

# Amplifying Voices in the Conversation

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Several years ago, while attending a theology conference that included renowned scholars, emerging faculty, and doctoral students, I was struck by who was not present: non-Western Christian leaders. Too often, whether in the halls of conference centers or in the pages of journals, a vast majority of the body of Christ remains underrepresented.

Among the *ISJ*'s core values is dialogue that is truly *global*, but for that dialogue to happen, many parties must be present at the metaphorical table. So we seek to amplify the key but often missing voices of the Global Church by giving preference to non-Western perspectives on theological education. Furthermore, for decades, the rooms where theology has taken shape have been filled with men, usually English-speakers. But now, barriers of language and tradition have begun to erode. Gatekeepers are beginning to acknowledge a greater spectrum of voices, to invite perspectives across categories of geography, language, and gender.

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## Incarnation, Language, and Culture

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, academia has gravitated toward relying on common languages for conducting its work. Degrees, events, and publications offered in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, and Chinese have smoothed the exchange of ideas. However, pragmatic solutions resting on these languages can marginalize those with less access to them. Financial wealth, political power, and technological access can increase the privileges of already-dominant language groups.

The Church has often championed the vernacular in order to communicate God's mercy. Though at times fraught with other problems, missions, Bible translation, and cultural studies have in many contexts valued otherwise underrepresented cultures. Our theology itself supports these practices: the Son of God took on flesh, entered time and space, and became fully human in order to communicate the Father's love to us. And from Pentecost, the early Church spread with what Lamin Sanneh calls a "vernacular character" that allowed it to reach many who then expressed their faith in their local cultures (1989, 2). Similarly, Bible translation has emphasized the importance of providing access to the Word of

God in local languages. In addition to the words of Scripture, people need to hear sermons and pastoral counsel, to learn theology and its applications, in their heart languages. A champion of indigenous languages, Kwame Bediako states that the ability to respond to the Gospel in one's heart language is critical for authentic divine encounters (1995, 60).

So, among the steps toward bringing more voices into theological dialogue is providing opportunities for learning to happen in local languages. This entails more than simply lecturing in the vernacular; it includes access to texts, quality assurance, and opportunities for further studies. As one article in this issue points out, theological education continues to wrestle with how to empower Christians to learn in local languages as part of extending God's mission.

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## In Her Own Words

Although women are enrolling in theological education in ever-greater numbers and hold more faculty positions and leadership roles at theological schools, especially in the West (Gin, 2018), many women still feel marginalized within theological discourse and church leadership. Without trying to resolve debates about certain New Testament passages, we must acknowledge that women have always been vital to the Church: they were among Jesus's first disciples; they are commended in the Epistles for their faithful labors; they have shaped Church history. Globally, women are a majority of those in the pews today.

To help to overcome the tension between women's marginalization and the reality of their key role in the Church, broadened seminary curricula and degrees for a variety of vocations have helped women to benefit from theological education. Women have found success as faculty or administrators and have used their authority in the classroom to encourage a new generation of women in theology. Slowly, the lack of women role models, access to education, and affirmation of calling is shifting – as this issue's set of reflections by women leaders in theology demonstrates. These reflections were curated from a 2019 symposium at Asian Theological Seminary in the Philippines. Listening to the experiences of women like these can help schools serve women better as members of the faculty and student communities.

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## Conclusion

In addition to amplifying diverse language groups and to inviting women to the table, this issue addresses broader issues through an article about how theological schools might engage consultants to help them achieve specific objectives, and a book review about the future of theological education. Throughout, these pieces reflect on the value of dialogue for the Global Church – dialogue that amplifies underrepresented voices, dialogue that is truly global, dialogue that leads to real solutions.

## References

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- Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-western Religion*. MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Gin, Deborah. "Women in Leadership survey: what we found may not be what you think." Association of Theological Schools. *Online Colloquy*. June 2018. <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/women-in-leadership-survey.pdf>



### Evan 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.