



## **Pandemic and Pedagogy: Ecumenical Consultation on Theological Education**

Theological education has benefited from online modalities for many years. Good pedagogical practices and difficulties are well chronicled. However, COVID-19 restrictions challenged most institutions with a choice to go online or close their doors indefinitely. Many theological institutions around the world were either pedagogically unprepared, or lacked infrastructure for online learning. Some students and faculties adapted well to the online format, but for many the lack of residential fees and ancillary institutional support exacerbated the existing crisis of sustainability, equity, and formation.

In order to deepen ecumenical fellowship in prayer, theological reflection, and mutual learning, the *World Communion of Reformed Churches*, the *Lutheran World Federation*, the *World Council of Churches* and *Evangelische Mission Weltweit* hosted a hybrid conference. From 5-7 December, 2022, 81 participants were hosted by *Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra, Ghana*. The modality was hybrid, with presenters and participants joining on campus and online.

At the consultation, we explored educational methods related to pandemic traumata and sketched pedagogical promise in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the multiple interlocking pandemics it has revealed and produced. Particular reflection was dedicated to asking how networks of theological institutions and ecumenical cooperation can shape the content and methods of theological discourse in digital space with new forms of online education that broaden the experience of global fellowship and spirituality and reconceptualize the scope, reach and aims of formal and informal theological education as a question of equity. Main insights that emerged can be grouped along the lines of trans-contextual insights, theological insights, and insights related to pedagogy.

### **Trans-contextual insights**

The Covid-19 pandemic has been accompanied by public health, economic, and political crises on a global scale. It has revealed the ongoing and interlocking nature of multiple pandemics of inequality, violence, and marginalization. It has also been a time in which we have recognized God's activity among us in new ways. The drastic shift to theological education online has partially afforded more access to constituencies that were previously marginalized (e.g. disabled people, people with care responsibilities, and those geographically bound), but it has at the same time also increased the burdens that those groups carry. It has revealed and increased the diversity of learners and produced compassion and solidarity, but also by and large further exacerbated existing inequalities as well as created new ones, as health risks, isolation, domestic violence, and racism have proliferated. The shift to theological education online has set some of these issues into sharp relief while invisibilizing others.

The pandemic has shaken certain privileges. Global experiences of (temporary) disablement, confinement, isolation, insecurity, and vulnerability have proliferated. These experiences have



led to a loss of white, male, colonial, able-bodied naivete and point all of us to the insights and resources of communities who have long grappled with and survived such conditions. While some have hoped that such shared experiences might lead to new forms of solidarity, we recognize that they can just as easily lead to doubling down on entitlement, and to the reification of hierarchies and power structures due to perceived and real threats.

The pandemic has served as a catalyst in the crisis of resident seminary education that has long been building up globally. It has also revealed many of the hidden costs of residential education, for individuals, families, and communities. While academic formation can be translated into new media with more ease than spiritual and ministerial formation we are not merely challenged to translate established models of learning, spiritual and ministerial formation into new formats. Between “form follows function,” and “the medium is the message,” we are reminded that pedagogy, design, and technology are never neutral. We are challenged to rethink what theological education is about, for whom it is, to which ends, and what it requires.

The pandemic has inflicted trauma on a global scale, for individuals, communities, and whole societies, which we already know will have effects for generations to come. It also affects generations of learners as well as instructors. Those who serve in ministerial formation, mentoring, and instruction are often impacted by multiple layers of pandemic trauma: by the trauma in our own lives and communities, as well as by the trauma inflicted from carrying, accompanying and making space for the trauma of our students and their communities. Instructors, administrators, and counselors experience higher levels of burn-out, depression, and anxiety than other professions, which compound the challenge that is in front of us to transform theological education but also remind us of the unsustainability of “pastor-centric models” in pedagogy as much as in ecclesiology.

The multiple crises that the pandemic introduced lead to needs for learning as well as unlearning. Time, energy, and resources are required to master new media, technologies, cultures of communication, as well as their necessary infrastructures, with differential effects for different communities. Time, energy, and resources are required to unlearn assumptions, privileges, and biases.

Contexts differ. Access to theological education was not universal or equitable in pre-pandemic times, nor was its shape. The pandemic has affected different communities in different ways and along different timelines. The push to online learning presents vast challenges as different communities have vastly different conditions in terms of access to the various infrastructures that are needed for online education (electronic equipment, internet bandwidth, electricity, this is particularly pronounced in Africa, but also in other parts of the globe), different pre-conceptions with regard to what counts as “real” education and formation (formal and informal), political dynamics and surveillance that impact the safety and integrity of online learners both on- and offline, as well as logistics such as compromising on “central” time zones, and so on. Accessibility as well as safety are logistical and technological issues, they are also ethical as well as justice issues, for individuals and communities, locally and on a global scale.



As most of us have been forced and pushed to embrace online education as a sheer necessity for survival and as a “new normal,” we also recognize that online education might not be the future for everyone, everywhere, and all purposes. For many communities, the standards of highly tech-rich societies are painfully out of reach. Those of us who come from tech-rich locations with stable infrastructure and broad access to intellectual resources are challenged to find new ways of sharing with, as well as advocating for those who do not, in the diverse ecclesial, national, and international bodies we inhabit as well as across urban-rural divides. We also have to ask critically why new technological standards should be the telos and whose resources count, which economic, colonial, and imperial interests they serve, and whether some communities cannot fulfill their educational aims more effectively in other ways, cultivating their own resources and practices rather than scrambling to “catch up” with an imposed technological ideal. We need to recognize that all of this is not only in the hands of teaching institutions, churches and communities which seek to be empowered. Governments and state education administration impact by accreditation procedures and demands to comply to standards and requirements.

It is also already clear today that the energy- and resource-intensity of the requisite technologies are not sustainable in the long-term or on a global scale. While a return to “the before times” and their own deep inequalities is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable, we thus have to be prepared for further cultural, ecological, technological, political, and ecclesial shifts in the future. Online might neither become nor remain the primary model of education. Our reflection on theological education and pedagogy cannot be one-sidedly about taking online learning for granted and investing everything into adapting to it. Instead, we are called to reflect on the ways in which digital transformations and the “move online” affect the dynamics of theological education, we are called to develop theological frameworks for their assessment, to cultivate intentional practices of mitigating their weaknesses as well as leaning into their promise, and to reflect on what can be learned from online experiences for theological education in general.

### **Theological insights**

Technology is part of creation, with its blessings and its curses. Theological education has always used a variety of tools, practices, and media for its intents and purposes. Just like residential learning, online learning has to critically ask the questions, for what and for whom is theological education? Who is able to access our spaces? Who is invisibilized by their shape? Who sets the agenda? Who is absent, left behind, or excluded? Online learning poses distinct challenges for infrastructurally disadvantaged, tech-poor, and less literate communities, and it calls us to reflect what responsible modes of stewardship and intercession look like.

Ecclesial communities, whether local or ecumenical, have always been partially “virtual” and remote: their visible and invisible unity constituted of bodies not all of which are ever physically co-present because they are ill, disabled, elderly, young, immobile, spread out geographically, or bound by other responsibilities. Theological education, too, has always been partially “virtual”



and remote: interacting with interlocutors that are only present on parchment, paper, or screens, keeping conversation not only with those physically distant, but also with those long temporally departed. The disruption and intensification of relationships that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about challenges us to re-ground our understanding of theological education in ecclesiology.

As communities of faith, we thus recognize that degrees of presence and absence are indelible markers of the incarnational reality of the body of Christ, and have in all times been mediated differently. Online media poses distinct technological, infrastructural, economic, pedagogical and cultural challenges, but it is just another modality that attends all embodied, incarnated, social, translocal, transtemporal, and spiritual communion. The Covid-19 pandemic challenges us to reground our understanding of theological education in liturgical and eucharistic theology.

Online spaces are also “spaces” which come with their own structures of access and visitability. We are challenged to recognize them, too, as “holy ground” of encounter with God and one another. A theology of hospitality can remind us of the need to make space for one another and for God’s presence among us in whichever medium, and of the porous and temporary nature of the roles of host and visitor, instructor and learner. It can ground us in a eucharistic and liturgical theology as it draws our attention back to Christ as the host and the bread of theological education in whichever space. It encourages us to recognize that just like in other liturgical spaces, our transitory attendance of online and offline spaces of theological educations is also to edify and commission, nourish and send us into the world.

The pandemic has displaced and scattered learning communities into theological diaspora of online “spaces” while also creating cross-contextual proximity. As in all diasporic situations, there is trauma and pain, which require trauma-sensitive pedagogies and labor of grief. As in all diaspora situations, there is a temptation to romanticize the places of origin and to neglect to “seek the good of the city” (Jer 29) in which we find ourselves in the meantime. As in all diasporic situations, there is a temptation to replace identity construction by way of place with identity construction by way of particularities of our communities, as well as to forget the physical and spiritual discomfort of the traditional classroom. Rearticulating our situation through a theology of diaspora can allow us to avoid such temptations and instead root ourselves in the body of Christ into multi-centered and networked modes of learning.

The pandemic has disrupted embodied co-presence in ecclesial communities as well as in theological education. In doing so, it has drawn attention to the embodied condition of all theological education as an inherent task, and one that the Christian tradition has tended to underemphasize or devalue. It therefore offers us the opportunity to attend to the needs of embodied existence on both sides of the screen as well as outside of the (physical or virtual) classroom, including the embodied nature of our intellects and spirits as well as the embeddedness of our individual bodies into local communities of intentional and incidental co-learners, to the blurred lines between instructors, learners, peers, and human as well as more-than human support systems and disruptions. The Covid-10 pandemic challenges us to reground our understanding of theological education in the incarnation.



Trauma is nothing new to communities of faith. Our faith is rooted in the trauma of the cross. From it, we learn to cultivate practices of grief and lament, care and solidarity. From it, we also learn that redemption never lies in violence, but in God's resurrection of the dead. Such hope re-orient us from what is possible to the reality and necessity of a different world. The Covid-19 pandemic challenges us to reground our approach to theological education on theologies of the cross. Built on the cross, theological education is called to acknowledge and articulate trauma, and to work in a space of Holy Saturday: articulating lament, doing grief work, practicing humility, forgiveness, and prophetic witness, while carrying on in a "minor key" pointing to resurrection hope.

### **Pedagogical insights**

Scrambling to adjust to the disruption of theological education due to the pandemic has revealed that our inherited models of education pay relatively little attention to the formation of academics as teachers and pedagogues. For pedagogy to be transformative, we not only have to transform our pedagogy, we also have to educate educators and capacitate institutions for empowering, expansive, and liberative pedagogies.

In and through the theological frameworks explored, the multiple pandemics of our time encourage us to learn from the ecumenical experience of decentralized membership in the communion of saints, from diasporic experiences of dislocation, from contextual experiences of embodied and communal cognition. It directs us to the particular expertise which disabled and neuro-diverse communities, as well as indigenous and communal pedagogies have to offer. We are encouraged by the innovative learning and experiential models for spiritual theology and ecumenism that we have found in the transformative pedagogies of EDAN, GETI, and creation care; in the IMC study process and in the WCRC's curriculum development by indigenous communities, in established distance learning models in Mekane Yesus and UNISA, as well as in the witness of many more institutions and networks of our members across the globe.

We commit to holding to the irreducible but creative tensions between theory and practice, online and offline, intellectual and spiritual, mind and body, individual and community, the global and the local, academy and church, the priestly and the prophetic, the private and the public, innovation and tradition, catholicity and contextuality, universality and particularity – in the distinct shapes in which these tensions manifest in online spaces.

All learning is attended by modes of physical and intellectual dislocation and relocation. Just like residential learning, online learning decontextualizes and decenters, albeit in different ways. Models of blended and multi-modal learning, which combine phases of physical co-presence with remote/online phases as well as a variety of media/tion, are best poised to negotiate the distinct challenges of both modalities, build intentional community, sustain it over time and space, and allow for transcultural as well as contextual immersion.



Just like residential learning, online learning has to balance privacy and safety that allow for vulnerability, transformation, and growth on the one hand, and publicness that allow for critical engagement, witness, and impact on the other hand. Online learning poses distinct challenges with regard to the transformation of people's homes into teaching spaces as well as different levels of vulnerability to surveillance and discipline in different contexts. It also has the promise of bringing the richness and challenges of the students' contexts into our classroom spaces in unprecedented ways, open space for emotional intimacy and care.

Just like residential learning spaces, online spaces have to negotiate between contextuality and catholicity, averting the ever-present dangers of abstraction on the one side and domestication on the other. Not only does all learning depend on social and communal support systems, theological education is also always aimed at the transformation of communities, not just individuals. Online learning poses distinct challenges for communal and contextual learning. It can also help us to resist the temptation to create self-sufficient students, attend to their communal embeddedness and the "peripheral learners" around them.

All learning comes with equalizing effects *and* with structures of authority. All learning requires the intentional cultivation of pedagogies to counter and undo power structures. Theological education online is called to recognize students as subjects rather than objects of learning, collaborate with them on curriculum and assessment design, and to diversify our pedagogies. We embrace and celebrate the democratizing, participatory, inclusive and collaborative potentials of digital technologies. We also recognize the need to attend to new hierarchies they create, the need to attend to differential burdens of precarity, risk, and vulnerability as they affect students, faculty, and institutions, and the need to cultivate digital literacy and best practices across generations and cultures.

Just like residential academic settings, online spaces require the intentional cultivation of spiritual discipline, liturgical and ritual practices, and eco-theological grounding. Online learning poses additional challenges on each of these counts, hence requiring even more intentional attention. Practices of care and listening, habits of relating to the human and more-than-human ecologies in which we are embedded, and new rituals of prayer, orientation, and reflection have to be cultivated.

Our own consultation is an instructive case study for the promises and limitations of online mediation of theological learning processes. The hospitality of our Ghanaian friends and the physical space at *Trinity Theological Seminary* allowed for an encounter that went far beyond facilitating intellectual exchange. But on-site participation was costly - financially, temporally, socially, as well as in terms of personal risk and energy. The hybrid model allowed us to bring voices, experiences, and communities into our conversation which would otherwise not have been part of the process. In our conversations, we time and again were confronted with different contextual conditions, factors, and issues, while also learning from one another across experiences. On-line and on-site siblings participated in different modes and faced different challenges: Audio and visual transmission issues at times hampered full access of online participants, but there was also a moment when "on-site" participants were cut off from power



and thus dropped out of the “on-line” space. On-line participants struggled with screen fatigue, on-site participants with the heat. But overall, the hybrid model allowed for sharing of experiences and for intensive discussion in order to learn from and with one another in ways that neither the on-site or on-line alone would have permitted.

Grateful that the body of Christ can be mediated in a variety of ways, and invested in its ever greater unity, we will continue to work toward theological education that is equitable, sustainable, nourishing, and transformative as it is oriented by God’s incarnated presence among us, within us, and beyond us.