

Grassroots Theological Education

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Theological Education by Extension in Malawi

Grassroots theological education should be viewed as an intrinsic part of theological education. It is part of a three-fold model of theological engagement: grassroots, ministerial, and academic. All three types of learning operate on the same continuum, yet each has a distinct purpose, distinct content, and a distinct audience. Refocusing on grassroots theological education will help the Church overcome some of the fragmentation of theological education, especially the grassroots/ministerial divide. It will help to integrate the three areas of theological education so that they inform and challenge each other. It will allow churches and their leaders to provide theologically sound answers to the actual questions of the grassroots Church.

Introduction

Grassroots theological education is part of theological education for the whole Church. The Church affirms that all baptised members are priests of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, everyone participates in the Church's mission as well as in God's mission on earth. The Anglican catechism highlights this when it answers the question "Who are the ministers of the church?" with a simple but striking summary: "The ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons" (2019). The summary does not begin with ordained ministers or bishops but with the grassroots Church. The "priesthood of all believers" was the Reformation's rallying cry and finds its key biblical expression in Exodus 19:4-6, 1 Peter 2:9, and Revelation 5:10. Therefore, one would expect that grassroots theological education would be seen as an important area within theological education.

Unfortunately, however, theological education is dominated by academia and ministerial training. One notable exception to this line of thought is C. S. Song, who argues that "lay-training should be a constituent part of theological education not as a replacement of the clergy but because all Christians equally participate in the mission of God" (qtd. in Esterline, 2010, 20). Along these lines, Roman Catholic theology acknowledges the priesthood of all believers. However,

as Thomas Hoebel and Stephen Bevans point out, Catholic theology distinguishes between the “common priesthood” and the “special priesthood of the ordained” (2003, 67-187; 2010, 7). Most Protestant churches maintain a similar distinction based on individuals’ function. These distinctions have become unbalanced, which results in a divide between education offered to clergy and grassroots education.

Academic theological education especially affects grassroots theological training. In my observation, theological training institutions (both grassroots and ministerial) seem more and more to align themselves with universities. Some may even seek to become independent universities themselves, as Robert Banks notes (1999, 7-8). This quest for academic recognition can result in an unquestioning acceptance of academic methodologies as the norm for theological education. This often leads to the assumption that there is only one way of educating students and only one setting for doing proper theology. (This mindset is especially problematic where universities follow the British tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries, in which higher education was a gentleman’s pleasure, detached from practical use.)

Through this trend, grassroots theological institutions depart from their founding vision of providing training to the Church. They transition from non-formal to formal educational models and from non-accredited to accredited programs. In some circumstances, this drive seems to be motivated not by theological considerations but rather by financial pressures. Many grassroots theological training institutions develop new programs under the assumption that theological education should be self-sustaining through tuition. They can charge significantly more for accredited programs, even though churches recognise the benefits of non-accredited programs. Thus, within grassroots theological training institutions, accredited programs grow, while non-accredited courses struggle.

If it is to equip all believers, theological education must encompass both non-formal and formal education as well as non-accredited and accredited programs. It must be able to reach believers who do not have the time, money, or inclination for academia.

In this article, I use the term “grassroots” for lay theological education because of how it offers a semantic link to organic imagery. Roots support the plant. Without roots, the plant dies. Damaged or underdeveloped roots equal underdeveloped or damaged plants. In human terms, “grassroots” refers to the main body of people in an organisation, the members rather than the leaders. Likewise, the Church is a living organism and is made up of the people of God and their leaders. Both groups have distinct training needs that should not be conflated. “Grassroots,” therefore, refers to the main body of the Church.

“Grassroots” should not be understood as a demeaning qualifier of this group’s intellectual ability – in the way that “lay training” is sometimes denigrated as being of lower quality and depth. Rather, “grassroots” theological education should be understood as life-giving training that nourishes the Church’s essential foundation – ordinary believers.

The starting point for my reflection is my experience of fragmenting theological education in an economically developing country in south central Africa. I am involved in grassroots theological education with accredited and non-accredited programs and with non-formal and formal ministerial education. Most non-formal theological education in my context happens due to lack of access to secondary school education. All contexts are different; however, the Church shares a global need for theological education. This need is particularly pressing because of increasing governmental regulation of theological education.

The Unity of Theological Education

Theological education operates on a continuum, with theological content as the unifying core. On this continuum are three distinct disciplines – academic education, ministerial education, and grassroots education. Some theological educators distinguish based on form of delivery – residential or distance education. Ross Kinsler uses the term “Diversified Theological Education” (DTE) for programs that combine these models (2008, 8-9). Graham Hill concludes that it is actually “difficult to define” DTE. Nevertheless, as Hill notes, Kinsler basically promotes grassroots theological education as a key discipline (2016, 308).

Each discipline uses an intellectual framework that is particular to it. At the academic level, thinking is predominately neutral, objective, and analytical; at the grassroots level, thinking is predominantly confessional, practical, and spiritual. Yet theology links all three disciplines. They influence each other through raising new questions or providing new answers to existing questions.

Academic education trains theologians to teach and research. Their education centres on gaining expertise in the academic theories and methodologies necessary to participate in theological discourse at the most intellectual level.

Ministerial training equips pastors and non-ordained leaders to work in the Church or in parachurch organisations. Their education centres on the theories and practices of effective Church ministry. It includes competence to assess contemporary ideas that affect ministry. These leaders have deep biblical and theological knowledge and the ability to exegete culture from that knowledge. Also, this training leads to personal development through self-reflection.

Ministerial education enables leaders to communicate God’s wisdom effectively to other human beings.

Ministerial education seems best achieved through an integrated curriculum where the discussion is not only about content but also about the use of the content in ministry settings and about how content personally affects ministers. The Church of England’s report, “Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church” (known as the Hind Report), stresses the three interconnected domains of being, knowing, and doing (2004, 56). An intrinsic element of theological ministerial education is a good understanding of human behaviour as well as the ability to reflect on one’s own humanity. Ministerial training also needs to include a comprehensive understanding of pedagogy (2004, 56-57; Shaw, 2014, 72; Lewis, 2006, 16).

Grassroots theological education refers to the process of equipping Church members with foundational competencies in their faith. Grassroots education centres on helping people gain expertise in biblical literacy, theology, discipleship, and contextual application. Biblical literacy refers to the ability to process biblical texts within an appropriate spiritual framework.

The table below compares the three (related and sometimes overlapping) types of theological education. Each has a purpose and core content that is different from the other fields.

Table I: A Comparison of the Purposes and Core Contents of Academic, Ministerial, and Grassroots Theological Education

	Purpose	Core Content
Academic	Preparing academic theologians for work in an institution of higher learning where they teach and research in the field of theology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academic theories and methodologies necessary to participate in the field. - Contemporary academic theological questions.
Ministerial	Preparing pastors and ministry leaders for work in the Church or a para-church organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Theories and practises of effective ministry, including competence to assess contemporary ideas affecting ministry and arising out of other fields - Biblical and theological competence - Personal preparation, including cultural exegesis (Harkness, 2001, 104-105)
Grassroots	Equipping Church members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Biblical, theological and discipleship skills, including contextual application - Biblical literacy

Thus, the continuum of theological learning moves from the theoretical

(academic) to the practical (grassroots), from the abstract (academic) to the situational (grassroots), from the neutral (academic) to the personal (grassroots). Ministerial training lies in the middle, combining theoretical and practical, abstract and situational, neutral and personal.

The Problem of Fragmentation

The fragmentation of theological education into disconnected subfields seems to be continuing rather than diminishing. Edward Farley warns of this continued fragmentation because of the focus on models of abstract knowledge deprived of a concrete setting, although he does not explicitly mention clergy-laity fragmentation (2001, xi; Banks, 1999, 62-63). Overall, an emphasis on intellectual skills increasingly contradicts ministerial preparation. Critical methodologies replace personal spiritual formation under the pressure of academic excellence, as many have pointed out (Farley, Banks, Kelsey, Cannell, Shaw, Ott).

Theological educators must reflect on the implications of this fragmentation and ask how it can be overcome. Banks helpfully observes, “Seminaries have often adopted secular models of education, rather than subject them to rigorous theological or practical evaluation” (1999, 6). The main paths for overcoming fragmentation are, first, repositioning the aim of theological education to serve the mission of God explicitly; and second, rediscovering the vocational (versus the purely intellectual) nature of ministerial training as a way to serve God’s people. In general, though, theological education seems not to be overcoming fragmentation; in fact, the emphasis on accreditation enhances fragmentation.

All of this has significant consequences for grassroots theological education because the grassroots Church, a key audience of theological education, demands and deserves a contextual, relevant theology that addresses individuals’ actual needs (Chan). Yet a key fault line in theological education is still the clergy/grassroots divide, which is often amplified by a schism between situational grassroots theology and abstract academic theology.

An expression of this kind of situational need can be seen in the following observation. The church I worship in has a praise team that chooses the songs we sing. One of their favourite songs is called “Yahweh the Great Warrior.” The main idea in this song is that Yahweh will fight and protect, for Yahweh is always victorious. The context is one’s fear of the spirit world and of human conspiracies. The song reminds the Church to trust God’s power and protection. Unfortunately, in the preaching, salvation is only mentioned in terms of rescue from guilt (the Western theological paradigm), rather than in terms of fear or shame – the cultural

context that makes “Yahweh the Great Warrior” resonate so powerfully.

This divide is also unfortunately enshrined in the distinction between “theological education” and “Christian education.” “Christian education” usually refers to congregational training, while “theological education” refers to formal, institutional training (Cheesman). The distinction is based on audience and locality. But too often, that distinction prevents a proper theological engagement between these two connected fields and leaves both grassroots education and ministerial education poorer.

Theological educators have suggested new centers of unity (like the mission of the Church) through which to address this fragmentation, but the clergy/grassroots symbiotic relationship in relation to theological education has not received enough attention. Especially among ordained theological educators, the predominant emphasis is still on ministerial education. These educators believe that theological education will be available to the grassroots Church through ordained ministers. Though that intention is good, the idea is flawed, as it assumes that ministerial theological graduates will somehow automatically be able to apply their training to address the concerns of ordinary believers. Educators assume that the clergy’s cognitive learning will automatically lead to beneficial training for the grassroots Church.

Sadly, in most cases, this is untrue. Ministerial theological education has a deficit when it comes to practical application and communication. For the above model to work, clergy need a detailed understanding of the grassroots audience and of the differences between grassroots education and ministerial education (see section 5 below for more detail).

In fact, the clergy/grassroots divide is essentially a division of priority and hierarchy in theological education. Instead of overcoming this divide, the *Cape Town Commitment* of the Third Lausanne Congress, a key document for the Majority World Church, accepts it as the status quo. Overall, the *Cape Town Commitment* makes three important and valuable points about theological education. First, it stresses that theological education is “intrinsically missional” (2011, 69). Second, it affirms grassroots theological education as foundational to all theological education because it exists “to equip all God’s people” (2011, 69). Finally, it affirms the nature of theological education as concerned with empowering all God’s people.

Unfortunately, the document then goes on to introduce a hierarchy of the recipients of theological education: “Theological education serves *first* to train those who lead the Church as pastor-teachers, equipping them to teach the truth

of God's Word with faithfulness, relevance and clarity; and *second*, to equip all God's people for the missional task of understanding and relevantly communicating God's truth in every cultural context" (2011, 69, emphasis original). The use of numbers indicates a division in importance. Here, ministerial theological education is higher in importance and prestige than grassroots theological education. I have heard this same sentiment many times from ordained ministers – that only the ministry of someone who is ordained counts and that spiritual blessings are only shared through the “man of God.” Therefore, it is not surprising that the ordained ministry is portrayed as spiritually superior to grassroots ministry. But ordination is a question of calling, not of a higher form of spirituality.

So what theological justification can be offered to support the view that grassroots theological education is done exclusively through the theologically trained minister? The answer is simple: none. It is biblically and practically impossible that all Church teaching will be exclusively done through an ordained minister. This, for example, would mean the collapse of all Sunday school activities, as very few (if any) ministers are involved in the Sunday school teaching that prepares the next generation of the Church. It would mean the collapse of youth ministry, women's guilds, and prayer meetings and Bible Studies. In Malawi, for example, most pulpits on Sunday morning are filled with lay Christians due to a shortage of ordained ministers. The Malawian Church has lay training institutes and denominational Christian training departments, but the initiative to start church-based grassroots theological education does not come from the clergy. Similar situations occur throughout the Majority World.

Though the Bible's “priesthood of believers” is divided into ordained and lay ministers, all members of the Church are priests. All members are called to participate fully in God's reign on earth. Therefore, all members need to be equipped for their participation in God's Kingdom. Hoebel reminds us that “The whole people is a kingdom of priests, but it is only *as a whole* people. Thus, if the Church is indeed the new people of God, then it cannot tolerate tendencies that do not have the whole people of God as the fundamental principle in mind” (2003, 33, emphasis original). Actually, Hoebel's assessment is very much in line with the overall spirit of the *Cape Town Commitment*, which stresses the whole Church's full participation in the mission of God: “Our love for the whole church, as God's people, redeemed by Christ from every nation on earth and every age of history, to share God's mission in this age and glorify him forever in the age to come” (2011, 8).

In light of these truths, grassroots theological education should be part of the ministry of the local church. In my own context, during the introduction for a new

grassroots course, two members shared that they were unemployed but – independent of each other – were planting churches in rural areas. Grassroots ministry is happening! How much better would it have been if these two individuals would have been trained long ago in their own church?

Ecclesiastical prestige and funding usually go to academic theological education and to ministerial theological education. This is not surprising, as society and the Church attach great value to academic qualifications. Similarly, within the Church itself, the training of future ministers is a natural concern. But no biblical justification exists for prioritizing one form of education over another. No member of the Church can be denied the opportunity to grow in knowing God. The prophet Hosea speaks of the inclusivity of theological knowledge when he warned pre-exilic Israel that “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). A mature understanding of the Christian faith has to be a universal Christian right that is open to every member of the Church.

Therefore, grassroots theological education should not be an elective but a core subject of ministerial education. Trained Christians are stronger in their faith, more committed to their church community, and the Church’s current and future lay leaders. Some have joined the ordained ministry (after discovering their calling), or serve in para-church organisations. Recognizing how beneficial grassroots theological education can be, a number of theological educators have recently emerged to call for the need for a renewed emphasis on grassroots theological education (Conway, Martey, Raja, and Bloomquist and Sinaga).

The Schooling Analogy: The Relationship between Types of Theological Education

I would like to use a schooling analogy to explain the relationship between grassroots, ministerial, and academic theological education (Harkness, 2011). This analogy also highlights one of the major pedagogical problems of grassroots theological education, namely monologue education.

In the British system, schooling is usually structured in three tiers: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Learners need to progress successfully through each tier in order to reach the next one. Each tier is dedicated to a specific audience with specific abilities. There is an emphasis on reading comprehension, as this is the foundational skill for self-study. There is an emphasis on understanding each subject (rather than simply repeating facts about a subject) and on the ability to apply that knowledge to a new context. Furthermore, material that is learned at an earlier stage might be revised and deepened later on. By the end of secondary school, learners should be prepared either to seek a vocation or to continue the

pursuit of specialised knowledge at the tertiary level. At the tertiary level, learners are introduced to the current set of knowledge in a specialized field and to the questions and critical methodologies prevailing in that field. The overarching philosophy of education in this model moves learners from dependence to independence.

Theological education would benefit if a similar approach were adopted. The Church needs to recognize that theological knowledge and practise cannot be applied as though one size fits all. Rather, each level asks different questions and requires different skills. For example, at the tertiary level, theological discussions have been ongoing for nearly two thousand years and are far advanced in complexity, while at the grassroots level, questions respond either to the Bible alone or to its personal, contextual application. Yet each generation of Christians that encounters the Bible asks similar questions about the text. For example: who are the sons of God and the daughters of man in Genesis 6:1-4, or what is the relation between sickness and demons in the gospels? The academic discussion over the last century has moved on from these questions, so theological institutions don't address them, even though they are being asked at the grassroots.

This metaphor provides an implicit warning to teachers in grassroots education, where intellectual monologues (lectures) are often the preferred method of content delivery. ("ICETE Manifesto"). There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the lecture – indeed, preaching often follows the lecture style. Yet the monologue style does not play a significant role in modern primary and secondary education. Instead, a variety of active learning elements are used, which include self-study, small group work, large group discussion, and question/answer sessions. Preaching still has a place within the church to challenge congregations, but it is one of many available tools, not the *only* tool. The best form of grassroots theological education engages in dialogue with its audience, as this significantly improves comprehension (Glissman, 2015; Jagerson, 2014).

The schooling analogy highlights the relationship between grassroots, ministerial, and academic theological education, in recognising that the audience matters and their questions and concerns matter. It also highlights that pedagogical methods need to be selected to support audience comprehension.

The Problem of the Hidden Curriculum

The schooling metaphor demonstrates a problem that arises when graduates of tertiary education, who do not have a background in pedagogy, enter grassroots education (Harkness, 2018). Academic or ministerial theological graduates only know one form of education – academic. Grassroots theological education may be implicit in ministerial education, but students will only absorb what is explicitly and actively included in the curriculum. Therefore, they do not absorb methods for grassroots theological education. The transfer of knowledge – from theory to practice, from general to specific, from one subject to another – does not happen automatically. It needs to be taught explicitly.

As Perry Shaw points out, grassroots education as a subject for academic or ministerial education is an example of the “hidden curriculum” (2014, 81-82). The hidden curriculum is the “unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives” that students in any education system absorb unconsciously (“Hidden Curriculum”).

Consider that the most common form of theological education is lecturing combined with individual essays and examinations. For ministers, coursework usually requires fieldwork (practicums or internships). However, fieldwork rarely follows the same rigour as the rest of a young minister’s studies, nor is it thoroughly integrated into the course of studies. As a result, by way of the hidden curriculum, this gives the impression that “real” theological education is academic, not practical.

Furthermore, in the classroom, course designs emphasize intellectual knowledge (which is assumed to lead to behavioural change). Classes often start with exposition of Bible verses or theological doctrine (which are then in some cases applied to current situations). This method might work for theological subjects, like Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology, but works less well for pastoral subjects that address human identity and behaviour. For this reason, pastoral study should engage other subjects in the humanities to help young ministers understand human behaviour.

Unfortunately, courses that prepare people for ordination lack this kind of contextual analysis and cultural exegesis. They do not prepare ministers to find adequate theological responses to daily challenges. Even worse, the academic

setting sidelines the integration of spirituality into the curriculum. In the end, theological graduates lack not only the tools to help their congregations grow personally but also the tools that will feed their own souls.

Grassroots theological training urgently needs to be added to the curriculum of theological schools as an independent subject. Those called to minister to the grassroots Church need to have a clear understanding of the needs of the grassroots Church and need to understand how current worldviews affect believers, because only then can they give theological answers to the pressing lived situations of the grassroots Church.

For example, a theological graduate has been in education for 12-13 years. The emphasis throughout secondary school has been to prepare the learner with reading comprehension and academic writing. This is followed by a four-year undergraduate degree and perhaps a two-year Master's program – a total of 20 years in the academy. Such a graduate will have lost touch with training the grassroots Church, as s/he has been trained to respond only intellectually to theological problems – and has been trained to ask only academic questions, which usually are not the questions of the grassroots Church. How does such theological education serve the grassroots Church as it faces persecution, war, corruption, or just the day-to-day wear of temptation and discouragement? How does theological education that does not offer training on how to respond to such issues serve those who must minister to the grassroots Church? How does academic theology enable the grassroots Church and its ministers to formulate adequate responses to these problems?

The Problem of the Non-Applicability of Academic Discourse to Grassroots Teaching

The purpose of theological education as defined by the Cape Town Commitment is “to strengthen and accompany the mission of the church.” (2011, 69). Similarly, The FTE Guide to Theological Education broadly defines theological education as “preparation – intellectual, experiential and spiritual – for serving and leading a church or community of faith” (10). The guide acknowledges that theological education is both formal and non-formal. Nevertheless, its sole emphasis is on formal theological education.

Allan Harkness offers a more comprehensive definition of theological education as “the processes adopted to encourage individuals and Christian faith communities to understand, appropriate, and express the Christian faith they espouse” (2013, 4). Ultimately, this purpose should guide theological education to evaluate its core methodologies. Practitioners of academic theological education, as well as

ministerial theological education, need to find ways to engage grassroots theological education, as the latter is essential for the Church's wellbeing. Academically trained educators are used to intellectual discourse as a result of years of schooling with an emphasis on academic logic. They need to recognize that intellectual discourse is not the preferred learning method of the grassroots Church.

In fact, the ability to communicate with the grassroots Church is a highly specialised skill. Sometimes, educators look at the simplicity of grassroots training material and conclude that it is of lower quality. This overlooks the fact that grassroots education excels in communicating through artful simplicity. Through such artful simplicity, academic theological research should influence the grassroots Church. Yet the development and application of grassroots theology for the Church's life and witness is still an exception rather than the norm. Most theological curricula focus on ministerial or academic theology, neither of which is simply transferable to grassroots education. Practitioners of grassroots education need to develop a comprehensive pedagogical framework, in the same way that academic and ministerial theological education already have.

Grassroots theological education has one major disadvantage in meeting this need: material cannot be offered for a price that will cover the costs of production and development. Accredited academic courses can charge their learners a significant amount to cover costs, but non-accredited courses will rely on Church funding. Despite this issue, theological and educational expertise need to be invested in grassroots education so that believers can fulfil their potential as members of God's Kingdom.

Grassroots theological education needs to ask three questions for appropriate training:

1. How do people learn at the grassroots level, especially if they do not plan to earn an academic degree? How do we motivate them to learn?
2. How can we design a well-rounded learning environment that addresses Biblical, practical, and spiritual needs? What learning elements can be included in order to provide a lasting education?
3. What do grassroots learners need to understand? What are the theological objectives that learners need to practice and master?

We need to determine what theological truths/skills should be in grassroots curricula and how to divide them between essential and topic-specific. We must include some essential lifelong learning strategies so that grassroots learners can go on to teach themselves and can communicate what they know to others.

In my experience with designing grassroots theological education here in Malawi, the most effective educational tool is a combination of home-study material and group discussion. Nowadays, this approach has been rediscovered and called “flipped learning” or “flipped classroom.” The flipped classroom uses self-study material for content delivery, then replaces the classroom with tutorials. Tutorials are usually small, less formal, interactive groups that apply course content.

Our assessment of over 30 learners who joined a newly designed course shows that all picked a combination of home study and group discussion as their preferred learning method (both in urban and rural settings). The reasons they gave were similar: home study allows learners to reflect on material in their own time. Then, discussions allow them to refine their thinking as they engage ideas raised by others that they had not initially prioritised.

The courses that we are designing are integrated, story-based biblical literacy courses, which motivate learners as they seek a deeper knowledge of God. One goal is skill-based education with an emphasis on mastering biblical literacy. Another goal is application of practical skills through integrating biblical content, hermeneutical tools, and reflection on spiritual themes – including worship and prayer (Glissmann, 2017). Some issues that arise for discussion from biblical texts are universal, while others are determined by the local context (such as “albinism in Malawi and the image of God”).

Conclusion

Grassroots theological education is vital for the Church. Individual members of the Church have a right to know their faith deeply. Grassroots theological education is a very exciting field of theological engagement, as it helps to make theology relevant to the lives of ordinary Church members. Grassroots education in its core content is contextual; it addresses worldview issues and trains the Church in sound theological reflection and action. In its delivery, it must respond to learners’ contexts and use methods that are appropriate for non-academic audiences.

Grassroots theological education also needs to be integrated into ministerial training. Most Sunday schools that I know of rely on workbooks written by practitioners. They include both theological content and suggestions for exercises, drawings, and songs. Bible study workbooks are also widely used. Such materials free clergy to concentrate on their area of strength, rather than trying to develop material on their own.

Among the practical challenges for grassroots theological education are the

development of theological and pedagogical materials and the costs required to do so. Unlike formal systems, grassroots training does not have a funding mechanism (i.e., tuition) for recouping cost. Funding for grassroots education would greatly improve if churches would take seriously their mandate to equip all members of the body (Ephesians 4:12).

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