

Continuing On After the Hurricane

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For many of us, time seems to have stopped since the term “COVID-19” entered the global lexicon. Yet, in theological education, things have also sped up, as many leaders find themselves busier than ever – meeting immediate needs in the community, shifting to virtual learning, scrambling to stretch budgets, caring for sick or grieving faculty and students, and trying to determine just how long this crisis will last. A seminary leader in India referred to this time of “anxious questions as we navigate this unanticipated situation.” A school leader in Ethiopia wrote, “COVID-19 will have an immense impact that will change the world in many ways.” On the other hand, from Central Asia, a school leader expressed more optimism in the situation: “The COVID-19 pandemic for sure has had a negative impact on our activities, but surprisingly it has revealed to us new approaches and motivated us to make some positive movements too.”

This intense mixture of crisis and opportunity has marked our world since March 2020. Crises are not new to those involved in theological education, especially in the Majority World. These schools often encounter disruptions, from spotty electricity to all-out war. However, the pandemic has had a unique impact because of its simultaneous, global, day-by-day consequences (Hunter 2020). Normal sources of help – such as international aid organizations and large Western donors – have seen their resources become stretched impossibly thin or evaporate altogether. In addition, pandemic-driven economic collapse, fear, and heightened political rhetoric have exacerbated simmering political and cultural tensions. Denys Kondyuk’s article, originally published on our website before the pandemic, gestures toward one context where long-standing political tension continues. Even as leaders devote considerable time and energy to the crises at hand, they must also attend to the ongoing work and mission of the school.

After the Hurricane

Crouch, Keilhacker, and Blanchard (2020) develop the metaphor of the blizzard for how long the pandemic’s impact will last. However, the metaphor of a hurricane may better describe schools’ experience. By April, institutions around the world had shut down, as if a giant hurricane had hit the planet. For several months, institutions focused their attention on withstanding gale-force winds and meeting immediate needs. Then, as schools surveyed the damage, most cobbled together temporary shelters, often moving instruction to online platforms like Zoom, Google, or social media. Now, as the world looks forward to treatments and vaccines, schools are entering the rebuilding phase. As they do so, many have

begun to ask whether they should simply reconstruct what existed before or make fundamental changes to their blueprints. Even though the winds and waves have subsided, the COVID hurricane will dominate many institutions' priorities for a considerable time.

The Mission Endures

For all the proper attention given to responding to the pandemic, the Church still faces its usual pressures. After the hurricane, "normal" thunderstorms will occur. In the same way, schools and church leaders must continue to address life's "normal" crises. Churches need leaders who can evangelize the unbelieving, comfort the hurting, guide the questioning, and speak to society's broader struggles. Lisa Lamb's article, published here for the first time, explores factors that will promote successful development of these leaders.

Thus, although the pandemic has affected how schools accomplish teaching (by forcing them to add virtual courses, for instance), it has not erased schools' primary role: to form leaders for Christian service and to encourage theologically grounded prophetic engagement with the Church and society. Time will reveal the pandemic's long-term effects on the modes of theological education, showcasing perhaps both continuity and innovation in the post-COVID future. In the meantime, school leaders continue to press forward, clearing the debris and building anew after the storm while continuing to hold true to the task of theological education within the broader work of God's Kingdom.

This issue offers three longer articles – one that relates directly to COVID and two that consider other issues within theological schools' ongoing mission. It also brings together a set of shorter essays that express encouragement and solidarity for theological leaders during COVID.

References

- Crouch, Andy, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard. "Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization is now a Start Up." *Praxis Journal*. 20 March 2020. <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>
- Hunter, Evan. "Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis: Moving from Desperation to Hope in Theological Education." *Insights Journal for Global Theological Education* 6, no. 1 (2020): online.



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