

# Defining Prophetic Voice as a Calling for the Theological School

Evan R. Hunter

*ScholarLeaders International*

Although they often practice theological research and reflection, many theological schools have not developed a prophetic voice – a sense of missional calling that addresses specific problems facing the Church and society. As an act of stewardship, the institution can develop this prophetic perspective on a set of issues that are particularly relevant to its cultural and social context and then mobilize resources entrusted to the institution to address them. The following article offers examples from nine Majority World seminaries that illustrate four ways theological institutions can develop prophetic voice to speak to the Church and society.

## Introduction

When asked about the prophetic voice of their institutions, most school leaders answer hesitantly at best, illustrating that the prophetic task of the institution remains one of the more underdeveloped callings for a school of theology. The term *prophet*, of course, connotes Old Testament individuals such as Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah as well as the New Testament image of John the Baptist. However, it can also bring to mind slick preachers promising healing and prosperity to all who will only believe – and give a little more. Theological schools often find that they must simultaneously distance themselves from smiling faces on billboards and attempt to provide Biblical correction to weak theologies that tickle itching ears.

In the Bible, prophets called the people of God to live out the fundamental requirements of God's Law (Wright 2006, 82). In his definition of prophetic voice, Brueggeman (2014) exhorts the Church to speak truth to a society that continues to live in illusions. For the theological school, the prophetic task can be viewed as a matter of stewardship. Uniquely equipped with resources through its faculty, library, and programs to provide sound teaching, the theological institution can guide believers to discern Biblical reality and then to apply that reality to the Church and society. While individual professors and graduates can have important prophetic roles in Church and society, the school as an institution can steward these same resources to bring Biblical truth to bear, to spark hope and transformation.

## Defining the Theological School's Primary Tasks

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According to the *Cape Town Commitment* (2010), “[T]he mission of the Church on earth is to serve the mission of God, and the mission of theological education is to strengthen and accompany the mission of the Church.” Theological education, therefore, fulfills a crucial role within the *mission del*. In doing so, theological education – whether offered at a seminary, Bible school, or school of divinity imbedded in a larger institution – has two primary tasks. (For more on the two-fold task of the institution and the work of the *Vital SustainAbility Initiative*, see “In Pursuit of Sustainability: Strategic Planning for Theological Education” by Smith (2018) and “Faculty Development in Service to the Mission of the School” by Hunter (2018).)

First, and perhaps most apparent, is the task of forming leaders for Church service. From an institutional perspective, formation includes structured teaching and mentoring, the impact of the community in which education takes place, worship (public and private), and ministerial practice.

Prophetic voice – the theological institution’s other task – has not always been an obvious calling. When a school decides to apply its capacities for Biblical understanding and theological reflection to issues its leaders deem pressing in the Church and society, that school steps into this prophetic role of analyzing reality in light of God’s truth. The school’s academic environment provides space and a process through which leaders may “test, develop and share their prophetic insights, to encourage and at times correct the church and society” (Smith 2018, 14). Within the community of scholars, individual professors often take on prophetic roles. (The prophetic role of the individual scholar warrants further development at another time.) Graduates also expand their school’s influence as they carry their school’s values, ethos, and causes into positions of Church service, whether in ordained ministry or as Christian leaders throughout society.

The theological institution, therefore, plays a critical role as the “house of prophets” where women and men gather as a community with institutional support to hone their work. The faculty of the school (and by extension the students and graduates) are the most important resource for achieving institutional mission. An institution’s ability to attract and retain professors whose work contributes to the good of the Church and society (through teaching, mentoring, and research) is crucial to its sustainability. However, in addition to individuals’ labor in the community, an institution has the opportunity to own a set of issues that are rooted in its particular mission and that respond to its particular context. By taking a proactive approach to a specific set of topics and by nurturing a group of citizens who speak to those topics (see Tiénou 2018), the theological school becomes champion and guardian of a shared prophetic voice.

Traditionally, seminaries focus on learning the truth revealed through God’s past

activity from the Bible and Church history. Yet that knowledge has implications for the Church in its current socio-political and cultural contexts. In calling theological institutions to address specific contemporary issues, Manfred Kohl writes, “[P]rophetic voice deals with the issues people face today and tomorrow, and how to deal with these issues in light of Christ’s message of forgiving grace for every new day” (2009, 78). More than simply embarking on a crusade for justice, the theological school grounds its voice in the Word of God. Furthermore, the institution’s prophetic voice becomes unique because it is located in a community of theologians who, from their personal and cultural experiences, devote special time and energy to Biblical application that calls the Church to action in light of the truth.

Developing prophetic voice is important to the theological school because it stewards the unique set of resources held by the seminary as part of the body of Christ. Through prophetic voice, the theological school can leverage its position as located within the Church and as, at times, speaking hard truth to the Church. Kelsey sums up this position as being simultaneously “about,” “with,” “for,” and “against” the Church (1992, 2007). Prophetic voices exhort God’s people to greater intimacy with Him. Prophets call the wayward back into alignment with God’s law.

Thus, as an institution, the theological school shapes leaders for the Church, spurs it to good works and right theology, and offers correction when error emerges. The school can take a similar role in society. As it pursues the common good, it provides correction and challenge rooted in truth and love.

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### **Developing the School’s Prophetic Voice**

Developing an institution’s prophetic voice requires commitment and work by school leaders. Pazmino observes, “Every faith community requires ongoing transformation and the nurture of prophetic voices to reveal forgotten information or new truth” (2010, 361). Theological educators commit to this practice of transformation and nurture by regularly engaging with one another, especially around the particular topics the institution has chosen. Pazmino calls this process one of “mutual formation with those viewed as disciples undergoing spiritual formation” (2010, 361). Through this process, educators form a perspective that expresses love toward the Church and society and that offers critical, Biblical reflection.

According to Almeida, the development of a prophetic voice and ministry within the school presupposes a commitment to Biblical notions of justice, sin, and grace, as well as the cultivation of the ability to observe and respond to needs with contextual sensitivity (2011, 45). Even so, schools must remember that, no matter how sensitive they are, prophetic voices are not always well received by the Church or society. Like the prophets of old, to adopt such a calling may lead to criticism and even persecution from power centers under critique.

## Examples of Prophetic Voice in Theological Education

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The following examples illustrate at least four ways that institutions can develop prophetic voice aligned to mission by drawing on the unique combination of resources (faculty) and location (context).

1. *Identifying Issues Facing the Church and Society that the School Should Address:* Most schools can quickly generate a list of problems about which the Church, and consequently the school, should exhibit concern. These issues result from the combination of the universal human condition marred by sin and the school's specific context. Prophetic voice emerges as a school determines which items on that list fit the scope of its own unique mission and resources.

For example, the *Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary* in Ogbomosho has identified a set of key issues in Nigeria that they feel called to address in their strategic plan. These issues include materialism and corruption, sexuality, creation care, peacemaking, urbanization, and ministry among Muslims (Smith 2018, 23). Addressing such a range of significant challenges will take time. In order to do so, they have created a research center and begun work on curriculum revisions that more directly engage their selected topics. In addition, they intend to develop faculty members able to resource each of these areas.

In another context, the *Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary* in Kyiv has identified the need for the Church to have a more robust theology of citizenship and national identity. Following the "Revolution of Dignity" that took place through the Euromaidan protests from November 2013 to February 2014, the school observed several changes and new needs within Church and society. They have chosen to address issues of what it means to follow Christ in Ukraine's present context. Their faculty have begun to address issues of identity and public engagement from a Biblical perspective. They have included more traditional Ukrainian songs and instruments in their music programs and in their community worship. The faculty member responsible for teaching public theology is now completing a dissertation on how evangelical churches used Scripture to support their varied political responses during the revolution.

2. *Developing Faculty Expertise and Commitment to Address a Set of Issues:* In exercising prophetic voice, schools should develop their faculty as a community of scholars qualified to speak prophetically to issues in service to the Church (see Hunter 2018).

In Lebanon, the *Arab Baptist Theological Seminary* has a particular set of values related to pedagogy and to Islam as it prepares Christian leaders to

serve in Muslim-majority contexts. During the interview process, every faculty candidate must read and interact with a pair of articles authored by ABTS faculty that articulate the school's position. Because of its location in the Middle East, ABTS's approach to theological education is different from models developed in Europe or North America. ABTS particularly pursues a calling to help deconstruct the Church's narrative of marginalization, to create a new paradigm of interaction with Islam, and to develop a new view of the faith community and its role within the mission of God (Accad 2019). This approach follows Brueggeman, who writes that the "task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (2001, 3). Through their purposeful recruitment and interview process, the school has assembled a faculty with a shared vision for their prophetic calling – to reshape the Church's understanding of its place in Middle Eastern society.

Similarly, the faculty members at *Servant of Christ Seminary* located in São Paulo, Brazil have embraced a theology of holistic mission that they believe best prepares their students to lead churches and serve in Brazil's urban society. To articulate this way of doing theology, the faculty will publish a monograph celebrating the school's 30th anniversary. In this publication, they will call the Church to engage its urban context with a Biblical, holistic expression of God's grace.

*3. Implementing Programs that Embody Prophetic Voice:* Some schools have been able to develop curricula and structure learning experiences that act upon their prophetic voice and thus help the Church transform society.

Like the faculty at *Servant of Christ*, the faculty at *South American Theological Seminary* in Londrina, Brazil would articulate their voice as one centered on holistic mission. Yet from its beginning, the seminary has taken a different approach to curriculum development. Rather than structure their programs around a set number of courses from each of the traditional disciplines, they began with an approach to theology that engages context (see), Scripture (judge), and mission (act). SATS often points to its alumni as evidence of contextual prophetic action. Led by a SATS alumnus who has consistently relied on a faculty mentor, *Refúgio* began as an outreach to drug addicts and prostitutes that evolved into a church-based community center with after-school programs that disciple children so that they never reach the nadir of the streets. Started by another SATS alumna (who has worked as a tutor in their online program), *Tok de Amor* began as a course project for a SATS class. Now, the ministry cares for 150 people a day as it offers hospitality to cancer patients seeking treatment at the local hospital and to their families. In each case, prophetic engagement, developed out of a theological approach grounded in holistic mission, has empowered entrepreneurial ministry that meets specific contextual needs within society.

In Dimapur, India, *Oriental Theological Seminary* identified corruption as an

issue they felt uniquely called to address. In a region where Christians comprise more than 90% of the population, they lamented over the state of the Church, especially as a new round of elections approached. To call believers to Biblical integrity, the school implemented a 30-day internship in which 33 students traveled throughout the region to champion Biblical principles undergirding a clean election.

In Medellín, Colombia, prophetic voice has taken the shape of developing a unique community of care for students, faculty, and staff on the campus at *Fundación Universitaria Seminario Bíblico de Colombia* (FUSBC). (For more on the ministry of FUSBC, see the article “Serving the Seminary Community in a Country of Conflict: Five Lessons Learned at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia” (Peñuela, 2018).) In a nation ripped apart by violence and displacement, FUSBC has become an oasis of hospitality. This value has become a hallmark of the school’s alumni and a testimony of healing in a city and nation that bear deep scars from the recent past.

*4. Convening Leaders to Address Important Facing the Church and Society:* As part of their prophetic voice, in addition to identifying important topics to address individually, theological schools can convene leaders to engage the Bible, theology, and society.

*Asian Theological Seminary* in Manila hosts an annual theological forum that draws up to 500 participants. Topics over the last few years have included the Church and Poverty; Creation Care and Biblical Stewardship; Christian Spirituality in an Asian Context; the Church’s Response to Globalization, Migration, and Diaspora; and Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God. Each topic responds to the unique set of issues facing the Church in Southeast Asia. After each forum, the seminary publishes the papers in a volume so that the participants’ theological reflections can continue to influence the Church.

Located in the West Bank, *Bethlehem Bible College* embraces a unique prophetic calling as the Church in the Land of Christ. Since 2000, they have hosted a biannual conference called Christ at the Checkpoint to promote dialogue and reconciliation among Christ-followers in the Middle East. The conference manifesto describes their primary purpose: “The Kingdom of God has come. Evangelicals must reclaim the prophetic role in bringing peace, justice, and reconciliation in Palestine and Israel” (Bethlehem Bible College 2019). Convening theologians, church leaders, and hundreds of participants, they speak prophetically (and sometimes controversially) to the Church out of their experience in the land of Jesus’ birth.

An institution's prophetic voice offers exhortation, guidance, and correction to issues facing the Church and society. For many institutions, however, the idea is both new and relatively underdeveloped. For some, pressing needs and the lack of human and financial resources may make developing prophetic voice challenging. Nevertheless, schools can begin small – even by simply identifying the issues they see as especially pressing in their context. They can consider how, given faculty expertise and their socio-cultural situation, they might begin to lead the Church to transform society. In doing so, each institution may find more effective ways to accomplish its mission in service to the Church.

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## **Evan R. Hunter**

Evan Hunter has worked with *ScholarLeaders International* since 2004. He currently serves as Vice President. Through SL, he has had the opportunity to work with hundreds of theological leaders across the Majority World. He holds a PhD in Educational Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He and his family live near Minneapolis, Minnesota.