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## **From the Biblical Theological Institute in Zagreb to the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek: A Look Back (1972–2022)**

In addition to preaching and performing miracles, Jesus Christ also taught his audiences. Why did he do this? Wasn't preaching enough? Teaching prepares the mind so that the heart becomes ready to accept God's messages under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, teaching, knowledge, and understanding are strategically crucial in God's economy of time because theology is a valuable discipline. In this short essay, I aim to outline the stages of development – the functional paradigm of the Evangelical Theological Seminary from its inception to the present day.

Before the decision to start formal biblical and theological education was made in 1969, the Presbytery of the Pentecostal Church of Christ (KPC) in the former Yugoslavia annually organized and held weekly seminars for pastors and preachers. Additionally, during this time, manuals of theology and Christian pedagogy were printed to assist in pastoral work. For me, the years spanning from 1985 and 2003 were particularly impactful, as they contributed greatly to my life, learning, and spiritual growth.

### **First Paradigm and Beginnings: BTI Zagreb (1972–1976)<sup>1</sup>**

Back in 1966, the Main Presbytery of the Pentecostal Church of Christ in SFR Yugoslavia, comprising Ludvig Üllen, Andrija Anđelić, Dragutin Volf, Jožef Hajdinjak and Andrija Sabo, decided to establish a theological school that would educate and prepare pastors and other spiritual workers in Zagreb and named it Biblical Theological Institute. Upon his return from postgraduate studies in the United States, Peter Kuzmič was appointed director of the Institute by the Main Presbytery. The BTI's ceremonial inauguration took place during a worship ser-

1 In his article "Deset godina BTI-a" M. Sc. Peter MacKenzie (alias Peter Časni) accurately described this period. *The Pentecostal News* published this article in its supplement *Izvori* in number 12 from 1982, to commemorate ten years of the Biblical Theological Institute.

vice on October 2, 1972, at the KPC in Zagreb, Ilica 200. Special guests were Dr. Gordon Fee and Dr. Charles Greenaway from the Assemblies of God (AoG).

In the beginning, a group of 25 students from various churches formed the first generation of classes. The classes were held in the basement premises of KPC in Zagreb. However, on April 8, 1973, the classes were relocated to the Institute's premises at 76 Kosirnikova Street in Zagreb. The first graduation ceremony took place on September 13, 1975, at KPC premises at Ilica 200, in Zagreb. The keynote speaker was Philip Hogan, the director of the AoG mission from the United States.

Due to various challenges such as a lack of resources, teaching staff, suitable spaces, and the fact that small church unions could not financially support resident students, a new operating paradigm had to be established.

### **Second Paradigm: Education by Extension Centers (1976–1984)**

A unique theological study known as TEE (Theological Education by Extension) was launched in various educational centers across Belgrade, Zagreb, Osijek, Novi Sad, Subotica, Vinkovci, and other locations on November 1, 1976. This initiative aimed to provide theological education to people in their local communities, without disrupting their connection to the church and at a lower cost. It provided an excellent opportunity for church members to gain relevant theological knowledge. Numerous professors, such as, Aleksandar Birviš, Branko Lovrec, Stjepan Orčić, Petar Časni, John Stetz, Gerald Shenk, and many others visited students in their communities. Students were not limited to young believers but also included long-term preachers and pastors such as Jan Pap from Pivnice, Duško Ružić from Bačka Palanka, Josip Moguš from Đakovo and Mira Volf from Novi Sad. The initiative also fostered sincere and fruitful brotherly cooperation among churches of different denominations, e.g., between Stevo Dereta from the Baptist Union and Andrija Sabo from KPC in Osijek, as well as Veljko Bogdanović from the Church of God in Vinkovci and Viktor Sabo from Subotica.

On February 25, 1983, the Biblical Theological Institute relocated its headquarters from Zagreb to Osijek, at 32 Dimitrije Tucović Street, now known as Cvjetkova Street. Despite the move, the institute continued to provide education at the KPC premises in Osijek. In an article published in *Izvori*, Petar Časni (1982) explained the education's purpose: "We aim to train individuals who possess intellectual prowess, but who are also filled with the Spirit, capable of leading God's people in ever greater undertakings of faith!" I recall my initial interaction with Peter Kuzmič during those times when I contacted him in 1983 from Osijek "Pothodnik" regarding my enrollment in part-time theology studies.

### **Third Paradigm: Spread and Growth of the Evangelical Theological Seminary (1984–1991)**

As students began to move to Osijek, closer to urban places containing the Churches of the Reformation Heritage, the process of internationalization and inter-denominationalization began as well. The school readily accepted students from abroad and other Christian denominations. Some students willingly gave up highly paid jobs and enrolled in regular studies, such as Toma Magda, Milan Špoljarić, Stanko Jambrek, and others. They were preparing themselves with the utmost gravity and dedication for spiritual service. These students also engaged in pastoral work in neighboring communities during the weekends, aside from their studies.

In the late 80s, following political changes in Eastern Europe, foreign students were allowed to attend the school. Students from former Soviet Union countries, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and also Africa and Asia were welcomed. The school administration managed student visas, accommodations, and arranged for English and Croatian classes as necessary.

As a result of changes in the teaching programs, the Biblical Theological Institute underwent a name change to become the Evangelical Theological Seminary on October 21, 1989. The year after, in 1990, a brand-new college building was constructed, equipped with various classrooms and offices for professors, an amphitheater, a kitchen with a dining area, a boiler room, a workshop, and student accommodation.

### **Fourth Paradigm: War and Post-War Years (1991–1999)**

Classes were temporarily moved to Slovenia from October 1, 1990, to September 1, 1992, due to the beginning of the Homeland War and the Faculty's proximity to the battlefield. The village of Ženavlje in Prekomurje became the new location, specifically the church premises of the Pentecostal and Evangelical (Lutheran) parish in Hodoš. Later, upon returning to Osijek, the faculty began offering post-graduate studies in Theology and launched the Multimedia Center *Izvori Vjere*, which involved creating audio and visual recordings and Christian radio programs.

Supplementary studies in Christian Pedagogy took place at the Institute for Christian Pedagogy and Culture in 1994. The Institute for Christian Psychotherapy was founded in 1996, with the psychological counseling center *Karis* and the Institute for Life, Peace, and Justice. The same year, academic cooperation with the Oxford Center for Mission Studies from Great Britain began.

As of January 1, 1998, the faculty gained full membership to CARNET and access to its resources. Later that year, on September 1, they completed the process of academic affiliation with the University of Leeds in Great Britain, which opened the possibility of postgraduate theological studies.

Over the years, the Faculty has actively engaged in humanitarian efforts across Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo. Additionally, they have made significant contributions to the field of theology by publishing textbooks and manuals, as well as books aimed at supporting the spiritual development of students and believers in Christian communities. The Faculty has always attempted to serve the evangelical churches and other Churches of the Reformation Heritage in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, using its resources.

### **Fifth Paradigm: Progress Despite Crises (2000–2022)**

The Institute for Christian Music and the Institute for Protestant Studies began operating on September 10, 2000. Following an academic evaluation and recommendation by the National Council for Higher Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology of the Republic of Croatia granted permission to implement university-level undergraduate and graduate programs in theological studies. The contract officially establishing “Visoko evanđeosko teološko učilište” (VETU – Evangelical Theological Seminary) in Osijek as the successor of the Biblical Theological Institute from Zagreb, i.e., the Evangelical Theological Seminary from Osijek, was signed on September 23, 2003. The Ministry of Science and Technology issued a Decision in September of the same year, adding VETU to the Register of Higher Education Institutions under serial number 0271.

On May 31, 2004, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana signed an agreement with VETU for collaboration in educational, scientific research, and other activities. VETU was subsequently registered as a scientific organization by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia on June 4, 2004, and installed in the Registry of Institutions at the Commercial Court in Osijek on January 7, 2005.

On June 10, 2006, VETU moved into a new building that included a library, reading room, classrooms, offices, cabinets, and practicums. Starting October 1, 2006, per the Bologna reform, VETU launched a three-year undergraduate program, a two-year graduate program, and a postgraduate (doctoral) study in Theology, following the Bologna reform.

During the year 2007, cooperation agreements were established with the Bible Institute situated in Zagreb and Elim Evangelical Theological Seminary (EETS) from Timisoara, Romania, in the area of theological education. Furthermore, this

period witnessed the founding of three new institutes – the Pastoral Institute, ISKUS (Institute for the Study of Christian Teaching and Worldview), and OSIMS (Osijek Institute for Missionary Studies). Lastly, the initiation of Erasmus projects stands out as a notable achievement during this time.

During this period of intensive globalization, democratization, rapid communication, urbanization, and migration, five critical areas of concern demand attention:

1. Ecclesial crises that often impact VETU as well
2. Adjustments to changing laws in the Republic of Croatia, the forming of new teaching and other staff, and operational funding challenges for higher education institutions, among others
3. Global changes and the search for effective approaches to theological education
4. The COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching consequences for communication, mobility, and classes
5. Demographic transitions, such as the departure of young people from Churches of the Reformation Heritage toward new labor markets.

## **Conclusion**

Since 1972, BTI/ETS/VETU has served as a strategic center for the education and practical training of future pastors and other spiritual workers. Despite facing obstacles such as religious freedom restrictions and other challenges in the countries of this part of Europe, VETU has expanded educational horizons and developed formative preparations for spiritual service, thus performing an essential task in spreading the Good News.

This biblical and theological school creatively and dynamically succeeded in combining the spiritual growth of its students, and their biblical and theological education with practical service in their respective social and national environments. Peter Kuzmič's unwavering leadership and vision have been very important in the school's growth and development over the past 50 years, contributing to it in a lasting and unforgettable manner.

We express our gratitude to God for the dedication and contributions of the many teachers, associates, and volunteers from both local and international communities who have wholeheartedly worked toward the growth and development of this esteemed higher education institution over the years. The alumni of this institution are now serving in various churches, denominations, and Christian organizations across Europe and the world, as pastors, religious teachers, professors, and workers in Christian media, humanitarian, and other social fields.

Regardless of new challenges, transitions, and changes, we will remain steadfast in our prayers to the Lord and seek wisdom “that comes down from above” to recognize the spiritual movements that will foster new paradigms of theological education in this institution. We firmly believe that this is God’s work, and despite the necessary adjustments and changes, this institution has a bright future ahead. Hence, we say, *Soli Deo Gloria!*