Research-Based Curriculum Review: Learning from the Africa Leadership Study

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Introduction

Leadership development is a buzzword found in the vision and mission statements of many evangelical theological institutions in Africa. The irony, however, is that the more theological institutions claim to be developing transformational leaders for the African church, the more leadership crises the church continues to encounter. Elliston (1988) used graphic words like over-functioning, non-functioning, undertrained, over-trained, inappropriately trained, dropout, overextended, and springboard to describe the perilous state of leadership in Africa. The phenomenal growth of the church in Africa further aggravates the situation.

The disconnect between the leadership training paradigms, especially the clerical paradigm, adopted by theological institutions and the contextual leadership realities facing the church in Africa continues to be the Achilles’ heel of theological education. The clerical paradigm — plagued by the clericalism, professionalism, and elitism — has struggled to produce the types of leaders required. It reinforces the notion that professional training for ministry happens only in theological institutions and that whoever darkens the doorways of such an institution ought to become a church leader. It is also mostly insensitive to leadership contexts. It inculcates students in skills and competencies that become outdated fairly quickly due to rapid cultural and social changes. The professional training paradigm assumes a fairly stable context, and defines competencies in terms of specialized skills and knowledge presupposing neat divisions and hierarchies of labor. Such a paradigm may suit bureaucratic, service, and commonweal (public-at-large) organizations, but may not in all aspects suit the African church, which is by and large a mutual benefit, faith-oriented, and culturally tinted institution. As Kelsey
(1992) concluded, “[E]ducated on the clerical paradigm, church leaders end up being ill-equipped to provide the most important sort of leadership worshiping communities require” (162).

The failure of our curricula to consider the African context in leadership formation may be due to scanty and inaccessible research. Consequently, leadership curriculum development has often been intuitive, mostly derived from imported practices instead of being grounded in relevant research findings. Such curriculum practices have been grounded in an epistemological framework assuming that leadership practices are not context-related, and that there is instead a fixed body of leadership knowledge that all leaders should know and apply. Consequently, the framework erroneously assumes that leadership development material constructed in Europe or the United States is suitable for the emerging African leader. Evidence of this assumption is noted in the number of “quick fix” leadership materials in deep and wide circulation, and in the type of leadership materials African leaders read (Priest et al. 2013).

Literature on leadership development has moved away from Platonic philosophy and trait theory to the intentional development of leaders. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) posit that leadership traits can be learned and improved upon. Max DePree (1989) indicates that leadership is an art that anyone can practice. If leaders are in fact made, then social, cultural, political, and economic contexts play a significant role in leadership development. Unfortunately, most theological curricula used to develop leaders in Africa do not consider seriously these contexts partly because educators lack primary data. Consequently, they end up designing curricula that do not equip people to handle issues arising from these contexts. This has caused acute leadership crises in Africa as our leaders from theological institutions do not know how to adequately handle corruption, negative ethnicity, globalization, social media, dysfunctional families, or witchcraft, to name a few societal maladies. Therefore, the question of concern is: “What do Christian leaders do and how can they be trained properly for ministry?”

The aim of this article is to apply the findings of the Africa Leadership Study (ALS) to curriculum development and review processes for theological schools. In doing so, it will underscore for institutions the value of implementing research-based

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1 Between the fall of 2012 and spring of 2013, researchers of the Africa Leadership Study designed a survey that was administered to 8,041 African Christians from three countries in three languages: Kenya (English), the Central African Republic (French), and Angola (Portuguese). The completed surveys were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The survey sought to identify the leaders and institutions creating significant positive impact in their communities (Phase 1) and to identify, through intensive interviews with the leaders and organizations identified in Phase 1, some of the factors and situations that have facilitated the impact (Phase 2). Data from the ALS is being used in a variety of ways, including the curriculum-related purposes here.
curriculum review in order to connect their curricula with the realities of those they serve.

Definitions

“Leadership” and “curriculum” appear extensively in this article and require precise definition. This article adopts the conceptual understanding of leadership that has been defined by the Africa Leadership Study as “influence that transforms people and their communities.”

“Curriculum” includes all institutional macro- and micro-processes involved in developing leaders for African churches and societies. The institutions in focus are theological colleges, Christian liberal arts universities, and church leadership training institutions.

Importance of Impact Assessment

Findings from the Africa Leadership Study indicate that the leaders creating the most significant positive impact in their communities are involved in either service (schools, hospitals, not-for-profit institutions, etc.) or mutual benefit organizations. These organizations have not received much attention in previous studies of organizations and leadership. Often, research findings involving commonweal or business organizations are applied uncritically to these organizations with unpalatable consequences. For example, students who have learned bureaucratic principles of leadership may want to run their churches like bureaucracies or service organizations. Thus, their leadership principles violate the nature of the organizations they were trained to serve.

The situation is compounded when it comes to African leadership. African forms of and perspectives on leadership practices have often been ignored in leadership studies. Only recently have autobiographies of African leaders emerged and, with the exception of Nelson Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom, they do not receive as much readership as biographies of non-African leaders. Thus, the leadership principles being taught in our theological schools to would-be leaders of service and mutual benefit organizations are derived from research on other forms of

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2 Types of organizations discussed in this article include: (a) mutual benefit organizations that focus on the welfare of their members (e.g., political parties, religious bodies including churches, unions, etc.); (b) business organizations that focus on the organizations’ own welfare (the primary concern is to maximize gain at a minimal cost so the organization can survive and grow in a competitive climate); (c) service organizations that focus on serving clients (e.g., schools, social work agencies, hospitals, etc.); and (d) commonweal organizations that exist to serve the public at large (e.g., parastatals, the police, the military, etc.).
leadership and involving non-African leaders. The absence of authentic and credible research on African leadership may have contributed to this scenario.

In the last fifty years, research on leadership in service and mutual benefit organizations has accelerated. However, this research is still in its cradle phase, especially as it relates to Christian leadership. Institutions invested in leadership training need to consider data from the available research when developing their curricula. Unfortunately, the limited research data is often inaccessible to practitioners of leadership education or irrelevant to needs of African churches. Consequently, much of the curriculum development for leadership formation in Africa is guided by intuition, which Barlex and Welch (2000), writing in another context, would describe as a “‘seat of the pants’ response to limited piloting and anecdotal evidence from enthusiastic teachers.” Decisions about what to include and remove from the curriculum are based on what teachers “think” students should know and not on the findings of credible research. In addition to “enthusiastic teachers,” enthusiastic missionaries, board members, and other interest groups have also used a few isolated instances to inform and influence curriculum development processes at our institutions. One effect of this intuitive approach to curriculum development is a bloated and heavily fragmented curriculum as each stakeholder insists that his or her viewpoints be represented in the curriculum.

Redefining Success

It is of interest to note how churches in Africa are receiving graduates from our theological institutions. It is common for pastors to enroll in leadership development courses after graduate theological training, suggesting that our curricula are not as effective in leadership development as we may claim. Our curricula may provide good theological, historical, and biblical knowledge, but they leave graduates chasing after leadership development programs. We may surmise that African forms of leadership practices have often been omitted from curriculum design and implementation due to the dearth of research. The non-alignment of leadership training and contextual realities has led to dire consequences, but we hope to reverse this trend.

Data, such as that found in the ALS, should encourage theological schools to redefine their measure of “excellence” in leadership development. Over the years, institutional excellence or success in leadership training has been defined in terms of output (e.g., headcount of graduating students) and input (e.g., quality of the staff, faculty, library, etc.). The ALS research highlights the importance of impact assessment in curriculum renewal. Excellence should not necessarily be described in terms of input and output, but rather in terms of the positive community impact created by alumni. Impact assessment requires dialogue with the constituencies
served by alumni. It requires a deep and cordial relationship between the academy and the community. Such relationships will require mutual support between the church and the academy, with the church providing both financial and moral support to the institution, and in return, the theological institutions responding appropriately to the intellectual and ministry needs of the church. A relationship like this would provide institutions with a research constituency that could offer insight into the work of the leaders they have trained. It would also allow churches to provide feedback concerning curriculum matters in view of what they need from their leaders. Communication from the churches will be used to adjust the inputs, processes, and outputs to form excellent leaders of impact.

Research Shaping Curriculum

The ALS survey results revealed that “African Christians are exercising energy, initiative, [and] vision in responding to African realities and felt needs.” This revelation counteracts “the widespread perception that Africans are doing little to change poverty, conflict, violence and foreign dependency. African Christian leaders are creatively and energetically working to address a wide variety of local problems and opportunities with[in] the framework of Christian understandings, communities and resources” (ALS Report, November 2013). As educators at schools with an express purpose of developing leaders, we can benefit from these findings.

The survey reveals the importance, influence, and breadth of Christian leaders in the church and in society. Findings pertinent to theological schools focused on developing leaders include:

1. Christian leaders in diverse contexts, including churches, have significant influence in Africa, especially regarding spiritual and ethical issues. Pastors and church leaders continue to have the most influence in the lives of the respondents, albeit only in areas related to personal spirituality.

2. Christian leaders in diverse contexts are using their secular training to play strategic roles in the transformation of their communities.

3. Gender continues to play a major role in leadership. Though men continue to dominate the scene, women have a strategic influence and role in contemporary Africa. Respondents frequently named women as effective leaders, despite their underrepresentation in leadership positions.

4. Churches are recognized for their strategic roles in the lives of African Christians and communities, and are listed frequently by respondents as among the most effective organizations they know.
5. Successful parachurch organizations are central to evangelism, discipleship, and social engagement, and have strong African leadership.

6. The Bible as the word of God is important in the lives of African Christians and a significant number of those surveyed read the Bible more than any other text.

7. Many of the Africans surveyed read books, especially those that are motivational, practical, or oriented toward achieving success; however, many of the Africans surveyed do not have favorite African writers and hardly read books authored by Africans.

8. Relational networks within organizations provide the basis for achieving success.

Research such as the Africa Leadership Study unearths strategic issues that leadership development institutions need to consider with regard to the classic curriculum.

**Leadership Beyond the Church**

Christian organizations creating a positive impact in Africa provide a gamut of services. In Kenya, the Christian Partner Development Agency is addressing the problem of drought in diverse ways through sustainable agriculture, community health measures, political activism, promotion of gender equality, water and environmental conservation, and institutional development. In the Central African Republic, the Christian Embassy provides services that range from professional skills training and micro-financing to water provision. In Angola, the Conselho de Igrejas Cristãs em Angola executes programs related to evangelism, assistance and development, theological education, healthcare for HIV/AIDS and malaria patients, peace and reconciliation, and personnel training (see Bowen’s 2013 ALS report on the “Range of Services Offered by African Organizations of Impact”).

Such diverse ministry engagements raise the question of whether theological schools know what their graduates do. The popular understanding is that theological institutions exist to provide leaders for churches. However, if they are filling diverse leadership roles, then questions concerning how seminaries are preparing them for such ministry are warranted. Most often, leadership training in theological institutions focuses on one type of leadership — pastoral leadership — that focuses on spiritual issues of importance to the congregation. Research can help schools evaluate their curricula and make adjustments to address the broader fields they serve. Schools seeking to meet broader leadership needs might want curricula that include other disciplines — such as psychology,
business, governance, etc. — to prepare holistic African leaders who can serve as resources for multiple community concerns (see Ngaruiya’s 2013 ALS report).

Leadership Development Beyond the Classroom

Not everything can be taught in the classroom. The ALS shows that leaders who have created a significant positive impact point to the strong influence of mentors in their leadership formation. Current training models, however, emphasize classroom interactions between students and teachers, and allot no time for the leaders-in-training to taste what leadership really requires. Instead of learning on the field, students spend most of their time in classrooms.

Yet, the Africa Leadership Study reveals that fewer than 10% of respondents in all the countries surveyed (8.3% in Angola, 7.7% in the CAR, and 9.9% in Kenya) indicate that their teachers have significantly influenced them. As most respondents were not pastors, this finding refers to teachers generally and not necessarily those at theological schools. All the same, the numbers are stark especially as teachers are expected to be role models and shapers of students. Yet, these reports suggest that those who influence leaders are probably not their teachers. Instead, the findings reveal that those who influence our leaders the most are typically elderly authority figures, especially religious leaders whose influence was noted by over 30% of the respondents (35.3% in Angola, 50.2% in the CAR, and 55.8% in Kenya).

Influence may be coming from people who are not directly or necessarily connected to theological institutions. Thus, leadership curricula should include ways for students to seek out and interact with such people. They should allow students to spend time with leader mentors for a protracted period. This would help students to integrate the theoretical knowledge obtained in class into the practical realities of life.

Holistic Engagement

The ALS research also reveals that African Christians have a passion for social justice and poverty alleviation; therefore, the curricula of our theological institutions must address the unhealthy dichotomy between the Social Gospel and evangelism. This brings to the table this question: “Whom does theological education serve — the church, society, or both?”

The common belief is that theological education serves the church and that anyone not serving within a church is not worthy of theological education. This thinking assumes that lawyers, architects, and engineers, for example, who wish to undertake theological education, should give up their professions and become pastors after their training. We need to reexamine our definition of theological
education. Wood (1985) defines theological education as “the cultivation of theological judgment.” Wood did not limit his definition to judgment involving situations in the church, but also those in the community and society. Theological education should help people to cultivate theological judgment in all facets of life be it social, political, or economic. Believers should exercise the “mind of Christ” in all things.

**Bringing Formal and Nonformal Training Together**

If, as the ALS research indicates, teachers, especially in classroom settings alone, have limited impact on developing leaders while mentors, including religious leaders, have significant impact, then theological schools should ask how mentoring can be incorporated effectively into their curricula. Mentoring may be part of the formal curriculum, but more often, it takes place outside of structured teaching. Thus, schools should also consider nonformal learning opportunities based on activities, relationships and patterns of life that extend beyond the classroom. Activities may include discipleship groups or service opportunities that include both faculty and students.

Theological institutions must overcome the polarization between formal and nonformal education. Coombs et al. (1973) defines formal education as “the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded educational system running from primary school through university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialized programs and institutions for full-time technical and professional training” (11). Kleis et al. (1973) defines nonformal education as any intentional, systematic, and goal-oriented education (normally outside of traditional schooling) “in which content is adapted to the unique needs of the students (or unique situations) in order to maximize learning and minimize other elements, which often occupy formal school teachers” (6). Formal education can be understood as highly content-sensitive and nonformal education as highly context-sensitive. Formal education tends to be teacher- or institution-centered, while nonformal education tends to be learner- or context-centered. The ALS research indicates that theological schools would do well to examine the impact of both on student experience in their degree programs.

The ALS findings suggest that leadership training should not be compartmentalized into formal versus nonformal modes. Each mode of training

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3 Note that Kleis et al. have not used a hyphen in “nonformal.” The renderings of these two models in educational literature and popular usage indicate that one is the antithesis of the other. However, the intention here is not to present one as the opposite of the other, as hyphenation may suggest, but rather to present each as a legitimate mode of education with its own philosophy, methodology, purpose, and research procedures. One curriculum paradigm that I have seen that tries to fuse both models in leadership development is the More than a Mile Deep Curriculum Project ([www.entrust4.org/about/our-ministries/africa](http://www.entrust4.org/about/our-ministries/africa)).
augments the other and both are needed to train leaders. One is not the opposite of the other, as they seem to overlap in very significant ways. They can complement one another. The Pastoral Trainers Declaration of Cape Town (2010) noticed the unhealthy dichotomy between these modes of leadership training and thus declared:

_Since the formal and non-formal sectors of pastoral training have knowingly and unknowingly allowed ourselves to be divided in heart and efforts, we declare together that we shall endeavor to build trust, involve each other, and leverage the strengths of each sector to prepare maturing shepherds for the proclamation of God’s word and the building up of Christ’s church in all the nations of the world._

In our training institutions, we must intentionally use both formal and nonformal training modes, leveraging the strength of each, in the preparation of leaders. The focus should be on neither teacher nor learner. The focus should be on learning. If the question “Is the student learning?” becomes the focus, then at any given time, both formal and nonformal modes may be necessary. We must intentionally weave deep theoretical reflection with opportunities for hands-on experience so that would-be leaders can learn from both. We must move away from the old paradigm of “theory, then practice” (application from theory) to “theory-building through practice.” We must move away from the paradigm of “training for the ministry” to the paradigm of “training in ministry.” We must allow our students to reflect on their practice, instead of only reflecting on what is presented in the extant literature or in class lectures. Our curricula should ensure that the life of the student is the laboratory of learning. Thus, our curricula should, with great intentionality, seamlessly fuse the explicit and implicit forms and bridge the artificial gap between the formal and nonformal modes in the quest to enhance learning.

**A Framework for Leadership Curricula**

Many suggestions have been made regarding how leadership curricula should respond to the research findings from the Africa Leadership Study. The type of curriculum that accommodates these suggestions will differ from the current curricula in our theological institutions. It is at the risk of drawing fire from those who believe that our present leadership-training paradigm is God-inspired, time-tried, and wholly trustworthy that I present five proposals, informed by the ALS findings, for a curriculum that fosters competent leadership training:

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4 Don Browning’s “The Revival of Practical Theology” (www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?tiitle=1373) succinctly summarizes various arguments about the role of practical theology within the fourfold model of theological education.
1. Reconsider perpetuating the fourfold division of theological education rooted in the Enlightenment. Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline of Theological Study* (1811) gave rise to the standard fragmentation of theological education into biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology. Three of these (biblical studies, church history, and systematic theology) are viewed as distinct disciplines in theological education. Practical theology is viewed as the application of the other three to concrete situations in the church or in individual lives. However, we must be reminded that this fourfold division, which subsequently led to the fragmentation of the present theological curriculum, was not designed with ministerial training in mind. Rather, it was an attempt to help theological studies gain acceptance into the emerging university model during the 19th century.

A more effective, research-based curriculum, aiming to combine formal and nonformal training, would not keep practical theology at the receiving end of biblical studies, church history, and systematic theology. Rather, practical theology should serve as the unifying force for the once-fragmented curriculum. Most of the non-clergy leaders surveyed are providing practical theological leadership without formal training in biblical studies, church history, or systematic theology. Those who have had formal training were quick to recognize that it is in their ministry practice that biblical studies, church history, and systematic theology come together and come alive. Thus, practical theology should emphasize public engagement to help leaders to consider the church’s role in the world beyond the church’s internal needs.

For example, a Christian educator should not only be trained to lead Sunday School and adult Bible classes. His training should also empower him to help the church understand governmental educational policies that affect the people of God. He should be able to challenge these policies or help the church adapt to them, using his training in theology and perhaps social science. When our curricula take practical theology into serious consideration, then they will begin to respond appropriately to the needs of our societies. When practical theology is taken seriously, then curriculum development will likely take contexts and the role of leaders in these contexts seriously.

2. Reconsider the current paradigm of integration. This point is related to the first. Integration, in most cases, takes the form of “bringing the silos closer” without demolishing the separating walls. This is evident in cases where academic departments cooperate to offer a program, but require
students to take a given number of credit hours in one department and then in the other department. This type of cross-disciplinary integration is not what I have in mind. Rather, the proposal is for a model of integration that centers on the output of multidimensional leaders. Instead of approaching leadership training from discrete courses of study, themes and issues relating to leadership are identified so departments can work together to provide avenues for students to study the intricacies and dimensions of the issues. Students will then be able to access resources from multiple disciplines as they strive to understand the issues. If this model of integration is adopted, then traditional course titles that are department-specific will disappear, as the focus will be on the issue and the content will be designed to address that issue.

Let me illustrate what I mean with a course I will call “Leadership Integrity.” The student may want to explore what the Bible says about this issue and study the Book of Daniel intensively. She may want to explore the effects of leadership integrity by examining leadership during the Dark Ages, studying biographies of contemporary leaders of integrity, investigating the political ramifications of integrity in leadership, etc. She brings all of these resources into the study of this concept over an extended period. By the time the study is over, the study will have covered several materials that hitherto have been fragmented in the classic curriculum. An integrated curriculum would serve well in training such multidimensional leaders.

3. Reconsider assessment strategies. Testing how much our students remember is the norm in learning assessment. Students who can reproduce our materials in forms that are very close to how we had previously presented them are considered excellent students. However, if we want to concentrate on impact assessment, then the most important consideration is what our students do with the materials given to them. This may have implications for how we frame our learning outcomes. I suggest that these be framed in terms of achievement outcomes that focus on what students will have done by the end of the learning engagement, rather than what they should be able to do after the learning engagement. For example, a course focusing on leadership in church planting could have this as an achievement-based outcome: “By the end of this session, the student will have formed a group of church planters.” Contrast this with the most common form of learning outcome: “By the end of this session, the student should be able to form a group of church planters.” In the second case, the student's potential ability is tested while in the first case, the actual accomplishment is assessed.
The focus on traditional assessment, and the desire to get A’s and B’s have led to unwholesome competition among students. This competitive attitude has a spillover effect, as few organizations surveyed by the ALS claimed to have viable partnerships with other organizations performing the same task. While many organizations cited “competitors” performing similar services, only two organizations reported partnerships with other organizations. However, this trend is reversed when it comes to interpersonal relationships among impactful individuals in African leadership (see Rasmussen’s 2013 ALS report). Yet, in our schools, we assess individual work and often discourage cooperation among students. A curriculum that aims to develop leaders should encourage more cooperation among students. If students are encouraged to collaborate on academic exercises and work together on projects of mutual concern, then they may keep working together in the future.

Conclusion

The research data from the Africa Leadership Study provides insight into many relevant areas — such as technology, the importance of female leadership, and the importance of pedagogy, among others — that have not been covered here. In this paper, I have sought to apply findings from the ALS to offer an example of how leadership training in Africa can be informed by research so that the resulting curricula will produce effective leaders on a very large scale — much larger than the group identified in the ALS research. The promise of capable African leadership already evident in the lifestyles and practices of emerging leaders will be greatly enhanced and multiplied if our leadership curricula are informed by research.

References


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