

Taking Action in a Context of Fragility and Volatility

EVAN HUNTER

EDITOR, INSIGHTS JOURNAL

Ministry in a Context of Fragility and Volatility

Nearly two years ago, I sat around a table with several seminary presidents from around the world. The countries they represented were facing intense sociopolitical turmoil: one had recently emerged from a decades-long civil war; two were engaged in protracted military conflict with one another; one was confronting an influx of refugees displaced by civil war; one had made headlines for atrocities committed by an extremist group; another was facing government pressure that could limit foreign funding or even the involvement of expatriate faculty. The most stable nation represented around the table, next to my own, has since come under martial law. For many seminaries in the world, the normal context of theological education is one of fragility and volatility.

By definition, schools of theology are called to engage the *missio Dei*. Institutional leaders step out in faith, with great trust in the God whom they serve. Despite all the planning and vision a leader may have, sociopolitical factors beyond anyone's control can cause destabilization that affects the school significantly. Leaders therefore operate with constant awareness of the fragile state of resources, human and financial, available to their institutions. The context of fragility and volatility calls not only for deep commitment to the school's mission, but also for action rooted in strategic planning, stewardship grounded in understanding the economics of theological education, and the sharing of ideas among a supportive network to accomplish the school's mission.

Facing Common Challenges

Theological education is under pressure in all contexts. As the Church has grown and changed, so also have the demands on leadership training for pastors, teachers, evangelists, and missionaries. Megachurch growth and shifting theological positions affect the role of the seminary in the formation of leaders.

Arriving with unclear vocational aspirations, younger students may have a need to sort out a calling to full-time ministry. They are often less biblically literate and theologically astute than previous generations. Older students often come to seminary in the midst of career changes, unable to enter into full-time residential programs designed under a different learning paradigm. In many places, seasoned pastors seek formal training for the first time, but do not want to pause from ministry or uproot their families in the pursuit of learning.

Educational delivery modes continue to evolve to meet these changing demands. Technology has created access to immense amounts of content, often available free of charge. Schools have scrambled to make courses available online, but often struggle with how to incorporate spiritual formation, mentoring, and service into the virtual curriculum. Pedagogical approaches that give greater attention to learner-centered approaches, mentoring, and service learning depart farther and farther from the traditional lecture hall.

Students who earn seminary degrees enter into an increasingly diverse array of vocations, including roles in traditional church ministry, as well as in areas of counseling, education, and other ministry and NGO leadership. As larger percentages of graduates pursue callings that do not involve weekly preaching, they want to develop leadership capacities in areas such as social justice and economic development. Schools must adjust curricula and degree offerings to meet these leadership needs, as well as the new set of theological issues that arises as the Church engages social and ethical issues within its context.

Finally, all schools face immense financial pressures as the costs of forming leaders for service in God's Kingdom often far surpass bearable tuition levels. Schools feel the impact of shifting church structures, denominational support, and outside funding sources. While common in North America, student loans are virtually unheard of in most of the world. The availability of scholarships and other student funding varies greatly, and funds often focus on targeted groups or areas of study. Because few students pay the full cost of their education, institutions must raise money for virtually every student who enrolls in their programs.

Operating within Thin Margins

Very few seminaries anywhere have an accumulated abundance of resources at their disposal. Rather, most schools have a missional vision that outpaces financial capacity. In addition, for most schools in the Majority World, human resources are also highly limited, meaning institutions often operate within even thinner margins than their counterparts in the West. Few fully credentialed, experienced candidates exist to fill job openings. Without deep pools of ready-to-work talent, schools must recruit and develop promising individuals from lower-level

programs. The process of faculty development is both time- and cost-intensive. From identification to recruitment to earning a degree, the process can often take five to ten years and cost tens of thousands of dollars – all without the guarantee that the individual will join the faculty.¹ Missionary and visiting faculty often help to address teaching needs and bring international presence to a faculty. However, they also introduce a new set of dynamics with regard to financial structures, responsibilities to agencies, and cultural and contextual differences.

Due to the similarly high need for executive leadership, many senior leaders find themselves quickly promoted into administrative positions. Starcher and Strick (2005) note that African scholars who have earned PhDs in the West find themselves in significant administrative leadership roles within two years of degree completion. For many, the promotion came within six months of their return. Generally, intensive time spent earning a doctorate in biblical and theological fields does not prepare adequately for the administrative responsibility of leading an institution. Consequently, many administrative leaders operate outside of their training and must seek additional help to enhance the skills required for executive leadership in the academic setting.² In addition, many school presidents remain among the school's senior academic faculty, often needing to teach advanced courses in addition to fulfilling administrative, fundraising duties. Furthermore, many have additional ecclesial responsibilities and serve in positions related to denominations, mission organizations, or regional academic associations. Few have adequate support, rest, and encouragement for the expense of their work.

Finally, support structures are often underdeveloped. As Ferenczi (2015) has noted, many governing boards provide only modest levels of support for executive leaders. In many instances, general infrastructure is also weak. Inconsistent electrical power requires the use of generators and purchase of fuel to keep lights and computers functional. Internet access often incurs significant cost for insufficient bandwidth, affecting both access to electronic resources, cloud-based

¹ The Faculty in Training (FIT) program helps address these challenges by inviting potential faculty members to accept an FIT position, through which they will earn their doctorates while teaching part-time for the school. Most often, FIT candidates choose a PhD program that does not require long-term residence, so they can participate at a distance, perhaps traveling once or twice a year to take courses, access library resources, and interact with their supervisors. By design, the job description and course load for FIT candidates include their doctoral research and writing. Senior faculty members serve as mentors to FIT candidates, offering guidance and encouragement as they develop their teaching skills and work on their dissertations. Upon completion of the degree, the candidates can move into full-time faculty positions.

² Programs such as the Overseas Council Foundations for Leadership in Theological Education (FLTE) and the ICETE Program for Academic Leadership (IPAL) have developed to provide additional training for executive leaders.

data back-up, and plans for the use of technology in distributed education models.

Constricted by threadbare budgets and limited resources, most institutions and those who lead them must operate within the thinnest of margins. Thin margins leave little room for mistakes. Natural learning curves have an inherent cost, which many schools have not the luxury to pay. The lack of basic support and access increases the burden on leaders, contributing to burnout and high turnover rates. Left unattended, the costs of mistakes and leadership changes can weaken institutions and limit effectiveness in achieving their missions.

Taking Action

On account of theological education's vital role within the Church, its precarious state requires institutional action. Thin margins, volatility, and fragility mean leaders must place an even greater premium on planning, stewardship, and maximizing the resources available.

- *Formulate a Strategic Plan:* Institutions in survival mode always succumb to the tyranny of the urgent. However, for long-term sustainability, institutions need clearly defined missions and holistic strategies – accounting for enrollment projections, student needs, program growth, faculty plans, board development, alumni relations, facilities, and finances – in order to achieve their missions. Each of the school's operational areas must be considered in accordance to the school's mission. Many leaders, focused on the immediacy of the tasks in front of them, find themselves in a mess as they accumulate resources like puzzle pieces. They need space to pause and review the picture on the box so they can place those pieces more strategically. A military term, strategy refers to the placement of assets prior to the battle. A proper plan increases efficiency, helps identify needs and coverage gaps, and allows for the proper sequencing of actions in ways that maximize impact and streamline costs. The Book of Proverbs describes the pathway to success as paved by planning and hard work (21:5). Diligence in planning is crucial to flourishing.
- *Understand the Business of Theological Education:* In his comments about the cost of discipleship, Jesus draws on the real-world economics of building a tower (Luke 14:28). Yet, too often, institutional leaders do not understand the actual costs of theological education. Ferenczi (2016) lists a viable business plan as one of the key strategic documents that institutional leaders must develop. In similar fashion, Bellon (2017) insists on understanding both the business and mission of theological education. Unexamined use of inherited financial structures and the assumption of fixed costs only increase the gap between understanding and the real

expense of forming students for Kingdom service. Theological education is a costly endeavor, almost always requiring resources beyond what students can afford to pay. An understanding of the economic realities is crucial to both annual budget planning and long-term strategy as institutions must find supplemental income to close the tuition gap.

- *Develop a Robust Network:* Proverbs reminds us that many advisers lead to success (15:22). Leadership is often lonely, so leaders need others in whom they can confide, and from whom they can learn and draw support. Networks foster solidarity, creativity, and shared learning. Through conversations with peers, leaders can recognize the common nature of the struggles institutions face. The sharing of ideas prevents the reinventing of the wheel and promotes innovation, as well as better use of time and financial investment. Networks create opportunities for sharing, evaluating, and improving ideas. The Kamba proverb from Kenya observes that “one mouth cannot determine whether the food is well-cooked.” A Swahili proverb also reminds us that “one finger does not crush the louse” (Africa Study Bible 2017, 936). In theological education, as in life, God has given us the wisdom of each other. This wisdom is especially important when resources are limited, margins are thin, and contexts are fragile.

References

- Africa Study Bible*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2017.
- Bellon, Emmanuel. “Theological Education in Africa, Business or Mission?” *InSights Journal for Global Theological Education* 2, no. 2 (2017): 21-34.
- Ferenczi, Jason. *Serving Communities: Governance and the Potential of Theological Schools*. Carlisle, England: Langham, 2015.
- Ferenczi, Jason. “Sustaining What Matters in Theological Education.” *InSights Journal for Global Theological Education* 2, no. 1 (2016): 48-59.
- Starcher, Richard L. and Sheldon L. Stick. “The Role of African Graduates of Theological Doctoral Programs.” *Christian Higher Education* 4, no. 4 (2005): 299-315.



Evan Hunter

Evan Hunter has worked with ScholarLeaders International since 2004, currently serving as Vice President. He earned his PhD in Educational Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where his dissertation explored contextual engagement of evangelical PhD programs located in the Majority World.