

RETHINKING CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

# Faith and Public Life

VOLUME EDITOR Alfred Sebahene

GENERAL EDITORS Riad Kassis and Mark Labberton



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## Theological Education as Formation of Prophets for the Church and Society

### The African Context

David Tarus

*Executive Director, Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA)*

#### **Theological Education and the Transformation of Society**

Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Éla insisted in *My Faith as an African* (1988) that the church must be awake to the cries of villagers and poor urban dwellers sleeping hungry because of empty granaries.<sup>1</sup> Éla's assertion is significant for what we think about God and theological education. God is concerned with the cries of people sleeping hungry, not just their spiritual well-being. In the same vein, theological education should help the church to be conscious of the cries of people wherever they live. A church that is not attuned to the cries of villagers and poor urban dwellers is a dead church. This calls for a carefully crafted theological education able to inspire such a conscious mindset. Such theological education is inspired by courageous innovation, questioning, being questioned, open exchange, and experimenting through the guidance of the Spirit. What hope does theological education have for and give to the majority impoverished by disasters, hunger, and exploitation around the world? What

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1. Jean Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 92–97.

kind of theological education enables a robust engagement with the realities of a complex world? Healthy theological education focuses on the formation of men and women in Christlikeness to enact a different reality in a warped world. Theological education appropriately done should produce men and women who are able to engage society in transformation.

Theological education has played a significant role in the transformation of the church and society in Africa. While some missionaries were indeed complicit in the colonial project, theological education itself proved subversive to imperialistic designs.<sup>2</sup> Theological education has promoted, and continues to promote, literacy not only in the lingua francas such as English, Swahili, and French, but also in vernacular languages.<sup>3</sup> Today, literature in indigenous languages exists because of the efforts of theological educators. Today, many Africans who did not receive formal education are able to read their Bibles in the vernacular because of the efforts of theological educators. Christian theological education helped to lay the foundations for the revival of indigenous African cultures and languages and has contributed to patriotic nationalism through its commitment to holistic approaches to life. So many of Africa's beloved heroes – whether Christian or opposed to Christianity – were prepared for their roles in gaining national independence and building national unity by theological educators.<sup>4</sup>

The church also has been a partner in development. Religious institutions work alongside governments and other development partners to contribute to the flourishing of societies. For example, the church provides spiritual, social, psychological, and often material support for families and individuals facing various challenges. The church has built hospitals, schools, colleges, and universities and has dug wells to help communities get water. Research shows that

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2. Kwame Bediako, “De-sacralization and Democratization: Some Theological Reflections on the Role of Christianity in Nation-Building in Modern Africa,” *Transformation* 12, no. 1 (1995): 5. Lamin Sanneh notes that during the colonial period in Africa, Christianity contained an inherent though “implicit conflict with colonial priorities”; *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 18. See also the discussion of Andrew F. Walls in “Overseas Ministries and the Subversion of Theological Education,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no. 1 (2021): 7–14.

3. See especially Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed., American Society of Missiology 42 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009); Lamin Sanneh, “Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation,” in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years*, ed. Philip C. Stine, Studies in Christian Mission 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1–23; and Andrew F. Walls, “The Translation Principle in Christian History,” in Stine, *Bible Translation*, 24–39.

4. I thank my colleague Joshua Robert Barron, a member of the ACTEA staff, for helping me draft the second and third paragraphs of this chapter.

development projects which work with religious leaders perform better.<sup>5</sup> We see this historically within the Roman Empire, as community welfare development projects launched by Christian leaders far surpassed what the Roman state was able to accomplish.<sup>6</sup> Today, secular development projects tend to be materialistic in focus and lack the holistic approaches that development can have when done in partnership with religious leaders.<sup>7</sup> Because holistic approaches resonate with holistic African worldviews, they are more likely to generate redemptive uplift and less likely to result in dependency.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, because of the respect accorded to religious leaders in their communities, they are positioned to raise awareness and influence the behaviours and attitudes of community members.<sup>9</sup> The resulting buy-in by the community increases the likelihood of success of a given developmental project.

In “De-sacralization and Democratization,” Kwame Bediako is concerned that, whereas Christianity subverted imperialistic designs and participated in transforming the post-colonial African society, “African Christianity, now with greater consciousness of its African identity and characters, may face an even greater challenge to be of service to Africa in the political realm.”<sup>10</sup> This is particularly true because African states seem to have made little progress since independence. In 1986, Ali Mazrui vividly described the crisis facing the African continent: “Things are not working in Africa. From Dakar to Dar es Salaam, from Marrakesh to Maputo, institutions are decaying, structures are rusting away. It is as if the ancestors had pronounced the curse of cultural sabotage.”<sup>11</sup> Almost forty years later, little has changed. Corruption is still rav-

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5. See, for example, Emma Tomalin, *Religions and Development* (London: Routledge, 2013), which explores the relationship between religion and development and examines the positive impact of faith-based organizations in both Christian and Islamic contexts.

6. Frederick W. Norris, *Christianity: A Short Global History* (London: Oneworld, 2002), 70, 99.

7. Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, “The Role of Religion in Development: Towards a New Relationship between the European Union and Africa,” *The European Journal of Development Research* 18, no. 3 (2006): 355.

8. Stephen Maxwell, “‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’ Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 350–73; Joshua Robert Barron, “Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel? An Examination of the Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity,” *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 33, no. 1 (2022): 88–103.

9. Health Communication Capacity Collaborative, “The Role of Religious Leaders and Faith Communities,” n.d., <https://healthcommcapacity.org/i-kits/role-religious-leaders-faith-communities/>.

10. Bediako, “De-sacralization and Democratization,” 5.

11. Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (London: BBC), 11.

aging the continent.<sup>12</sup> Political instability is destroying African nations. There were thirty-seven attempted unconstitutional regime changes (coups d'état) in Africa from 2010 to 2021.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, despite vast deposits of minerals and precious metals, huge hydraulic potential, incomparable biodiversity, exceptional human capital, and impressive geographical wonders, Africa lags behind other continents of the world.

In *The Challenge for Africa* (2009), Nobel Peace Prize-winner Wangari Maathai notes that, despite Africa's wealth, beauty, and prosperity, the image of sub-Saharan Africa is one of devastation, pain, primitive tribal customs, civil disorder, armed militias, child soldiers, mud huts, open sewers, corruption, dictatorship, genocide, and other dysfunctions.<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Katongole laments in *The Sacrifice of Africa* that "churches and coffins are perhaps the two most prevalent images associated with Africa today."<sup>15</sup> That churches and coffins comfortably coexist in Africa is a sad reality and one that betrays the God whom Christians worship, as Jean-Marc Éla observes: "We glimpse the dangers of blasphemy and of betrayal to which churches open themselves when human distress and situations of death provide more evidence each day for the trial of the God whom they announce."<sup>16</sup> Sadly, many of the churches spread throughout the continent are those that view faith as "a performance-enhancing drug or a soothing balm rather than as a resource to orient their life in the world."<sup>17</sup> Such a warped faith, Volf, adds, "is merely a crutch to use at will, not a way of life."<sup>18</sup> Christians attuned to prosperity theology are pre-occupied with prosperity and health and rarely see themselves as witnesses of a different reality.

The church needs robust theological education able to meet complex contextual issues and to help form people for faithful public life. Seminaries must be facilitated and equipped to carry out their mission. This facilitation includes **developing relevant accredited programmes, institutional facilities to support**

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12. See Alfred Sebahene, "Contours of Corruption: A Challenge to and for the Church's Public Witness in the Twenty-First Century," chapter 10 in this volume.

13. Charles Onyango-Obbo, "What Africa's Coups Reveal about Us," *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 9 September 2021, <https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/opinion/what-africa-s-coups-reveal-about-us-3543530>.

14. Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa* (London: Arrow, 2009), 78–79.

15. Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 29.

16. Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 179.

17. Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 23–24.

18. Volf, *Public Faith*, 16.

the programmes, well-equipped libraries, well-trained and resourced faculty, robust executives, and engaged boards.

Informed by the need to serve a broader constituency, some seminaries have become liberal arts universities. These institutions are informed by the belief that faith speaks to all spheres of life – education, arts, science, politics, communications, and so on. Some reputable Christian universities in Kenya, for example, started as Bible schools. These include Africa International University (formerly Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology), St. Paul's University (formerly St. Paul's United Theological College), Scott Christian University (formerly Scott Theological College), Kenya Highlands University (formerly Kenya Highlands Bible College), and others. Similarly, some theological institutions have been integrated into state-funded universities as departments of religious studies, for example at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

These Christian universities and religious studies departments struggle to avoid mission drift, a seductive liberal ethos, and secularistic bents (e.g. the temptation to move education away from the influence of faith),<sup>19</sup> as happens to many faith-based organizations.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, many Christian universities are salt and light, helping to bring the Christian faith to the public arena by providing a Christ-centred education and worldview to thousands of students who, in turn, go out to infuse society with the gospel of Christ. The church needs to support such institutions as Christopher Wright notes: “Wherever Christians enter professions that do give them public space – in politics, journalism, broadcasting and other media – they need to be supported and encouraged by the church to understand the front-line nature of their calling.”<sup>21</sup> These institutions prepare frontline workers for the marketplace. They must not take their responsibility arbitrarily but with the commitment and dedication it deserves.

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19. Harriet Akugizibwe Caroline Kintu, “Effects of the Transition of Theological Seminaries in Kenya to Universities on Their Evangelical Christian Identity: An Inquiry into Africa International University,” ch. 9 in *Governance and Christian Higher Education in the African Context*, eds. David K. Ngaruiya and Rodney L. Reed, ASET Series (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019), 160; Semeon Mulatu, *Transitioning from a Theological College to a Christian University: A Multi-Case Study in the East African Context*, ICETE Series (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017), 190–201.

20. Peter Greer et al. observe in *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2014) that mission drift is a pervasive problem that faces all faith-based organizations of all varieties. Theological institutions must therefore be alive to this reality.

21. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 271.

## Six Critical Areas of Formation

There are at least five critical areas that theological education needs to pay attention to in forming students for witness in the public realm. These include (1) Theological anthropology: who are we, and why do we need to be formed? (2) Transformation: what exactly are we attempting to do? (3) Telos: what is the end of theological education? (4) Time: how much time does it take to form? Is formation instant or gradual? (5) Technology: how do we facilitate spiritual formation, and guard against misuse of technology, in this digital age? and (6) Technique: how do we form students for God's mission? Where do we form them?

### *Theological Anthropology*

Spiritual formation is necessary because of who we are; we are human beings **created in the image and likeness of God** but **greatly marred by sin** (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). Our creation in the image of God means everyone bears a God-given intrinsic worth that cannot be compromised. The fallenness of all human beings means that we cannot extricate ourselves from the powers and forces of darkness without divine assistance. Because of sin, we are not naturally drawn to God but away from God and will need God's intervention for us to align with God's purpose for our lives. This divine aid comes through Jesus Christ by the Spirit. The redemptive activity of God in Christ frees us from the enslaving power of sin.

Theological anthropology is essential for how we conduct theological education. We must see students as people created in the image of God. This perception is vital in many ways, including **respecting students and valuing them as worthy contributors of knowledge and people being prepared to go and serve other image bearers**. Acknowledging the fallenness of students helps the theological educator to be charitable and patient and to invest time and energy in spiritual formation. **A proper pedagogy also flows from a proper view of humanity**. As James K. A. Smith convincingly argues, we need to view students as affective beings shaped and reshaped by things around them “to be a certain kind of person.”<sup>22</sup> Smith regrets that Christian education still operates as if students were mere **“containers for ideas,”** or **“thinking things,”** rather than **“loving, desiring, affective, liturgical animals who, for the most part,**

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22. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

don't inhabit the world as thinkers or cognitive machines.”<sup>23</sup> Smith urges us to see Christian education as the formation of “a peculiar people” rather than as mere dissemination of information.<sup>24</sup> These “peculiar people” are those who shall make a difference in society as they faithfully and courageously witness to a different way of public life.

### ***Transformation***

Theological education forms believers in Christlikeness to serve the church and transform society. It is a holistic formation of a peculiar people – men and women transformed in Christlikeness. It begins from the premise that people have already been *de*-formed by sin and Christian education *re*-forms them afresh in Christlikeness. It is a formation that counters worldliness – the values that are contrary to God's values. Structural, institutional, and interpersonal spheres are all affected by a God-infused presence as believers manifest a different way of life. The implication for theological education is that our task is to provide an education that is formative, an education that goes beyond the mind to other areas of life.

As students become connected to God, the source of life, God draws them to himself and away from “the patterns of sin and death which mark our past and present, and into his own future of which resurrection is both the sign and the pledge.”<sup>25</sup> Students formed in Christlikeness are peculiar people commissioned to serve their churches and societies. They have been appropriately formed as agents of Christ's redemption (2 Cor 5:18, 20). As they embody the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), they model to the world a different reality. They become the face and flesh of Christ, “concrete embodiment [and] enfleshment . . . a people who are called to present to the world a visible alternative to the world's arrangements.”<sup>26</sup> They live by kingdom values wherever they are. Miroslav Volf agrees:

When we embrace faith – when *God* embraces *us* – we become new creatures constituted and called to be part of the people of God. That is the beginning of a journey: our insertion into the

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23. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 32, 34.

24. Smith, 31.

25. Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context*, Trinity and Truth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 72.

26. William H. Willimon, *Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 52.

story of God's engagement with humanity. As we embark upon it, faith guides us by offering itself as a way of life that indicates paths to be taken and dark alleys or dead-end streets to be avoided, and that tells us what our specific tasks are in the great story of which we are a part. Finally, the story itself gives meaning to all we do, from the smallest act to the weightiest.<sup>27</sup>

### **Telos**

The end of theological education is to contribute to a God-glorifying world through formation of God-glorifying disciples. These are men and women shaped and sent for God's mission. They have been shaped to contribute "to God's cosmic vision of restoration and new creation in the world and the divine intent to morally rehabilitate all peoples and nations in Christ."<sup>28</sup> Such people will not spectate but will actively engage in God's kingdom work through different vocations and spheres of life. They will go out as active image bearers "cultivating God's good creation, working to renew a fallen world, bearing witness to how the world can be otherwise, bearing fresh olives to a world battered by the floodwaters of injustice."<sup>29</sup> This formation begins with connecting learners to God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Their connection to Christ will shape their lives and ministry and show them what they are intended to be and do because it is Jesus the Christ who exemplified what we are called to be and destined to be. He showed, lived, and offered life in its fullness.

### **Time**

The renewal of the image of God occurs through Jesus Christ by the Spirit. It is not instantaneous. It takes time. It is a progressive journey. Writing about the sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin, Matthew Boulton envisioned formative education as "a sanctifying, disciplinary, recuperative path, and in that sense a humble and humbling return, little by little, to full humanity

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27. Volf, *Public Faith*, 16.

28. Celucien L. Joseph, *Theological Education and Christian Scholarship for Human Flourishing: Hermeneutics, Knowledge, and Multiculturalism* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2022), 68.

29. James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 5.

in Christ's image."<sup>30</sup> Ruth Haley Barton observes, "Spiritual transformation takes place *incrementally over time with others in the context of disciplines and practices that open us to God*. In general, while we are still on this earth, our transformation will happen by degrees (2 Corinthians 3:18), and we need each other in order to grow (1 Corinthians 12)."<sup>31</sup>

## **Technology**

The concern for formation increases significantly with the use of technology. Students often have unrestricted and unmonitored access to the Internet and often stray to areas that end up de-forming them in profound ways. Pornography, intrusion of other people's privacy, and even radicalization are just a few examples of misuse of technology. Our students are constantly being shaped and reshaped by digital culture. If we genuinely believe that our role as a seminary is to form students for the church and society, then we cannot abandon this role. We must think of ways of actualizing formation, even online. Joanne J. Jung's *Character Formation in Online Education* is a helpful resource for seminaries and professors as they find ways of facilitating spiritual formation of online students.<sup>32</sup> We can partner with local churches, alumni, and different communities to facilitate formation of students.

## **Technique**

Theological education forms people for God's mission through a holistic education that embraces a broader vision of humanity in its comprehensive nature. God's people need to be "equipped with new intellectual reservoirs and skills for thinking" as well as "new habits and desires and virtues."<sup>33</sup> Such an education should be holistic. It should train the mind (knowing), transform the heart (being), and provide vocational competencies (doing).

Where does this holistic formation happen? It happens in the classroom, the playground, discussion forums, chapels, the explicit and implicit curriculum, the written and unwritten curriculum, curricular and extra-curricular

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30. Matthew Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 4.

31. Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 13; emphasis original.

32. Joanne J. Jung, *Character Formation in Online Education: A Guide for Instructors, Administrators, and Accrediting Agencies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2015).

33. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 5.

activities, and online discussions. Thus, it is important to view formation happening in various ecological systems that include the institution, the church, the wider community, and even the digital space.<sup>34</sup>

Seeing theological education from the perspective of ecology is significant because schools will not limit the work of formation to the campus environment. They will fulfil their role in imparting knowledge and shaping students' character in collaboration with different partners such as local churches, practitioners (pastors, counsellors, mentors), and local communities where students live and serve. Therefore, students need not be physically together to experience community and to be formed because they always live in formative communities (e.g. church and community). Students are part of different communities. The seminary is a community, the community outside the campus walls is another community, and the church is another community. All these different communities shape the lives of seminary students.

For residential seminaries, a greater task is placed on professors and college mentors to ensure personal, pastoral, and vocational formation. However, for online theological education, the church is the primary centre of formation. Kevin Smith, President of South African Theological Seminary (SATS), a fully online theological school, writes, "The paradigm of how the Lord, the seminary, and the church work together to equip the saints for ministry is different in distance education from in contact training. The seminary provides content and learning activities; God nurtures character and calling; the church recognizes and validates it."<sup>35</sup> I will now suggest three critical things for theological institutions to do as they train men and women to serve as prophetic voices for the society today.

## What Theological Institutions Should Do

### *Clarified Mission*

The Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA), the organization I serve as executive director, partners with ScholarLeaders International in helping theological institutions clarify their mission in their path to sustainability. Through the Vital Sustainability Initiative, theological institutions look again at their mission because mission drives everything a

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34. E.g. see Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth through Online Education* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018).

35. Kevin Smith, "Reflections on ACTEA's Draft Standards for OdeL," communication by email, 14 September 2020.

school does and is. It shapes student recruitment, formation, prophetic voice, faculty development, learning, pedagogy, resources, sustainability, executive leadership, and board governance.<sup>36</sup> The school's mission should be attuned to God's comprehensive mission for the world because a theological seminary exists to serve God's mission.

The comprehensiveness of the *missio Dei* means we go beyond mere affirmation of evangelical tenets, as important as they are – conversion through Christ; active sharing of the word of God in word and deed; the centrality of the Word of God; and the significance of the cross of Christ for the salvation of humanity<sup>37</sup> – to “other priorities such as cultural discipleship, a theological vision of work, a re-appreciation of beauty alongside truth and goodness, a commitment to social improvement and a vision of impacting the world of ideas as well as the personal lives of individuals.”<sup>38</sup>

Theological institutions should therefore clarify their mission in the local context. What is God calling us to do in our local context? Be sure that the answer is comprehensive. It should not be limited to doctrinal affirmations and teaching but should also include other areas of life. Once the members of the institution have understood what it is here for, they should go ahead and fulfil that calling with faithfulness. They should work with the church in supporting the institution to serve God's mission on earth. The Lausanne *Cape Town Commitment* clearly articulates the missional nature of theological education:

The mission of the Church on earth is to serve the mission of God, and the mission of theological education is to strengthen and accompany the mission of the Church. Theological education serves *first* to train those who lead the Church as pastor-teachers, equipping them to teach the truth of God's Word with faithfulness, relevance and clarity; and *second*, to equip all God's people for the missional task of understanding and relevantly communicating God's truth in every cultural context.<sup>39</sup>

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36. ScholarLeaders, “Critical Lessons from VSI Engagement” (unpublished document, 2022).

37. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 7.

38. Marvin Oxenham, *Character and Virtue in Theological Education: An Academic Epistolary Novel*, ICETE (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019), 58.

39. Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action; The Third Lausanne Congress*, foreword by Doug Birdsall and Lindsay Brown (Lausanne Movement, 2011). <https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment#capetown>.

Theological education accompanies and strengthens the church in fulfilling God's comprehensive and holistic mission. Christopher Wright avers, "Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission – God's mission."<sup>40</sup> John Stott asserts, "Mission arises from the heart of God himself, and is communicated from his heart to ours."<sup>41</sup> Howard Snyder and Joel Scandrett agree: "The church is on mission because God is on mission."<sup>42</sup>

Prophetic theological education helps the church to "speak on behalf of the independent Divine Auditor . . . [offering] the voice of evaluation, of critique or approval, according to the standards we learn in God's own revelation."<sup>43</sup>

A theological institution animated by a faithfulness to God's mission will serve local communities even if that service means putting everything on hold. This has happened several times in some of the institutions that are part of the ACTEA network. Université Shalom de Bunia (USB), in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui (FATEB), also known as Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (BEST), located in the Central African Republic (CAR), are beacons of light in war-torn countries. DRC and CAR have been subjected to war for decades.

Université Shalom de Bunia, then called Theological School of Northern Congo (ETCN), became a university in 2007 to serve the wider public through relevant education. The university chose Shalom as its preferred name because the seminary had then been seen as a place of shalom; it was a place "where reconciliation will start" and a place to enhance "wholeness of life and fullness of life."<sup>44</sup> USB has lived up to its name. Apart from its varied programmes such as environmental studies, medicine, administration and management, agriculture, development studies, and theology, USB is known for being a haven of peace and reconciliation. George Atido, who serves as vice-chancellor, notes that USB has slowly been exerting its prophetic voice in a country devastated by war, corruption, and poverty.

The Development Faculty worked the last seven years to help Pygmies make a transition from essentially indentured servitude to

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40. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 62.

41. John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 335.

42. Howard A. Snyder and Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace; Overcoming the Divorce between Earth and Heaven* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 117.

43. Wright, *Mission of God's People*, 271.

44. Mike Saum, "Moving towards Shalom," AIMStories, n. d., <https://www.aimstories.com/blog/moving-towards-shalom>.

timber barons to become sustainable farmers who also take care of the environment. The Faculty has initiated informal reforestation programs that encourage Pygmies to take care of nature as they draw their daily bread from it. As a result, 90 hectares (222 acres) of forest has been legally secured for a Pygmy band as their own and 17 Pygmy households have successfully embarked on farming and reforestation using tropical species. This experience is now being replicated from 2 to 9 other villages and the total secured forest area has increased from 90 hectares to 1,110 hectares (approximately 2,741.7 acres).<sup>45</sup>

FATEB, led by Nupanga Weanzana, has been a hub for refugees since 2010 when the war broke out in the region.<sup>46</sup> At one time they hosted more than four thousand refugees from different ethnic communities and religions. The university has also hosted several peace meetings and consultations. It is because of this that Pope Francis visited the institution in 2015. In addition, FATEB's preschool, primary, and secondary schools are dependable schools in the community providing education to thousands of children. Every day they receive more than three thousand school children. This doesn't mean that FATEB has a lot of resources. On the contrary, it is barely surviving. Despite this, the institution soldiers on. They now have a campus in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and a primary school in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo. Through education, the college shapes the morals and future destiny of children.

Jesus's prayer in John 17:18 (NIV), "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world," is a reminder that a seminary must understand its mission (prophetic voice). Missional questions include the following: What does it mean for our seminary to be sent like Jesus into the world? What is God calling our seminary to do in the local context? Is what we do advancing God's mission? Is it the best way to advance God's mission? How should we align all our programmes and resources with our mission? These are relevant questions that an institution must answer as it seeks to clarify its mission so that it can better serve the church and society.

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45. George Atido in an email to the author on 2 May 2023.

46. Kate Tracy, "Surge in Christian-Muslim Strife Stirs Genocide Fears in Central African Republic," *Christianity Today*, 12 December 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2013/december/christian-muslim-genocide-central-african-republic-bangui.html>; Inna Lazareva, "Now We're Back It's Even Worse: The Bangui Residents Who Preferred a Refugee Camp to Their Home City," *The Guardian*, 5 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/05/mpoko-airport-bangui-residents-return-city-worse-refugee-camp-internally-displaced-central-african-republic>.

### ***Contextually Relevant Curriculum***

Africa's seminaries, Bible colleges, and university departments of theology and biblical studies have a long way to go in providing a contextually relevant curriculum. After many years, the theological curriculum still needs to be decolonized because it still bears the stamp of colonialism. It was hand-delivered to institutions by well-meaning Western missionaries. The church and its seminaries received it as if it was cast in stone. They never questioned the assumptions the curriculum bore. They never asked what needed to be done to make sure the curriculum was actually addressing the questions asked by local communities. It was assumed to be normative for the whole church everywhere. It was fully dressed in Western thoughts. It looked Western. It was taught using Western language, idioms, and even illustrations. In my own studies at Scott Theological College, I studied Wayne Grudem, Millard Erickson, and other Western systematic theologians. I did not study the works of African systematic theologians because it was assumed that Grudem and Erickson were standard textbooks for "proper" systematic theology. The others were deemed "contextual" theologies, which are typically considered to be "second-rate endeavours."<sup>47</sup> This ignores the fact that "all theology is contextual [and] is culturally contingent."<sup>48</sup>

Sadly, to date, many seminaries do not care to understand their contexts and to use context-relevant materials. That is why many seminaries still depend on Western-generated resources, teaching patterns, and ideas, ignoring home-grown resources, pedagogies, and epistemologies. A theological education able to transform society must be home-grown. It must speak to the local context by understanding it fully and then walking backwards to the kind of education that will achieve that purpose.<sup>49</sup> It must be thoroughly flexible, relevant, yet faithful to Scripture. It must be dynamic, always adjusting and learning from the culture and context and positioning itself to serve that context. Theological education that is not alive to the context is irrelevant. Thus, it is unacceptable for seminaries to import curricula without connection to local contexts. Excellent theological education is alive to the context. It is in constant conversation

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47. Kenneth R. Ross, "Decolonizing the Theological Mind: Work in Progress," ch. 2 in *Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum in an Online Age*, eds. Felix Chimera Nyika et al. (Zomba: TSM, 2022), 31.

48. Joshua Robert Barron, "The Camel Has Four Legs: A Contextual African Practical Ecclesiology," in *Ecclesiology in Africa*, ASET (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2024), 367.

49. See Rupen Das, *Connecting Curriculum with Context: A Handbook for Context Relevant Curriculum Development in Theological Education*, ICETE (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2015).

with the local context, always providing context-relevant curricula and looking for ways to be of more significant influence in local communities.

Theological education is not merely an academic discipline. It is a transformational discipline working to strengthen and accompany the church in its mission for the transformation of God's good but fallen world. It is a theological education of salt and light, a prophetic theological education able to facilitate a different way of life. It is a theological education that produces hopeful possibilities and the necessary commitments to realize those possibilities. It is a theological education of hope in a world of hopelessness; a voice for justice and reconciliation in a world of injustice and conflict; a theological education that witnesses to the Lord's presence on earth. It is a theological education with the courage to speak. But it cannot speak unless it understands the message and those to whom it speaks. It understands God's message clearly spelled out in Scripture (it has the resources and the personnel to exegete the Word) and context (it also has the resources and personnel to exegete the world). This exegesis of the world must be done in partnership with other disciplines – political science, sociology, anthropology, and others. The saltiness of theological education calls for “a critical distance”<sup>50</sup> from the world, being careful not to be immersed in it so that we become blind to its distorting nature (Rom 12:1–3). Thus, theological education must look beyond itself and even beyond theology itself to utilize the resources available in social science, and must go beyond library-focused research to actual immersion in communities and churches. Gregg Okesson observes, “The task of unfolding the many rich nuances of Christian witness requires tools with greater animation than words printed on a page.”<sup>51</sup> Such theological education must be courageous to innovate in order to be relevant in a complex world.

### ***Courage to Innovate***

Theological education that facilitates prophetic public life needs the courage to innovate in order to speak to complex issues affecting the church and society today. Seminaries are barely surviving. They have fewer and fewer students. Facilities are barely maintained and need to be more utilized. Teachers are underpaid. Churches are not supporting seminaries as they used to. In *Leading Financial Sustainability in Theological Institutions: The African Perspective*,

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50. Wright, *Mission of God's People*, 271.

51. Gregg A. Okesson, *A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness to a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 149.

Emmanuel Bellon provides a graphic picture of many theological institutions in Africa today: “The carcasses of struggling institutions littering every corner of the continent bear witness to [endemic financial challenges].”<sup>52</sup> Is there a way out? Bellon writes, “These ailing institutions are still hopeful that somehow a contextually relevant remedy will emerge to set them on a path to financial sustainability.”<sup>53</sup>

It is a reality that the typical seminary student is likely going to be an adult interested in bi-vocational ministry. Seminaries are no longer attracting younger students who favour full-time residential training. Students prefer to study in the comfort of their homes and closer to their workplaces and families. The rapid acceleration of Internet access and widespread use of smartphones have contributed to newer ways of theological education. With this kind of reality, “the future is campus-free,” as Matt Ayars avers.<sup>54</sup> Steve Hardy observes, “Training programs of the future are likely to function as theological resource centers serving a number of off-site programs, rather than as a single location where all teachers, classes, books and students can be found.”<sup>55</sup>

Survival is not the only reason for innovation in theological education. Mission is of primary importance. Mission is driving new ways of training. Innovative seminaries are conscious of their mission to make theological education “accessible, more affordable, and cheaper to deliver.”<sup>56</sup> This is of particular importance because seminaries need to meet the growing demands of the more than 95 percent of untrained pastors worldwide. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, which conducted a comprehensive global survey on theological education, there are “5 million pastors/priests in all Christian traditions worldwide (Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Independents, including bi-vocational).” Of these only “5% (250,000) are likely to have formal theological training (undergraduate Bible degrees or Master’s degrees).”<sup>57</sup>

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52. Emmanuel O. Bellon, *Leading Financial Sustainability in Theological Institutions: The African Perspective* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), 3.

53. Bellon, *Leading Financial Sustainability*, 3.

54. Matt Ayars, “The Future Is Campus-Free,” *Christianity Today* 66, no. 7 (Oct. 2022): 32–33.

55. Steven A. Hardy, *Excellence in Theological Education: Effective Training for Church Leaders*, ICETE (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016), 121.

56. Ayars, “Future Is Campus-Free,” 32.

57. Center for the Study of Global Christianity, “What Percentage of Pastors Worldwide Have Theological Training?” Frequently Asked Questions, n.d., <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts/>.

What needs to be done to scale up ministerial training for the 95 percent who need training? Is this going to be achieved by traditional seminaries alone? Are seminaries bold enough to make drastic decisions about how and who they educate? Are they willing to adapt to new methods and strategies? Are they willing to utilize innovative technologies in the formation of ministers for the church and society? Are they willing to brutally assess the curriculum, even retiring courses that are no longer relevant and instead offering relevant courses? Are they willing to hold their professors to a high threshold in who they are and what they do? Are they willing to collaborate with others (e.g. other disciplines) in the formation of students? Or are they going to be protective of their spaces to avoid being “tainted” by other disciplines? Are they willing to descend from their ivory towers of academic scholarship to the levels below?

Marvin Oxenham poses some critical questions in his *Character and Virtue in Theological Education* which show that we need to be thinking beyond traditional theological education:

As we consider the failure of theological education in your region, could it not be that the very definition of traditional theological education is problematic? If, for example, faith communities are tired of polished academic graduates and are looking for lay leaders, why should theological education be restricted to “tertiary level”? Is it really even necessary to produce “degrees”? Furthermore, if students are mobile and are looking to be trained in a quick-paced society, why do we continue to operate in traditional “institutional” contexts? Might we not break down this church-academy dichotomy and explore shared educational spaces? And again, if the “Berlin” model is too limited in its “academic and vocational purposes,” should we not investigate other purposes?<sup>58</sup>

The reality is that theological institutions are very slow to investigate other viable models. They are afraid to experiment with new ways of training. In *Living above the Level of Mediocrity*, Charles R. Swindoll challenges Christians to rise above traditionalism. He defines that as “an attitude that resists change, adaptation, or alteration” and “being suspicious of the new, the up-to-date, the different.”<sup>59</sup> He advocates “openness, allowing room for the untried, the unpre-

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58. Oxenham, *Character and Virtue*, 22.

59. Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity: A Commitment to Excellence* (Dallas: Word, 1987), 163.

dictable, the unexpected – all the while holding fast to the truth.”<sup>60</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, former general secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), urged theological institutions in Africa to be innovative, creative, yet sensitive to the leading of the Spirit.

In our theological education process renewal may demand flexibility as opposed to rigidity, freedom of the Spirit as opposed to legalism, and originality of symbolism and thought forms as opposed to traditionalism. Of necessity, our pedagogy will shift emphasis from formal to informal, from “communication to” to “communication with,” from clandestine individualism to community, from obligation to commitment, and from mere display of talents to discovering, developing, and deploying the charismata.<sup>61</sup>

Martin Accad, currently president of Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, observes that the traditional theological education that limited training to vocational service of ordination is no longer relevant, especially for regions where Christianity is the minority religion. In such contexts, theological education is about preparing people for prophetic ministry. “In seminaries that are conscious of their ‘prophetic’ role, whether in the [Middle East and North Africa] or outside of it, theological education consists in a process of ‘deconstruction,’ ‘paradigm shifting,’ and the ‘reconstruction’ of an alternative consciousness.”<sup>62</sup>

Jean-Marc Éla urged African churches to innovate and explore new directions in theological education for the whole church. “We need to *imagine* new solutions that do not simply copy former models, which are too marked by the historical characteristics of a particular period of Christian life.”<sup>63</sup> He argues that the future of the church in Africa depends on “declericalized” ministries – “making full use of the diaconal and priestly potential of the Christian laity.”<sup>64</sup> This calls for courageous innovation, questioning, being questioned, and experimenting with the guidance of the Spirit in order to make full use

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60. Swindoll, *Living Above the Level*, 163.

61. Tokunboh Adeyemo, “The Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education,” in *Evangelical Theological Education: An International Agenda*, ed. Paul Bowers (Springwood: ICAA, 1994), 12; ICAA is now ICETE. AEAM was founded in 1966; in 1993 the organization simplified its name to Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), though evangelical groups in Madagascar are still included.

62. Martin Accad, “Theological Education as Formation for Prophetic Ministry,” Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, 1 August 2019, <https://abtslebanon.org/2019/08/01/theological-education-as-formation-for-prophetic-ministry-2/>.

63. Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 63; emphasis original.

64. Éla, 63.

of God-given resources available to the church. This courageous movement involves a “return to our people, becoming their companions in life and their travelling partners.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, a theological education that is alive to the context will need to deconstruct, shift, and reconstruct so that it can provide a robust theological education able to serve the needs of society and the church. This consciousness helps the seminary to be in tune with the church and society.

## Conclusion

Theological education plays a critical role in the transformation of communities. It does this by walking alongside the churches and supporting them through the formation of men and women to serve the church and transform society. The church transforms society through its teaching, character development, and actual practical acts of charity and compassion. The church is also a moral compass for society. Through its prophetic voice, the church speaks to society and draws it back to God’s purpose. It speaks to societal realities such as political conflict, poverty, health, religious violence, tribalism, and corruption, which adversely influence society. But the church cannot speak well if the voices of the leaders are muted or distorted. Leaders must receive proper biblical and theological training so that they can courageously and faithfully speak to and address societal issues. Proper training comes in different forms – formal or non-formal – and is offered in a variety of ways. Theological education, whether residential or not, whether designed for lay leaders or those preparing for full-time Christian ministry, has the high calling of forming men and women to be witnesses in the society for the glory of God. This will happen through a clarified mission, contextually relevant curriculum, and the courage to innovate.

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65. Éla, 182.

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# Contributors

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**Brenda Darke** is a missionary with Latin Link. She was born in the UK and graduated from Southampton University in 1973 with a BEd. She has taught children with severe cognitive disabilities in schools in England. She also has completed studies in transcultural mission (All Nations Christian College, 1984–5) and theology of disability (Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 2001).

In 1985, Brenda moved with her husband and two young children to Peru. Since 1995 they have lived in Costa Rica. Brenda works towards the inclusion of people with disabilities in churches through teaching in a Bible college in San José and through networks across Latin America as well as being a published author on the subject. She is also involved with pastoral ministry for *Personas con Discapacidad* (PcD, [People with Disabilities]) and their families.

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