

In Pursuit of Sustainability: Strategy & Planning for Theological Education

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Philip Melanchthon, the essential yin to Martin Luther's yang, led reformation of Lutheran education. The times demanded new educational materials and forms, and consumed much of his attention from his inaugural lecture at Wittenberg in August 1518 until his death in April 1560. Melanchthon's personal impact was felt from primary levels through university.

His final decade was tough. Luther had passed in 1546, and Melanchthon's health was never good. There were wars and rumors of wars. Poverty was pervasive, resources limited. Printing presses democratized access to material, but literacy was limited so the general public remained poorly informed. Opposition was often fierce, some from other Protestants. Near death in April 1560, Melanchthon famously penned in his diary: "Thou shalt be delivered from sins, and be freed from the acrimony and fury of theologians."

In that final decade Melanchthon continued to write biblical commentaries, and he searched for guidance and encouragement as he did so. The psalms figured prominently, including:

I will tell of the decree of the LORD...

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling kiss his feet...

Happy are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2.7-12 NRSV)

From this he concluded:

"The gospel must be taught and therefore learned. And according to this dictum we should reflect on our studies: God affirms that he wills to establish this kingdom by preaching; therefore, he defends study and teaching; he will not allow churches, schools and houses of teaching to be entirely destroyed."

(Comments on the Psalms, 1553-55, from the Reformation Commentary on Scripture)

To not “be entirely destroyed” is hardly resounding optimism, but theological education rarely has an easy time of it. Its institutions, typically, struggle mightily.

Why Struggle? Is Theological Education Important?

In the main, we suggest that schools of theology within the church exist for two essential purposes: first, to equip and form pastors, preachers, missionaries, teachers and other leaders for the people of the Church; second, to help leaders test, develop and share their prophetic insights, to encourage and at times to correct the Church and society. As the psalmist declared, educators form leaders to *tell of the decree of the Lord*, and prophets to call people to *serve the Lord with fear and trembling*. The host of other functions – from social roles within a university to participation in academic guilds – are secondary.

Essential theological education is not, of course, to be equated with a particular institution or pedagogical system. Schools come and go regularly, and theological formation takes many forms. Compare medieval monasteries with the modern academy. Or consider growth of the Church in China during the Cultural Revolution, with formal education prohibited and materials limited, and contrast it with the systems and resources available in a modern Western university. Technology is rapidly transforming Western education but just getting underway in the Majority World. Forms and schools are temporal, but the need to form leaders and to call the Church to faithfulness and society to virtue will remain.

Can Theological Schools Become Healthier Through Effective Strategy and Planning?

The disciplines of strategy and planning are well established, but primarily practiced outside of theological education. ‘Strategy’, originally a military term, refers to development and placement of assets before engagement. Theological education is inherently strategic for it prepares women and men to engage battles against ignorance and immaturity, sometimes against spiritual wickedness in high places. ‘Planning’ is orderly preparation for engagement.

*Wisdom prevails over strength,
knowledge over brute force;
for wars are won by skillful strategy,
and victory is the fruit of detailed planning.* (Proverbs 24.5-6 NEB)

Developing coherent strategy is akin to solving a Rubik’s Cube. The first step is to consider how the resolved cube will appear. What will constitute success? In

our case: What is the school's unique, inherently contextual mission within the Church? What sort of students do we intend to prepare for which vocations? What prophetic voice needs to be heard in the Church and society from this specific school community? Answers to these questions provide the reason the institution exists within the Church.

Having defined what the cube will look like when solved, we line up colors and patterns, including: a) student recruitment and standards; b) curriculum and certification, as connected to vocations; c) faculty and faculty development; d) facilities and facility development; e) life-long learning and alumni development; f) cooperative education arrangements with other institutions; g) pedagogy, including use of technology; h) executive and administrative leadership; and i) the financial model, including tuition, local and international donors, and alternative income sources (often called 'third stream'). These nine elements – sometimes others – are important because they must be aligned in support of the mission of the educational institution within the Church.

Almost everything takes time to develop and involves the entire community, so the plan is simply an integrated, realistic program for bringing about the intended outcome.

Perfection is not the standard. There is a saying in corporate circles: two types of companies fail, those that do not plan and those that follow their plan. The point is that the discipline of planning focuses leaders on mission and the interrelated elements that are important to success. But after the plan is complete unanticipated events are normal. Planning, however, has prepared leaders to modify their actions with the mission of the institution in mind.

For the past several years, ScholarLeaders International has had the privilege of working with a number of leading schools to help them clarify their missions and consider their strategy for fulfilling their purposes. Schools are from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. All are evangelical, from a range of denominations or non-denominational. Programs vary in scope and target, from full-time residential to part-time education for full-time pastors, from education for church leaders to lay professionals, from doctoral to certificate level. Each is making important contributions, forming leaders and encouraging those who speak boldly to the Church and society. All struggle financially. We refer to this work as the *Vital SustainAbility Initiative (VSI)*.

Each school is unique with distinctive challenges, strategy and plan. There are, however, shared objectives and themes, of which we would like to describe four.

1. Context drives mission.

All schools teach the Scriptures and form leaders for the Church. But what is the lens through which these essential functions are viewed? Two examples:



Ivan Rusyn, President
Ukraine Evangelical Theological Seminary (UETS)

More than a decade after independence from Russia, Ukraine is still threatened by incursions in the East. Kiev, the home of UETS, is a relatively safe haven for Eastern evacuees, and the school hosts displaced families on campus. Post-traumatic stress among refugees is evident to school leaders and to students. Aware of the need and sensitized by those who suffer, the school is training pastor-counselors. Also, concerned for the new nation, the faculty is exploring the Christian meaning of Ukrainian citizenship.



Atef Gendy, President
The Evangelical Theological Seminary of Cairo (ETSC)

Created in 1863 by Presbyterian missionaries, ETSC is now owned and led by Egyptians. It sustains a residential program for pastors in the Upper Nile and has added programs for urban pastors among mega-city Cairo's growing population, for missionaries to North Africa, and for professionals with wide-ranging interests. In Egypt's restricted religious environment, the school's Center for Middle East Christianity engages Christians and Muslims regarding the history of faith in Egypt, the specific contributions of Christianity, and ways in which common good might be advanced through cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

From these two schools – and many others – it follows that each school has a unique mission, informed by the local Church, by needs in society, the unique gifts of the school, and the calling of its faculty and other leaders.

Students are part of that mission. We have interviewed dozens and no student ever said: “My dream is to complete a Master of Divinity.” Students dream of vocations, not degrees. Ironically, schools typically conceive of and measure the product of the school as a program leading to a degree or certification, rather than a student prepared for a vocation.

We find that discussion of the mission of the school is needed and valuable. In

many cases, missionary founders set an agenda decades ago, typically related to formation of pastors through programs based on Western educational models. Sometimes that important heritage has not been challenged and updated, considering changes in the Church and society, deeper knowledge of the local culture, and considerable advances in theological sophistication among national faculty. School leaders are typically over-taxed and most have not taken the time necessary for deep reflection on an alternative mission, and they are typically not sure how to go about it.

As above, the most important questions are: Which students do we intend to prepare for which vocations? What prophetic voice needs to be heard in the Church and society from our specific school community? The challenge is to clearly define the mission of the school and then to consider everything else in the light of that mission. With limited resources, institutional leaders must put a premium on strategic focus.

2. Economic reality is harsh.

The most important thing to remember about the economics of theological education is that schools that employ typical education models lose cash on every student. Tuition, on average, covers about 30 percent of cost. This is true globally but Western institutions are kept afloat by national and university subsidies, past generosity (endowments), current donors, and student debt – each of limited availability in the Majority World. And the Majority World Church is often centered – *thankfully* – among the poor. Financial viability, therefore, is constantly in jeopardy.

Schools charge tuition so look like businesses, but hold little if any potential for profit. Perhaps it is counter-intuitive, but we cannot grow our way out of financial problems. Growth, in fact, exacerbates financial challenges.

Well-intentioned major donors sometimes help initiate new programs and, without realizing it, thereby add to the school's long-term financial challenges.

In our experience, school leaders do not understand these economic realities. We can always find a way to accept one more student at minimal cost, but it does not follow that faculty, curriculum and facilities are fixed when ten students are added or subtracted. With disciplined management, virtually all costs can vary with the number of students. School financial accounting systems, however, do not report data in a manner that makes this evident. In-kind contribution of missionary faculty, capital expenditures, and the maintenance backlog are often ignored in management reporting.



Prabhu Singh, President & Ian Payne, past-President South Asia Institute for Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS)

SAIACS is considering extension of its ministry in North India. Church growth is documented so the school considered expansion of its residential program. With analysis, leaders were surprised to estimate that enlargement of the existing program would lead to a deficit of about 12% of incremental costs, and require significant capital investment. This, along with factors related to the objectives of prospective students, led to consideration of alternative means for expansion, including a hybrid, residential-distance program.

Not only are economic realities poorly understood by school leaders and donors, they are under-appreciated by students. Although tuition covers only a portion of the cost of education, students typically view it as expensive and search for relief. They do so with little sense for the generosity already provided by the school and its donors. This robs students of the encouragement of being surrounded by the Church as they are formed for ministry.

Each student presents an opportunity for generosity. In recognition of his or her calling and value to the Church, the school and its donors provide a gift to form the prospective leader for service. However, each student also presents an investment choice. Is this student likely to impact the Church in a manner consistent with the mission of the school and commensurate with the investment in his or her formation? If mission drives us, the total number of students and graduates matters only insofar as they are prepared for vocations consistent with the mission of the school.

With this in mind – and to provide accurate information for leaders, students and donors – we encourage schools to price tuition at full cost, then to grant scholarships that enable students to attend. Scholarships would be based on the likely impact of the student on the Church, the ability of the school to form her/him for ministry, and the needs of the student.

It is important to consider that harsh economic realities will probably become more challenging. Relatively low cost, technology-enabled programs are growing almost everywhere. High quality free content is increasingly available in many languages, and from reputable sources (e.g., Third Millennium, Fuller Theological Seminary). Independent, charismatic, and mega-churches – growing in many contexts – place less value on credentials

than do traditional denominations. There is growth in demand for high-quality theological education among Christian professionals, but they place a low value on credentials so reduce the barrier to competition from non-formal and non-accredited education. Also, support from Western denominations may continue to decline as long-term missionaries retire.

Would any of you think of building a tower without first sitting down and calculating the cost to see whether he could afford to finish it? Otherwise, if he has laid its foundation and then is not able to complete it, all the onlookers will laugh at him.

‘There is the man’, they will say, ‘who started to build and could not finish’. (Luke 14.28-30)

3. Community: Sustainability & Learning

The community that makes up and surrounds a school – students, faculty, alumni, local leaders, other theological institutions and faculty, donors – enables the school to thrive and contribute to Jesus’ movement. Pressures of each day lead administrators to focus on the immediate – the students and faculty – but there is much more to consider.



Emiola Nihinlola, President
Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS)

NBTS is exemplary in many ways, including the community of encouragement and support that it gathers. This reflects, in part, Nigeria’s distinctively entrepreneurial culture. Perhaps it was also born of necessity when Western support ended and Baptist missionaries withdrew. Certainly, it reflects well on the innovative qualities of the school and denominational leaders. Whatever the reasons, NBTS attracts support from all over Nigeria as it forms vocational pastors for the Nigerian Baptist Convention, then for the broader West African Church. All this is facilitated by NBTS’ close relationship with alumni. The annual pastors conference draws thousands for continuing education and fellowship. A forum of the heads of theological institutions, organized by NBTS, is held regularly and well attended. Specific projects attract funding from inside Nigeria; e.g., alumni recently funded a conference center and hostels for graduate students. The Baptist Convention and its affiliated churches cover almost 80 percent of NBTS’ operating expenses.

NBTS' experience is not typical. Different cultures respond very differently to participation challenges, of course, but much of NBTS' success relates to organization and effort. Few schools, in our experience, have an easily accessible database for alumni and donors. Even fewer are in regular contact, sharing concerns and requesting support and referrals to those who can support the school with their talents, connections or funds.

This has implications for institutional health, of course, but development of a community network is also important for education. As a 'practice' – theology, teaching, being a pastor – implies continued learning. Other practices, medicine for example, require it. Yet lifelong learning – a frequently affirmed value that too often seems more slogan than practice – is largely neglected while schools focus on current programs and students. A primary reason for developing the alumni network is to encourage graduates and to provide experiences that enable continued learning and development.

Pursuing mission requires that school leaders consider the entire community in which they participate and lead, including its needs for ongoing education and formation, and opportunities to support the school in its mission.

4. Effective executive leaders are indispensable.

At one level, leadership concerns effective guidance and oversight for the school, an economically fragile enterprise with an important mission. The president (principal, vice chancellor, doyen) typically also teaches, contributes to the scholarly community, represents the school when it attracts students, faculty and resources, oversees the budget, and even guides construction projects. Management ranks are thin and, as in all organizations, ultimate responsibility rests on the chief executive.



Elizabeth Sendek, President
Colombia Biblical Seminary (FUSBC), Medellín

In 2010, the government of Colombia battled FARC, the Marxist, drug-financed force attempting to take over the nation. Much of the conflict was centered in Medellín. FUSBC was in severe financial difficulty following investment losses and years of deficit spending.

Accounting and internal controls had failed. Elizabeth Sendek became president and, with board and staff support, prepared a strategic survival plan for 2011-16. In the midst of civil unrest, the school provided high-quality education and a safe environment, sheltering faculty, students, alumni and others. It became an alma mater, 'nourishing mother', in a

very full sense. The survival plan worked and the school is now fairly healthy, contributing to the Church in Colombia and working toward the highest level of government accreditation. Elizabeth's executive gifts include the ability to prepare and follow a plan, to enlist and encourage the support of the faculty and students, and to incarnate the school's welcome.

Leadership challenges extend beyond the walls of the school. In Colombia it related to the evangelical movement in the midst of civil unrest. Schools are often in difficult circumstances, sometimes with opposition from numerical majorities grounded in other religions, or in atheism. In a few cases, tribal concerns and Church politics form head winds as resistant as alternative faiths. As in Colombia, severe civil unrest and war have recently challenged leaders in Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Lebanon, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Ukraine – home to over half the schools we have been working with as part of the Vital SustainAbility Initiative.

Church governance and guidance is an increasing challenge. Western missionaries are withdrawing from the field, along with their administration and funding. With few exceptions, denominational distinctions and clout are declining. Mega-churches grow in almost every region, typically led by charismatic preachers and functional specialists who place limited value on traditional academic credentials. Some are proponents of questionable theology, most notably the prosperity gospel. Non-formal education is increasingly available, and popular. These trends extend the Church, often in surprising and creative ways, but evangelicals globally have been slow to organize new local structures to steer the Church in these often challenging waters.

The point is not, of course, that schools should provide formal church governance. However, we evangelicals often miss the Biblical function of the bishop: the wise overseer and shepherd of the Church – which needs its shepherds! If not schools of theology and their faculties, who will be the theological guides? If not the executive leader of the school of theology, who will marshal and encourage faculty resources?

The job of school leadership is valuable and wide ranging, typically fulfilled by gifted women and men who were trained in theology and education. They need encouragers, friends who listen and provide occasional guidance, and mentors concerned for their development. This sort of support is among the most important roles for peers and trustees. Leadership is a gift from God, a discipline to be developed and practiced, and a role to be cherished, valued

and encouraged, as part of the Church.

Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has given you charge, as shepherds of the church of the Lord. (Acts 20.28)

Theological education is important because it is an important element of the Church, focused on formation of its leaders and prophets. Tools related to formulation of strategy and planning can contribute to the distinctive value of each school, and to its ongoing vitality and sustainability.

Note of Appreciation: To each leader of a partner-school for being our client, for educating us in your context and bearing with us when our lack of understanding was evident, for exploring ideas and sharing insights, and for your hospitality. To the five generous but anonymous foundations that enabled this work, for sharing your ideas, and for your concern for the mission of each school and its leaders. To our friends and colleagues at Overseas Council for the opportunity to work with you these past few years.

Appendix: An Example

The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS) has given us permission to share from their long-range plan, which they distilled to seven goals, each supported by objectives, sub-objectives, and tasks for 2016-20. The seven goals are unique to NBTS and involve change from past practice. Specifics are not, therefore, directly applicable to another school but we hope the example is helpful to those developing strategy.

NBTS language is in *italics*; an underline indicates a primary challenge area. Explanatory comments follow each objective.

1. *Lead the NBC seminary network for theological education, for the Nigerian church (not limited to Nigerian Baptists).*

NBTS, the graduate school for the Baptist Convention, will regularly convene leaders of the Baptist system for theological education to consider its shared role within the Church, and to encourage one another. Also, to the extent it is welcomed, NBTS will network with other denominations to share in ministry and exchange faculty, and will deliberately offer education to leaders from other Christian denominations.

To continue the example: Two objectives support this goal, one focused on rectors of other Baptist schools, the other on leaders from other denominations. Each objective has three supporting sub-objectives with anticipated tasks. The individual or department responsible is identified. Sequence is defined for the current year and four more, with greater specificity

and detail in the first year than in following periods. Each of the seven goals (#2-6 below) is described and detailed in this manner. In total, seven goals are supported by 41 objectives and hundreds of sub-objectives and tasks.

2. *Form leaders for the Nigerian church through growing and focused enrollment for vocational formation as pastors, teachers for theological institutions & professionals.*

To its traditional focus on pastors and teachers, NBTS will add programs for Christian professionals to enable them to become more effective reflections of their faith at work.

3. *Guide the Nigerian church, theologically and prophetically, in critical areas facing the church and society, including: materialism & corruption, sexuality, creation care, peacemaking, and urbanization – and equip the church for its ministry among Muslims.*

These are explicit priorities for development of NBTS capabilities and, in several cases, its prophetic voice within the Church. Each involves faculty and curricular development.

4. *Develop the NBTS faculty for its mission to form leaders for the church & society, and to guide the church theologically (20-25 new faculty, plus development of current).*

As a large school with a number of retiring faculty, NBTS faces a major challenge in faculty development – roughly half of the faculty are to be hired in the next few years.

An observation: Faculty development, generally, is among the most challenging and strategic elements of a school's plan. It requires careful long-range reflection, considering the calling of both the school and the prospective faculty member. However, faculty development is rarely taken up in a systematic manner, considering what new expertise is required to address prioritized topics, growth in the number of students, new programs, retirements and normal turnover, and a sequence among prospects to obtain advanced degrees. Only a few schools provide for ongoing development of faculty members in research or in pedagogy. Also, faculty compensation at some schools is not adequate to assure focus on the institution and its mission. All these elements go into a comprehensive plan.

5. *Reformulate curriculum & pedagogy, in the context of implementing technology (shifts: teacher to student-centered, include leaders other than pastors, integrate technology).*

NBTS has been quite traditional but believes that technology is under-utilized, and that a more student-centered approach will be more effective and formative. Also, as the school brings in more students focused on civil leadership, the perspective of faculty will need to be broadened from its current focus on pastors.

6. Modernize Ogbomoshosho site and facilities to emphasize the beauty of creation, with particular attention to Nigerian historical & architectural distinctives... as well as to maintenance and hospitality.

The site, developed originally by Baptist missionaries, needs development and renovation, and to be better supported by ongoing maintenance. This will be guided by development of a master plan for the site.

7. Assure the sustainability and continued vitality of NBTS, considering... partnerships, mobilize alumni and the network of churches, proposal writing, wealthy Nigerians, board sponsorship, business manager for 3rd stream activities.

These are priorities for fund raising to enable development of the school for its mission.



Larry A. Smith

Larry Smith, President of SCHOLARLEADERS INTERNATIONAL, spent years counseling multi-national corporations on strategy and organizational effectiveness.