

Ivory Towers to Muddy Grounds

Some thoughts on Mission in Theological Education

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Issue 1. In many contexts theological education has become academic, informative, liberal and thus distanced itself from the general public. In some contexts it has become too contextual that has lost the academic vigour and ministerial aspect to the training. In some contexts such education has become too spiritual or evangelical and has lost the contextual and academic flavour.

In most cases there is a widening gap between theological educators, institutions and church members and lay leaders. In some cases the churches prefer to invite a familiar lay preacher and leader for their Bible study than to ask a theologian.

Issue 2. In many contexts there is a widening gap between churches, their leaders and their simple members and non-attending members who are baptised as members. The leaders and pastors are not able to cater to the spiritual and other needs of their members. Particularly there is a widening gap between the pastors and their middle aged and young members. Even among the evangelical churches one can hear these criticism of the pastors.

The attitude of the church leaders towards the contemporary culture of youth and others and also their indifference to anything new widens the gap between them. The leaders spend most of their time in other activities such as fund raising or other programmes that do not allow them to spend time for the youth. This has certainly widen the gap between the church leaders and the youth or even middle aged members.

Issue 3. In many contexts there is a widening gap between the Christians and the community in which they live in. In some way there is a widening gap between the churches and society at large. It means the churches do not engage in the social, political and cultural issues and changes that are happening around them. They pray for such issues in their intercessory prayers but do not participate in such issues or often do not reflect as community together. Much of the community's affair is no more the churches' affair

Issue 4. In some contexts there is a widening gap between Christians and other religions. A lot of ignorance is spread around the minds of all communities which lead to suspicion and confrontation among different religious communities.

Issue 5. In some contexts neither the theological education nor the churches take the media or public space seriously that they are often represented negatively and thus often are misunderstood by the public in many ways.

Issue 6. In some contexts there are many charismatic groups and neo-evangelical groups that make a huge impact on the simple Christians and spiritualise them in many ways. Such kind of Christianity including miracle oriented, prosperity

gospelists, tele-evangelists and neo-gurus who mixes all religions are popular among many Christians and non-Christians. This leads to a challenge for recognising differences within emerging and established Christianity. There is also a need for awareness education among the public about these neo-evangelicalism.

Issue 7. In many contexts people are faced with natural disasters and ecological issues related to these disasters. Very often theological education addresses these issues theologically and motivates the students to get them involved in and through their ministry. It is essential that even during the theological formation, some practical engagement both prophetically and also creatively (in promoting awareness and education to the public) needs to be considered as part and parcel of their learning process.

Issue 8. In some contexts the conflicts have become everyday reality. In such contexts how theological education can focus much on the engagement in removing ignorance, stereotypical concepts about the other and establish contact and understanding between warring communities. It demands theological education to go beyond their regular teachings and focus on these issues and make attempt to resolve some of these contextual and immediate issues.

Issue 9. In many contexts the problem of HIV/AIDS and other deceases have become reality for many people. Many Christian theological educators can no more address them as merely ethical issues rather they need to engage proactively as many ministers find them in their church or in their work places. They need to proactively engage in promoting awareness, education and action in this regard which needs to begin from theological education itself rather than after this training.

Issue 10. In many contexts there is an ever widening gap between economically rich and the poor. It has led many people to commit suicide because of their poverty and their loans. Theological education needs to discuss this politically and also critically develop alternatives for the churches in terms of ministry for the poor.

From the above Issues I would like to raise a few questions in theological Education -

- a. Should theological Education address the above issues? If so why should they address the issues stated above? What do we need to do to improve at present in our theological in order to address these issues?
- b. How do we shape the ministerial formation to address these issues? What are the pedagogical methods that we need to adopt in order to address these issues?
- c. What are the issues with our methodology of theological education? Should we keep a tension between academic, contextual, ministerial and ecumenical emphases?

Some of these issues are already addressed in many theological colleges and seminaries. Some of these questions are already asked among the churches and seminaries around the world.

By highlighting the above issues one can recognise the fact that there are crises within theological education, among churches and also their interaction with the society at large. To address some of these crises we present a case for mission to be made as an integral part of the theological education and ministerial training and be considered as a separate discipline of the ministerial training. Those who have already ventured in this area have found it very fruitful to much extent in bridging those gaps that are mentioned above.

There are a few conceptual hypotheses for consideration in support of the above argument.

1. Mission as a subject would enable people to maintain the tension between the Christian movement and Christian institutions correcting each other as in the Old testament the temple and prophetic movement did for each other (Walter Bruggemann)
2. Mission takes the ministry to its borders or margins. It means to take up a lot of risks to address the crises. As Kosoko Koyama wrote, Crisis is both danger and opportunity and so addressing the crisis can be a danger. It is danger because the people within the churches do not want to accept the new venture and change of traditions and so on. It is danger because people are not sure about new ventures whether it will bear fruit or not. It takes us to a future of further risks. It leads at times to risk Christ for Christ's sake (MM Thomas) in order to create space for those who may not know about the Gospel, to engage and establish relationship with them, and thus find a time to share God's love with them.
3. Mission education also enables the people to listen to the world at large, listen to people of other faiths, their concerns and their problems with Christianity. It also enables the leaders to listen to their own congregational diverse voices. In a sense the whole pedagogical or ministerial style changes to some extent. The leaders try to listen rather than dump their views on the people as it depends on the old style of learning and studying. In this sense mission should not become a mere experiential but learning and listening together not only based on their contextual experiences but also on the basis of reflections and critical studies that are already made through other resources. It reminds us of the dialogical model of Paulo Freire on Education
4. Mission education would highlight some of the contemporary issues such as development of the communities and their participation. Some of these paradigm shifts have already happened within the Missiological studies. Incorporating such struggles linking the socio-cultural and political issues together doing theology would certainly bridge the gaps between the churches and the society at large. Mission has to enable theologians to identify themselves with the poor and marginalised though the support for the church at times come from the rich and middle classes. While participating in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*), theologians has to take participating in the solidarity and advocacy programmes and see it part of their inevitable mission. I would agree with Thomas Thangaraj that to participate in the mission of God means to participate in the struggles of the poor and marginalised in their

process of liberation and upliftment which he calls as *missio humanitatis* (mission of human beings).

5. Mission education takes the popular and mass culture seriously. This certainly can enable people to do mission in the public sphere along with their ministerial work. In this sense some ministerial may specialise in the area of mass media and mission which would enable to speak, write and produce programmes for the public at large making sense of the relevance of the churches today.
6. Mission education has to promote community orientation along with individual freedom. It has to follow the 'UBUNTU' s concept of spirituality in Africa. It means – I am because we are (Mbiti 1969).. Since we are therefore I am. we are all connected, we cannot be ourselves without community, health and faith are always lived out among others, an individual's well being is caught up in the well being of others.
7. Mission has to bring together many diverse aspects of theology together and has to maintain the *creative tension* between different views, perspectives and practices. Very often those who worked among the HIV/AIDS, disasters, conflicts have not been recognised as mainstream mission workers. They themselves have struggled to define their own work besides being charity work. Even those who engaged in interfaith relation building find it hard to convince the churches for support and encouragement. It is essential to maintain the creative tension (Bosch) between diverse perspectives and practices of mission and be promoted among the Christian public as an essential task of mission.

I have highlighted a few points for making mission relevant and important in today's context. This in simple terms means getting mud on our coats and suits as theologians. Mission would certainly take us to the muddy grounds where the people are.

Mission is to enable the theologian to accept people as they are. Mission is to take theologian where the people are. Mission is also to train the theologian to communicate within the people's understanding and communication.

Mission enables the theologian at times to play constructive prophetic role in public (not only providing critique but also alternatives with hope), kenotic immersion with issues in multicultural and multi-religious context in working along with different people and communities and also to engage in others' search meanings of life and of God while letting them to participate in our own search.

If these conceptual shifts are considered theological education would become relevant and effect and may address some of the issues stated above to many extent. If people's level is considered to be the muddy grounds, it is essential for theologian to go those places where they would get the mud on them. The aim of the mission education is to lead and guide theologian to these muddy grounds.