

ABSTRACT

Evangelical theological education in Africa is in a state of significant change as seminaries respond to the realities of Africa and the needs of the churches they are serving. These trends are highlighted and assessed in missiological terms.

KEY WORDS

Theological education, evangelical, Africa, context, church and society.

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

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SETTING THE SCENE

Most seminaries in Africa 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 such as Chad, Sudan and the DRC for example. Zimbabwe is the prime example of a basket case economy where a seminary had to cope with runaway inflation. 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.

There are hundreds of bible schools and lay training programs at certificate level, in both formal and non formal modes of education. This paper will concentrate on degree conferring, accredited seminaries in the evangelical stream of theology that are located in sub-Saharan Africa.

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

TRENDS and CHALLENGES

- 1. Self Governing.** There has been a massive change over the past decade or two with respect to the ownership, leadership and governance of evangelical seminaries. This was a long time in coming. Mission founded national churches gained their independence in the wake of the wave of 'uhuru' over 40 years ago 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 Overseas Council 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, 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 dignity¹ and so Overseas Council International has worked hard to help partner seminaries to become more self sufficient from local sources, especially with respect to the operating budget. 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 to 50%.

New and creative ways are being found to raise supplementary income. Some examples are: To build and rent out houses to Christian organisations. Build an office block for rental income. Open a cyber café at the gate of the seminary. Operate a junior school for profit. Plant two 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 being '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.

¹ See the hard hitting book by G Schwartz, 2007. *When Charity Destroys Dignity. Overcoming unhealthy dependency in the Christian movement.* Philadelphia: World Mission Associates.

- 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 on behalf of the 100 partner seminaries. The lack of journals means that lecturers will eventually fall behind in their scholarship and in the trends and current debates.

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 many lecturers are expending their energy to obtain higher degrees and have no time left to publish. 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 2009, a training workshop was organised in Kenya for first time aspirant writers. Fifteen people attended who were to write on African related subjects such as iLobola (bride price), rights of passage, conflict in the DRC, ministry to refugees, sickness and dying, childhood in Africa and the like. A second writer's workshop will take place in West Africa in 2010. Theological reflection on issues confronting the church has been part of 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' (Bosch 1991:489). 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 of the seminary 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 who have at least a masters degree or doctorate. 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 however better placed to address most contextual issues with insider knowledge of the problems. But there is another issue here. It is the relationship between local and contextual theologies and the universal body of theological and historical truths that are held in common by all Christians.

- 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 in South Africa 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. One subject that is important but that is being studiously avoided is that of gender studies. There is still a long way to go before we can say that the training given to pastors is adequately 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? There is another related assumption concerns the professionalization of the clergy who are the ones who do all the work and the resulting marginalization of the laity. A partner seminary in western Kenya currently trains teachers during their school holidays. They already have some tertiary training and are already in leadership positions in their churches but now they are being given the necessary theological training to enhance their contribution to the local church. But they will not seek ordination. The question is thus how to design theological education that serves the whole people of God.

Another 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 constructed, first by identifying the desired outcomes, then, secondarily, to construct the curriculums and learning experiences that will achieve those outcomes. The key question to ask is ‘what competencies are needed to be an effective minister in this context?’

- 5. Accreditation and Excellence.** In South Africa, we are only too aware of the law requiring registration with the South African Qualifications Authority and accreditation by the Council on Higher Education. In most African countries however, the governments have shown no interest in theological education. To fill this gap an organization called ACTEA (the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa), a subsection of the World Evangelical Fellowship, has done sterling work for 30 years. It has built up a credible reputation so 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 with respect to

quality assurance 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 the accreditation of theological education. Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Kenya are a few examples. In time, I believe more will follow suit. While there are benefits to government accreditation, there is also the danger of political interference or political favouritism that could 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), as an electronically based seminary, 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. The real time interactive video lecture is coming. Africa will lag behind the rest of the world due to infrastructural problems, but change will come. Newspapers are in decline in the West because of access to online news. Both colleges and newspapers are in the business of creating and communicating information. Paradoxically, both are threatened by the way technology has made that easier than ever before. New technology will be a powerful driver of change in theological education.

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 Yesu 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, in turn, 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 seminars in Chad, Senegal, and Cote d' Ivoire have been around the subject of HIV/AIDS. Three seminaries are experimenting with evening classes for young professionals.

Models of distributed education are appearing. It might be by extension campuses where the lecturer goes to another town, or by distance learning (text based or electronic), or by short course residencies. Whatever the case, it is clear that the mode, time and place of delivery is changing.

- 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'? Secular society needs good programs in leadership studies, business studies, computer studies, even medical studies and the like. This is self evident. But should the seminary change to become the vehicle to meet that need? The danger here is that the rapid growth in numbers of students enrolling for these other courses will swamp the theological faculty and deflect it from its original purpose to serve the church.

This, in turn, 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. Theological colleges have trained ministers for this rather cloistered church oriented model of ministry. The debate is whether the curriculum should be broadened to equip ministers to deal with poverty, aids and conflict as an expression of the ministry of a local church, or whether the seminary should be training Christians for 'secular' work but as witnesses as salt and light in society. This raises the missiological debate as to whether God works directly in the world or mainly through the Church. My position however, is that the usual vehicle for expressing the Missio Dei is the church despite 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 Association of Evangelicals in Africa. 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 34 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 Nazarenes and the Assembly of God seminaries are jointly sponsoring a master's degree program. Much more could be done however, even if it is sharing library resources through a common data base. The Lausanne Covenant rightly states 'We confess that our testimony has sometimes been marred by sinful individualism and needless competition'.

If this paper had been written from the perspective of education, some other important concerns would have been addressed. Many key books have been written analyzing theological education in all its many facets.² They reflect the fact that there is a lot of soul searching going on in theological education because there seems to be deep dissatisfaction with the current model. While these debates are not of much concern yet in Africa, they will arise sooner rather than later.

a. Much classroom practice is in the form of the ‘banking method’ as if Paulo Freire³ had not existed, in negation of the large body of literature on adult education.

b. The curriculums are still organized around specializations of subjects but the problems to be faced in the ministry do not come as ‘old testament’ or ‘systematic theology’ but as life related whole units that need to be solved on an interdisciplinary basis. More use of problem based learning and case studies would serve this end well. In practice most curriculums are overcrowded with content, courses and programs and the focus is on the transference of information.

c. Evangelical seminaries all affirm the importance of an holistic education that includes head, hands and heart. In practice most effort goes into the academic component because that is more easily assessed. There is need for the other two domains to receive intentional education design in both learning experiences and assessment.

d. Evangelical theological education has lacked a theology of education with the result that it has followed the trends in society and become captive to the spirit of the age which has to date been the rationalistic enlightenment paradigm.

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

Theological education in the evangelical sector of the church is in the state of rapid change. It is both exciting and daunting. Fundamental questions are being asked as to what should be taught, where should it be taught, who should be taught and how should it be taught?

Faculty qualifications are improving. This needs to follow through to research and publications. There is today less dependence on lecturers from the West because nationals can now do the job.

² See: Aleshire, D. 2008. *Earthen Vessels. Hopeful reflections on the work and future of theological schools.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Banks, R. 1999. *Reenvisioning Theological Education. Exploring a missional alternative to current models.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Cannell, L. 2006. *Theological Education Matters. Leadership education for the church.* EDCOT Press. Cole, V. 2001. *Training for the Ministry. A macro-curricular approach.* Theological Book Trust. Farley, E. 1983. *Theologia: The fragmentation and unity of theological education.* Philadelphia: Fortress. Kelsey, D. 1992. *To Understand God Truly. What's theological about a theological school?* Louisville: Westminster.

³ See Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum

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.

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AUTHOR PROFILE.

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DECLARATIONS

1. No part of this article has been plagiarized.
2. This article has not been submitted to any other journal for publication. Dr D Werner attended my paper in Stellenbosch and has asked me to write one providing a global overview of evangelical theological education rather than the limited focus on Africa that this paper had. Clearly, some of the trends will be common to both papers.