

InResponse: Vision and Leadership: Vital to Sustaining the Faith in Sub-Saharan Africa

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In his article, “Sustaining What Matters,” Jason Ferenczi presents a multifaceted understanding of the sustainability of theological institutions. Theological schools play a critical role in ensuring the future of Christianity, particularly in my own context of Africa. As President of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS),¹ I agree that human resources, especially executive leaders, play a critical role in sustaining schools. Most importantly, leaders need to convey a vision for both the institution and the individuals it forms. In Africa, leaders play a critical role in whether Christianity will continue to flourish in this century.

A Look at My Context: The Importance of Leaders

The vitality and growth of the Christian faith in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the twenty-first century are certainly a joy to the Global Church. Though the decline of Christianity in the Western world is a matter of regret, it does call for critical reflection on the future of the Christian faith in the Majority World. What is the future of Christianity, which is now spreading like wildfire in Africa?

In the first century, the Christian faith flourished in both Asia Minor and North

¹ By the grace of God, I am an emerging Christian leader in Africa. I serve as the Vice Chair of the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa, Director of the International Council for Higher Education in West Africa and President of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomoṣo, Nigeria. My specialization is in Systematic Theology. For about thirty years, I have served as a theological educator and administrator. The NBTS, established in 1898, was the first degree-awarding institution in Nigeria. It became a postgraduate school in 2002 and is the first theological institution to offer doctoral degrees in theology, education, and church music in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Africa. Vibrant churches were planted by the Apostle Paul in Turkey and beyond. Will Sub-Saharan Africa become like North Africa in the future? Will Nigeria become another Turkey? What should we make of the painful observation that, despite the full presence of vibrant churches in some African nations, our societies still exhibit rampant social vices like materialism, corruption, poverty, kidnapping, armed robbery, and misgovernment? What do we make of the elements of truth in the popular, but painful joke that “African Christianity is one mile wide, but one inch deep”? Will that kind of Christian faith survive in Africa? Certainly, the growth trend mentioned earlier is a complex phenomenon, but the intention of this author is to call attention to just one aspect of the matter: the critical need to raise visionary, transformative leaders for the Church in Africa.

One presupposition of this article is that the future of the Christian faith will be guaranteed in Africa if the Church and Christian leaders of today are trained to make the Gospel of the Kingdom have transformative impact on African nations. The African Church is in dire need of theological institutions that can raise up and multiply transformative learners (church pastors, theological educators, and civil leaders) who are committed to living and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, in order to contribute to the transformation of African nations. These two issues of vision and leadership are closely interwoven and vital to sustaining the Christian faith in the African context.

A Vision for Theological Education

What type of theological education will guarantee the future of genuine Christian faith in Africa? Although Africa is known as a bright continent with a sunny climate, unfortunately and paradoxically, many African societies are in darkness because they lack leaders with visions for societal transformation. How true is the parable of the Lord Jesus Christ: when a blind man leads another blind man, both will fall into a pit (Lk. 6:39)! Evangelical theological educators in Africa need to work with clear and bright institutional visions. In recent ecclesiological parlance, African theological training programs need to be more purpose-driven. For the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, that means balancing the values of spiritual, scholarly, and ministerial development, and integrating them into every instructional activity. Theological relevance should not be taken for granted, but rather planned and pursued deliberately in ministerial formation programs. I wish to assert that the future of the Christian faith can be assured in Africa if we offer theological education that can equip learners to respond effectively to contextual societal realities.

My overarching burden now relates to how theological education can bring greater transformative impact to Sub-Saharan Africa. In February 2017 I led a spiritual reflection on Matthew 6:25-34 for the NBTS staff and students with

the theme “Wanted: Gospel Ministers who are Kingdom Workers.” I proposed that theological education must be revitalized in Africa, with a renewed vision for Kingdom leaders. Educational processes, including curriculum design and development of methodologies, are to be conducted with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God in the hearts and lives of African students, who will then carry out Kingdom ministries in the Church and society. The curriculum of ministerial education should thus be focused to help students access the knowledge, secrets, mysteries, and keys of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:11, 16:19). This emphasis on preaching and living out the Gospel of the Kingdom is imperative for theological education to serve and enable the African Church to fulfill its prophetic and missionary roles on the continent.

Sadly, the Kingdom focus of the Gospel has been compromised in many places in Africa. Many African Christian religious activities have become utilitarian. I am inwardly troubled and disturbed. At the risk of sounding alarming I wish to state that many African preachers are deviating from the true Gospel. Rather than concentrating on the Gospel of redemption that will transform lives and societies, many are preoccupied with other “gospels” of material possessions and achievements – money, positions, pleasures (Gal. 1:6-7). When the Church abandons the authentic Gospel message and lifestyle, society is made poorer.

Theological education in Africa is crying out for the renewal of its mission to establish the fear of God in people and righteousness in the land (2 Chr. 7:14). I was privileged to attend the 50th Anniversary Thanksgiving Service of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa in November 2016; I pleaded that Evangelical theological education should remain committed to training in godliness (1 Tim. 4:8). Knowledge of academic theories and sharp ministerial skills cannot redeem souls, grow the Church, transform society, or expand God’s Kingdom unless the Church and Christian leaders are spiritually formed and buoyant. For the Christian faith to survive in Africa, theological education must recognize the priority of spiritual formation. Contextual application of global best practices in education and administration, improvement of facilities, and the acquisition and use of technology all become more significantly profitable to the extent that they are able to enrich and energize the Kingdom vision.

The Importance of Leadership

High-quality Christ-centered leadership, characterized by integrity, plays an essential part in preserving the Christian faith in Africa. Africa is bedeviled with many problems: social disharmony, cultural perversion, moral erosion, economic poverty, political disorientation, and religious deception. I align myself with Christian analysts who affirm the great need for leaders who can model Christian faithfulness, biblical obedience, and true discipleship to transform contemporary

African society. Many African nations lack exemplary, honest, purposeful, and sacrificial leadership. Africa needs more political leaders like Nelson Mandela of South Africa and religious leaders like Peter Jasper Akinola of Nigeria.²

The truth of the matter is that regrettably, with regard to leadership selection and performance, the African Church fares no better than the larger society. Churches, denominations, and organizations sometimes choose our top leaders via quarrels, intrigues, desperation, and even mud-slinging litigation. Too often, personality clashes that result from conflicts of interest, lack of team spirit, and other manifestations of poor leadership characterize church and parachurch organizations. Thus, high-quality church and societal leadership is desperately needed as a Christian witness in Africa. One way for theological educators to contribute to the survival of the Christian faith in Africa is to embody and exemplify principled, godly, Christ-centered, servant leadership. Only teachers who serve as role models can rightly train, equip, and transform learners who will in turn offer Christian service and leadership with transformative impact on African societies.

As asserted by Ferenczi, theological institutions need help in many areas: competency in administration and management; standard finance systems (the business plan); staff development (“human capacity”); facilities and resources (especially libraries and technology); curricula that are more balanced, student-centered, Church-related, and society-friendly (“adapting to the context”); more effective instructional delivery; and scholarship assistance for students.

Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that **ensuring the future of the Christian faith in Africa requires developing, encouraging, and supporting heads of theological institutions and teachers who can offer visionary and transformative leadership characterized by:**

- A faith that is equally true to biblical revelation and to authentic African spirituality,
- Critical reflection on contemporary Christian praxis, so as to expand and deepen African Christianity,
- Dialogue with and responsiveness to socioeconomic poverty, hunger, ill health, and other inhumane development indices plaguing the continent,

¹ Nelson Mandela offered brief, but purposeful democratic leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. Bishop Peter Jasper Akinola, while serving as the Primate of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), stood courageously in favor of biblical orthodoxy in the contemporary debate on human sexuality. That “conservative” stance inspired even greater respect for the Church in African society.

- Victory over the growing and pervasive storms of liberal Christianity through sound hermeneutics and theology,
- Breakthrough from enslavement to religious and cultural superstitions, and resilience before the upsurge of Islamic aggression,
- The practice of Evangelical faith and an obedient Christian life amid the emerging pluralism of ideologies, philosophies, and religions in Africa and beyond.

How will the Christian faith survive in Sub-Saharan Africa? One strategy is to develop spiritually buoyant, academically competent, and ministerially experienced faculty who will live, lead, and teach for the transformation of the Church and society.



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