

RENEWAL OUT OF AFRICA

A Report on the African Consultation on the Viability of Ecumenical Theological Formation

held at the Moffat Mission, Kuruman, South Africa

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Introduction

The consultation was held at the historic Moffat Mission, Kuruman, in the North Cape Province of South Africa. Founded by Robert Moffat of the London Missionary Society in 1820, the Mission was the first outpost of Christian mission beyond the Orange River. David Livingstone began his work as a missionary and explorer at the Moffat Mission, as did many others who pioneered the planting of the church in southern, eastern and central Africa. In this year when the bicentenary of the LMS is being celebrated, it was fitting that our Consultation should be held at the Moffat Mission which is now administered by an ecumenical trust (Congregational, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian) and that it reached its climax in the bicentenary Sunday service held in the church at the Mission in which we were the guests of the local community.

We came together from various parts of Africa (Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, Zaire and Zimbabwe); we represented different Christian confessions and traditions (Anglicans, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ, Lutheran, Methodist, Moravian, Presbyterian, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist); we also welcomed a Muslim participant. At the same time we were conscious that many parts of Africa as well as Christian traditions (Copts, Ethiopian Orthodox, African Independent to mention some) were not represented. We also recognized that while we were a truly African consultation, the African continent is vast and varied, and that important sub-regional differences (North, sub-Saharan, West, Central, East Southern), often reinforced by the use of different colonial languages (Francophone, Lusophone, Anglophone), had to be kept in mind.

The ancient Romans were aware that something new always comes out of Africa. Our report is entitled "Renewal out of Africa" because we believe that Africa's pain bears witness to the message of the cross that new life can only be born through suffering and because we have experienced the renewing power and promise of Africa's spiritual and human resources. While our report has no stamp of approval other than its own intrinsic merits, we offer it to the Global Consultation on Ecumenical Theological Formation in the hope that it may contribute to the renewal for which we all yearn.

1. The pain and promise of Africa

All who are familiar with the reality of Africa today and genuinely concerned about its plight will equally reject both Afro-pessimism and romanticism. We need not elaborate on the pain of Africa as this is the subject of media reporting day by day throughout the world. But a catalogue of its plight will immediately bring that pain to mind:

Famine, refugees and ecological damage

The subjugation and marginalization of women

Slavery, colonialism, racism and tribalism

Wars, oppression, dictatorships, corruption, and genocide

Disease, poverty, hunger, AIDS, street children, informal settlements and the struggle for survival

Economic and cultural dependency, and global marginalization

Lack of education, illiteracy, and the brain drain

There are nevertheless signs of hope amidst widespread despair. Despite its long legacy of slavery, colonialism, and oppression, many African countries have made remarkable progress in establishing democratic rule and stable government. The transition to democracy in South Africa is widely heralded as an inspiration not only to the continent but to the world as a whole. There are also many other symbols of hope to which we can bear witness, most unnoticed by the media. These reflect the resilience of Africa's people in the midst of adversity, their religious commitment and rich cultural traditions. Our prayer is that Africa's suffering may be a source of redemption for the world, and that those engaged in the pursuit of a viable ecumenical theological formation for the church universal may discover the seeds of renewal in Africa's heritage.

2. The renewing vision of African Christianity

"Vision is a deep dissatisfaction with what is and a clear grasp of what could be". (George Kinoti)

African Christians confess the faith of the church universal. In doing so we especially affirm with African religious tradition that God the creator of all that exists is the source, giver and renewer of life and love. We also confess that in Jesus Christ God's redemptive grace and healing love for the world is revealed, and that the Holy Spirit empowers people in their witness to the reign of God. The rule and will of God (reign of God) has to do with justice, truth, love, freedom, healing, peace, reconciliation and righteousness.

Africa provides fresh metaphors for theology (our understanding of God). One metaphor which spoke to us in Kuruman was that of God as the root of the human tree with its many and diverse branches all of which belong together and draw sustenance from the same source. African sculpture often depicts the intertwined character of human society in which all members are organically related in their need, their solidarity, and their sharing. For Africans, sin is essentially the breaking of such bonds and redemption, their healing. African spirituality and worship have a distinct character which expresses this vision of Christian faith and community. It is a spirituality which is joyous and spontaneous, a spirituality of solidarity in suffering, a spirituality integrated fully into daily life.

Four aspects to the renewing vision of African Christianity may be identified. It is:

An holistic vision: beyond dualisms of gender, body/soul/mind, spiritual/material; visible/invisible.

A healing vision: transforming the human, social and ecological condition.

A communal vision: stressing and celebrating the human family tree of interrelatedness and partnership.

An ecumenical vision: inclusive of all confessions, denominations, people of other faiths; recognizing all God's children created in God's image.

3. The need for ecumenical theological formation in Africa

"When the church focuses on the needs of the world, its pain and suffering, denominationalism becomes relativised and ecumenical commitment is strengthened." (A comment at the consultation)

Given the needs of Africa, ecumenical theological formation (ETF) is vital if the church is to witness to the reign of God and participate in God's redemptive mission in Africa. ETF is demanded by biblical ecclesiology; by the multi-faith character of the continent; and by the need to share resources.

We are particularly concerned that ETF embrace those traditions which have such a long history and rich tradition in Africa, notably Coptic Christianity and Ethiopian Orthodoxy; but we are also committed to pursuing our vision in company with African Initiated Churches, Pentecostals, and those Evangelicals who were not represented amongst us.

ETF in Africa must give special attention to the need for dialogue between Christianity-Islam-African Traditional Religion because of their dominance throughout the region. But other faiths (e.g. Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism) which are numerically smaller should be warmly included in such dialogue in terms of African concerns.

We are deeply aware that there are strong anti-ecumenical forces operative in Africa as elsewhere in the world. Part of the legacy of the missionary movement in Africa has been the proliferation of denominations, and this has been exacerbated by the rapid growth of independent church groups initiated within Africa itself. Denominationalism is a powerful reality, and the creation of denominational structures and pursuit of denominational interests often continue to undermine ecumenical endeavour. Some churches and leaders, even though they may belong to the World Council of Churches and other regional ecumenical organizations, are hesitant and suspicious and do not encourage ecumenism. This is a major obstacle to ETF. There are also many Christian missionaries and church groups which are ideologically anti-ecumenical and right-wing.

4. Catholicity and Contextuality in African Christianity

Catholicity means, inter alia, expressing a common humanity with all people and cultures as well as belonging to the church universal. Catholicity also means that the search for unity as expressed in ecumenical formation does not mean uniformity but a respect for and an encouragement of the enriching differences of culture, tradition and experience.

Many of the problems facing those who are engaged in seeking to develop and promote ETF derive from a lack of such catholicity, and therefore a lack of ecumenical understanding and commitment, within the churches. For this reason it is of the utmost importance that the results of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* should find expression more widely in Africa, and that the concerns of Faith and Order should become much more of a priority, though considered from the perspective of African theology, the witness of the church in Africa, and the needs of the region. There is a special need, both within the church universal and within Africa itself, for a greater sense of African church history and its relationship and contribution to the church universal.

Contextuality has been variously understood. We refer here to the fact that the universal faith of Christians must of necessity find expression in local and regional contexts. But more profoundly, contextuality means the emergence of new forms of faith expression, forms which inevitably reshape the content of faith as Scripture is reflected upon in the light of experience. African contextual theology is not simply a matter of transplanting something universal (as though so-called universals are not themselves located within and shaped by a particular context) within a particular locality, but the growth of theological reflection within the rich soil of African culture, religious tradition, and communities of faith and struggle. It is facile to judge this as syncretistic but this may also be true of European forms of theology. In affirming our catholicity, we therefore also claim the right to develop our own expressions of Christian faith in dialogue with African tradition mediated through our experience. Hence the need for ETF to be of, with, and from the people of God in each place.

5. The ecumenical theological formation of/with/from the people of God

"Ecumenical theology and theological education should help us to understand how we travel with God our creator and source of life in a church and world full of strife and tensions. " (Nyambura Njoroge)

From an African perspective, if God is the Creator of all then the people of God cannot be confined to the Christian church. Hence the need to locate ETF within the context of African society as a whole and in relationship to people of other faiths.

With this understanding we must nonetheless consider ETF in relation to (i) the church as *laos*; (ii) the training and role of pastors; (iii) the training and role of theologians working in the academy; and (iv) the role and responsibility of church leaders. Each of these is integral to the others and must be understood in their interrelatedness and mutuality. This is expressed in the letter to the Ephesians where the various forms of ministry, whether those of church leadership, prophetic utterance, evangelistic outreach, pastoral, or theological education and formation, combine to enable the church as a whole to fulfil its mission in the world.

Christ gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for ministry (Ephesians 4: 11)

(i) The ETF of the church as *laos*

"We learn about God from the Book of Scripture and Experience" (St Augustine: an African theologian)

Understanding that ETF is something which is pertinent for the whole church involves something of a paradigm shift in our thinking. This paradigm shift has many consequences.

It means recognizing that the Bible, our primary text, belongs to the *laos*, the whole people of God. Biblical scholars and others engaged in theological formation should therefore recognize that they are called to serve the *laos* and not just participate in their specialist guilds.

In continuity with the Bible's own narrative structure, the primary mode of theological discourse in Africa is that of 'story telling'. The new paradigm insists on the importance of telling these stories in one's mother tongue and the development of communication skills for this task.

It requires learning from the People of God, recognizing and utilising local forms of spirituality, wisdom and insight - cf. Ephesians 1:17f. Here, in particular, learning from the African Initiated (Independent) Churches and their modes of spirituality, healing, and community support is crucial.

It requires critical communication and dialogue with the tradition, sifting it for its goodness and nourishment.

It requires particular concern for gender issues, recognizing the role certain biblical and cultural traditions have played in marginalizing and oppressing women.

It involves, finally, a recognition of the variety of gifts (charisma) of the whole people of God:

- The natural gifts of community leadership and resourcefulness;
- The specialist gifts which members of the *laos* have received through training (scientists, artists, social scientists, etc.)

- The spiritual gifts of healing, prophecy, understanding, encouragement, teaching, etc.

ii) The ETF of the pastors

Acknowledging that within the context of the *laos*, the whole people of God, there are those whom God calls to positions of leadership and service, the new paradigm of ETF recognizes the need to train these leaders to serve the people in creative and innovative ways.

There is, above all, **the need for pastors to be trained as practical theologians**. By this we mean that they must be given tools that enable them to reflect theologically on the situation of the community which they serve. They must therefore be equipped to enable the congregation to understand and analyze the pain and promise of their context, to reflect on this in the light of the Scriptures and their theological traditions, and to engage in transformative action in mission. To enable them to undertake this task, the See - Judge - Act methodology of doing theology in African context should be taught to pastors.

This need, and the need to produce pastors whose training equips them for ministry in the African context, indicates an urgent **need for curriculum reform**. Although new content is required, far more fundamental is the need for new models of thinking theologically and ethically about the social contexts of ministry. This, again, signals the need for the training of pastors as practical theologians.

New curricular must include:

- African theology, history, spirituality and religious heritage;
- Studies in the theologies and forms of ministry of the African Initiated (Independent) Churches;
- Tools of social analysis, and models for thinking theologically about this analysis;
- Gender issues and perspectives, and an understanding of the social and ethical issues surrounding human sexuality.

This new paradigm requires openness to fresh learning and insight. It recognizes and insists upon the need for **ongoing theological formation** after initial theological education. It recognizes and insists upon **the need for sustained ecumenical exposure and learning**. It recognizes **the need for academic training to include non-theological disciplines**, so that the task of understanding the social context of ministry and acting efficaciously within it is made viable.

iii) The ETF of theologians teaching within the academy

(By this we refer broadly to all those who are involved in the ETF process within seminaries, colleges, universities, academies, TEE programmes, and who have a special responsibility for the training of pastors, evangelists, catechists, etc.)

Theologians who teach in the academy have multiple tasks within this new paradigm of ETF:

They have a special responsibility in the **equipping of pastors for their ministry** and in ensuring that these pastors are given adequate tools in their training to enable them to function as practical theologians as outlined above.

They also have a responsibility **to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue** and to help guide the church in its public responsibility as part of civil society.

In order to fulfil these tasks, academic theologians should be **involved in the life of the church**,

listening to the stories of the people and their response to the Bible.

Academic theologians also have the responsibility of **pursuing research** which is appropriate to their vocation.

There is the constant need to train such theologians in the various specialist fields both within Africa and elsewhere.

Training in Europe and North America should be encouraged where appropriate, but models for such training need to be devised which ensure that it is relevant to the theological task in Africa.

Short-term scholarships for study abroad for doctoral students registered in African universities should be encouraged.

Centres of advanced theological education in Africa should be strengthened or developed.

Library resources, especially on African theology, history, etc. should be as available in African institutions as they are in Europe and North America.

iv) The role and responsibility of church leaders (presidents, moderators, bishops, etc.)

Church leaders play a vital role in theological formation and should be regarded as partners in the ETF process.

Ways need to be developed whereby this is facilitated, especially opportunities for sabbatical reflection and further study. Those engaged in theological teaching and research should be sensitive to the issues, problems and concerns of church leaders. There should be joint consultation and planning. Church leaders should give the lead in ETF.

6. The renewal and creation of appropriate structures

A variety of structures currently exist for the promotion of ecumenical theological formation at different levels in the life of the churches (congregation, district, synod, denomination, ecumenical councils). We refer to the various associations of theological institutions, ecumenical academies, ecumenical theological and religious studies faculties, seminaries and TEE in all their variety of styles and programmes. These need to be encouraged and resourced in terms of the vision of African Christianity and the goals we have indicated, and brought into creative networks with each other. We also need to consider the formation of new structures which may be appropriate to the present day. Of urgent concern is the development of curricula, textbooks, accreditation procedures, etc. It is essential to pursue efficiency and maximise the use of resources.

7. Regional and sub-regional cooperation

Africa is a vast continent. Pan-African consultations and programmes are necessary for some concerns and issues may need to be tackled on a continental basis. But they cannot do what needs to be done at a sub-regional level. Here we have to take into account the differences of language, both colonial (Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone) and indigenous, and the different cultures and needs of North, West, Central, East and Southern Africa. A combination of African regional and sub-regional cooperation is advisable and needs to be strengthened and developed.

The role of post-apartheid South Africa within Africa and especially southern Africa needs to be given serious attention with regard to the development of theological education. South Africa's educational resources should be used in such a way that South Africa does not drain resources from the rest of Africa, but becomes a partner in ecumenical theological formation and mission throughout

the region.

8. Financial Viability

"Financial viability is a multifaceted issue. It is about global partnership. But more primary is how we resource the ministry of word and sacrament in the context of words of ministry of all God's people. It is about how the people of God individually and severally take corporate responsibility for the formation programmes without sacrificing the integrity and identity of a people." (John Pobee)

The viability of ETF is qualitatively more than its financial viability, but without financial viability it is impossible to develop an ETF which is viable in the fullest sense.

We recognise that Africa has benefited greatly from the financial help received over the years from the Theological Education Fund as well as from Ecumenical Theological Education of the World Council of Churches (ETF/WCC) and other partners. Without this it would not have been possible to do what has been done. Such help remains necessary if the new direction in ETF in Africa is to take place. At the same time we acknowledge that we have to develop more adequate accountability structures and break free from a dependency mentality. Our vision of a new programme and approach to ETF Africa is primarily our responsibility, but it cannot be achieved on the basis of resources available within Africa alone.

With all this in mind, we are establishing a task force to develop a strategic plan for the region and sub-regions which will give concreteness to our vision. We will present this plan to the global consultation and to our ecumenical partners indicating our priorities and financial needs.

9. Recommendations to specific constituencies

A. To the World Council of Churches we recommend:

- i) that the next mandate for ETF include the need for the global communication of the new paradigm in theological formation which has emerged within the viability programme and especially the vision of renewal which comes out of Africa;
- ii) that structures and institutions for this purpose be resourced and encouraged within Africa in accordance with the strategic plan;
- iii) that BEM and Faith and Order issues (especially the project on ecclesiology and ethics) be given far greater priority in Africa in order to assist in overcoming the crisis in ecumenical commitment;
- iv) that world confessional families be requested to encourage their African constituencies to participate more fully in ETF.

B. To the All Africa Conference of Churches we recommend:

- i) that the recommendations to the WCC be noted and supported, and where appropriate be acted upon;
- ii) that the commitment of the AACC to the development of African theology/ies be renewed, and that it participate with the WCC in the development of and enabling of the next ETF mandate;
- iii) that dialogue between people of different faiths be encouraged and strengthened on the African continent.

D. To church leaders of WCC member churches in Africa: we recommend that this report be given careful attention especially by those responsible for theological education within the churches. In particular we draw attention to the issues specifically relating to church leaders which we have identified in the report.

E. To associations of theological institutions and all those engaged in ETF in the academy within the African context: we recommend that this report be noted and taken into account in the future planning of theological education/formation in Africa.