

# Reimagining Pastoral Training

## The 90% Crisis

Originally posted to the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission [website](#), March 07, 2026.

*Alongside the expansion of the Church in the Majority World lies a crisis so urgent and spiritually consequential that it threatens to undermine the very foundations of its growth. This crisis is the overwhelming lack of accessible, affordable, and contextually grounded training for those called to shepherd these burgeoning congregations. This essay presents pre-reading for an online forum where we will explore the issues further. A follow-up essay presenting findings from the forum will follow.*

The landscape of global evangelicalism is currently defined by a profound and unsettling paradox. Across the Majority World, spanning the vibrant communities of Sub-Saharan Africa, the dense urban centres of South Asia, the rapidly developing nations of Southeast Asia, the diverse terrains of Central and South America, and the interconnected islands of the South Pacific, the Christian church is witnessing an era of extraordinary numerical growth.

As we now know well, the centre of gravity for the global Church has shifted decisively, with the majority of believers now residing in these regions, hence the term the “Majority World”. However, alongside this remarkable expansion lies a crisis so urgent and spiritually consequential that it threatens to undermine the very foundations of this growth.

### 1. The Paradox of Growth and Crisis

This crisis is not one of interest or devotion, but of leadership. More specifically, it is the overwhelming lack of accessible, affordable, and contextually grounded training for those called to shepherd these burgeoning congregations—theological, pastoral, and administrative training, bolstering their spiritual formation as leaders.

While the number of new believers and local churches continues to climb at an unprecedented rate, the capacity to develop the theological and pastoral competencies of leaders has lagged dangerously behind. This mismatch between the quantity of the harvest and the preparation of those caring for the harvest is a major defining challenge of our time.

The true scale of this trained leadership vacuum was brought to light with stunning clarity during the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) General Assembly 2025 (GA2025) sessions in Seoul, Korea.

Delegates and researchers presented data that shocked the global community: over 90% of pastors currently serving in Africa, and similar proportions in other rapidly growing regions of the Majority World, have received no structured or certified biblical or theological training.

For those within denominations that require thorough training prior to ordination, this figure may seem

outrageous, but the rapid growth of the Church in the Majority World is typically non-denominational. New church plants and Christ-following movements have grown rapidly outside of traditional Evangelical (predominantly Anglo-Euro-American) denominational structures. We live in an age where existing established-church permission is no longer required before forming a new fellowship.

We can debate finer points of ecclesiology, orthodoxy, and canonical or apostolic authorization, but the Spirit of God refuses to be constrained by the systems of men (and it usually is masculine!). The fact of the matter is, millions of people are coming to know and follow Jesus as Lord, reading and obeying their understanding of the Bible, and living and loving accordingly. If they are not visible through a particular denominational lens, that does not negate their existence.

We’re not certain how the GA2025 presenters arrived at their statistical percentage, but the “90% Crisis” is more than a mere data point; it represents a global ecclesiastical and missional emergency. It indicates that the vast majority of the world’s fastest-growing congregations are being led by individuals who, despite their sincere faith, plain reading of scripture, and sacrificial calling, lack the essential theological foundations and ministry skills required to sustain long-term spiritual health—for themselves and those they are shepherding.

## 2. A Crisis Bigger Than Numbers: The Scale of the Emergency

To understand the gravity of the situation, one must look at the sheer numbers involved in this educational deficit. Michael Ortiz, representing the Global Pastoral Training Alliance, highlighted a staggering reality during the GA2025 proceedings. His research indicates that there are approximately 3.7 million churches around the world that currently operate without a single trained pastoral leader.

Again, the church is multiplying far faster than our current traditional leadership or pastoral training models can cope with. The velocity of church growth in these regions is amplifying the emergency, but it has been brewing for decades. For every one pastor who graduates from a formal three-year residential seminary, hundreds of new house churches, fellowship clusters, or village congregations may have been established. We simultaneously say, “praise God!” but also “God help!”

The lack of training is not a theoretical problem; it manifests in profound practical and spiritual challenges that can devastate communities of faith in Jesus. The following challenges were identified at the GA2025 as the most critical consequences of the training deficit:

- **Syncretism:**

Without robust exegetical skills, an understanding of the whole narrative of holy scripture, an appreciation for how scripture has been interpreted in other places and times to produce foundational doctrines (e.g. early church creeds), and, most importantly, how to do the theological work required to see the gospel rooted indigenously into their contexts, many pastors too easily and inadvertently blend Christian doctrine with local traditions, resulting in a diluted or misrepresented gospel.

- **The Spread of Prosperity Teachings:**

One version of such syncretism that has proven very attractive in contexts of economic hardship is what is known as the “prosperity gospel”. While this has some scriptural support what theologians call “the Deuteronomic principle” (if you follow God, blessing will follow), it finds fertile ground among leaders who lack the hermeneutical skills to interpret the entirety of Scripture in context. For example, the New Testament more fully explains that when God does bless, by God’s grace, our responsibility is to be a blessing. Generosity is the antidote to self-centred prosperity theologies.

- **Misinterpretation of Scripture:**

Continuing this theme further, a common issue arising from the “plain reading of scripture” is the temptation to “proof-text” isolated verses to support personal agendas or cultural biases, leading congregations into unhealthy licentiousness (misunderstanding grace), legalism (misunderstanding authority) or heresy (misunderstanding the gospel).

- **Vulnerability to Division and Moral Compromise:**

Leaders without training in pastoral care or biblical ethics are more susceptible to outcomes like (but not limited to): burnout, moral failure, or replicating authoritarian cultural power structures within churches that run counter to well exegeted teaching of the New Testament.

- **Inability to Lead New Believers into Deep Maturity:**

Many untrained pastors excel at evangelism and grow large numbers of followers through their confident singular-minded preaching but struggle with the second half of Matthew 28:19b-20: fully immersing them (baptizing) into the family (the name) of God and teaching them to obey everything Christ commanded—the ways of God’s New Creation Kingdom. Without a focus on spiritual and character formation, leading to maturity in Christ within the fellowship of God’s people, even sincere followers of Jesus can remain immature, leading to the accusation of being “a mile wide and an inch thick”, a superficial Christianity barely distinguishable from the surrounding culture. Churches like these may have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof (2 Timothy 3:5).

These traits are obviously not restricted to the Majority World. Anyone with eyes to see will recognise the temptation towards these extremes within well-established Christian traditions and new expressions that have emerged in the West, attracting large numbers of people looking to satisfy their itching ears (2 Timothy 4:3). We acknowledge that even well-trained leaders can drift away from their ministry education (assuming it was robust in the first place). They are usually exceptions though.

It is also essential to clarify that this crisis is not a result of a lack of calling, intelligence, or passion among grassroots or new movement leaders. The crisis is entirely systemic.

Our methods for delivering theological training have failed to adapt to the geographic, economic, and cultural realities of these leaders.

### 3. The Systemic Mismatch: Why Traditional Training Models Fail

When we speak of systemic failure we are speaking of the current structure of theological education delivery. The reports presented at the GA2025 made it clear that the traditional seminary model, characterised by residential, full-time, and expensive academically rigorous study, was designed for a context that no longer represents the majority of the global Church. This systemic mismatch is defined by three primary barriers:

- **Financial Limitations:**

For the overwhelming majority of pastors in the Majority World, the cost of a traditional seminary education is impossible. Most are bi-vocational, supporting their families through farming or small trades. Relocating to a seminary means abandoning the very means by which their family survives. Even if scholarships are provided, it can be very difficult to return to the life they lived prior to training (see next).

- **Lack of Access:**

Traditional quality institutions are almost exclusively urban-centric, creating a training desert for the millions of pastors serving in remote villages and urban settings not supplied with theological education. This creates a brain drain effect as leaders leave to undertake training. When a leader shifts away from their context, builds new networks, and is exposed to new opportunities for ministry (and the wellbeing of their family) they rarely return to the rural or impoverished areas where they are most needed. That's not to criticise those who have travelled such a road, and we shouldn't prohibit that being a possibility, but those who do remain deserve to be well served with quality training resources and recognition of the work they put in to educate themselves theologically and professionally.

- **Inflexible Academic Structures:**

Traditional theological education is built on Western academic cycles; rigid, full-time, and residential programmes that assume the student has

the luxury of dedicated time. Flexibility has increased for higher education in recent years, but many courses still require at least some time at the education provider's campus. Furthermore, entry requirements often focus on formal educational prerequisites that many gifted, fruit-bearing pastors do not possess.

The central paradox of the crisis, as identified by the GA2025 reports, is this: The very people we need to train, the grassroots pastors, the church planters, and the bi-vocational leaders, simply cannot afford the time or money to attend the institutions designed for training. In this sense, traditional theological training is an elite pursuit, available only for a privileged few. Far too few for the needs of the global Church today.

### 4. A New Vision: Take Theological Education to the Leaders

The GA2025 sessions issued a clarion call to the global Church to embrace a "fresh theological education", a paradigm shift that moves away from the "come-to-us" institutional model and toward a "go-to-them" missional model. This vision is predicated on six non-negotiable pillars that make it:

1. Accessible
2. Affordable,
3. Flexible,
4. Decentralised,
5. Local-Language Based, and
6. Delivered Within the Community.

Perhaps the most impactful moment of the GA2025 sessions was the personal testimony of David Taunus (one of the MC's 2026 forum speakers on this topic). David spoke of his father, a man of profound faith who planted dozens of churches. By every biblical metric, his father was a quintessential servant of God.

Yet, as David pointed out, his father would never have qualified for formal training in any major seminary. He lacked the academic credentials, the financial means, and the ability to leave his growing flock. David's reflection highlighted a stinging truth: when our training models exclude the people God is already using, the fault lies with the model, not the leader.

### Conclusion: A Call for Courageous Innovation

The "90% Crisis" is the central challenge that will determine the spiritual health and theological integrity of the Church in the Majority World, and increasingly the West as theological institutions fail to attract new students and sustain their viability.

As the Church continues to grow numerically, if the training gap remains unaddressed, we will see an increase in churches drifting away from biblical fidelity into heresies, which usually lead to toxic religious expressions that claim the name Christian but bear little or no evidence of following the teachings of Jesus. Congregations will lack the spiritual depth to withstand cultural pressures.

Dare we say it, popular theological expressions in certain (Western/ised) contexts are providing us with a case study of how a coopted and corrupted Christianity can drift so far from core New Testament teaching. This sets a very dangerous but influential precedent that biblically faithful theological education desperately needs to counter at the rapidly growing edges of the global Church.

If the global Church courageously embraces decentralised, accessible, and community-based training models, with robust assessment and certification delivery, a different future is possible. In this scenario, every village pastor receives ongoing, contextualised biblical training in their own heart language. Local churches are transformed from consumers of spiritual content into vibrant centres of mutual learning. We long to see a global Church that grows not just in numbers, but in maturity, faithfulness, and resilience.

Ultimately, the discerning question before us is: Can we courageously embrace the innovation required to match the speed of the Spirit's work, ensuring that our collective investment of necessary resource enables the global Church to be led by ministers who are deeply grounded, faithful, and ready for the future in their particular time and place? The time for hesitant reform has passed; the time for courageous innovation is now.