

MISSIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA – AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CHALLENGES FACING EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Introductory remarks.

I work for an organization called Overseas Council International. It was founded 35 years ago by four Americans in order to help resource the emerging evangelical seminaries in the majority world where there has been explosive growth in the church. The founders believed that the seminary was the key to the future of the Church. ‘As goes the seminary, so goes the Church’ was the saying. Funds were raised in the States and transferred to partner seminaries in the majority world.

Ten years ago they realized that the seminaries needed more than just money. Human capacity building was needed in order to lead an institution effectively. Thus the annual ‘Institutes of Excellence’ were started in which training was given in matters of governance and leadership, financial management and fundraising, and curriculum design.

Four years ago a new strategy was implemented with the appointment of continental Regional Directors who were nationals. I was the first appointment for Africa. There is now an Argentinian for Latin America, a Lebanese for the Middle East, an Indian for South East Asia and a Chinese for China. I relate to 34 degree level, accredited evangelical seminaries in twenty countries in sub Saharan Africa. (There are, of course hundreds if not thousands of bible schools and church based training programs that minister at the large base of the pyramid among the laity and underqualified pastors.) This has given me a unique overview of an important and large section of theological education in Africa.

Setting the Scene.

Most seminaries operate in the context of poverty. The students and their churches are cash strapped. Some have survived horrible protracted wars (Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Liberia to name a few) and have suffered the resultant destruction of infrastructure and services. Some still operate in very unstable environments (Chad, Sudan, DRC) for example. Zimbabwe is the prime example of a basket case economy. Many are in countries with sporadic and unreliable electricity supplies. One seminary in Kenya became an instant refugee camp in January during the post election factional fighting. Most have problems with poor internet connectivity, especially in the lack of bandwidth. Doing business, even importing books, becomes an uphill struggle with red tape and sticky fingered officials! Travel is often difficult and very expensive. One recognizes that running a tertiary level educational institution is very stressful and very challenging.

It is for these reasons that I have the utmost admiration for those exercising leadership in our partner seminaries. They are heroes.

With these introductory remarks behind us let us examine this sector of theological education from a missiological perspective.

- 1. Self Governing.** There there has been a massive change over the past decade or two. This was a long time in coming. Mission founded national churches gained their independence in the wave of 'uhuru' but mission agencies were able to retain control of seminaries for a lot longer because of the high cost of running them and the lack of suitably qualified national lecturers. Today, only one of the 34 partner seminaries is headed by an expatriate. All the rest have nationals as principals. All of them have governing councils made up of nationals. This has had some liberating consequences. They have been free to seek out new relationships with other like minded seminaries in the region and they have found the space to begin to change their curriculums. The psychological ownership of the seminary is now clearly vested with Africans. On the negative side, I must mention that in many cases the Boards are problematic because people are appointed who do not have the skills to add value to the seminary.
- 2. Self Supporting.** With the independence of the seminaries has come the loss of easy funding from Western mission agencies. This might be a blessing in disguise in the long run as it is forcing seminaries to break their dependency mode of thinking. There is always a constant tension between viability and dependency. Charity often destroys dignity and so OCI has worked hard to help partner seminaries to become more self sufficient from local sources, especially with respect to the operating budget. I imagine that there will be need for overseas help for capital projects for many years to come. The locally sourced share of the income budget varies from 0.5% (Zimbabwe) to 90% with the average being around 45%. New and creative ways are being found to raise supplementary income:
 - Build and rent out houses.
 - Build an office block.
 - Open a cyber café at the gate of the seminary.
 - Operate a junior school.
 - Plant 2 acres of bananas for sale on the open market.
 - Have a contract with the government to train the chaplains of the army, police and prison services.

In these two aspects evangelical colleges are increasingly fulfilling two of Henry Venns 'Three self principles'. His third principle, that of 'self propagating', is largely inapplicable because seminaries are not meant to aggressively replicate themselves. I would be so bold however as to add a fourth dimension and that is to be 'self theologising'. In as much as Venn's Three self formula addressed the issue of dependency of the third world church on the West, so too this fourth

dimension also addresses an aspect of dependency. This time it is the question of curriculum content and learning materials.

- 3. Self Theologising.** Most of the evangelical seminaries have seen themselves as being teaching institutions, faithfully transmitting the scholarship of the West. The libraries are generally adequate, probably averaging around 20000 volumes, although Francophone and Luzophone seminaries have greater difficulty sourcing theological texts. The common weakness is, however, in journal holdings. This is largely due to the cost of ordering and maintaining a journal series. Overseas Council is working on this problem by investigating taking a group licence to e-journals. The lack of journals means that lecturers fall behind in the trends and current issues.

An important factor that militates against research is the fact that the brightest and most qualified lecturers tend to end up in administrative positions and have to multi task which leaves little time for research. Much more needs to be done to engender a culture of research in our partner seminaries.

Another factor is that at this stage of development much energy and effort by lecturers is going into obtaining higher degrees and not into publishing. But we are on the cusp of change here and in the next decade we will see the production of new knowledge that finds the light of day in books and journal articles. The complaint that text books are too Eurocentric and do not address African realities is being addressed. In January this year, I organized a training workshop in Kenya for first time aspirant writers. We had 15 people in attendance (subjects included iLobola, rights of passage, conflict in the DRC, ministry to refugees, childhood in Africa etc). In February next year the second writer's workshop will take place in West Africa. Doing theology is certainly inherent to the mission of the Church in all situations and down the ages. Africans need therefore to do their own theologizing by relating the Text to their context. Dawid Bosch, quoting Kahler writes that 'Mission is the mother of theology'. Theology has always developed as the church crossed frontiers with the gospel. The theological enterprise needs to enable the church better fulfill its missionary task. This requires a strong link with the faith community and raises the question as to the primary point of reference for seminaries: Is it the academy or the faith community?

A sub text in this section relates to the use of overseas lecturers. The marked decline in the number of overseas lecturers has been offset by the rise in the number of properly qualified African faculty members. Of course there is the balancing act of having to find the salary of national staff as against the free services of externally supported missionaries. National lecturers are better placed to address most contextual issues with insider knowledge of the problems.

- 4. Context and Curriculum.** The curriculums were, for the most part, deposits left behind from the mission enterprise. Most curriculums bore little relationship to African realities. In 2004 I organized a conference on HIV/AIDS and the

Curriculum. Ninety seven people attended from 40 bible colleges and seminaries from 19 different African countries. Of these only four or five had any courses on HIV/AIDS! Mercifully things are changing. In fact two seminaries now offer masters degrees in the subject. Courses on AIDS, peacemaking, development studies, leadership, holistic child development and the like are being incorporated into curriculums today. But there is still a long way to go before we can say that the training given to pastors is preparing them to work in the context of African realities.

One challenge that is emerging is the realization that pastors also need to be given income earning skills because so many churches do not provide a livable wage. The context of poverty is challenging the assumed Western model of the full time paid clergy. Should seminaries therefore include marketable job skills in their training programmes?

A fundamental question is ‘What should be taught?’ If seminaries exist to serve the Church then the competencies to be produced must relate to the nature of the ministry. Curriculums need to be built from the user end backwards into the classroom by asking ‘what competencies are needed to be an effective minister in this context?’

5. **Accreditation and Excellence.** We in South Africa, are only too aware of the law requiring registration with SAQA and accreditation by the CHE. In most African countries however, the governments have shown no interest in theological education. To fill this gap an organization called ACTEA, a subsection of the World Evangelical Fellowship, has done sterling work for 30 years. It has built up a credible reputation such that graduates from ACTEA accredited seminaries are given recognition when applying to South African universities for further studies. The accreditation process is very thorough – a team of 5 people visit a seminary for 5 days and investigate the seminary under 5 headings. The great benefit is that a self reflective culture is inculcated in the seminary through the Self Evaluation Review. There is however, a new discernable trend in which national governments are becoming more involved in accreditation of theological education. Ghana and Kenya are two examples. In time, I believe more will follow suit. While there are benefits to government accreditation, there is the danger of political interference or political favouritism that will undermine the validity of the process.
6. **Models and Modes.** The model of theological education we have inherited is that of the full time residential student. This model is under pressure because of the high cost of tuition and accommodation coupled to the loss of income for the duration of studies. The growth of the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) to 4300 students in 10 years is testimony to this. The rapid development of electronic delivery systems will transform the method of delivery in time to come. Virtual interactive class rooms are possible. Real time interactive video lectures are coming. Africa will lag behind the rest of the world due to

infrastructural problems, but change will come. I recently read a fascinating article entitled 'What colleges should learn from newspapers decline'. The author makes the point that 'Both industries are in the business of creating and communicating information. Paradoxically, both are threatened by the way technology has made that easier than ever before.'

In the west, degree level seminaries too easily become elitist and loose touch with lower level schools. A new model is emerging in Africa whereby higher level seminaries help to resource lower level bible colleges. Mekana Yesus Theological College in Addis Ababa is a case in point. It is at the apex of the pyramid, but it helps 4 lower level regional colleges which help 12 lower level local colleges. In Mozambique the Nazarene seminary has only 30 full time students but it overseas lower level lay training programs for 1000 people in 50 extension sites. One seminary in Kenya runs classes for 60 teachers during the school holidays for people who are already in ministry and leadership positions in their local churches. Many seminaries hold in-service training events for pastors. A number of recent examples have been around the subject of HIV/AIDS (CAR, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal).

- 7. Church or Society.** A question today in the minds of at least a dozen seminaries is that of becoming a Christian University. This raises numerous questions about the nature and purpose of theological studies. It begs the question as to what constitutes a 'Christian university'? The need in society for good programs in leadership studies, business studies, computer studies, even medical studies and the like, is self evident. But should the seminary be the vehicle to meet that need? The danger here is that the rapid growth of students attending these other courses will swamp the theological faculty and deflect it from its original purpose to serve the church. This raises a fundamental missiological question as to the mission of the church in the world. Much church life is, well, too churchy! The church does need to become involved in a redemptive way in the life and needs of broader society. My position however, is that the usual vehicle for expressing the *Missio Dei* is through the church (with all its faults). For mission to be Christian it needs to be done in the name of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God.
- 8. Competition or co operation.** Jesus prayer in John 17 was 'that they may be one, so that the world may believe'. This link between unity and mission was a theological imperative driving the ecumenical movement. The important evangelical statement, the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 similarly calls for evangelicals to cooperate in its paragraph 7. Even though evangelicals have historically been wary of the ecumenical movement, there has always been an informal ecumenism which was expressed through many joint ventures and faith mission structures. In the seminaries there is an informal mixing of students from many different denominations. Some seminaries are owned jointly by several denominations. Some are owned by the national evangelical fellowships. Two were founded by the continental Africa Association of Evangelicals. Even those that belong to a single denomination have up to 40% of their students from other denominational backgrounds. The Overseas Council's annual 'Institutes of

Excellence' brings the leaders of the seminaries together and has had the effect of building relationships between previously isolated theological institutions.

The more difficult point at issue is to find inter seminary co operation, but there are a few notable examples. The Francophone grouping of 24 seminaries and bible colleges has adopted a common core curriculum and they share lecturers to plug gaps in each others faculty needs. The Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology was jointly sponsored by three agencies rather than having each one start its own graduate school. In Maputo the Nazarene and the Assembly of God seminaries are jointly sponsoring a master's degree program. Having said that, these examples are noteworthy because they are the exceptions. The Lausanne Covenant rightly states 'We confess that our testimony has sometimes been marred by sinful individualism and needless competition'.

In summary. In summary then let me make some generalized concluding statements.

Theological education in the evangelical sector of the church is in the state of rapid change. It is both exciting and daunting.

There is an increasing improvement of faculty qualifications. This needs to follow through to research and publications.

There is less dependence on lecturers from the West because nationals can now do the job.

The seminaries still have close links to denominations and the faith community. They have not spun off into some independent orbit.

New modes of delivery will become apparent in the next decade, be it electronic or paper based distance learning, extension courses, mixed mode block release. The full time residential model will have to change.

If 'Mission is the mother of theology', as I believe it is, then the seminaries in Africa need to engage much more with African realities such as poverty, gender, children, climate change, corruption, exploitative leaders, health issues, war and violence, urbanization etc. Notwithstanding the changes in the curriculums to date, much more needs to be done.