspondence courses began with a festive worship service 14 October 1956 in Oleviste Church, Tallinn.⁴⁵ Teaching took place at the Baptist church on Kalju Street. The examination commission (practically, the oversight committee) consisted of three members: Osvald Tärk, Oskar Olvik, and Robert Võsu. They served as the main lecturers, organisers, and authors of teaching materials. Over four years, together with Imant Ridaliste, they produced about thirty titles of compiled study materials. However, the way material was evaluated, put together, and presented, was the result of the work and ideas of the Estonian authors themselves. These typewritten A4-format texts — often over 100 pages each — were used for decades.⁴⁶ Tärk and Võsu continued writing, and their texts became more original, reflecting more clearly the authors' own theological views. In addition to training pastors and preachers, a music department was opened, which was essentially a choir directors' course led by Vardo Holm. One-third of the curriculum was theological, and two-thirds musical.⁴⁷ At the time, choir work — besides worship services — was almost the only permitted form of congregational activity, and the training also helped prepare organists who accompanied congregational singing on piano, organ, or harmonium.

⁴⁴ Toivo Pilli, *Usu värvid ja varjundid: Eesti vabakoguduste ajaloo ja identiteedist* [Colours and Shades of Faith: About the History and Identity of Estonian Free Churches] (Tallinn: Allika, 2007), pp. 90–124.

⁴⁵ EKB Vanempresbüteri juures asuva Presbüterite Katsekomisjoni protokolliraamat (hereafter PK) [The Minutes Book of the Examination Commission for Presbyters at the ECB Senior Presbyter's Office], minutes no 7, 1 November 1956, EEKBLA.

⁴⁶ Üllas Linder and Toivo Pilli, *Osaduses kasvanud. Kirjutisi Eesti EKB koguduste loost* [Grown in Fellowship: Writings from the History of Estonian ECB Churches] (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Koguduste Liit, 2009), pp. 232–233.

⁴⁷ PK, minutes no 2, 20 August 1956; no 5, 14 September 1956, EEKBLA.

One might question whether the requirements of these courses were too demanding. There was an attempt to maintain continuity with the pre-war seminary, and students were even called the ‘fifth cohort’ of the seminary.⁴⁸ Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to start from the problems faced by ministers and give theological interpretation to these situations. However, at that time, apparently no one was thinking about the method of problem-based learning. The learners found it difficult to keep up with the course requirements. Many of the participants earned a living for their families in other professions and carried out pastoral work as volunteers or for a small fee. This left them with little time for study. Certainly, the distance-learning courses developed theological thinking and provided a stronger foundation for pastoral work; they also fostered a sense of belonging and strengthened communication networks between participants. Yet, only one out of the forty managed to complete the full four-year programme. This was Paul Himma, the presbyter (or pastor in present language) of the Salem congregation in Tartu.⁴⁹ However, the courses certainly also played an encouraging role and promoted spiritual life. Ülo Meriloo notes in his memoirs that the heart, too, was cultivated.⁵⁰

The distance learning courses were closed in 1960 following an oral order from the Commissioner for Religious Affairs. Already a year earlier, the music department, which had operated for nearly two and a half years, from 1957 to 1959, had been forced to shut down. The atheist campaign of Khrushchev had begun. Nevertheless, the courses became legendary. Study materials reproduced by mimeograph could be found in almost every home of an ECB minister, but perhaps even more important was the awareness that theological education actually could be organised even during the Soviet times. This strengthened the identity of the ECB Union and encouraged the continuation of self-study. There was also another wider consequence: materials prepared

⁴⁸ ‘EKB usuteaduslikud kursused, 1956–1960’ [ECB Theological Distance Courses], typewritten collection (Tallinn, 1960).

⁴⁹ Uudo Rips, *Issanda aednik: Märkmel Paul Himma elust* [Gardener of the Lord: Notes from the Life of Paul Himma] (Tartu: Salemi Baptisti Kogudus, 2000), p. 25.

⁵⁰ Ülo Meriloo, *Ränduri päevik* [A Traveller’s Diary] (Tallinn, 2001), p. 78; PK, minutes no 1, 7 August 1956, EEKBLA.

for the courses were translated into Russian, and the correspondence Bible courses that were opened in Moscow in 1968 took inspiration from what had been done in Estonia. The All-Union leadership of the ECB with their office in Moscow welcomed the contribution of Estonian lecturers, who were invited to teach in Moscow and from whom contributions were expected for the All-Union Russian-language ECB journal *Bratskii Vestnik* [Brotherly Herald]. Several Estonians — especially, but not exclusively, students sent from Russian-speaking congregations in Estonia — studied in these Moscow courses in the 1970s. Contacts were established with Baptists from other regions of the Soviet Union.⁵¹ The contribution of Estonians to the development of ECB theological education across the Soviet Union was significant, although educational standards in Estonia were likely somewhat higher.

In the 1960s, systematic theological training in the Estonian ECB Union came to a standstill, although experience and literature continued to be shared through personal relationships. When Robert Võsu became Senior Presbyter in 1970, the organisation of training once again came onto the agenda, even if only in a non-formal way. Võsu's method was to gather pastors and co-workers in different regions, give lectures, share information, and engage in spontaneous discussions. For example, in 1974 it was noted that study gatherings had taken place in five different locations and that interest in learning had increased.⁵² Notes by Uudo Rips from 1973 to 1981, reflecting the activities of a study group in South Estonia, have been preserved. Participants delivered short sermons and received feedback. Robert Võsu taught topics related to personal evangelism, which he himself had studied in depth. He also gave overviews of world religions statistics and the situation of Christianity in Europe. Based on these notes, it can be concluded that in the 1970s the gatherings initially took place in Tartu, while later Rips attended lectures in Tallinn.⁵³ Regional training days initiated by Robert Võsu took place over several years. Those interested

⁵¹ Ermo Jürma, email correspondence, 21 January 2022.

⁵² PN, minutes no 32, 17 September 1974, EEKBLA.

⁵³ Lõuna-Eesti piibliõppegrupi konspektid, 1973–1981 [Notes of the South Estonia Bible Study Group, 1973–1981]; Uudo Ripsi märkmed, 1973–1981 [Notes by Uudo Rips, 1973–1981], kaugõppekursused 1970–1980 [Distance-learning Courses 1970–1980], box 2.4.1, EEKBLA.

could validate their studies through examinations. Pastor Ermo Jürma recalls that in the late 1970s he took exams with Oskar Olvik and Osvald Tärk.⁵⁴

In 1983 and 1984, study group activity increased again. Alongside Võsu, teachers now included Joosep Tammo, Peeter Roosimaa, and Ermo Jürma, who all had received theological education in East Germany, and also Ants Rebane who had studied in Switzerland. The 1950s correspondence course materials remained in use, and suggested reading supported self-study. Examinations were often taken at the lecturers' home. In 1983, the correspondence courses organised in this manner were attended by 25 people in Tallinn, 15 in Tartu, 9 in Saaremaa, and 10 in Pärnu, as well as 9 additional students from various other locations. Surviving examination records show that students actively completed the initial examinations in Biblical Theology, Introduction to the New Testament, Introduction to the Old Testament, History of the People of Israel, and Exposition of the Book of Amos. After this, however, students' momentum appears to have declined, and subsequent examinations were taken less frequently and more irregularly. Those taking the examinations were primarily younger students in their twenties and thirties, many of whom were not ministers, but were still seeking their calling or wanted to grow in theological knowledge.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, many of them subsequently became pastors.

It is difficult to say whether the leaders of the ECB Union realised that it was challenging to sustain a curriculum that followed a structured sequence of subjects and required examinations, or whether they recognised the need to provide continuing education also for those who preferred a less systematic form of instruction. In any case, 'consultation days' were organised between 1981 and 1989. These were not primarily intended for students beginning in theology but rather for ministers and church workers, although no strict distinction was made. The consultation days had already begun in Tallinn during Robert Võsu's period of leadership and continued later while Ülo Meriloo

⁵⁴ Ermo Jürma, email correspondence, 21 January 2022.

⁵⁵ Kaugõppe kursuse hindend, 1983 [Grades of the Correspondence Courses, 1983], EEKBLA.

served as Senior Presbyter. Participants met almost every month except during the summer. Most of the teaching responsibility rested with Vösu himself, but a new generation of lecturers also emerged. In addition to the theologians educated in Germany, Jüri Puusaag should also be mentioned. Occasionally, foreign guest speakers participated, especially toward the end of the 1980s. The topics were designed to support participants in their spiritual ministry and to keep their thinking fresh. Lecture themes included biblical exposition, presentations on church life and theology, lectures on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, Christology, church history, ethics, and pastoral care. Practical guidance was also offered on preaching and the order of worship services and ordinances. In the early 1980s, Osvald Tärk delivered a series of lectures on the principles of the ECB Union as he understood them.⁵⁶

Throughout the Soviet period, despite restrictions, the ECB Union consistently sought ways to provide theological education. This included a deliberate effort to train future teachers of theology. Robert Vösu worked strategically to send younger students abroad for systematic studies. Tiit Niilo studied in Finland (1973–1974),⁵⁷ Ants Rebane studied in Switzerland (1978–1981) and later earned a Doctor of Ministry degree in the United States.⁵⁸ Particularly influential were Joosep Tammo and Ermo Jürma, who both went on to do a further one-year study course in Halle University, and Peeter Roosimaa, who studied at the Baptist seminary in Buckow (East Germany) from 1979 to 1982.⁵⁹ All three later played significant roles in shaping the Union's theology, educational efforts, and church life, and they became teachers when the seminary was reopened in 1989.

Vösu's long-term vision seems to be clear: to pave ways for offering systematic theological education. His commitment to education was especially notable given that no formal educational requirements were set for clergy in the ECB Union, even though theological training

⁵⁶ Konsultatsioonipäevade ettekannete lindistuste nimistu, 1981–1989 [Catalogue of Recordings of Consultation Day Lectures, 1981–1989], EEKBLa; see also Toivo Pilli, *Usu värvid ja varjundid*, pp. 70–76.

⁵⁷ PN, minutes no 25, 10 October 1973, EEKBLa.

⁵⁸ Ants Rebane, email correspondence, 22 August 2004.

⁵⁹ PN, minutes no 87, 12 May 1982, EEKBLa.

was valued. Every now and then the question about ‘minimum requirements’ emerged, but there is no evidence that anybody would have been rejected for ordination because of insufficient education.

There were also voices within the Union claiming that faith and zeal alone were sufficient, and that academic knowledge might hinder spiritual work. Võsu represented a balanced view: both prayer and knowledge are necessary; religious enthusiasm and learning must not be opposed to each other. As it turned out, his efforts laid the groundwork for the later development of free church theological education.

Friendship Groups as a Learning Context

A distinct phenomenon during the Soviet period was the theological learning that took place in friendship groups. This was not coordinated by the leadership of the Union but arose from the participants’ own initiative. One such learning environment was the Haraka Institute in Pärnu, which was essentially a circle of young people interested in theology and culture.⁶⁰ Theology was not studied there in the classical academic sense; rather, discussions centred on topics that were of immediate interest to the participants, giving rise to philosophical and theological excursions. When the church is marginalised within society and its institutional structures are weaker, personal relationships become all the more important. Since little has previously been written in Estonia about informal friendship groups as environments that facilitate learning, this article examines the subject in somewhat greater detail. It should also be noted that similar circles of friends and soulmates emerged elsewhere in Eastern Europe. They fostered independent thought and served as incubators for fresh ideas.

Joosep Tammo, when he was the youth leader in Pärnu Immanuel Baptist Church, had begun gathering young men interested in theology. This happened before he left to study in Germany in the late 1970s. The first meetings under the name Haraka Institute appears to have taken place in 1978 at Tammo’s home on Haraka Street

⁶⁰ Toivo Pilli, ‘Haraka instituut Tõrvas’ [Haraka Institute in Tõrva], *Teeekäija*, 3 (2017), p. 14.

(English: Magpie Street) in Pärnu, although similar gatherings go back to the beginning of 1970s. Contemporary recollections and notes confirm that the topics discussed ranged from cultural theory to practical theology and philosophical questions. In February 1979, participants delivered short sermons, which were subsequently analysed over several successive meetings.⁶¹ A few years later, on 2 August 1982, Joosep Tammo taught the structure of sermon composition, the use of illustrations, and language in preaching. He placed particular emphasis on evangelistic preaching, arguing that it should avoid moralising and coercion.⁶² It appears that during the second half of 1979, after Tammo had left to pursue his studies, the activities of the friendship group under the label 'Institute' subsided a little. This did not, however, mean that its members ceased to maintain contact. They continued to meet, for example at church on Sundays or while organising various activities together. When Tammo came back from Germany, new energy was poured into the activities of the friendship circle.

The Pärnu circle was primarily concerned with the relationship between Christianity and society, and between theology and culture. At one gathering, for example, a paper on atheism was presented. During the school holidays in August 1982, when Joosep Tammo was visiting Estonia from Germany, the Institute held its so-called 'summer session', or 'Culture Day'. In his presentation, the Estonian poet and preacher Albert Ruutsoo examined the problem of the debasement of life, which he described as 'mechanical civilisation'. Referring to Albert Camus, Ruutsoo observed that 'the end of a mechanically lived life is weariness'.⁶³ Toivo Pilli presented a paper on cultural issues in the Christian journal *Elukevad* (Spring of Youth), while Tõnu Lehtsaar's presentation, entitled 'Culture and the Human Person', dealt, among other things, with creative activity. Joosep Tammo's paper 'Culture and Christian Ethics', using the image of the Tower of Babel, argued that culture has a tendency to assume a function that causes fragmentations in human fellowships. Human beings, however, were created to live

⁶¹ Joosep Tammo, *Lectio*, Notes 1979 <<http://38698.edicypages.com/elu/markmeid-1979>> (accessed 16 January 2022).

⁶² Karl Pajusalu, Notes, Karl Pajusalu's personal archive.

⁶³ Albert Ruutsoo to Karl Pajusalu, personal letter, 10 August 1982.

‘within a community of fellowship’.⁶⁴ The Culture Day described above was a typical example of the Institute’s activities. Such round-table discussions usually brought together six or seven participants, occasionally more, and provided an opportunity for thoughtful discussions of theology, culture, and society.

This group also organised occasional excursions and residential retreats. Winter retreats were held in 1984 and 1985 at Kempri Farm in Tahkuranna, near Pärnu. The 1985 retreat focused on the doctrine of the Trinity. Participants prepared papers on the basis of the literature available to them and engaged in collective discussion of the issues raised. Toivo Pilli remembers reading a book in German, and preparing a presentation — unfortunately, the memory fails regarding the title of the book! A larger gathering took place in August of the same year at Tiit Johani’s farm in Holstre, not far from Viljandi. The unifying theme was ‘Bear Fruit in the Whole Truth!’, with passages from the Second Epistle of Peter serving as the guiding motif. Approximately thirty participants attended, a considerable number for the circumstances of the time. Recalling these retreats, Joosep Tammo remarked, ‘They were part of the Institute’s activities. They usually lasted for a couple of days.’⁶⁵

When Toivo Pilli and Karl Pajusalu began their studies at Tartu University in the early 1980s, they brought with them the model of fellowship and study that had developed in Pärnu. One of the members of the circle, Tõnu Lehtsaar, was already living in Tartu. In Tartu the group met in the side hall of the Kolgata Baptist Church as well as in private homes, including Pajusalu’s student flat. The interests remained wide-ranging. For example, participants discussed the ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who sought to reconcile Christian theology with evolutionary theory, introduced the theological thought of Paul Tillich, and explored Juri Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere.⁶⁶ Ants Rebane occasionally participated in the Tartu gatherings. In 1983, he gave an

⁶⁴ Karl Pajusalu, Notes, Karl Pajusalu’s personal archive.

⁶⁵ Toivo Pilli, ‘Sõpruskonna tähendusest’ [On the Significance of the Circle of Friends], n. d., manuscript, Toivo Pilli’s personal archive.

⁶⁶ Karl Pajusalu, Notes, Karl Pajusalu’s personal archive.

overview of developments in twentieth-century theological thought.⁶⁷ Tõnu Lehtsaar presented several papers on communication and psychology, such as one in 1985 explaining the dynamics of the psychotic group.⁶⁸

Whereas the Institute in Pärnu consisted primarily of young men, with occasional exceptions, the Tartu circle more often included young women with an interest in culture and theology. In Tartu, the boundaries between the Institute's activities and other forms of cultural life were more fluid. Poetry evenings and meetings with interesting individuals, for example, contributed to this group's intellectual vitality. The influence of the same circle was evident in these events, and many of the participants were the same. Theological discussion groups continued in Tartu during the second half of the 1980s. According to Ermo Jürma, a meeting featuring presentations was held at the home of Valdeko Säre in February 1987, attended also by Tarmo Toom and Tarmo Uustalu from Tallinn.⁶⁹ Friendship and a shared interest in theology fostered connections between participants in different towns.

A fellowship of individuals in Tallinn, from Evangelical Christian and Baptist backgrounds and with an interest in theology, also convened for discussions. The activities of the Haraka Institute, whether in its Pärnu or Tartu manifestations, likely served as a model, becoming known through personal networks. As illustrative of these activities, in October 1983 a discussion circle took place in Tallinn at which Peeter Roosimaa presented a paper on the links between Christianity and the Industrial Revolution; Tarmo Toom examined the relationship between music and Christian worship; Toivo Pilli addressed cultural issues in the history of Estonian Free Churches; and Joosep Tammo delivered a presentation entitled 'Culture Reborn in Christ'.⁷⁰ In January 1987, another discussion group met in Tallinn under the name the Areopagus Club. Once again, the relationship between Christianity and culture formed the central theme, under the title 'The Sociodynamics of

⁶⁷ Toivo Pilli, Notes, Toivo Pilli materials, Haraka Institute and study days, box 6, EEKBLA.

⁶⁸ Tõnu Lehtsaar, 'Psühhoiline grupp' [A Psychotic Group], manuscript (n. d.), Karl Pajusalu's personal archive.

⁶⁹ Ermo Jürma, email communication, 18 January, 2022.

⁷⁰ Invitation to the discussion circle, 29 January 1983, Karl Pajusalu's personal archive.

Culture, or On the Physiology of an Idol'. The main paper was presented by Joosep Tammo, and the model he proposed gave rise to a lively debate. Seven participants attended, including Jaan Bärenson, Ingmar Kurg, and Tõnu Lehtsaar.

These informal circles of friends created networks of interpersonal relationships that fostered trust and established a foundation for the exchange of ideas and mutual learning. These meetings also represented a form of intellectual formation distinct both from individual self-study and from the courses organised by the leadership of the ECB Union. The significance of such networks extended beyond the acquisition of knowledge: they also gave rise to enduring personal friendships and mentoring relationships. Joosep Tammo identifies a further dimension: 'The idea of establishing some kind of intellectual club represented, in a sense, a deliberate response to a more emotionally oriented form of religiosity. We thought that if it created relationships and expanded, it would also acquire a missional dimension.'⁷¹ Initiatives such as the Haraka Institute also inspired another important activity: the production and circulation of typewritten 'journals' or, rather, collections of articles.

The most significant collection, or periodical, to reach a wider readership was *Lectio*, edited and published by Joosep Tammo. Between 1977 and 1979, at least ten typewritten issues appeared. Participants in the Haraka Institute formed part of *Lectio's* readership, while also contributing ideas and material of their own.⁷² Some articles were translated from the Russian-language journal *Logos*, published in Belgium for readers in the Soviet Union. *Logos* was a Catholic periodical containing both devotional material and intellectually demanding theological and cultural essays. In Estonia it circulated through a Lutheran pastor Tiit Salumäe, and Tammo adopted it as the principal model for his own publication.⁷³ Naturally, the so-to-speak hand-produced *Lectio* had its limitations. It was typewritten, occasionally

⁷¹ Toivo Pilli, 'Sõpruskonna tähendusest', Toivo Pilli's personal archive.

⁷² Timoteos Pilli, 'Teoloogilise ajakirja *Lectio* lugu' [The Story of the Theological Journal *Lectio*], (unpublished research paper, Hugo Treffner Secondary School, Tartu, 2019), p. 25.

⁷³ Timoteos Pilli, 'The Story of the Theological Journal *Lectio*', p. 13.

contained typographical errors, and some duplicated copies were faint and difficult to read. Nevertheless, this publication challenged its readers intellectually and broadened their horizons of knowledge, particularly within the intellectually stagnant and officially atheist society of the late Soviet period. No doubt, it also widened the theological discussion in the free church setting in Estonia.

Inspired indirectly by both the Haraka Institute and *Lectio*, Pilli and Pajusalu published three issues of the cultural journal *Jäljed* (Footprints) between 1979 and 1980, exploring cultural themes from a Christian perspective. These issues included, for example, reflections prompted by a concert by pianist Rein Rannap, a selection of poems, discussions of the theatre productions ‘Waiting for Godot’ and ‘The Makarenko Colony’, and an introduction to Mother Teresa following her receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. Subsequently, in 1987–1988, Pilli edited two issues of *Lugemisvihik* (Reading Notebook), a publication reflecting a more traditionally free church theological orientation.⁷⁴ Between 1981 and 1988, Ingmar Kurg edited *Logos*, a journal that appeared six times annually.

All of these publications were produced in typewritten form, and the number of copies were very limited — certainly less than a hundred. Compared with the publications discussed above, Kurg’s *Logos* functioned more explicitly as the voice of the official interests of the ECB Union.⁷⁵ It followed established patterns, was primarily intended for the denomination’s presbyters (pastors), and enjoyed the support of Robert Võsu, the Senior Presbyter of the Union, who regarded the journal as an important instrument of leadership and ministerial work. By contrast, *Lectio*, *Jäljed*, and *Lugemisvihik* reflected a more ecumenical outlook. They welcomed a broader range of contributions, engaged with questions of general culture, and created an intellectual space that encouraged creativity and experimentation with new ideas. Both the activities of these circles of friends and the typewritten journals they produced embodied a measured form of protest against intellectual

⁷⁴ *Jäljed* I–III; *Lugemisvihik* I–II, EEKBLA.

⁷⁵ It is not clear if the title of this Estonian typewritten journal was or was not inspired by the Belgian publication *Logos*.

complacency and stagnation in both church and society, while deliberately avoiding overt criticism.

The Communist state kept these activities under close observation but did not prohibit them outright. It is possible that the system of control, represented by the Commissioner for Religious Affairs, tolerated gatherings, study days, and the limited circulation of typewritten materials, provided that they did not address overtly political issues. Robert Võsu, as Senior Presbyterian, may also have succeeded in establishing a *modus vivendi* in his dealings with the authorities. Joosep Tammo has suggested that the atheist regime was particularly concerned by the charismatic revival that took place at Oleviste Church during the 1970s and 1980s, as it proved difficult to control. In discussions with the Commissioner, Võsu may therefore have argued that educational initiatives were necessary to maintain balance within church life.⁷⁶ This interpretation, however, remains speculative.

Summary and Conclusions

Estonian Baptists and the ECB congregations, particularly their leaders, attached considerable importance to theological education. During the formative years of the Baptist movement, preachers and leaders regarded theological learning as an apologetic resource. They studied German-language theological literature and even examined the New Testament texts in the original language. This strengthened their religious identity. Consistent with Baptist tradition, questions concerning religious practice and Biblical interpretation were discussed at conferences held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attended by representatives of local churches. Approximately a dozen preachers, including influential figures like Karl Kaups, Johannes Lipstok, and August Johannson, received theological training at the Baptist seminary in Hamburg. The experience acquired abroad, together with locally organised short courses for ministers, laid the foundation for the establishment of a theological seminary in Estonia. The need for

⁷⁶ Toivo Pilli, 'Sõpruskonna tähendusest', Toivo Pilli's personal archive.

a more systematic programme of theological education developed gradually over time.

The Estonian Baptist Preachers' Seminary was established in Keila in 1922 under the leadership of Adam Podin, with substantial support from international partners. Its primary purpose was to prepare ministers for service in local congregations, equipping them with the skills required for Biblical interpretation and the effective communication of the Christian message. In 1931, the seminary relocated to a new building in Tallinn, and soon adopted the name Estonian Baptist Theological Seminary. Several young lecturers who had received theological education abroad, including Osvald Tärk, Evald Mänd, and Edgar Kilimit, introduced more ambitious theological and academic objectives. These developments were, however, brought to an abrupt end by political change, as the seminary was closed by the Soviet authorities in 1940.

The educational efforts undertaken before the Second World War were nevertheless far from futile. The fruits of the seminary's work became evident during the Soviet period, when many of its graduates served their congregations with dedication, applying in the Communist context the theological insights and practical ministerial skills they had acquired through their pre-war training. The pre-war seminary came to assume an almost symbolic status — perhaps somewhat idealised, yet serving as an important reminder of the significance of theological education for Christian ministry in general, and for Baptist work in particular. Former students continued to meet during the Soviet era,⁷⁷ while the seminary's documents and library were secretly preserved in the attic of the Kohila Baptist Church. This investment in theological education enabled the ECB Union to maintain institutional stability and pursue its mission with purpose even under the challenging conditions of an officially atheistic regime.

During the Soviet period, it was impossible to re-establish the seminary. Instead, efforts were made to compensate for its absence through short-term training courses and theological distance-learning

⁷⁷ For example, a reunion of the pre-war seminary students to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the school was organised in 1972.

programmes. These initiatives were intended to prepare new ministers and church workers while also strengthening unity within the Estonian ECB Union, into which the Soviet authorities had merged four previously independent free church denominations. Independent study was actively encouraged.

In a surprising and exceptional development, the ECB Union received oral permission from the Soviet authorities to organise theological distance-learning courses between 1956 and 1960. For a period of two years, additional training was also provided for organists and choir directors. The academic requirements of the programme may have been overly demanding, reflecting an attempt to emulate the objectives of the pre-war seminary. Nevertheless, those who participated acquired valuable theological knowledge and practical skills, while also forming personal relationships that proved beneficial in their ministerial service. The lecturers produced nearly thirty typewritten study manuals and prepared lecture notes. Although these were largely compilations, they constituted an important body of teaching and learning material that provided a foundation for the theological education of the next generation. On the basis of these texts, beginning students in the 1970s and 1980s undertook non-formal examinations administered by more experienced ministers.

Some of these materials were translated into Russian, thereby supporting the correspondence Bible courses established by the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Moscow in 1968. Robert Võsu and Osvald Tärk, who taught on these Moscow courses, drew extensively upon both the experience and the teaching materials of the pre-war seminary and the theological courses of the 1950s. In retrospect, the preservation of theological education within the Estonian ECB Union, despite the severe constraints imposed by the Soviet regime, proved to have a far greater long-term significance than might initially have been anticipated.

During the 1970s, the Senior Presbyter Robert Võsu organised regional study groups for ministers and other church workers. These training sessions enabled him to identify and encourage new workers for service in local congregations. At the same time, the study gatherings

provided valuable encouragement and support to those already engaged in ministry. Võsu's energy and determination in organising training initiatives and promoting theological education were remarkable. By 1983, the various study groups comprised approximately 60–70 participants, the majority of whom completed four or five examinations within the following two years. Thereafter, however, the number of candidates taking examinations declined significantly. It appears that the demands of sustained theological study, particularly through independent reading, were difficult to reconcile with the responsibilities of everyday life and ministry.

A less demanding, yet highly effective, form of continuing ministerial education was provided through the consultation days held in Tallinn between 1981 and 1989. These gatherings featured lectures on a wide range of subjects, at times addressing issues of contemporary relevance. They also brought together ministers and lay church workers from different congregations, fostering a sense of unity and providing opportunities for discussion and the exchange of ideas. Another significant contribution of Robert Võsu was his crucial role in enabling some young theologians and preachers to undertake formal theological studies abroad during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Later, these theologians and pastors contributed to the life of ECB Union for decades.

The present article pays particular attention to friendship networks that facilitated informal theological education. One such network was the Haraka Institute, an informal friendship circle that started in Pärnu, a seaside resort town, in 1978. Its meetings featured presentations and discussions that broadened participants' intellectual horizons, fostered an ecumenical understanding of theology, explored the relationship between Christianity and culture, and provided opportunities to practise preaching. This form of theological education was neither coordinated by the leadership of the ECB Union nor intended to follow a prescribed curriculum. Consequently, it allowed for a greater degree of spontaneity and intellectual creativity. Similar friendship networks of individuals interested in theology subsequently emerged in Tartu and Tallinn. The network was further strengthened,

and its ideas disseminated, through the typewritten journal *Lectio*, edited and published by Joosep Tammo between 1977 and 1979. *Lectio* also served as a model for some subsequent publications, as short-lived as they were. Although the circulation of these typewritten texts was necessarily limited, their readership extended beyond the members of the friendship network itself. These collections articulated ideas that went beyond the themes typically addressed within the Estonian Free Church tradition.

And finally, theological education took various forms in Estonian ECB life. It could take place through individual study or within discussion groups, following either a structured programme or the spontaneous interests of the participants. Theological education constituted an important element of the ECB Union's identity. The provision of ministerial education, combined with religious commitment, served as a means of building up congregations, offering necessary tools for pastors and preachers, and equipping them to respond to changing circumstances. It also contributed to identifying and preparing new church workers for ministry. Keeping theological education alive even during atheistic times prepared opportunities for re-opening the theological seminary in 1989 when the society opened up for religious and political freedoms.