

# The Purpose of the *Journal*: For Such a Time as This

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“For such a time as this.” When asked why we would start a new journal at this time, the answer may be found in Mordecai’s words to Esther: we hope that the *Journal* may, in fact, be just the right resource “for such a time as this.”

The church has overused these words, sometimes appropriating them as a slogan for conferences and theme for Vacation Bible Schools. Yet, they capture the idea of hopeful expectation. They point the church toward the theological concept of *kairos* time – an appointed time. Beyond a mere counting of minutes and hours – *kronos* time – there are moments that deserve notice – and action. They indicate that perhaps God is at work in this moment.

When Mordecai speaks these words to Esther, he indicates not only that there are a unique set of circumstances at hand, but also that the moment includes the opportunity for action. Alignment of context and opportunity for action moves the phrase “for such a time as this” from trite slogan to a statement of hopeful anticipation. As this new journal begins, it does so in recognition of a unique moment in the history of global theological education. It also begins as one response to the opportunity for action. Launching a journal obviously cannot compare to the deliverance of God’s people from the hands of a maniacal vizier, nor to the ultimate salvific work of God through Christ Jesus in the fullness of time. But it does come as one opportune action at a unique time in the history of the church and for this reason it begins perhaps “for such a time as this.”

## *The Purpose of the Journal*

When *Theological Education*, the journal of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the United States and Canada, began fifty years ago, it did so expressly to increase communication among schools (Ziegler 1964, 1). In a way,

the purpose of this journal is similar, but with a much broader scope. We need greater communication among schools globally. We need to learn, to share, and to engage in discourse in order to continue developing both the theory and practice of theological education in light of global realities, including those outside the traditional centers of education in the West.

The purpose of the *InSights Journal for Global Theological Education* is to provide a platform for scholars and practitioners to address issues related broadly to theological education. In response to the context and the arising opportunities of the moment, particular attention is given to voices from non-Western contexts as they engage the global conversation.

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## For Such a Time as This: The Context of the Moment

### *A Time of Growth*

In the last decade and a half, many have noted the demographic shift in the church due to the rapid growth of Christianity in the non-Western world. This growth has moved its center from the West to the Global South (Jenkins 2002; Sanneh 2009; Robert 2000). As the church has grown, so too has theological education, albeit at a much slower rate (Bowers 2007). Hundreds of Bible schools, seminaries, divinity schools, and Christian training centers exist in the Majority World today. While the vast majority of schools train pastors and Christian workers at diploma and undergraduate levels, the number of institutions with viable graduate and postgraduate programs has continued to increase rapidly. For example, since 2004, more than twenty reputable PhD programs have been established in non-Western schools associated with the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education. Scott Cunningham of Overseas Council has described this maturation in educational programs, particularly at the doctoral level, as the “third stage of development” in evangelical postsecondary education (2007, 134). In many cases, these schools offer globally competitive programs that are contributing to theological reflection on contextual issues, as well as preparing the next generation of theologians and leaders who will guide the church in their own contexts and likely beyond.

### *A Time of Significance*

Wright (2006) describes the role of theological education as correcting error, responding to and driving mission, and helping to guide the church into maturity. Most theological schools have as their express mission the preparation of pastors, missionaries, and other Christian leaders so that the church can grow in both breadth and depth. Bowers’ (2007) comments about the critical role of theological schools in Africa apply across much of Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe,

and the Middle East – the so-called Majority World. Building on Andrew Walls’ metaphor of monasteries in medieval Europe, he describes theological education as the backbone of the church, providing cohesion and vitality:

*Just as the great monastic centres spotted across Europe held things together for the Christian movement through those centuries of chronic disruption and confusion, could it be that today in Africa our theological schools are playing a similar role? Amidst all the heady vibrancy and growth of Africa’s Christian communities, but also amidst all the debilitations and disorders of this continent, the theological schools have remained linked together as beacons of steadfastness, and hope, and constructive engagement. It has been these schools, and their stream of graduates moving out into leadership roles across the continent, that have anchored, and sustained, and equipped, through circumstances not so dissimilar from those of the medieval monasteries, with survival ever threatened, but nevertheless surviving and conserving and rejuvenating (Bowers 2007, 2).*

Theological schools, and their faculty and students, reflect biblically and theologically on the issues arising in particular contexts to make sense of the chaos, and to help the church respond in meaningful ways with hope and grace.

As the church in the non-Western world continues to grow, it requires strong theological schools to equip kingdom laborers to meet the resulting demand for leadership. In addition, theological schools outside the West will serve the global church by offering and even leading important perspectives on some of the most pressing issues of our day, such as poverty, suffering, reconciliation, corruption, and Christian engagement with Islam. These issues – and many others – hold global significance, but they are particularly urgent and consequential for churches in the Majority World. Therefore, we need to encourage institutions and leaders who can best contribute to the global discourse on these matters to do so at this time.

### *A Time of Change*

The growth in theological education comes as higher education in general and theological education in particular are facing considerable pressures and undergoing shifts in enrollment, delivery modes, and economic sustainability. Across disciplines, educators have called for more “useful and efficient” degrees to meet the needs of an increasingly globalized world (Nerad and Heggelund 2008). Within universities, this has led to questions regarding degree purpose, vocational preparation, and assessment standards (Walker 2008). This time of questioning traditional methodologies creates new opportunities for alternative

approaches to higher education (Maki and Borkowski 2006). These same pressures and opportunities exist for theological schools, particularly those outside the West.

In addition to pressures related to enrollment, faculty development, and economic sustainability that challenge all schools, theological institutions must also address questions related to serving the church and engaging society. Theological schools continually wrestle with the relationship between the church and the academy as they prepare leaders for both global and local contexts. Caldwell (2010) and Higgs (2008) are just two voices among many reminding schools that geographic location within a context alone does not guarantee relevance. Rather, contextual relevance requires engagement with the issues, theoretical concepts, and distinctive pedagogies found within a particular cultural milieu.

As the winds of change continue to stir, many theological schools have opportunities to adjust their approaches and curricula to meet new needs. While longevity and stability can help some traditional institutions remain steadfast, the younger and less rooted schools can become more nimble in times of change. They can recognize and respond to new opportunities to engage societal issues and help the church to continue growing amidst pressing challenges.

#### *A Time of Ongoing Theological Development:*

Theological schools play an obvious and important role in ongoing theological development. They serve as intellectual communities that conduct research and reflect theologically on issues that matter to the church, in both its local and more universal expressions. They develop leaders who can help the body of Christ live out its kingdom calling in this particular moment in time and space. As the center of the church has shifted from the North and West to the South and East, greater attention has been given to understanding theology and its connection to cultures within specific contexts. Non-western voices have helped the church move away from a paradigm of viewing Western theology as normative and all others as “contextual” (Kang 2010).

Theological schools serve as centers for such culturally-engaged theological reflection, bringing the truth of Scripture to bear on the issues faced by the church within their particular situations. Their insights contribute not only to the theological discipline but also to the educational process. Theological schools outside the West have the opportunity to significantly shape the field of theological education, rather than follow what is “merely derivative of ‘northern’ ideas, models and pedagogies” (Aitchison and Paré 2012, 12).

Several writers have observed the “polycentric” nature of the global church’s

missional activity today (Shaw 2012; Wright 2006). Mission no longer originates from a single focal point, moving to receptive peripheries. Rather, centers of missional activity can be found throughout the geographic dispersion of the church. The church's polycentric reality requires increased dialogue among theological schools so that new ideas can be shared, critiqued, and refined.

### *A Time of Challenge*

Most schools face both internal and external threats to survival. Acute financial stress, low student enrollment, faculty development challenges, and accreditation pressures endanger some institutions. External forces such as warfare, insurgency, sectarian violence, and political limitations of freedom may also affect student enrollment, faculty recruitment and retention, and even the very existence of some schools. At a recent meeting with leaders from schools in fifteen countries, all but two had experienced violent unrest in their countries. Whether currently, in the recent past, or as anticipated in the very near future, instability is the norm in many parts of the world.

Economically, tuition-based models of income have reached their limits. Often, institutions must not only seek additional funding through donations or alternative revenue sources, but also raise money for scholarships to help students cover their contribution to the overall budget. Campuses often require investment to upgrade or expand facilities in order to remain competitive or meet increasing demands. Evolving student demographics and contextual engagement may require new curriculum models. Alternative delivery modes require evaluation and potential financial investment. Many schools with a rich missionary heritage face challenges of departing missionary faculty, and the financial and governance questions that emerge from the transitions. Many schools are seeking regional and governmental accreditation, sometimes requiring changes that impact mission.

Some of these challenges are not new to theological education, and some are common to all schools, including those in the West. However, many institutional leaders in the Global South find that these challenges are exacerbated in their contextual realities. In addition, the relative frailty of their institutions often means that decisions must be made, sometimes quickly, with little margin for error. Many non-Western schools do not have deep reserves in funds or personnel that can mitigate risk, cover mistakes, or allow for slow processes of change. Furthermore, many who lead theological institutions find themselves having to operate far beyond their experience or academic training in areas such as finance, organizational leadership, and management.

Most of the challenges faced by institutions and academic leaders will increase

rather than dissipate in the coming years. Many leaders express gratitude for resources such as the Overseas Council Institutes or ICETE Program for Academic Leadership that support them in their roles. Others are looking for additional help, sources of shared wisdom, colleagues along the journey, and research to inform important decisions.

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## For Such a Time as This: An Opportunity for Action

These unique times also come with an opportunity for action – in this case, the opportunity to increase communication and to share ways of engaging realities confronting the church today. An opportunity now exists to create space for conversations that acknowledge and value voices from all directions. The *Journal*, therefore, has been created for such a time as this.

### *The Opportunity for Multilateral Exchange*

In recognition of the generative work being done, both in theological reflection and within the practice of theological education, the *Journal* will provide a forum for exploring ideas and sharing insights. Although, recent history shows that this sharing has predominantly happened in one direction, the time now affords the opportunity for that sharing to be multi-lateral, from West to South, South to West, and South to South. No one region is simply a receiver of information; rather, generative centers exist in both the traditional sending regions as well as the traditional mission fields.

Wuthnow (2009) has observed that while the church in the Majority World has grown considerably, most of the resources – both material and intellectual – remain in the West. Although certain resources continue to exist in an unbalanced way within the global body of Christ, intellectual resources – including reflection on the doctrine and practice of the Christian faith – are now more broadly generated and distributed. The church needs more platforms for engaging these resources, and connecting the wells of knowledge that have emerged and that continue to deepen throughout the global church.

To borrow language from Sanneh (2003), the shadow of the West “looms large” over theological education in the Majority World. The influence of the West is undeniable as much of Majority World theological education derives from the global missionary movement. Yet, these schools, many birthed and nurtured by Western involvement, have continued to grow on their own. Their maturity helps to undercut what Caldwell has termed “subtle colonialism,” which implies that all good training must take place in the West (2010, 33). Theological education in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East has proven to be innovative, attentive to context, and effective. The *Journal* seeks

to provide a platform for sharing valuable insights so that the global practice of theological education can be enhanced by voices that have hitherto remained at the periphery. The conversation will broaden and the shadows will shorten as we collectively learn from various innovations, strengths, and challenges from non-Western perspectives.

### *The Approach of Insights*

The *InSights Journal* seeks to encourage non-Western voices in the global conversation on theological education. Our Editorial Board features accomplished theological and academic leaders from across the Majority World. They hold degrees in a variety of theological and related fields, including but not limited to education. More importantly, all bring experience as practitioners of theological education through their roles as professors and administrators. Theological education is a field in which experts in a variety of disciplines are called to engage.

The *Journal*, therefore, seeks to share from this broad experience. Some of the articles will focus on developing the field of theological education, addressing learning theories, curriculum development, and the like. Others will focus heavily on the practice of theological education, as authors share from their personal and institutional experience. Some articles will be grounded in primary research. Others may reflect on a theme to model dialogue and the fruitful learning that can result from collaborative scholarly engagement.

The *Journal* is rooted in the evangelical tradition of the global church. However, the *Journal* is not limited to that tradition. The practice of theological education rightly reflects the theology of particular schools, but is not bound to any one tradition. As an ecumenical space for learning, dialogue, and mutual understanding, voices from Catholic, Orthodox, and other Protestant traditions are welcome.

In addition to publishing semiannual issues that include articles, essays, and book reviews, the *InSights Journal* website will host an area for Conversations. This online platform will provide space for ongoing dialogue about articles, as well as topics introduced between publications. The online forum will allow for the sharing of additional insights by an even broader range of stakeholders in the practice of theological education. It will also provide a venue for the sharing of resources.

Over the coming months and years, the *Journal* will seek to address issues such as the economic sustainability of institutions, challenges related to contexts of change and uncertainty, innovative educational models that meet contextual needs, curriculum development to meet various needs of the church, pedagogical concerns, learning needs and instructional design, partnerships, alternative economic models, academic leadership and administration, and more. These

issues are of interest and concern to theological educators regardless of location. However, they take on complex forms in non-Western contexts that deserve fuller exploration. It is our hope that the *Journal* can highlight innovative practices, scholarly research, theological reflections that will stimulate conversations influencing the future of theological education for the benefit of the church.

Overall, our purpose is to create a platform that will generate conversation. Some of those conversations will take place within the published pieces of the *Journal*. Others may take place through the online platform. Perhaps some of the most important will take place in the hallways and faculty rooms of schools, as individuals discuss together ideas sparked by something here.

### *Concluding Thought*

The church has entered a new global reality. The center of gravity has shifted, and the generative centers for theological reflection and innovative practice are following suit. One implication is the increasing need to learn from one another and to create space for more voices to enter into the global conversation, bringing their expertise, experience, and findings. A unique context, coupled with an opportunity for action, is why we have begun this endeavor. It is our sincere hope that it will serve the church by strengthening theological education, for such a time as this.

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