

Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis: Moving from Desperation to Hope in Theological Education

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“We live in an unprecedented time.” Those words, alongside adjectives like “strange,” “unique,” and “challenging,” have been repeated frequently since the term “novel coronavirus” entered the collective lexicon. In the last 50 years, perhaps no other event has impacted so much of the world so quickly and so thoroughly as the COVID-19 pandemic. For theological education, especially in the Majority World, these are indeed daunting times, challenging the dominant models of what we do and even threatening schools’ existence.

However, it may also prove to be a time of creativity and innovation as schools respond. As the initial shock subsides, we can look around and notice that we are not alone. Solidarity does not change the situation or make it less difficult. But it can provide encouragement as we offer hope to one another. Solidarity brings us out of our collective spaces of isolation, opening us to learning with and from one another.

The following essay outlines some common challenges and shares some emerging steps of hope for theological education. It does so with particular concern for Majority World realities, and it draws on examples from schools in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Time will provide opportunities for further learning, as this year may hold some turning points for theological education. But part of the way forward is recognizing where we are and moving onward, prayerfully and with hope, toward what will come next.

The Crisis Has Created a Common Set of Mounting Challenges

Theological schools almost everywhere operate with the thinnest of margins, a situation even more acute across the Majority World. During the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions face challenges in meeting humanitarian needs, helping faculty and staff shift rapidly to new learning approaches, addressing growing financial crises, and, in some places, surviving this crisis in addition to preexisting national crises.

Common Challenges:

- Humanitarian Needs
- Rapid Shifts to Online Learning
- Demands on Faculty
- Financial Challenges
- Following on Existing Crises

Acute humanitarian needs: When national lockdowns required schools to shutter their classrooms, most residential students departed for home. However, some students could not return, becoming a new kind of refugee. Seminaries stepped forward to house them. In Lebanon, a group of students from North Africa had to turn around at the airport when their flights were canceled. In Eastern Europe, many students from Central Asia remain isolated on campus. The abrupt closure of travel in India stranded international and domestic students alike. In each country, seminaries are housing these students, providing meals and basic care out of their own tight budgets, even buying sanitation equipment to maintain proper isolation procedures. Cases like these multiply around the world. Beyond attending to those housed on their properties, several schools are using resources to meet immediate needs for food and medical care within their communities.

Rapid shifts to online learning: Unable to host face-to-face classes, schools have scrambled to move courses into remote learning modes. Schools with existing online programs have been able to use their technology quickly to meet the needs of recently disbanded classroom programs. However, for many, the shift requires developing technological infrastructure, course content, and learning activities appropriate for the digital format from scratch. In the short term, some schools have seen positive responses. A professor in Ukraine has enjoyed hosting video chats. Students in Brazil have expressed gratitude for the quality of their courses, even when circumstances demanded hasty modifications.

Even so, most schools are simply focused on survival – on delivering content. Some professors have conducted live lectures via Zoom and Google Hangouts. Others have rushed to record lectures, post notes, and make materials available

for download and online viewing. Still others have been able to modify assignments and create threaded discussion. They are doing all they can, but they often remain uncertain about how students receive content or whether students can access materials. In crisis response mode, questions about course design, library access, holistic formation, and assessment must wait for the future.

National and regional situations complicate schools' efforts. Inadequate technological infrastructures and power grids and the closure of public internet cafes have hampered some students' online engagement. At some schools, only a handful of professors own laptops, and even fewer students have computers or adequate home internet access. Many schools have had to upgrade hardware on campus and for remote use by professors. One school in the Middle East has provided cellular modems to faculty and given students stipends to improve internet service.

At the worst, at some schools – such as one in Nigeria and another in Central Asia – students who cannot connect have had to drop courses or postpone completion. Other schools have had to cut their academic terms short because they cannot make the rapid changes required to continue online. The crisis has caused a unified effort to move more learning online, but implementation and results remain significantly uneven.

Increased demands on faculty: The pandemic's demands have created quite a scramble for faculty, many of whom have not had much training in developing online courses. Some professors not only have never had a desire to teach in a virtual environment, but they also had been assured that they would not have to do so. Even where schools have facilities for recording courses, the lockdown has meant that professors must teach from home, often with little support and while managing family responsibilities. Many are trying to provide counsel to students via text messaging. Furthermore, financial challenges often mean that they are being asked to take a pay cut at the same time as they are being asked to do far more. This further contributes to their physical, mental, and psychological hardship.

Pressing financial challenges: As schools scramble to keep courses going and meet students' needs, financial pressures mount. Schools have lost income across all categories. Income challenges are not unusual. However, to have all four major sources threatened simultaneously and without a clear idea of when the crisis will subside has made the financial outlook dire for many schools.

- *Tuition:* For many schools, these months – halfway through the academic year – mean enrollment for the coming term and collection of the next

round of tuition payments. However, schools have had to postpone enrollments and tuition billing, unsure when classes may resume or what form they will take. Class delays will result in loss of tuition income. For some, a move to online courses may require adjustments to tuition rates. Even when schools resume (and they will need to think carefully about how to do so, as Maloney and Kim make clear in their April 2020 article), many students will have been without work for months, which may mean they will not have the needed funds to enroll. Increased delays, changes in format, and loss of income for students may all lead to lower enrollments even when the path forward becomes clear.

- *Local donations:* The crisis's economic fallout has affected all donors. Churches support many schools, either directly or by covering students' fees. Lockdown has prevented churches from meeting, significantly decreasing the offerings they receive. One school in Ethiopia exemplifies this situation as they expressed concern that churches that have not been able to meet will also not be able to give during the next academic term.
- *International donations:* The economic crisis will constrain donor capacity in the West, where major donors to Majority World schools are often located. In addition, travel bans mean that school presidents' fundraising trips have been delayed or canceled. Unable to visit donors, several presidents have said that they fear a significant revenue decline. As they wait, they do not know whether financial situations will grow worse and have a further negative impact for months to come.
- *Third stream income:* Lockdowns and social distancing have eliminated income generated by guest house and facility rentals. In some cases, as at one school in Ukraine, these revenue-generating projects can provide up to half the school's budget. If bans on large gatherings extend for another season, these schools will face even more significant financial challenges. Each quarter that passes represents unrecoverable income.

Schools have had to delay long-term and special projects as needs shift from capital improvements to this month's operating income – a shift complicated by two factors. First, cutting expenses can be challenging when schools face humanitarian efforts like caring for students stranded on campus, or when reducing salaries or cutting staff directly impacts provision for families. Second, immediate shifts to online education require investments in technology. Hardware purchases, internet upgrades, and service contracts are necessary but unbudgeted expenses. Facing these complex barriers, leaders continue to make sacrificial commitments to keep their schools afloat.

Following on existing crises: In some places, such as Lebanon, Hong Kong, and India, the pandemic adds to preexisting economic and social upheaval. Economic constraint and political unrest in many places in 2019 had already placed pressure on schools. Conflicts brought a decrease in local giving and third-stream income (less tourism in the Middle East, for instance), so schools in these places faced budget constraints prior to economic closures because of the pandemic. In some cases, conflicts had also narrowed access to goods and services, a situation now exacerbated. Thus, schools encounter a new set of increased expenditures, financial constraints, and logistical challenges on top of already-unfolding conflicts.

The Crisis May Catalyze Innovation

We do not yet know how long the crisis will last, but it is clear that it will have a lasting impact. In an article posted on *The Praxis Journal*, Crouch, Keilhacker, and Blanchard discuss the COVID-19 crisis in terms of meteorology: blizzard, winter season, or ice age (2020). The crisis has not subsided so quickly that schools will be able to wait out the storm and return to business as usual. Thus, this crisis may be a winter season; if so, adjustments have to be made. If it is an ice age, then the landscape may change irrevocably.

In a recent interview, Elie Haddad, President of Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon, stated that a crisis can be a time of fear or a time of innovation (Ortiz, 2020). Right now, most schools are still in survival mode. But once the dust settles, new ideas and practices will emerge. In *Reverse Innovation* (2012), Govindarajan and Trimble challenge two assumptions that hinder innovation: progress always develops iteratively from previous models; current institutional structures are necessary to accomplish objectives (see also Hunter, 2016). The COVID-19 crisis topples these assumptions in real life by disrupting every aspect of theological education around the globe, especially in the Majority World. It forces schools to realize that the structures to which we have become accustomed cannot function as they did in the past. Thus, although the situation is challenging, it may lead to truly innovative paradigm shifts in how schools accomplish the primary task of forming leaders for Christian service.

Immediate Responses: Already, schools have become creative, using virtual platforms for more than their classrooms. A school in Brazil has created a vibrant worship community through online chapel services. In the Middle East, summer conferences have been repositioned as interactive webinars.

Schools have recognized that although they have a primary calling to train leaders, they may also have a temporary role in meeting immediate humanitarian needs. For example, a school in India has mobilized resources to provide food for day laborers trapped by the pandemic shutdown.

Theological schools have often become places of refuge, especially during times of political unrest. In the last decade, schools in Latin America and parts of Africa have protected the displaced. During COVID-19, many schools care for stranded students, working hard to provide meals and maintain standards of sanitation and social distance. In addition, a school in the Middle East has opened its guest house to frontline medical workers needing accommodation. The Church has a long history of serving people in times of crisis, and we see seminaries stepping up to continue that legacy.

Preparing for a New Future: As this winter or ice age progresses, schools will need to turn their attention to some of the longer-term changes required for theological education's new normal.

- *Online investment:* Many of the moves into online education have been expedient measures to complete academic terms that began in face-to-face environments. If students cannot return to physical classrooms, then many schools will need to invest more time and energy in program design for virtual environments. Faculty training, administrative systems, and budget projections will need revision. Questions related to appropriate platforms, types of online interaction, access to resources, and student formation will require intentional answers. Even as schools plan to incorporate more technology, though, lack of national infrastructures, disparities in access to broadband, and limited device availability ensure that while technology may play a greater role in the future, it cannot serve all the Church's needs. Schools must plan within these constraints.
- *Formation in online environments:* Some aspects of discipleship and spiritual growth are inherently incarnational. Schools will need to consider which aspects of formation must take place on campus and in relationship with faculty, staff, or fellow students. New partnerships with local church leaders and increased use of shorter, intensive times of in-person interaction may provide some answers.
- *Holistic changes resulting from the transition online:* Depending on how permanent the shifts may be, leaders will need to address questions about facilities, including the use of dorms, classrooms, chapels, and libraries.

In a recent post for *Teaching Theology*, Graham Cheeseman comments that the current crisis has highlighted the effectiveness of virtual learning environments and how technology can help maintain relational connections. At the same time, isolation has shown us how much we need physical presence with other people. For the Church and the seminary, both these lessons warrant consideration as leaders think about how schools will form future leaders for Christian service.

Schools will have to address other long-term changes.

- *Financial stresses:* When the coronavirus finally retreats and courses resume (in whatever new forms they take), financial challenges for theological education will remain. A global recession may place further pressures on schools' income sources. Students may have difficulty paying tuition, and they may expect different tuition structures if the models have shifted to embrace more technology and less residential study. Churches and individual donors will take time to recover. Experience has shown that donations lag behind economic rebounds, so it may be years before contributions return to previous levels. Even foundations have seen a decrease in available funds and may take time to recover. Third stream revenue sources will also have to rebuild as locations incrementally release from lockdown. Like donations, conferences, hotel rooms, and recreational activity tie closely to nations' financial statuses. Schools should plan for income reductions for at least the next 12-24 months.
- *Mission transformation:* Crisis forces schools to examine their core mission. COVID-19's impact will extend far beyond theological education, reflected in shifting needs in the Church and society. Examining these challenges will guide schools as they pursue their primary purpose – forming leaders for Christian service and for speaking prophetically to the Church and society. Schools can offer Biblical guidance as new issues emerge. Unfortunately, for many schools, the aftermath of the crisis will probably require a contraction of activities. Programs, curricula, delivery, and personnel may all warrant reconsideration if schools are to survive to pursue their missions.

As schools prepare to engage a situation changed by the coronavirus, leadership should ask what core they will build on. As they do so, they can, in Elie Haddad's words, "reconceptualize pathways for the future" (Ortiz, 2020).

Crisis Moves Us to Action – and a Reason for Hope

In the same way that the unprecedented scope of the crisis has placed extreme burdens on people around the world, solidarity in suffering has led to an unparalleled amount of collective action. At no other time in history has the scientific community been so united in a common cause, worked more collaboratively, and shared more data (Apuzzo and Kirkpatrick, 2020). Such concentrated effort offers hope that new tests, treatments, and perhaps a vaccine may develop.

For the Church, hope is grounded in Christ. Still, the scientific community's broad collaboration provides inspiration as schools engage their portion of God's mission. In theological education, the solidarity that comes from the crisis's universal impact can also move us to action. Over the last month, churches have had to disburse their gatherings but have united in prayer and serving the poor. As part of the Church, theological schools not only join this work but also continue to learn about how to form leaders for Church ministry in times of need.

Gifted, passionate, creative women and men lead and teach at theological schools around the world. As they find ways to engage one another, they discover wisdom and mutual pastoral care. The intense focus on the coronavirus crisis has also led to the development of new collaborative spaces for mutual learning and resource sharing. A few examples:

- The ICETE Academy has developed a set of nano-courses, including *Educating in Crisis*, which includes a forum for sharing experiences related to the COVID-19 crisis. A second short course explores *Developing Community in Crisis* when face-to-face interactions cannot take place: <https://icete.academy>.
- ICETE has developed a page for sharing resources and conducts weekly interviews with regional leaders as a way to promote new ideas: <https://icete.info/community/sharing-resources-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/> and <https://icete.info/equipping/video-archive>.
- The Asia Theological Association has developed a technology response team to: a) meet the immediate needs of emergency remote learning; b) provide real-time support related to technology and faculty training as faculty teach online for the first time in some places; c) guide ATA on how to use its website as a gathering place for resources for faculty and students.

- Several libraries and research repositories, including JSTOR and EBSCO, have made resources temporarily free to help meet resourcing needs. As evidenced in Wheaton’s list (and several like it), one challenge remains in accessing significant electronic resources in languages other than English: <https://guides.library.wheaton.edu/COVID19Offers?fbclid=IwAR1pL9shshSQfKbhHCEaRyUtbro-lm5VSuWZoNOury6XJ5F7pX-c7hlj6HNg>.

For most schools, responses from their communities to their efforts have been surprisingly positive. The vulnerable, impoverished, and elderly have welcomed schools’ efforts to meet humanitarian needs. Faculty and students have embraced new platforms and have learned about their own abilities to adapt. In this time of intensified conversation about online education, schools can make the most of students’ and faculty members’ gracious responses and can solicit their input as they make decisions about the future. Schools reluctant to engage online learning (for a variety of reasons) have found themselves forced not only to consider possibilities but to execute them to the best of their abilities. They have identified clear, specific needs for faculty training, infrastructure development, and managing student engagement and can seek concrete solutions. Shortcomings in online models have moved from theoretical and ideological to practical and tangible, allowing for informed discussion and innovative solutions.

The ubiquity of the crisis has taken a toll on theological education and its leaders. The immediate shifts have required immense efforts and, at times, personal sacrifice so that schools and, more importantly, their missions can survive. In the face of daunting challenges, as the initial wave subsides and we envision the future, we do so with a sense of hope. Theological education has an essential role in the Church. Crises reveal the importance of leader formation and of Biblical reflection on each day’s issues. Drawn together by a sense of collective desperation, we cling to Christ and to one another, and hope begins to emerge.

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