

FROM THE PARTICULAR TO THE GLOBAL

LOCATING OUR TASK AS THEOLOGICAL EDUCATORS IN AFRICA

within the

VIABILITY STUDY PROCESS

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1. Reflections on our location

This Sunday, here at the Moffat Mission, the bicentennial of the formation of the London Missionary Society will be celebrated. Formed in 1795 by British Nonconformists who had been revitalised by the Evangelical Revival, the LMS soon began sending missionaries to the "ends of the earth" (at least from the perspective of Europe) in obedience to its mandate to proclaim the "glorious gospel of the blessed God" to all peoples. In 1799 Johannes van der Kemp arrived in Cape Town to pioneer the work of the LMS on the eastern frontier. Twenty years later, and also two decades before the Afrikaner Great Trek, Robert Moffat and his missionary companions travelled north to establish a mission station beyond the boundaries of European colonisation on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. In 1820 he established the Kuruman mission station from which Christian missionary activity spread out further into the interior. We are meeting, in fact, at one of the most historic places in the history of Christian missionary endeavour. In Africa, a place of pilgrimage which can be compared with Iona in Scotland and other sites sacred to Christian tradition.

Revisionist historians have enabled us to move beyond the romanticism with which the work of the missionaries was previously viewed within Christendom. The extent to which they were wittingly or unwittingly the servants of colonialism and capitalism has been documented and laid bare. Such critique does not imply a lack of respect for their remarkable achievements, nor does it deny their costly commitment to Christ and dedication to the preaching of the gospel. They were men and women of their time who, if they were alive today, would probably agree with their critics. For they were pioneers with a passion for souls but otherwise largely untrained for the tasks they were commissioned to undertake. Nobody had told them about cross-cultural mission; no one had given them language training or advised them on how to survive the African wilderness. Indeed, the only theological formation many of them received in those early years was that of evangelical experience and a knowledge of the Bible derived from their own reading and the sermons they heard. But whether we evaluate their achievements for good or ill, there can be no gainsaying that they contributed to the transformation of sub-

Saharan Africa.

We have not gathered in one of the major centres of South Africa, such as Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town, or even in their vicinity. That much is obvious to all of us who have travelled to get here not only from the rest of Africa but even from within South Africa. Yet we have met at the place where the great north road passed from Cape Town into the interior of what colonists, traders and missionaries referred to as "darkest Africa". From here, David Livingstone launched forth on his crusade to end slavery and, according to his own light, to establish civilisation. Here the Bible was first translated into Sechuana and philological guidelines established which were to have widespread ramifications. Yes, indeed, if it were not for places like this, and in many ways especially this place, the outreach of Christianity into the southern half of Africa would not have occurred in the way in which it did, and we would not be gathered here, or perhaps anywhere else either, to consider the future of theological education in Africa.

Whatever else they may have done, the missionaries planted the church and, of particular interest to us they educated the first corps of indigenous catechists, lay leaders and eventually ordained ministers without which the church in Africa could not possibly have become viable. Of course, the missionaries were not too eager to hastily train and ordain indigenous clergy for a variety of good and bad reasons. Tiyo Soga, the first black South African to be ordained, received his theological education in Scotland where he was also ordained in 1856. But the missionaries soon established training centres as at Lovedale, Healdtown, Tiger Kloof and elsewhere for the purpose of such training. When we consider the limited resources available for theological training, we can only wonder at the many positive results. Moreover, many of the leaders they trained, including ordained ministers, provided a new generation of political leadership which was critical to the development of African nationalism.

Of course, the missionaries made mistakes, some of them serious enough to evoke the disenchantment of some of those whom they had trained leading them to break away and form their own independent churches. Their insensitivity to African culture has left us a legacy which we are only now beginning to address in the life of the so-called mainline churches and in theological education. In their endeavour to take Christ to the whole world they often forgot that their understanding of the gospel had its own particular character shaped, at least amongst the Nonconformists, by Victorian evangelicalism, individualism and morality. Moreover, despite their best intentions and sometimes because of them (e.g. comity agreements), their work often resulted in a denominationalism which divided rather than united African Christians, reinforcing ethnic divisions in the process. This remains a major obstacle to ecumenical theological formation in Africa today. So we may trace other contemporary problems which we face back to their legacy. But whatever they did wrong, we may still want to ask what the missionaries did in order to create a ministerial leadership which has left such an impact on African church and social history. The answer lies, I surmise, in large measure in the

fact that those converts who came forward for ordination already gave evidence of leadership ability, and the missionaries took considerable care in their selection not wanting to lay hands on anyone too hastily. I surmise, further, that their chief instrument in formation was in providing role models of rugged piety, personal moral integrity, and individual initiative - for that is what characterized so many of them. In modern parlance, there was little if anything comparable to what we would now refer to as training in critical theological reflection or hermeneutics along the lines of a Bishop John Colenso.

If the Boers had not established their republic in the Transvaal, and if gold had not been found on the Witwatersrand, so shifting the centre of gravity in the development of South Africa away from this scene of cross-cultural encounter, Kuruman would have become a metropolis located at the cross-roads of southern Africa, and this mission station a piece of expensive real estate. But history determined otherwise. The Boers tried to keep the missionaries out, and gold lured all and sundry in search of instant wealth. Despite its abundant water supply, Kuruman became a backwater as South Africa lurched forward along the path of centralised industrialisation, urbanisation, and then descended into the dark night of racism and apartheid. In the process, the Moffat Mission itself was a victim of economic forces and political developments, only managing to survive by the sheer faith and grit of those who were committed to maintaining its witness and protesting its interests. Although rooted in a particular denominational (Congregational) tradition, in an act of ecumenical commitment, and at a time when it was going through its darkest hour, the Mission was restructured in the 1970s as a sign of hope for the future.

Now, as the face of South Africa changes yet again, we are witnessing the miracle of rebirth not only on the macro-level of a country in transformation, but also in many places which have been on the periphery in the past. Moffat Mission, with its ecumenical commitment, promises to be one such place, especially in rethinking what Christian mission means today, and in engaging in a praxis appropriate at this time in this the least of all the new nine provinces of a new South Africa. The recent inauguration of the Kalahari Desert School of Theology, however modest, and the attempt to develop a theological education appropriate for rural ministry centred here, suggests how appropriate it is that we should be gathered here to reflect on the viability of ecumenical ministerial formation in Africa today. Although ministry in urban settlements is an urgent priority, we dare not neglect the needs of rural society, indeed, the two need to be considered in tandem.

Thus we gather here in this rural setting from various parts of the continent which have received the gospel from the missionaries, many of whom passed through this place en route to their particular destinations. We come to consider our respective experiences of Christian faith in relation to the ambiguous legacy which they have left in order to contribute to the global task of ecumenical theological formation in a new era. What can we share with the ecumenical church from our particular locations in Africa and out of our own African experience, and what can we, in return, learn from others who

participate in this process of reflection on the viability of theological education today?

2. Our place within the global process

The origins of the present WCC programme on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) may be traced back to the foundation of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) which was launched in the late 1950s to help establish theological educational institutions and programmes in the third world. As the name TEF indicates, the major focus of its work was in helping to make theological programmes financially viable. We in South Africa benefited greatly from that initiative, for example in the help which we received in developing the Federal Theological Seminary. South Africans also contributed to the work of TEF, not least through the labours of Desmond Tutu long before he became a bishop. Since those early days TEF has gone through several phases in pursuing the mandates which were given to it in promoting contextually based theological education in the third world.

Eventually the TEF mandate came to an end and was replaced by ETE, and since 1993 a shift of focus has occurred within ETE away from a concentration on financial viability to the viability of theological formation itself. Financial viability remains a concern, of course, but now within the broader context of the debate about the methodologies, substance and aims of theological education as a whole. This is the concern which has led to the process of which we are now a part. In pursuit of this goal several regional and confessional consultations have been held in various parts of the world (e.g. North America, Germany, Rumania, Asia, Pacific-New Zealand-Australia, Latin America, the Caribbean, West Africa). Alongside these regional events there was also an international consultation held in Geneva in August-September last year which explored the theme from a variety of confessional and contextual perspectives. Next year the process will reach its climax in a global consultation to be held in Oslo, Norway, in August.

What we are doing here this week, then, is part of a process that has been going on for several years in many different places - an attempt to explore the viability of ecumenical theological education within particular contexts, and to work out the implications of these explorations on a global level. Already a large body of documentation has developed with important insights that need to be kept in mind as we proceed [\(1\)](#). Perusal of the material indicates, as we might have expected, that while there is a great deal of debate, and sometimes confusion, about the nature of theological education, there is also a considerable degree of shared experience and insight arising from different contexts. In some respects there is a greater degree of commonality and consensus within what we used to call the third world than there is within the traditional centres of theological education in the northern hemisphere. Yet we are all aware, certainly those of us engaged in theological education in South Africa, that we have been going through something of a crisis in theological education during the past decade, symbolised by the tragic closure of

the Federal Theological Seminary in 1993, a subject to which I will return in a moment.

Our task this week, as I have already intimated, is to reflect on our varied experiences in theological education in Africa in order to make our particular contribution to the global process which ETE has initiated. But it is also something more. We have the responsibility and opportunity of suggesting the new terms of reference or mandate which should determine the next phase in the life and work of ETE.

4. The Crisis in Ecumenical Theological Education

We have long been aware of the problem of financial viability with regard to theological education, especially within third world contexts. Historically, this has not been as great a problem in the northern hemisphere where the churches and theological institutions have generally had more than adequate resources for the task, often funded by the state. But those engaged in theological education in Africa and other parts of the third world are only too conscious of the financial problems which have to be overcome. We in South Africa, especially those of us within the university system, are aware that the financial problems are far greater in other parts of our continent than even here. Yet we too face serious and growing monetary constraints. In the course of this consultation we will devote a session to financial viability, but as the programme as well as the process as a whole indicates, the viability crisis in ecumenical theological formation is about more than financial concerns.

The relationship between financial viability and viability in its broader sense was demonstrated in the collapse of the Federal Theological Seminary or FEDSEM. This is not the place to engage in a comprehensive analysis of the reasons why FEDSEM failed, but a few comments may be helpful in terms of our task. FEDSEM was founded in 1961. It was, in many respects, the crowning achievement of a century of missionary based theological education, and a bold attempt at ecumenical theological formation. It brought together the theological training institutions of several major denominations (Anglican, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist) institutions developed specifically for the training of black candidates for the ministry. As such, however, FEDSEM reflected the historical division between mission and settler church, a division which mirrored the racial stratification of the church in South Africa. Paradoxically, FEDSEM was also a response to apartheid and especially Bantu Education, and even though it fitted into the segregationist scheme of things, it was a thorn in the flesh of the apartheid regime. FEDSEM was, in fact, the place where black theology in South Africa matured and from which it made its impact upon the churches and society. This was a primary reason why the government expropriated FEDSEM's campus in Alice, forcing it into exile in Umtata, and then to its final destination in Pietermaritzburg.

Although dependent, especially in its early years, on a large and well-trained missionary staff paid by overseas mission boards, and on large grants from TEF and elsewhere in order to remain financially viable, FEDSEM increasingly aimed at providing a theological education which was viable for the South African context. In the process it produced a new generation of black theologians and ministers of a high quality, some of whom are now in leading positions within church and society. Why, then, did it collapse? Why did this major ecumenical achievement in theological formation suddenly become financially unviable? The reasons are several and complex and cannot be discussed in any detail here. One of them was undoubtedly its location in violence wrecked KwaZulu. Another was a lack of ecumenical commitment upon the part of the participating churches and some of their leaders. Yet another, was the fact that apartheid began to crack at the seams allowing black students access to traditionally white universities. At the same time, well-trained black theologians also became eligible to teach in such institutions so that FEDSEM had to compete for their service. The moratorium on missionary involvement and the general withdrawal of mission personnel compounded the problem. The result was a lack of ecumenically committed leadership, mismanagement, and the deterioration of academic standards. All of which combined in the end to undermine FEDSEM's financial viability. But financial failure was in large measure a reflection of the deeper malaise - a crisis in the commitment of the churches to ecumenical theological formation, and a corresponding lack of ability on the part of FEDSEM to provide a viable ecumenical theological formation. In the end, FEDSEM failed because it was not delivering. That is symptomatic of the crisis in ecumenical theological formation which we face, because the failure of FEDSEM is our failure.

The crisis facing us is, however, of a far greater magnitude than can be illustrated by reflecting on FEDSEM alone. It is a global crisis. Theological formation today has to take place in a world which is presently undergoing enormous changes politically, culturally and economically. Every nation and most local communities are going through fundamental changes as perhaps never before. In some countries these changes are of such a nature that the very fabric of society is being torn apart by violence and war. In many situations around the world people are not primarily concerned about improving their quality of life, but simply struggling to survive. But even in more affluent countries many social problems are reaching crisis proportions. We are all aware, for example, of the extent of informal settlements throughout Africa, Latin America and Asia, and the frightful poverty in which so many people are forced to live; we are also aware of the impact which AIDS is having on virtually all societies. If theological formation is related to the mission of the church, and it surely must be, then all of this impinges directly upon theological formation for ministry.

For many people in the western and northern hemispheres, Africa is a problem, a basket-case. It can only spiral downward into one disaster after another. Before rushing to correct this image let us acknowledge that it contains an element of truth, and in many situations an unfortunately large element of truth. There has been a growing realism about Africa within the Organization of African Unity during the past few years. And

those of us who have experienced the euphoria of fundamental change in South Africa know only too well that we face enormous challenges which have to be overcome if our fragile democracy is to achieve the goals for which we hope and work. We can certainly blame colonialism, apartheid, and the economic stranglehold of the capitalist world for many of our ills, but we also have to recognize the extent to which we all must accept blame. But apportioning blame does not solve the problem and that is precisely our responsibility.

But the crisis which we face is not just one which is, as it were, out there in the world, it is also a crisis within the life of the churches themselves. Ecumenism is no longer "the great new fact of our time" even though its achievements have been far-reaching and remarkable. We are all aware that there has been something of a backtracking in ecumenical commitment and involvement during the past decade or two. This has had an impact upon theological education as we have noted in the case of FEDSEM, just as it has on other aspects of the life of the church. At the same time we are aware that the very contours of historic Christianity are changing as a result of the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism and Independent churches - notably here in Africa. Indeed Christianity itself is far more variegated and divided today than at any time previously in its history. Moreover, the vacuum created by the withdrawal or reduction of missionaries of mainline denominations in Africa has been filled by many others whose approach to Christian faith is more fundamentalist and sometimes blatantly right-wing. This has all kinds of implications for theological formation, not least the fact that many students training for the ministry today may have very little background in the life and tradition of the historic churches.

But then, of course, we also live in a religiously plural world. Christianity no longer has the kind of hegemony it once had in many places. Even in the historic lands of Christendom the church is now only one player in the field of religious endeavour. Here in South Africa there is presently a resurgence of African traditional religious life, sometimes explicitly rejecting Christianity as a foreign import. In some places in Africa, the relationship between Christianity and Islam is a great cause for concern. But even where religious faiths are not in conflict, the challenge of religious pluralism in Africa has significant implications for theological formation. At the same time, we also have to consider the impact of secularisation upon our societies, aware that the process of secularisation has a character somewhat different to that in Western Europe and North America. While comparative studies may be helpful in analysing the situation as we experience it, we must avoid planning an interpretative grid on our context derived from elsewhere.

But if all this were not sufficient a challenge for those of us engaged in theological education, we are also faced with a crisis in our understanding of the Christian faith and its meaning for today. We are well aware of the many-sided debate about biblical hermeneutics and the variety of theologies which have emerged in our time and different

contexts, not least here in South Africa⁽²⁾. What, we must ask, is the appropriate relationship between Christianity and African culture, Christianity and democracy, the church and the state, the Christian and society, women and men ethnic communities? What do we mean by evangelism and how do we engage in that task today in a multi-faith and sometimes post-Christian context? How do we express a spirituality which is both prophetic and popular, rooted in Christian tradition and yet expressive of contemporary experience, catholic in its scope yet contextual in its character? What about the host of ethical problems facing the church and society today, particularly in the form in which we encounter them here in Africa? And underlying all of this is the question of what is the theological enterprise anyway. What does it mean to "do theology" in our context, and what does all of this mean for the viability of theological formation?

A crisis is not only a moment of judgement but also one of opportunity. We could well surrender before such an onslaught. We could retreat into our denominational ghettos and cling to certainties of the past which worked then and which, we insist have got to be made to work still. But there is another alternative, namely that of engaging reality in ways which are creative and authentic. Our task at this consultation is to respond to the crisis and the challenge facing us in terms of our particular contexts in a way which will bring about new life. And that is precisely what the study in viability is all about - the development of a creative, qualitative and authentic approach to theological formation which enables the church to make its decisive contribution to new life and hope in a world undergoing such traumatic changes⁽³⁾.

5. The emerging global agenda

My task in this introductory paper has been to locate our work within the overall ETE process, not to deal with the various issues which are on our agenda. But it is part of my mandate to try and locate our discussion within the global process. Let me conclude then, by outlining the major themes and areas of discussion which have emerged in the process of global consultation:

- I) The social, political, cultural and economic contexts within which theological formation has to take place;
- ii) The ecumenical character of theological formation both in terms of context, method and substance;
- iii) The background, preparation, training, roles and relationships of those who are engaged in theological formation, and in particular gender issues in theological education;
- iv) The relationship between theological formation, the churches and the academy or university;

- v) The relationship between theological formation, spirituality, ministry and mission;
- vi) The development of curricula, programmes;
- vii) The pedagogical tools of theological formation, including the use of electronic media;
- viii) The development of resources (libraries, physical plants, text-books);
- ix) The structures needed for cooperation between theological programmes and institutions both nationally, regionally, and internationally;
- x) Theological formation in relation to people of other religious faiths;
- xi) The financing of theological education.

Although this is an awesome list to keep in mind as we enter into our own discussion, it is probably not exhaustive, nor does it elaborate on many issues which need to be considered under each heading. The issues or topics mentioned are universal, but the way in which they are experienced and the way in which they are handled varies from one context to another.

Let me simply refer here out of my own experience to the relationship between theological formation and university education, with special reference to the role of departments of Religious Studies. One reason why I wish to comment on this in particular is because of a comment in one of the preparatory documents for this conference, namely: "In Africa at the university level there has been a development from sectarian and denominational institutions to more ecumenical structures. The classic illustration is the change from Theology to departments of Religious Studies (Legon and Cape Town) or ecumenical faculties like the Protestant Faculty at Yaounde or at Kinshasa⁽⁴⁾. The Department of Religious Studies did not start out as a theological department and then change character, rather it began as a Department of Religious Studies (in 1968) along the lines of that at the University of Lancaster, but then began to develop a theological studies programme, something usually avoided in Europe or North America. The primary reason for this, has been the demands of our context. We cannot simply study religion as an historic or symbolic phenomenon. Religion in Africa, whether it be African traditional, Islam, or Christianity, is so much a part and parcel of everyday life and commitment that it is unsatisfactory to simply deal with it phenomenologically. Student and contextual demands, alongside of the interests of some of the faculty, required a theological studies programme even though the churches were not involved in any way. But this has meant that theological education within such a context is by definition located within a multi-faith and inter-disciplinary context. There are, of course, aspects of theological formation which cannot be dealt with in such a department. But the point which I wish to stress is that a classic department of Religious Studies has been

restructured to include theological studies on the basis of our particular African experience. Moreover, theological studies have also been broadened to reflect the multi-faith dimension of our African reality.

We have neither the time nor the resources to deal with all the issues in any exhaustive way, but it is our task to try and reflect on them from our particular African perspectives. In other words, our responsibility is to try and provide the global process with those insights which derive from our own experience. Of course, we are aware that we are not fully representative of all those engaged in the task of theological formation in sub-Saharan Africa - something which we should keep in mind as we proceed - at the same time we can only speak with authority on those things which we have personally experienced. Whatever else we might say and contribute to the process, we should not fail to share that story.

1. See Ministerial Formation, Nos. 64 to the present.
2. See John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds. *Doing Theology in Context*, Cape Town, David Philip; New York, Orbis, 1994
3. John de Gruchy, Quality, Authenticity, Creativity and Ecumenical Theological Education, in *Ministerial Formation*, No. 67, October 1994
4. 'All African Consultation on Viability of Ministerial Formation Today', p. 1