Theological Education in Africa: Business or Mission?

EMMANUEL BELLON
Director, Vital SustainAbility Initiative

Abstract: Financial viability remains one of the greatest challenges facing schools of theology. To succeed, schools in Africa need to better understand the business of theological education in order to better accomplish their mission. To do so, schools must better understand the true costs of forming leaders, engage the church in the mission of theological education, and adapt to the changing demands for leadership training in the church. This article explores how institutional leaders can strengthen this understanding, developing solid strategic plans and mobilizing more resources to better serve the mission of their schools.

Introduction

Building leadership capacity to spearhead the growth of Christianity in Africa is a venture plagued with myriad challenges. At the core of these challenges is the struggle of training institutions to attain financial viability. The primary purpose of theological institutions is to raise leaders who will shepherd the Church and influence society. This is in response to the plea of Jesus Christ for his followers to pray that the Lord of the plenteous harvest will bring in more laborers to complete the task (Lk. 10:2). This clarion call has been answered in many different ways, including through theological education. Nevertheless, fulfilling the Great Commission is a gargantuan task that requires prodigious resources.

The role of available resources for the establishment and continued operations of institutions is often underestimated and, more importantly, overshadowed by the urgency to produce pastors, no matter the cost. As the seasoned African theologian Kwame Bediako observed, "During the past thirty to forty years, the mushrooming of churches in independent Africa has led also to the proliferation of Bible schools…" (2001, 29). As theological institutions were founded to meet the shortfall of pastors, school leaders borrowed models from Western theological education that have little or no relevance to the African context as far as resources are concerned. Western theological institutions enjoy generous financial support from Western churches, foundations, endowments, and wealthy individuals, whereas their African counterparts have no local support and depend on foreign Western generosity.

The African model for theological education has therefore been incongruent with the context from day one. Consequently, Africa is littered with financially stressed theological training programs. The efforts of institutions to survive financial crises have led to all manner of bungling academic programs. The institutions struggle with debt, and those who opt for cost reduction are shrinking into unimaginable sizes and shapes. Expanding training programs of all kinds, as well as conversions of seminaries into Christian universities, complicate the financial landscape. Acknowledging this conversion phenomenon, S. R. Graham observes: “Much has been written in the recent months about the financial challenges facing educational institutions. A few have ceased operations, others have cut expenses and expanded their missions to incorporate a broader constituency” (2015, 1). Semeon Mulatu’s 2012 dissertation research on Protestant institutions that have converted from seminaries into universities in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo confirms that it is more difficult and complicated to operate a university than a seminary.

So what does theological education in Africa need to do in order to fulfill its mandate to train leaders for the Body of Christ? This is partly determined by how churches and mission agencies perceive the theological institutions they own. Is theological education business or mission? Was it meant to be business or mission? If the financial model of early theological education is now untenable, as evident in many institutions, then how are we to manage theological education? If theological education is a business with clear profitability targets, then the business is a lousy one. One consistent feature of almost all of the continent’s training programs with which I have interacted in the recent past is repeated losses as per business standards. Unlike business ventures, where more customers result in higher sales and profitability, every student in theological education is a cost: the more you have, the bigger your cost. If theological education is a mission, then what is the goal? What financial model should support the mission? How should we fund the mission so that the mandate to train leaders for the Church and society is fulfilled?

Perhaps the business of the mission of theological education is not an “either-or” discussion, but rather a “both-and” one. Theological education is a mission because it is part of the Church’s response to the central Commission given by Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. Similarly, it is a business because it has all the features involved in any business venture: customers, products, personnel, infrastructure, and returns on investments. Yet, all too often the mission is haphazardly defined and the business of accomplishing the mission is in tatters.

There is an apparent disconnect between the business and mission of theological education; hence, the search for financial viability has been elusive. The viability of African theological institutions deserves a critical examination of certain factors, such as inherited financial models, church ownership, strategic planning gaps, resource mobilization infrastructure, changing needs of leader formation, and institutional leadership capacity. Although these factors are not exhaustive, they provide the framework for our discourse on financial viability among theological institutions in Africa. In this reflection, I will be drawing heavily from my experience as someone who has served as a seminary president for years and who has also coordinated five seminaries in different African countries. More importantly, I will also reflect on some of the lessons gained from my current position of assisting nineteen theological institutions in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Asia to develop viable strategies for institutional sustainability.

Inherited Financial Models

Western churches and missionary agencies have founded almost all of the theological institutions in Africa. Very few institutions were established through indigenous initiatives and among these few institutions, many were started with Western gifts and donations. As Gatwa indicates, theological education "eats up a lot of money, and the African churches do not have such funds. Financial dependency is common to almost all these [theological] institutions – their funding comes essentially from abroad" (2003, 11).

African schools have based their financial models on a series of assumptions: we reach out to unbelievers, they respond favorably to our message, and then we plant churches. As churches grow quickly, we need pastors to lead the churches; but since there are no trained pastors in the denomination to hire, we establish bible colleges, usually at the certificate and diploma levels. However, since we do not have the resources to start a school, we appeal to our sending church or agency to send cash so we can buy land, build structures, and provide for the education of pastors. We also request library books and qualified teachers who can serve as self-supporting missionaries. Shortly after the missionary teachers show up, we enroll men and women who have heeded the call of God in their lives to be trained as pastors. Often, these recruits are willing to be trained, but have minimal education and no cash to pay for tuition. No problem, we enroll them anyway, and solicit the money from our mission agencies and churches to cover the operational costs of the school. This continues for years until certificate- and diploma-level courses are no longer enough, so we add bachelor's degrees and later master's programs, and we change the name of the school from bible college to seminary.

As can be seen, this financial model requires an upfront investment to establish the school and also continuous gifts from Western mission agencies to sustain operations, since students do not pay tuition. Therefore, the two main sources of funding for continued operations are gifts from mission agencies and churches, and the donation of salaries through self-supporting missionary teachers. After a while, students are asked to pay about 10 to 15% of the tuition, sometimes with scholarships for those who cannot afford the cost. Thus, a third income stream is added with the introduction of tuition. Although the seminary may belong to an African denomination or mission, there is no expressed financial support from either.

This continues for years until the missionary teachers decide to return to their home countries. Often, the departure of one missionary means the loss of two faculty members or staff, since both spouses tend to serve in the institution. The departure of missionaries also means the stoppage or reduction of funding from friends of the missionaries who have previously supported operations. It also means that local leaders and teachers without missionary support must assume teaching responsibilities with insufficient operational funds. Although the departure of missionaries is often gradual, the financial impact of their absence is sudden and institutions are quickly plunged into financial crisis. It is obvious that local denominations and mission agencies are oblivious to the huge financial responsibility they must bear to keep institutions operational. Stopgap measures from churches to address such financial situations have often fallen short of what is needed to maintain normal operations. This is evident in many theological institutions across Africa.

Missionaries and mission agencies have never come to an amicable understanding with local church leaders regarding what it takes to establish and operate a bible college. Although church leaders and mission agencies appreciate the contribution of the bible colleges, they never understood what it takes to establish, operate, and manage schools of such caliber. Similarly, after receiving initial grants and donations for infrastructure, missionaries never factored the costs of teaching, regular maintenance, and school operations into the overall cost. The only items captured in their financial records were gifts and how they were spent. Even after tuition was later introduced to many bible colleges as a source of revenue, the total income was insignificant when compared to the overall cost of operation.

Churches and local mission agencies only realize the true cost of operating bible colleges and seminaries after the departure of missionary teachers, administrators, and staff. Previously, African churches had entrusted the establishment and operation of seminaries to their missionary counterparts, and had never worried about operations or maintenance. Later, churches realized that operating a seminary is an expensive venture for which they are totally unprepared. The Western missionaries had applied a financial model that had been convenient at the time for their ministry, and it had served its purpose for that season. However, when the Western missionaries handed over leadership of the schools to local churches, the financial model quickly became untenable. Since the exodus of missionaries from different parts of the continent, institutional leaders have struggled to revise this financial model with very little success. Graham reiterates that even the Western model [generating income from tuition and fess, individual and group donations, endowment return, and denominational support] is not sustainable, and observes that Western theological schools have struggled with financial issues since the 1850s and have yet to discover a viable model (2015, 1).

Most often, the calculation of a seminary's operating budget is erroneously limited to faculty and administration costs. There are so many unaccounted costs because they were previously either considered as gifts in kind or as donations to the school. Hence, the actual cost of operating a seminary for an academic year is not really known. Costs such as classroom repair, missionary salaries, invested resources in fundraising, cost of volunteers, cost of outreach to the community, and others were never factored into the overall operational cost. A careful calculation of these costs against revenue would quickly reveal the reasons behind the perpetual deficit at many institutions.

Gradually, the cost of training each student per year is becoming evident, and the gap between tuition and cost is gaining much appreciation. According to a 2010 Overseas Council International (OCI, an Evangelical Christian agency supporting over 50 theological institutions in Africa) survey of 32 African theological institutions, the highest revenue that institutions derived from tuition was 30% of the annual operating cost. Many of the institutions recorded much lower revenue from tuition per year. The bottom line is that no theological student in Africa pays the full tuition cost of education. According to the OCI survey, the remaining 60% (or more) of revenue needed to train each student per year is raised through gifts and donations, which fluctuate over time. A recent (2012) posting on the Liberia Bible College website indicates that only 10% of their total revenue is generated from within Liberia; 90% is derived from overseas donations.

Often, school leaders argue that since tuition is low and since we have few students, if we increase the number of students, then we could increase our revenue. Certainly, fewer students do increase the cost per student, but since schools cannot increase the number of students per class infinitely, there will always be a gap. If students are not paying the full tuition, then no matter the number of students we enroll, we will never break even. Therefore, more students do not necessarily mean more revenue. Since the inception of school fees in theological education in Africa until now, we have yet to find an institution where tuition is equivalent to operational cost, and where more students will eventually result in a break-even budget and subsequently, a surplus.

The inability of school leaders to raise funds from other sources to cover the remaining 60% (or more) cost of operations immediately creates a deficit. Nevertheless, many theological institutions, strapped by financial pressure, operate under the premise that adding students alone will increase their revenue. This defective financial planning model still predominates at many African theological institutions. In reality, a theological seminary can achieve financial equilibrium only if it "has sufficient resources to conduct its mission with quality, preserve the purchasing power of its financial assets, maintain its physical assets, and provide fair compensation to its employees" (Graham 2015, 8).

Church Ownership of Institutions

The notion that a seminary exists to strengthen the Church and its witness in a dark world has not done much to improve church ownership of seminaries. This is partly historical and, to a great extent, due to negligence. Even decades after African leaders have taken over missionary-planted churches and ministries, theological education has continued to experience dwindling support in cash and in-kind. Although churches invest huge resources in building expensive edifices, there is no commensurate investment in theological education. Seminaries remain at the periphery of churches' core activities, and therefore lack the support they need to grow and thrive. Among the few African denominations that generously invest in theological education, the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) stands out as a shining example worthy of emulation. The determination of the NBC to sustain and develop its seminaries in Nigeria beyond the initial missionary investments is unusual.[1]

By and large, missionaries started seminaries in Africa to train pastors to shepherd growing congregations of believers in Jesus Christ. The Church is therefore the raison d'être of theological education; however, since the departure of Western missionaries, the Church's investment in institutional development has been minimal. Historically, national church leaders have repeatedly failed to grasp the vision of their Western counterparts, as evidenced by their scant interest and investment in theological institutions. Ownership transcends investment; it also reflects the extent to which a church is willing to draw on the intellectual offerings

[1] The NBC supports about ten seminaries in Nigeria, but also funds a big portion of the budget of its premier institution, the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary.

of its institution in addressing thorny and complicated issues in society. It relates to the Church's proactive engagement with the academy to generate theologically informed responses to society's changing needs.

The emerging gray areas in alternative lifestyles and the lack of depth in efforts from the pulpit to address these issues should motivate church leaders to embrace theological institutions as strategic partners in the search for wisdom and direction. Reciprocity in such a relationship would ensure that leaders in theological institutions do not sit in their ivory towers, but rather participate in the day-to-day activities of the Church, washing the feet of the faithful, and demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ as ministers of the Gospel. Responsive engagement and interaction would also educate the Church regarding the core operations of theological institutions and the need to demonstrate true ownership by facilitating school operations.

Changing Demands in Leader Formation

The first students who pursued theological education were individuals in full-time pastoral ministry. Many hardly possessed the qualifications required for the programs, but were accepted into the programs because they needed further training to effectively execute their duties as ministers of the Gospel. As time passed, the demography shifted to high school graduates in need of college-level theological education to serve as pastors. These were admitted to residential programs and studied under scholarships provided by the schools. Many of these young leaders were unmarried and had few social responsibilities. Others who already had college degrees went on to pursue postgraduate studies while still in their youth. Although many of these graduates continued to serve the Church as pastors and church leaders in different capacities, others discovered later that pastoral ministry and theological educational leadership are not their calling.

Today, churches are no longer looking for pastors among young graduates with only a first degree in theology, but rather seeking those who have broader experiences in life, educational exposure beyond theological training, and the ability to help parishioners with various life issues and deal with the social complexities of our time. These kinds of leaders are formed by interactions beyond the classroom. The demand for a different kind of church leader must alter the modus operandi of theological educators. The demand is pushing more professionals from other disciplines into theological education as second-career students. Russell West notes that although the financial predicament of residential seminaries may continue for a while, a new breed of seminarian is rising – seminarians who are prepared to explore emerging innovations upon older ministry training approaches (2003, 113). In fact, "full-time students living on campus and with faculty living at least near the campus is, for most institutions, a thing of the past" (Evans and Smith 1994, 51). Instead, more and more leaders now enroll as part-time students while maintaining their jobs and hope to serve as either full-time or bi-vocational pastors.

Yet, the theological curricula have not changed in response to these demographic shifts. Modes of course delivery and residential requirements for students have remained the same. Institutional response to changing leadership demands is an important determinant of financial viability, especially if the majority of these students are professionals who have the capacity to pay higher tuition and receive limited scholarships. The resources and infrastructure needed to serve this growing group of students are not as expansive as what is needed for young high school graduates in the traditional residential bible college environment. These older professionals do not need dormitories, cafeterias, sports facilities, and the many other amenities required by residential students. With reasonable classrooms and administrative offices, a good electronic library, the requisite faculty (who may be adjuncts or working part-time), and supporting staff, the seminary can operate efficiently. The socioeconomic status of working professionals enables them to adequately foot their own tuition bills and thus contribute to the wellbeing of the seminary. Finally, because these new leaders are adult learners, they are highly motivated to finish the program and step into their various church ministries. All this is to say that the change in demand for these leaders should influence school recruitment strategies, curricula, modes of delivery, and the development of physical facilities. Considering student demographic shifts will ensure efficient use of limited resources, which will significantly reduce the cost of operation and increase revenue for institutional viability.

Strategic Planning Gaps

The importance of strategy in achieving a mission cannot be overemphasized in theological education. The kind of strategy an institution adopts determines whether the institution will be successful or not in fulfilling its mission. Strategy shapes the mission of the institution, and determines the various tasks and activities that must be undertaken to fulfill the mission. An institutional mission does not remain static as society changes; there should be corresponding change in the institution's leader formation strategy. This requires a strategic thinking and planning culture, which is nonexistent in many African theological institutions.

The strategic mission of forming leaders and engaging society prophetically should be at the core of institutional learning and planning. It is central to everything that happens in the institution. Inability to articulate a clear mission aligned to the dynamic needs of society makes it virtually impossible to effectively plan for financial viability. It is not unusual for theological institutions in Africa to operate for years without clear strategic plans outlining focused goals and objectives for achieving their missions. This is partly because the expertise needed for such planning may be lacking and the cost of engaging professionals is prohibitive. As Aleshire rightly observes in the North American context, "Quality in theological education may be enhanced by good institutional processes, but those processes, however good they may be, do not define quality theological education…quality begins with knowing something so well, so intimately, so respectfully, that 'love of' and 'commitment to' characterize this knowing" (1994, 12). Similarly, in Africa, strategic planning can facilitate learning and ensure that schools adapt their missions to changing contextual needs.

When the strategic planning gap is addressed, the mission of the institution becomes clearer, and every effort and activity can then be focused on achieving the mission. The mission determines the kind of academic programs to be offered and the caliber of faculty needed to train leaders. The faculty then determines the kind of library resources needed to support the academic programs as they endeavor to fulfill the mission. The central responsibility to train particular kinds of leaders also informs the acquisition and maintenance of physical facilitates and other resources. The extent of the resources needed then informs the development of fundraising objectives and infrastructure.

Strategic planning thus reduces disjointed and tangled decision-making. It also influences the recruitment of management and administrative staff who are able to effectively facilitate the work of faculty and students. It harmonizes every decision and action regarding the institution, and provides a vision of the future that inspires passion in those serving the school. If theological education is the Lord's business, which must demonstrate clear returns on investment, then we have the stewardship responsibility to employ every known strategy in order to produce lasting fruit in a financially viable manner.

Resource Mobilization Infrastructure

The ability to mobilize resources, whether for business or for non-profit endeavors, is critical for the fulfillment of any vision. However, one cannot mobilize resources with poor and dilapidated infrastructure. Experience has taught us over the years that student tuition alone is not enough to meet the financial obligation of institutions and so, we must solicit funding from other sources to keep the boat afloat. Nevertheless, little effort and few resources are invested in the establishment of fund development offices and in the training of their staff. L.H. Olley boldly asserts that whether we are dealing with "a seminary, college, or university, the larger institution usually must have at least one staff person, if not an entire department, devoted to fundraising" (2008, 215). This person needs to be fully devoted to working with alumni and donors, and often to developing proposals for foundations and grant agencies.

Often, this responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of the school president and everyone looks to the president to bring in funds from wherever he or she may find them. An important lesson that we have not learned from our missionary counterparts is that fundraising is fundamental to the success of mission initiatives and that without funds, great ideas and passion evaporate over time. The success of missionaries and their activities in many African countries can be largely attributed to the availability of funding from their home churches. Like Western mission agencies, theological institutions in the West have also invested in people, systems, and structures for fund development. Today, these theological institutions remain in existence because of the success of these offices.

If tuition contributes to only a third of the institution's entire budget, then the remaining 70% needs to be raised from other sources. Fund development offices drive such fundraising initiatives. Business organizations are always looking for different opportunities to raise share capital so they can grow and expand the business, and theological institutions cannot do less. In order to fulfill their missions, theological institutions need to set up funding offices with qualified staff who can craft effective plans for successful fundraising campaigns.

It is often suggested that "third stream" projects (income-generating ventures) can fill this void, but observations from across the globe attest to the fact that theological institutions lack the business abilities and competencies for successfully operating third stream projects. Very few theological institutions have third stream projects that are thriving. Projects that do thrive are often due to a particular kind of seminary leadership. This simply means that seminaries must see fund development as a critical component of ministry, and must provide the attention and all the resources needed. A seminary's financial viability is therefore inextricably linked to the effectiveness of its fund development initiatives.

Institutional Leadership Capacity

At the core of every theological education is leadership. Students in theological institutions are equipped to become leaders in churches and parachurch organizations. This leadership is not only spiritual, but also permeates every aspect of our *Sitz im Leben*. It is extensive and deep, and has far-reaching consequences that transcend this life. Therefore, institutional leaders must model a high standard of leadership for students – the type that demonstrates stewardship par excellence. Thus, it behooves institutional governance bodies to select leaders who have certain qualifications for the position of seminary president. As Senior and Weber reiterate, "The truly effective religious leader is one who enables a community to mobilize its energies for the hard work of transformation and adaptation to social change. The challenging task for leadership today may be in building up institutions rather than tearing them down" (Senior and Weber 1994, 30).

In addition to academic qualifications, theological expertise, political alignment, contextual suitability, and good relationships with strategic partners, leaders should have the capacity to lead and grow a theological institution. Oftentimes, scholars rise to leadership positions because of their academic achievements; however, it takes more than academic success to lead a seminary effectively. Leaders must be able to distinguish business decisions from that of mission, and be able to seamlessly integrate the two and hold them together in dynamic tension. Ability to lead in this manner ensures that an institution operates at the highest of standards while accomplishing its mission.

Among theological institutions in Africa, very few leaders assume seminary presidency with the background and experience required. Many learn on the job with little or no mentoring at all. The result of these leadership transitional practices is evident in the institutional struggles across the continent. The skills and competencies needed to lead a theological institution can be more complex than those required for a business venture with defined deliverables and profitability standards. The leader must first be called by God to serve and that calling takes time to verify. He or she must understand the core business of theological education, which is training leaders to shepherd the Church and society. He or she must have a strong biblical and theological background or exposure, and must be able to articulate the mission of the institution in such a light. Administration and management of faculty, staff, students, facilities, and academic programs present incredible challenges for a theological school leader. Furthermore, nurturing church and funding partner relationships as stakeholders of the mission is a delicate work that requires certain skills and competencies.

It feels overwhelming for a governing board or church to consider all of these qualifications before selecting a leader for the position of institutional president. Yet, the situation in many seminaries requires just that if the institution is to be salvaged from imminent collapse. In many institutions in Africa, leaders with both strong academic backgrounds and leadership skills are a rare species. It seems that leaders with the capacity to fulfill both the business and the mission of theological education must be theologians who have had opportunities to lead other ventures, possibly through for-profit or non-profit organizations, prior to assuming seminary leadership. The confluence of business insight and theological reflection in their thinking could then enable the institutional effectiveness and growth so desperately needed in all of our theological institutions.

Conclusion

As theological institutions in Africa flounder with only a few sporadic glimmers of hope, we should remember that God cares about everything that affects His work. As much as He is concerned with what will advance and grow His Kingdom, He also gives due attention to those things that may hold back the spread of the Gospel to all nations. Currently, the financial prognosis for many theological seminaries in Africa is discouraging, but by integrating proper business acumen with missional focus, institutions will begin to rise again. A robust business and missional approach to theological education will require an effective and efficient financial model, strategies to strengthen Church ownership of seminaries, careful attention to the changing trends in and demand for leader formation, and strong fund development infrastructures. Above all, it will require God-prepared leaders with broader experiences in life and organizational behavior to reap the abundant harvest. God cares, and as a result, He has made sufficient and appropriate provisions for the advancement of His Kingdom. Financial viability of theological education in Africa can be achieved as we draw from all of God's to improve the leadership of our institutions.

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Emmanuel Bellon

Prof. Emmanuel Bellon is the former Vice Chancellor of Nairobi International School of Theology/International Leadership University and former President of five other institutions in four African countries. He is Vice President (Executive Network) of ScholarLeaders International and Director of the *Vital SustainAbility Initiative*, designed to guide 19 theological institutions in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Asia to plan strategically for institutional sustainability.