

On the Shoulders of Giants: Traditioned Innovation and Leading Change

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Leaders of theological schools in the Majority World stand on a rich heritage. The growth of theological education has followed the growth of the church, albeit more slowly. In most places, schools have benefitted from the investment of missionaries and the legacy of Western higher education. However, current contextual realities, as well as the educational and economic pressures facing schools today, require a new vision and courageous leadership to bring about necessary change.

The executive leader embraces the challenge to look to the horizon and chart a course toward the new destination. In doing so, she or he must often navigate the tension between the accepted historical approach and innovative ideas. Theological institutions, particularly those in the Majority World, feel these tensions acutely. They recognize that inherited models will not serve them well as they meet new challenges, but at the same time they strive for excellence and recognition within the Western systems.

Traditioned Innovation

In describing the tension faced by church leaders, L. Gregory Jones, then Dean at Duke Divinity School, now Provost at Baylor University, coined the phrase “traditioned innovation” to describe the call and responsibility Christian leaders have to both preserve tradition and lead change. Jones (2009) writes:

We are the carriers of that which has gone before us so we can bear witness faithfully to the future.... The task of transformative leadership is not simply to “lead change.” Transformative leaders know what to preserve as well as what to change. We need to conserve wisdom even as we explore risk-taking mission and service. Too much change creates chaos. Transformative change, rooted in tradition and the preservation of wisdom, cultivates the adaptive work that is crucial to the ongoing vitality and growth of any organism, Christian institutions included.

Traditioned innovation describes a helpful approach for theological schools, as it enables them to build on what has gone before while also enacting necessary changes that address the current set of contextual, educational, and economic realities. Many schools have inherited systems, structures, and even mission statements that are no longer adequate in the midst of a changing world. Through traditioned innovation, leaders can acknowledge that the past has brought them thus far but plot a new course of action that will serve the church within their contexts today.

Articulating a New Mission

Often established through missionary endeavors, many theological schools in the Majority World trace their roots to the need to train pastors for newly planted churches. That need continues as the church grows numerically and seeks to deepen in its understanding of God's word and its impact on contemporary society. However, theological schools in much of the world have seen shifts in student profiles and aspirations. Not all students intend to serve as pastors of local congregations. Graduates seek broader roles in vocational ministry such as teachers, counselors, or relief and development workers in Christian NGOs. Through engaging their local contexts, schools have initiated both formal and non-formal programs for laity such as Christian professionals who seek greater biblical understanding but intend to continue in careers in areas such as law, business, or practicing a trade. Pastoral training remains an integral part of a theological school's mission, but it is no longer the totality.

Recently, the senior leader of an influential theological school in central Africa has recommended a change in their mission statement from an original purpose to form pastors for Francophone Africa to a new, broader vision to contribute to the advancement of God's Kingdom in Francophone Africa through teaching and training. As this mission statement is refined and ratified, it indicates a new course, built upon and inclusive of the original calling of the school, but one that the leader believes will enable the school to do more for the Church in their region.

As a second example, a school in the Middle East has a long history of training denominational pastors. However, as the urban center has grown, they have established programs to help develop church leaders for new churches, often outside of their theological tradition, as well as Christian professionals who want to engage informal workplace ministry. Their identity as a school that trains pastors for rural denominational churches has changed as the context has changed. Their mission has expanded to meet the needs of the Christian population in their urban setting.

At several theological schools, enrollment in programs designed for non-

vocational Christian leadership has eclipsed the number of students on an ordination track. Whether non-formal certificate training offered through churches and extension sites, accredited online leadership programs, or evening residential courses, most theological schools train Christians for an array of Christian service that includes but exceeds the role of formal pastors. Most often, a change in the mission of the school seeks to align the stated purpose with their enacted reality. In each case, leaders guide the school in the fulfillment of God's calling on the institution as it addresses the needs of the Church today.

Developing Relevant Programs

For most evangelical schools in the Majority World, the current curriculum is a direct derivative of Western models. In some cases, the courses and requirements have remained significantly more stagnant than the original models, which have undergone multiple revisions in their Western contexts. Imported theology and structures continue to come under critique. However, the ability to innovate and develop new programs has come slowly. In many cases, contextualization takes place at the individual course level, but it is not always implemented more systematically in curricular and program offering changes that meet the needs of students who seek to serve the church within their contexts.

If students who come to theological schools have new and different vocational aspirations, it follows that many schools need to revise their curricula and programs to meet these needs. Most theological students seek to be prepared to fulfill God's calling on their lives. While a Bachelor of Theology or a Master of Divinity degree may be the solution, few Christian leaders seek the degree specifically for the requisite hours of Bible courses, theology sequences, and the like. Rather, they want to be equipped for service in God's Kingdom. Consequently, some schools have begun curriculum revisions to meet these expressed needs.

For example, one school in the Philippines has undertaken a significant program revision to orient their curriculum around vocations instead of degrees. Rather than depict their degree offerings based on the academic requirements, they have chosen to describe the preparation they provide for ministry as pastors, counselors, teachers, and NGO leaders. They will still have accredited advanced degrees and meet the course requirements in each of these areas. But the program design begins with the vocational aspirations of the student. From there, they determine the appropriate mix of Bible, theology, practical, and other courses that are needed to equip students for their particular calling.

Another school in Latin America continues a tradition of an annual review of their bachelor program designed to train pastors. In developing their three-year curriculum, they begin by determining the biblical knowledge, theological

understanding, and ministry skills pastors need in this particular context. From there, they have developed a three-year sequence that will teach their students how to read and exegete the scriptures, how to interpret the societal needs of their context, and then how to engage in guided ministry as a way to integrate practical skills and theological understanding.

Theological curricula have developed out of a long tradition of the systematic study of the Scriptures and preparation of students for service in the church. However, as contexts, theological questions, societal needs, and student objectives have changed, schools must continue to adapt and change their curricula as well. Theological education needs leaders who can help guide schools out of the inertia of inherited systems and toward effective new programs rooted in the tradition of quality biblical training in service to the Church.

Rethinking Financial Resources

The inherited financial structures of theological institutions increasingly show their inadequacies for future sustainability. Operating costs for schools have increased as well-trained local leaders have replaced missionary faculty members. Infrastructure and technology upgrades, library resources, and online access all require ongoing funding. Tuition rarely, if ever, covers the true costs of an individual student (Smith 2015). Even in instances where institutional revenue exceeds expenses, faculty often remain undercompensated, facilities have fallen into disrepair due to neglected maintenance, and schools do not hold reserves to handle future challenges or provide funding for future growth. Financial viability, therefore, requires additional income sources beyond what the students can pay.

As a revenue source, tuition has come under increasing pressure. Many students in the Majority World struggle to meet even modest tuition payments and usually lack access to student loans as found in the West. In many instances, schools have responded to competition from other schools and readily available online material by further reducing tuition as a way to attract more students. Furthermore, as student profiles have shifted, so have the sources of tuition revenue. Churches that sponsored aspiring pastors for training do not provide support for students seeking formation in other vocations. While recognized as important for the context, higher academic degrees – including research doctorates – do not receive funding support from local congregations who do not see the direct benefit of supporting these women and men in their studies.

Scholarships have provided subsidized direct tuition costs, but they remain in short supply. Only a handful of agencies (such as Overseas Council International, Langham Partnership International, and ScholarLeaders International) provide direct support for higher degrees. Theological institutions raise additional

scholarship funds from other donors such as foundations and church partners. However, as the number of programs has increased, the number of scholarship sources has not kept pace. In doctoral education alone, the number of evangelical schools offering PhD programs increased tenfold from 2000 to 2015. In the three years from 2012 to 2015, enrollment in those programs increased by more than 50% (Hunter 2016). When added to the proliferation of master's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and pastoral training programs, finding additional sources for scholarship support will remain a daunting challenge.

Therefore, the financial resourcing for theological education requires further innovation, especially in the Majority World. Setting tuition levels to match the real cost of education would help both students and the church fully grasp the required investment of quality theological training. Recognizing that students cannot afford the true cost of their education, the institution can reduce the expense transferred to enrolled students by offering subsidies and scholarships to reach realistic payment levels. Setting tuition closer to the actual cost will therefore not necessarily increase the amount that students pay to the school, but it will help all stakeholders better appreciate the value theological education represents.

One key to innovation will be increasing funding from local sources. Inherited models draw on resources accessed through expatriate missionaries. In many cases, these donors remain critical funding sources and important for the development of further global partnerships. However, the reliance on overseas funding has contributed historically to underdeveloped cultures of philanthropy, especially with regard to theological education. Therefore, schools have a larger challenge in mobilizing local donors who will give to their mission.

However, instances of creativity and success exist. One school in India recently chose to expand their use of technology-enabled learning not just because of an increased economic efficiency but also because they believe it will generate more Indian-sourced income. A school in Nigeria has built upon their rich tradition of holding a theology conference for pastors by mobilizing alumni giving to construct a large building on campus. Another school in Argentina has encouraged wealthy ranchers to contribute livestock, the sale of which helps fund student scholarships. In each instance, the innovation represents contextual approaches to mobilizing local funding.

On the Shoulders of Giants

Theological schools in the Majority World need to make adjustments to their inherited models. By invoking Jones's notion of traditioned innovation, they do so with an acknowledgment that they have reached this point through the investments of others. To invoke the phrase popularized by Newton, leaders

can see new vistas and cast new vision for theological education because they stand on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before them. By definition, institutions preserve tradition. And many institutions desire continuity with their heritage and Western counterparts. However, leaders can also see a need for innovation in response to changing context. From this vantage point, leaders can see new opportunities that will lead to greater effectiveness and sustainability in their call to serve the Church.

References

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