IN THIS ISSUE:

Amplifying Voices in the Conversation
Evan Hunter

Theological Education in Africa Using Indigenous Languages
Jim Harries

The Art of Consultancy: A Guide for Theological Programs and Their Consultants
Perry Shaw

Roundtable: Reflections from Women in Theological Leadership

Introduction
Annette Gumihid-Sabanal

A Kenyan Perspective
Emily Choge Kerama

A Mexican Perspective
Dinorah Mendez

A Filipino Perspective
Athena Gorospe

An Ethiopian Perspective
Seblewengel Daniel

A Palestinian-Israeli Perspective
Rula Mansour

A Korean Perspective
Jung-Sook Lee

An Ivorian Perspective
Eliane Mensah

An American Perspective
Meritt Sawyer

Book Review
Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education
Ka Hon Tony Wong
# Table of Contents

Amplifying Voices in the Conversation ....................................................... 9

Theological Education in Africa Using Indigenous Languages .......... 12

The Art of Consultancy: A Guide for Theological Programs and Their Consultants .............................................................. 23

Roundtable: Reflections from Women in Theological Leadership .... 36
  • Introduction - ANNELLE GUMIHID-SABANAL
  • A Kenyan Perspective - EMILY CHOGE KERAMA
  • A Mexican Perspective - DINORAH MENDEZ
  • A Filipino Perspective - ATHENA GOROSPE
  • An Ethiopian Perspective - SEBLEWENGEL DANIEL
  • A Palestinian-Israeli Perspective - RULA MANSOUR
  • A Korean Perspective - JUNG-SOOK LEE
  • An Ivorian Perspective - ELIANE MENSAH
  • An American Perspective - MERITT SAWYER

Book Review

*Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* ............ 59
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Purpose: The *InSights Journal for Global Theological Education* provides a forum for scholars and practitioners to address issues broadly related to theological education. We are particularly interested in engaging non-Western voices in the global conversation. The journal’s audience includes faculty, administrators, resource and funding agencies, accrediting bodies, and other researchers in the field of theological education.

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Amplifying Voices in the Conversation

Evan Hunter
ScholarLeaders International

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.

Incarnation, Language, and Culture

In the 20th and 21st 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.

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.

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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**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.
Theological Education in Africa Using Indigenous Languages

Jim Harries
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Abstract

My research finds that theological education in English in East Africa creates several problems: 1) It keeps indigenous believers from communicating their faith directly in their heart-language. 2) It does not account for variations between regional dialects of English. 3) English may be used only to ensure orthodoxy to satisfy Western patrons. 4) Thanks to use of English, theological education can be perceived as a path to financial or 5) spiritual power. 6) Use of English positions “Africanness” as a failure and does not deal honestly with the African context. To overcome these problems, I advocate for theological education in Africa in indigenous languages.

Introduction

Ok nonyalore, naneno mano chon.
(It was not possible, I saw that long ago.)

A friend of mine, the bishop of a church in Kenya, said this to me in 2013, two years after we closed a theological education by extension program. We had run this program using indigenous languages. I was the only expatriate teacher; all the others were indigenous. I had become fluent in Swahili and Luo, the languages we used. I had taught in that program for eighteen years. But I was not surprised by what my friend said. Instead, I asked – why did he not tell me that eighteen years earlier? The answer is that eighteen years earlier I could not have heard him. Now, all those years later, I had come to a new understanding.

Why could our program not succeed? I believe that locals would not attend this program because it held no prospect for material advantage. When I say “material advantage,” some readers may think “prosperity gospel.” That is right. But we should not forget that, in Africa, many people do not draw stark lines between material and spiritual prosperity (Harries 2015; Maranz 2001). Theological education programs in Africa provide material reward by two means: outside resources as rewards (generally from foreign missionaries), or indigenous means for wealth acquisition. These two means often overlap. We offered neither. Until we did so, the program could not succeed.
We lacked another factor that might have rescued us: English. If I had taught in English, I might at least have helped people learn English through exposure to a native speaker. In today's Anglophone Africa, English is inherently valuable—unlike indigenous languages. English often has to be acquired with money (Maina 2009), so offering free English classes is like giving someone money. English is the language of valued certification. And English can open a student to the Western world. It can give access to millions of pages of writing. However, knowing English does not help students understand themselves, their traditions, their ancestry, or their tribal past. Use of English prevents students from contextualizing what they learn. If English is the language of theological instruction, it is difficult to know whether learners are valuing theology or English.

Furthermore, use of English allows teachers to use Western materials (Ndjerareou 2012). On the other hand, Westerners teaching in an indigenous language learn the language in the process. The desire to know how to teach in the local language orients them to local churches, to local people, and to local events. They are inspired to help the process of contextualisation in ways a teacher confined to English cannot.

Thus, theological education in English in Africa can combine three benefits for students: acquiring English; learning “proper” Christian discourse; and transforming perceptions. The last benefit is valid, but in addition to it, theological education in Africa often implicitly trains students how to talk correctly and how to explain what they know in ways that please foreigners but may not benefit other local believers. In these cases, students may be motivated by a desire to benefit from Western wealth—not from a desire for heart change that, in turn, will change their cultures.

As I reflected on these facts, I began to be alarmed. In addition to the extension program mentioned above, I had taught theology part-time at an American-run Bible college using English. What exactly was I doing? I wasn’t converting people to Jesus—young people who studied with me were already believers. I wasn’t starting a church—their churches were already running. I wasn’t engaging deeply with what believers were doing—I was too distant culturally to understand the dynamics of church life. Instead, I was enabling people to express their faith and practices as if they were Westerners. Indeed, as I realized that African Christians can gain money from appearing to be Western, I became very concerned—had I trained theological students to be conmen? Had I taught them to imitate my language in order to make money out of the West?

This problem seems to have been created by Western missionaries, or at least to be a problem to which Western missionaries should respond. Rather than asking “What are African Christians doing wrong?” we should ask “How will we—Western missionaries, theologians, missiologists, scholars—respond to this situation?”

Grounded in my experience in Kenya, this article considers the use of English in
Some Problems Deriving form Teaching Theology in English in East Africa

1. Students do not learn how to translate theological terms into their mother tongue (MT).

When speaking to a local audience, indigenous pastors/teachers/speakers who share a MT with their audience may still prefer to speak in English because they do not know how to translate what they want to say into the MT. Lacking MT theological vocabulary from having learned theology in English, indigenous teachers are left with the choice of giving their message in English or not at all.

One church leader told me that he was used to preaching in English. He read theological books in English. He knew theology in English. But he did not know how to translate everything he knew into the MT. So preaching in English was much easier, even to his own people. I told him, “But then you are leaving the most difficult task, translation, to someone else. That ‘someone else’ is probably much less well informed than you. Yet that someone else is the one forming the message received by most of your congregation.” Why should someone choose to talk in a way that they know that their audience will not understand? This preacher appeared to use English for convenience, foregoing an opportunity to touch hearts, because he had learned theology in English and did not know how to translate that theology into a language his congregants could understand.

2. Western English and Kenyan English (or other regional English dialects) are not always equivalent.

For many ESL speakers, English exists as a layer over their MT. Even when locals speak in English, they speak it in ways that are not “Western” but that have local concepts in mind. For example, when a Luo speaker says house in English, what s/he has in mind is ot. Yet ot carries vast amounts of content that the native English term house does not. For example, ot is used to represent “family” (i.e., the family of one wife, so a polygynous man has more than one ot). An ot must be constructed in a particular location and facing a particular way in relation to the ode (the plural of ot is ode), the houses, of other family members. To do this incorrectly is to invite a curse resulting from the displeasure of ancestors who came up with the required building plan. On the flip side, the English term house has much content that ot does not typically have. For example, it is bought and sold on the open market; it has sophisticated indoor plumbing; it includes a kitchen (in the case of an ot, the kitchen is typically a separate building).
Or, similarly, when Luo people say Lord, they are thinking of ruoth. Lord in English (outside of Christianity) implies perhaps a slightly pompous man who received an honour bestowed by royalty. The term is very little used. The term ruoth, while similarly being quite rare in Luo, differs particularly because the term it translates from Swahili (which is very widely used in Luo-speaking areas), Bwana, is common and can mean mate, husband, lord, boss, colleague, and so on. Ruoth has other implications of having been a ruler in the bad old days when social structures reflected internecine warfare.

As these two examples show, theological education designed in the West can ignore key cultural questions – such as location, facing-direction, and design of someone's house – factors that may easily bring confusion (for example, is the implication that the builder of the house is cursed?) or that may omit vital context, such as the need to build a new house should someone take a new wife. The statement Jesus is Lord implies a wealthy White beneficiary. Yesu en ruoth implies that Jesus has taken charge of local community affairs, perhaps overriding the need to follow all the usual stipulations when it comes to housebuilding.

This problem plays out in many ways in theological education. Overall, theological education in English creates an aura of “wanting to be European / American.” It is something for young and urban people, who have little clue about the real issues faced by their societies or about their origins (for example, in declarations of prior generations of ancestors).

3. Students prioritize maintaining an appearance of orthodoxy.

When an African speaker knows that Western theologians are in his audience, he will be concerned about orthodoxy. The same concern could arise if a listener might report what was said to a Western authority (a supporting mission organization or denomination, for example). Someone who has received formal theological training will be aware that theology can be expressed in right ways and wrong ways. Sometimes the line between right and wrong can be quite thin. A competent theologian knows how to negotiate that line so as not to create problems, but the very fact of this difficulty can make people wary of speaking in a language that, they feel, is less precise.

The pastor I mentioned under Problem 1 had two choices. Either preach in English or in the MT. If he used English, his sermon would be translated into the MT. If he used the MT, it might be translated into English. At that point, I perceived an underlying danger beyond simple convenience. If he shared using the MT, he would rely on someone else to translate into English. If the translator translated inappropriately, anyone listening to the English might question his orthodoxy. As the minister of a church linked to the West, wrong teaching on his part could be quite serious. Any official evaluation of what he said would be conducted in English. Because more power resided with English-speakers, communicating
deeply to locals was not his main concern. He had to be careful that what he said would be pleasing in English. Having a translator into English would be risky. It would pin his reputation on the whim of someone else’s choice of English terms to translate his MT words.

At a very basic level, for example, in Luo, *wach* is the usual translation for *word*, but *wach* could also mean *problem or issue*. An inept translator from Luo into English translating *wach Nyasaye* as “problem of God” instead of “word of God” could introduce theological error.

Or take another example: An African church called their leaders *Omukambi*, a Luyia word that could be translated *priest*. They needed a title for the overseer who led the *Omukambi*. They called him *Omukambi mkuu* – the main *Omukambi*. No one had an issue with this – until *Omukambi mkuu* was translated into English as *high priest*. At that, Western theologians threw up their hands in horror, declaring that there is only one high priest, Jesus Christ!

So, in today’s global English-speaking Church, what a local intends when s/he uses a particular term is not important. Rather, because English is usually the language of evaluation, it is preferred, regardless of what will be understood by indigenous listeners. (I consider related issues in more detail here: “Magic, Divine Revelation and Translation in Theological Education in the Majority World Today (With a Focus on Africa),” *Missionalia* 47.2 (2019): 165-176, https://missionalia.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/265.)

4. Students misunderstand theology as a route to financial wealth.

To exacerbate the problem with English being used to please Westerners, for some African students, theological education can be a “game” in which one can “win” money. Many African churches benefit financially from relationships with Western churches; those relationships hinge on apparent similarities between Western and African churches. These similarities include expressed doctrinal solidarity, so not only is English important for maintaining an appearance of orthodoxy for the sake of evaluation, but it is also important because positive evaluation often leads to Western-based funding. Theology’s value comes to lie in its “foreignness” or its “correctness” leading to money.

I once attended a theological seminar in Kenya, put on in English, on AIDS among youth in Africa. All the Africans at the seminar were invested in English theological education because their livelihoods depended on it. In that seminar, my Kenyan colleagues were learning to talk the talk that was necessary to maintain Western-facing relationships. Whether what was said was right for them in their own communities was not the point. What counted most was whether it maintained their relationship with the West.

This problem can also surface within indigenous contexts. Some
prosperity-oriented churches seek to attract local wealth. The means they use to do this is “knocking out” impediments to wealth and prosperity. These impediments come in many shapes and sizes – as in my house-building example above. If failing to build correctly is diagnosed as being the source of someone’s failures, then the local means to wealth include suggesting that the person rebuild their house, and/or that they carry out a ritual to compensate for bad building. Or, to take another example, someone might perform an exorcism in order to solve the problem of troublesome ancestors (exorcising the troublesome ancestor). If these kinds of solutions move people to be generous to the church, the church will often advocate for them.

While English preaching can be oriented to solving the above kinds of indigenous problems, it obviously lacks precision. At the same time, use of English and familiarity with English-speaking circles brings more hope of acquiring either a windfall or some regular support from a concerned foreign (American or European) contact.

5. Students misapply theology for spiritual power.

As well as financial gain, some students of theological education may seek spiritual power, treating education as a magical process. Saying the right thing in the right way in the right language can be perceived as “spiritual” or “godly.” For example, some indigenous churches maintain a liturgy borrowed directly from Catholic or Anglican prayer books – even though their other practices do not reflect belief in that liturgy. The liturgy might talk about one God, but the church’s practices might be oriented toward paying attention to ancestors. The congregation values “saying the right words” not to understand or live them but to invoke spiritual power.

I know that the question of whether insights acquired during English-language theological education can be effective against “traditional” evil forces can be contentious. My guess is that English-language theological education can sometimes be perceived as “dumb” because it does not engage with actual problems. For example, if a problem arises because someone has built their house improperly, can a Western textbook on theology written without knowledge of housebuilding issues really help? This is comparable to ways in which money from certain sources, e.g., sale of land, can be considered “bitter” (Shipton, 1989). This money appears to be equal to money acquired from other sources, yet it will bring problems in its wake. So English may apparently be able to solve problems, but spiritual help’s effectiveness depends on a language that correctly articulates what is going on.

From an African point of view, theological education in a MT could easily be interpreted as watering down theology, reducing its ability to help one acquire the power that comes with links with donors that are generated by expression of Western theology.
6. Use of English can imply that Westernness is “right” and Africanness “wrong”.

Worst of all, teaching theology in English does not help the African Church contextualize the Gospel – and it positions African Christians themselves as the barrier to the Gospel. Because dominant English discourse is Western, when African cultural problems are discussed in relation to theology, those problems can seem to arise from ways in which Africans differ from English-speaking Westerners. African culture makes African Christians into “wrong people.” Thus, use of English in church contexts backs African believers into a corner: in theory, African culture is being transformed by a contextualised Gospel, but in practice, what is African has simply become “wrong” and gone into hiding.

Above I mentioned a seminar on AIDS taught in English in Kenya. A Western missionary arranged the seminar. Apart from him, I was the only Westerner in attendance. Because the event was in English and papers were likely to become public, the main speaker, a figure in the international theological world, felt he had to “cover his back” to satisfy absent Western colleagues by proposing solutions to the AIDS epidemic that fit with Western culture. In other words, the presentation he gave us, pretty much word for word, could as well have been given by a Westerner.

As a result, the Kenyans in attendance, who were not participants in Western culture, became the problem. The message became clearer and clearer: “The problem preventing you from countering AIDS or getting closer to God is who you are.” “Demon casting,” the valued local problem-solving strategy, was discussed, but not written down. (The small group in which I participated discussed this but did not mention it in the report that was later presented to the plenary.) To write of it would have been to risk falling foul of Western critique.

After the seminar, a small-group discussion focused on young people’s susceptibility to AIDS. A Kenyan member of our group, realising that Kenyan believers were not doing the things that would be expected of Western believers that might have helped them to keep AIDS at bay, said, “I keep wondering if we are Christians.” This comment did not surprise me. Our language was English, and our model for being Christian was Western, but my colleagues were not Western Christians – they were African Christians. This meant that they fell short of the model of “what a Christian is” that we were assuming.

A focus of our discussions was young people going to university and getting AIDS; how could we help them to avoid this? We could not, because “acceptable solutions” assumed a Western culture: Africa is known to be a leader in AIDS infection rates. Much of the spread is said to be through heterosexual sex, in which especially young people are engaging. It was clear that to prevent or reduce sexual exposure would require conditions more akin to boarding secondary schools than to Western university campuses (for example, forced separation of dormitories for men and women). Yet, given the globalisation of education and of
contexts in which young people acquire higher education, making the standard different for Kenya as against the rest of the world would be unacceptable. Levels of self-control for various (cultural) reasons being lower amongst Christians in Kenya than those in the West meant that students were exposed to relatively high levels of sexual temptation, that, according to our discussion participants, would clearly result in a great deal of fornication that would in turn spread AIDS. Western solutions to AIDS infections had to presuppose levels of sexual freedom that for Kenya are problematically high.

The above is related to the widespread contemporary understanding in the West that a woman's body belongs to her, and that she can and should defend it. As always, ways in which Africa is different are concealed for the reasons discussed in this article. (Implying that African people are different can be seen as accepting inferiority and questioning the relevance of the very donor funds that people are hoping to acquire.) Yet it seems very clear to me that, in Kenya, men (male family members) are to a greater extent responsible for protecting their women’s bodies. Because universities are contexts in which family protection is ineffective, women are left particularly vulnerable to seduction by other men.

As this example demonstrates, often, theology in Africa is not only taught in English but developed on the contours of Western culture. Western theology “works” for Western people; where it does not “work” for Westerners (many of whom are leaving the Church), those problems are Western problems. In my experience, when theological problems arise, they always seem to center on African culture: reasons for sin or failure always go back to “African culture.” Yet when African people changed their theology to fit their own situations, they were often condemned by Westerners for doing so.

Something parallel to the above arises in indigenous churches – as in the case of a British visitor to an indigenous church here in Kenya. This British visitor used to endeavour to give simple messages in the church. What really grated on him was the noisy shouting that for Kenyans constituted an integral part of repentance. Similarly, a clearly stated focus of the church was healing. Efforts at opening a clinic faltered quickly, however. Local people did not have in mind biomedical healing by biomedical means. The Swahili term *pona* (heal) is helpful here. It derives from *poa*, to cool. Healing, in local cultural context, is cooling. That which needs “cooling” is the friction created by envy and anger by community members; it is often translated into English as witchcraft attacks sent back and forth among groups. British English does not reveal this connection. African culture caused the healing project to flounder.

In such situations, Africans may be taught about a loving God. Then the more astute ones realize that because of who they are, they cannot follow this God in the way prescribed. That is soul-destroying, because it can be taken to imply, “For you the African, because of who you are as an African, there is no salvation.”
In this final section, I will look briefly at demon casting. Demon casting is the process by which a person’s troubles are chased away by getting a lot of attention – laying on of hands, hands shaking the possessed person’s head, gesticulations, noisy prayers, and so forth. My impression is that Westerners consider demon possession to be an exceptional, frightening instance in which an “imagined,” bodiless, foreign being takes over a person’s consciousness. By contrast, to try to approximate the African attitude, I could say that demons represent ways of encapsulating one’s issues into a removable form, like putting your problems into a disposable container. The demon becomes a surrogate and, therefore, somewhat relieves the sufferer of responsibility for the origin of the problem. Dramatic attention received in the process of exorcism confirms the sufferer’s relevance or importance to their community.

I would like to relate the six above-listed problems deriving from teaching theology in English in East Africa to demon casting. Christian Western practices approximate the act of demon casting with psychological counselling. But this correlation makes Western terms untranslatable into African realities and obviously creates a gap between Christian counselling and Kenyan Englishes that follow demon casting practices. Students engaged in theological education in English quickly learn to speak it in a way that suggests theological orthodoxy, in which counselling is considered more appropriate than demon casting. Their speaking this way may not tally either with their heartfelt convictions or with truth on the ground. Furthermore, they may assume that because English-speakers seem to be materially prosperous, their own use of English ought to improve their economic standing. Yet this dispenses with the situations that demon casting addresses and that have no true parallel in English. Because Western English seems to lead to prosperity, Africanness – its language and practices – must be “wrong,” or impoverishing.

In the AIDS seminar, the speaker suggested that African Christians should do less demon casting. A little local knowledge, however, would have revealed that on the contrary, even churches that traditionally disregarded demon casting were moving toward more demon casting. This topic illustrates another way in which knowledge of a language without appreciation of its context can be misleading (Bassnett 1980/2002). Churches were moving towards demon casting because local indigenous theology valued it. Had the seminar been taught in a MT, demon casting would simply have been assumed to be part of the content. But because the seminar was in English, a deep tension existed between local practice and theological education. I had the strong impression that there was a kind of mutual agreement among the Africans present not to make demon casting an issue, presumably arising from prior experience when its becoming a prominent concern simply fouled relationships with foreign donors.

The very categories inherent to Western English mean that demon casting will
probably not be taken seriously by English-speaking theologians. In Western English, *demon* connotes a disembodied spirit. Westerners associate belief in demons with primitivism. Western media and academia highlight cases of exorcism with negative consequences (Davis 2016). Because *demon* itself has unhelpful connotations and appears in negative contexts in English, talking about demons in the African context is difficult. And therefore, a practice that has therapeutic benefit for many Christians in Africa is anathema to English speakers. Once again, English as the “language of theology” hinders contextualization of Christian doctrine.

**Conclusion**

The above six points and the case studies given direct us, I believe, to some basic problems with the use of English as the language of theological education in Africa. I suggest that these issues make a clear case for the necessity of using indigenous languages.

Western scholars have mostly ignored these problems. In many cases, scholars lack the dual language/cultural skills that would allow them to perceive these problems. And some scholars who have perceived them have, perhaps, chosen to remain quiet because solutions would threaten their livelihoods. The use of a Western language for theological education in Africa would be appropriate if and only if we were insisting on Africans becoming Western before they became Christian. If that kind of totalitarian need for complete culture transformation as a prerequisite for accepting the Gospel is not our aim, then the use of English for theological education in Africa is problematic.

Am I recommending that donors withdraw support from all English-language theological programmes in Africa? Are we to do that even if African people, for many obvious reasons, would very much like to maintain those programmes? No, not necessarily. But I would like to see less of the “rule of the foreign donor.” Given the situation’s complexity, I advocate for more modest changes that at least acknowledge cultural paradoxes. These changes include:

- Supporters of English-language theological programmes valuing (and never belittling) the innate superiority of theological education in indigenous languages.
- Westerners investing their lives more than their money into indigenous-language theological education.
- Missionaries spending a minimum of two years learning the MT and culture of the people they will serve before they begin teaching those people.
- Missionaries doing that training among the people themselves, not in a classroom.
- Some theological training being offered without foreign subsidy (direct or
indirect).

I acknowledge that these modest suggestions leave deeper issues brought by English-language theological education unaddressed. But if Western attitudes change even a little, perhaps serious indigenous theology can at last begin to arise in Africa.

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Author’s Note

In the development of this material, I benefited significantly from insights shared by Paul Sanders, Pat Harrison, Dick Hart, Stuart Brooking, Paul Clark, and Michael Ortiz. The material here, aimed primarily at schools, is developed in greater depth in the ICETE Academy course, “Consulting with Wisdom and Grace” (which is directed more toward consultants): https://icete.academy/mod/book/view.php?id=1644&chapterid=723.

Introduction

A recent initiative undertaken by the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education has been the formation of ICETE Consultants. (Details of the ICETE Consulting initiative will appear shortly on the ICETE webpage at https://icete.info/. The initiative is being developed under the leadership of Dr. Kevin Lawson and myself.) We seek to train, supervise, support, and network a team of consultants who will serve the development of theological education globally. ICETE Consultants will support schools and regional accreditation commissions within the ICETE network and beyond as they seek to raise the standard of robust and reliable educational capacity.

We anticipate that consultancy will occur at three levels:

- With schools that are confronting a particular challenge or that wish to strengthen some aspect of their efforts via conversation with an outside specialist;
- With schools seeking to begin new initiatives via resources and dialogue;
- With follow-up for accreditation, cooperating with regional accreditation commissions to help schools develop.

The ICETE Consultants initiative seeks to support the vision for qualitative growth in theological schools by making available a cadre of experienced and qualified consultants who are able to advise schools with wisdom and grace.
However, understanding the process of consultancy, matching the right consultant to the right context, and ensuring the right attitude in both the school and the consultant are essential elements of a fruitful experience. This article advises theological schools as to what sort of consultant may best serve their needs, describes the character of a good consultant, and outlines what the school can expect during the consultancy process. Finally, it describes the phases of consultancy.

**Building Capacity: Organizational Questions for Consultancy Visits**

**Where are we?**

Before inviting consultants, a school must seek to determine its current situation and its key potential growing points. If the school does not have a clear understanding of its needs, a more general team consultancy may be called for, a group that can help clarify the needs. (Many initial accreditation visits serve this general purpose.)

**What type of consultant do we need?**

Once a school knows its potential growth points, its leaders need to know what kind of person will most likely be able to help them move forward. Equally, consultants need to know if they are capable of bringing what is required to a particular situation and consequently when to accept and when to refuse an invitation to consult with a school (Richarme 2011).

To help the school decide what consultant might be right for them, let me analyze different types of consultant and what each has to offer. (Note that the roles are not strictly discrete.)

- **Field specialists** have been actively engaged in ministry for years – perhaps decades – and provide understanding of the whole field. This type of consultant has extensive contacts, having worked with most of the other key figures in the field. Often, these field specialists have completed successful ministry careers and have moved into consultancy to stay involved in a field that has played a major role in their lives. People listen to these specialists and trust their judgment because of their years of experience.

  This consultant can be particularly helpful for a school that is considering entry into a new area or a new approach. This consultant will tend to focus on the big picture and how the big picture may impact the details of decision-making. Field specialists generally have wide knowledge of how similar organizations function elsewhere and how structures and practices have succeeded or failed in comparable situations. (Senior consultants like these must realize to what extent their...
Examples of where a field specialist may be valuable would be when a college wishes to transition to become a university, or a college wishes to initiate a new masters or doctoral program, or where a centralized college wants to open extension centers. In each case, a field specialist knows how these changes have been implemented elsewhere and knows potential pitfalls and dangers. Through a more global knowledge, the field specialist can advise the college whether or not the initiative is appropriate and what steps might be taken to maximize potential success.

• **Process specialists** are able to identify more efficient and effective ways of doing things; they concentrate on actions. Unlike field specialists, for whom global experience is the greatest asset, process specialists have extensive successful experience on the ground – for example, as President or Dean. The process specialist can see both the big picture and step-by-step means of strengthening internal processes. Process specialists are a bit like doctors – analyzing symptoms, seeing possible causes, and recommending suitable therapy. Good process specialists are able to propose simple recommendations that are not simplistic. They may also suggest specific functional specialists who could help weak elements in the institution.

A school must take care that the process consultant recommends process modifications that are relevant to its unique ministry context and are not generic. Equally, process specialists must ensure that the situation will be monitored carefully after they leave.

An example of where a process specialist may be helpful is where enrolments have fallen off steadily, so a school needs someone to diagnose the cause to determine if different processes might improve recruitment. Another example would be where financial sustainability has become problematic; a process specialist could suggest possible pathways for streamlining the school and attaining greater financial health.

• **Functional specialists** are specialists in a specific field, such as one of the five elements of educational institutions – governance, educational excellence, administration, pastoral care, and external relations; they focus on people. This specialist is useful in setting up a new element within a school and identifying the tasks, responsibilities, and outcomes of that element. In contrast to process specialists, who look for more efficient pathways for getting the job done, functional specialists recognize gaps and are able to suggest ways to fill these gaps. A school must take care that the consultant is aware of its other elements and how changes suggested in one area impact other parts of the school.
Field and process specialists often have functional expertise that emerges from their long experience. A common example would be to have an experienced Academic Dean consult with a college where they have new Dean who is unsure of what is involved in the job; or perhaps the school is even struggling to find a person qualified, and the consultant can help identify the right person. Another possible scenario that suggests the need for a functional specialist would be where a Board has sought to micromanage a school – or perhaps the Board has been too hands-off. Having an expert in governance consult with the Board holds potential for building a healthy relationship with the school’s leaders.

- **Subject matter specialists** are more engaged in a narrow subject or technology; they have comprehensive knowledge about a specific area. Some might be specialists in e-learning, orality, critical thinking, curriculum development, library, or academic documentation. The subject matter specialist is not concerned about the big picture. The school must take care with subject matter specialists because the knowledge they possess is so specialized that only other subject matter specialists in their field are able to tell if they are correct or not. Also, the school must take care with subject matter specialists because their expertise must be current, particularly in quickly changing fields.

- **Pioneering specialists** are leaders who have had significant experience in launching creative new ways of doing things. They have encountered opposition, which they have learned to address appropriately. Pioneering specialists are valuable for schools seeking foundational change. A school must be careful that a pioneering specialist does not simply repeat an innovative package that may have worked elsewhere; the pioneering specialist must help the school discover its own pathways forward.

Some situations that might benefit from a pioneering specialist are the development of research centers, or the establishment of cooperative initiatives with other colleges or even with government agencies. A pioneering specialist is comfortable with creative thinking “outside the box” and has experience in risk-taking.

- **Sounding board or critical thinking consultants** are particularly skilled at listening, analyzing, and providing insight. These are the rarest. They may or may not know anything about your field or the characteristics of your school. But they are able to listen carefully to your descriptions and determine whether the arguments are logical and consistent. They can ask questions and test assumptions that people within the school take for granted. They can provide an alternative perspective on situations that may not be immediately apparent to insiders. And, possibly most important to senior leaders, they may offer a willing ear for highly confidential concerns that the leaders don’t wish to share with others.
Sounding board consultants often function like psychotherapists, using Socratic questioning, answering questions with questions, and facilitating others’ self-diagnosis and planning. One reason that these are the rarest of consultants is that these consultants offer only themselves to an organization – they do not bring a finished product. Unlike engagement-oriented consultants, this type of consultant is most effective over a longer period of time, gaining the trust of the school leadership. In return, their insights are given time to mature and bear fruit. A school must take care, however, that the consultant is providing enough value to justify the time and possible expense involved.

An example of where a sounding board consultant may be helpful would be at a school where there are rumblings of conflict, and the leadership is unsure what factors are leading to this loss of trust. (There may be many reasons, such as differences in understanding as to the school’s purpose, unspoken expectations, external stressors, and so forth.) A good sounding board consultant would be able to ask the right questions of the right people so as to help the leadership find the best pathway forward. But sounding board consultants can also be helpful when a school is flourishing, wants to look ahead, and is uncertain which of many different good possibilities to prioritize. Again, through careful questioning, the sounding board consultant can help the leadership clarify the way ahead.

Of the tens of thousands of consultants, most tend to fall into one or two of the above categories. Occasionally, however, one can find a consultant with capability in several of these categories. These are not common, and a school must understand the trade-offs being made by gaining breadth of knowledge over depth of expertise. The most significant combination involves a field or subject matter specialist who also has sounding board or critical thinking expertise. These consultants are rare and valuable, because people with this combination of characteristics tend to be running organizations rather than consulting for them. In Christian ministry, consultative ability generally arises from a combination of training, ministry experience, life formation, and most importantly, spiritual maturity, what Robert Clinton describes as “Convergence” (Clinton 1993).

Which consultant do you need?

A school needs to determine what kind of specialist it needs at this time and in this place and whether it is preferable to have a local consultant with intimate knowledge of the context, or whether there is benefit to having someone come from further afield who brings paradigmatically different perspectives. Choosing the right consultant is more likely to lead to the desired outcomes. Equally, for consultants, knowing when you are suitable and when you lack necessary competencies will enable successful work with the school.
The following checklist might provide some guidance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundational Need</th>
<th>Type of Consultant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you entering a new field or type of ministry?</td>
<td>Field or pioneering specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you trying to reduce expenses in your school or to increase the efficiency with which your school functions?</td>
<td>Process consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is one section of your school struggling to meet objectives, not communicating with the rest of the school, or floundering in the delivery of its services?</td>
<td>Functional consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are the members of your school strong on general information but not up to speed on the latest technologies or techniques available in a particularly important element of the ministry?</td>
<td>Subject matter specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you thinking about making some radical changes to your leadership or management team, or making strategic ministry changes that you don’t want to share with the rest of your leadership team just yet?</td>
<td>Sounding board consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you stymied by a new concept or development?</td>
<td>A subject matter specialist probably knows too much of the nuts and bolts, so a sounding board consultant would likely be better here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you convinced of the value of your ministry but experiencing difficulty engaging the community in a positive way?</td>
<td>Critical thinking consultant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the consultancy process to be fruitful, schools need to be on the lookout for consultants of good character, and consultants need to know themselves and understand the characteristics of a good consultant. Expertise alone is insufficient. Good consultants are committed to a school’s needs and agendas rather than presenting pre-planned packages.

Above all, schools and consultants must realize the highly relational nature of the process. Particularly in theological education in relational societies, consultants are more likely to be successful if they focus on emotional intelligence and spiritual guidance over practical advice, even while acknowledging that they have been invited because of their expertise.

As school leaders read the character description below, they must recognize how much the consultant needs from the school for the process to be fruitful. A consultant does not simply come in to tell the school what to do; a consultant comes to listen primarily – so those at the school must be ready to speak honestly, boldly, clearly, and in Christian love. If those at the school do not own the process, the consultant’s final recommendations likely will not truly fit the school’s needs – and all the time, money, and effort will be wasted. Schools who participate fully reap the most long-term benefits from consultancy.

Quality consultants are characterized by:

- **Research**: Good consultants do not begin their consultancy on arrival but take time beforehand to research a school’s history, demographics, and local societal challenges. While this information will inevitably be general, it can provide basic parameters to guide the visit. Oftentimes, the school can provide valuable documentary information – such as the results of a recent accreditation visit or field research that they have conducted. Open sharing (by the school) and careful reading (by the consultant) of this material provides a significant head start for the consultancy visit.

- **Politeness**: People appreciate good manners (though courtesy is always culture-specific). From the consultant, a letter of thanks in advance to the person at the school who invited you will establish good rapport. The consultant should thank the school for their hospitality both verbally and in writing following the consultancy. Depending on the cultural context, a small gift to the school may also be appreciated. Schools may give a small gift-souvenir to a consultant. Consultants should note that the extent of thanks they express is context-specific, and they do well to ask the individual hosting them at the school whether they should open the gift in public and/or express thanks.

- **Listening**: When a consultant arrives at a school, the starting point should be to be quick to listen and slow to speak. The temptation for those of us with expertise is to speak too soon. However, we cannot adequately
provide wisdom and guidance unless we first listen patiently and delve deeply into the school’s relationships and systems. In some ways, consultancy is a form of “institutional therapy,” so the basics of reflective listening (“What I hear you saying is . . .”) are often a strategic element for guiding the school. Careful listening establishes the consultant’s credibility by demonstrating resonance with the school’s needs and aspirations rather than simply bringing a personal agenda. Many consultants struggle to listen, particularly if there has been financial outlay to get them there: a consultant can easily feel pressure to deliver a result in a short period. They do well to clarify that their work is a stage in a process and that its results may not be very visible. Often, the greatest gift a consultant can give to a school is to raise questions rather than give answers, even if the consultant has few tangibles to show at the end.

- **Asking the right questions**: Quality consultants assume that they do not understand the institution in which they find themselves, so they will not give any “answers” until they have asked a plethora of questions. Good questions include the basics: Who? What? When? Where? Why? These questions should be asked in advance of the consultant’s visit but continue to be significant upon arrival at the school. As responses come, a good consultant can quickly grasp the key issues and step back to see the big picture – playing the role of synthesizer more than analyst.

- **Focus**: Throughout research and listening, consultants must pay attention. Careful listening can be exhausting, but it is key, particularly in the early stages of the process.

- **Silence**: As they begin to make suggestions, consultants must be comfortable with silence to allow those at the school to process what they are saying. When others process what the consultant says, they will more likely own their responses and actions.

- **Humility**: Consultants must have the humility to accept refusal and opposition. Change will only come when the school is convinced of what the consultant advises. Often, consultants are unaware of factors that make it difficult or even impossible to implement their suggestions. A non-threatening pathway may be to offer suggestions that have worked elsewhere and then provide space to discuss why the idea might not work in this specific context and what elements of the idea might be feasible.

- **Cultural sensitivity**: A consultant must be aware that most methods are not readily transferable across cultures. Therefore, a consultant needs to present suggestions tentatively, asking advice about how the ideas might be adapted locally. Someone who has multicultural experience can be a significant asset, as they can help facilitate intercultural communication.

- **Paraklesis**: Throughout the process, the consultant must prioritize the school’s agenda, not their own. Consultancy is a *parakletic* process in which the consultant comes alongside with encouragement, exhortation, challenge, and consolation and points to possible ways forward.
Beginning with the school’s own questions and agenda empowers the school to choose the plan that will best suit its local needs – and the consultant will see most change when participants have discovered their own solutions to their own problems. So a consultant’s best role is not to give answers as the expert but to help the school develop its own answers to challenges.

- **Prayer and faith**: The spiritual dimension must never be lost. Consultants should pray with and for those whom they serve, and they must trust God’s sovereignty. In addition, consultants need to ensure their personal spiritual well-being. The “wisdom that comes from above” (James 3:17) emerges from openness to hear God speak.

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The Process of Consultancy

A consultancy usually moves through five stages (Block 2011). I describe the process below from the school’s point of view, with notes to consultants about key themes along the way.

1. **Entry**: The first phase is the initial contact, when you invite the consultant to work with your school. During this phase, you at the school should:
   - Listen to the consultant and be receptive to them as they seek to build trust. Above all, a quality relationship is crucial for success.
   - Arrange timing and logistics for the consultant’s visit.
   - Establish terms, including the extent to which the consultant’s role is only advisory, or whether you expect them to do some sort of intervention. Perhaps you just want the consultant to advise on a personal basis, with a very open agenda. Or maybe you want the consultant to observe the school and reflect on what they see. Or perhaps the school has a specific problem, and you don’t know how to solve it. In one situation I know of, the consultant only discovered upon arrival that the problem he had been contacted to address actually required police intervention, and the school expected the consultant to mediate between it and the government. So having clear understanding in advance is crucial.
   - Confirm plans and expectations in writing in order to safeguard the school and the consultant. Clear expectations can mitigate misunderstanding and conflict. In particular, clearly define when you consider the consultant’s job to be “done.”
   - Supply the consultant with information, as they request, so that they can undertake an initial exploration of the problem and determine whether they are the right consultant for the job.
   - Respond to the consultant as needed as they develop ideas for the best way to start.
• Prepare the school’s faculty, students, staff, board, etc. for the consultant’s in-person visit. The consultant is “invading the school,” and some may resent this invasion. Yes, the consultant is coming by invitation, but their conversations may be difficult, and participants at the school may be reticent to speak, concerned that they may say something inappropriate. You need to tell those involved explicitly that it is acceptable for them to talk freely to the consultant.

When consultants describe their worst disasters, they usually see that the problem lay in the initial phase. If you wish to make the most of the consultant’s wisdom, you need to be open, responsive, honest, and clear to help avoid misunderstandings down the road.

2. **Discovery**: During this phase, the consultant asks question after question after question. Participants at the school should answer fully and honestly. Only through extensive dialogue can the consultant gain an accurate sense of the problem or situation, so even when their questions may seem difficult or confusing, seek to work toward understanding. Very often, the consultant’s greatest contribution is in helping you discover answers to the school’s problems for yourselves. During discovery, the school should:

• Enable the consultant to talk to stakeholders (faculty, staff, students, board, alumni, etc.). Those impacted by final decisions must participate in the discussions. Otherwise, ownership of the implementation process will be limited or even resisted.

• Help the consultant develop checklists. As a part of research and listening, the consultant may have participants develop checklists of what is important to them: theological, educational, contextual, etc. Through these checklists, reflect on what elements are most important for your school, community, local churches, etc.

• Respect appropriate times. Working with the consultant, keep meetings to a maximum of 6 hours per day. Consultancy is demanding, and the consultant (and you at the school) need time alone to reflect on each day’s discussions.

• **Note to consultants**: *Taking longer in your travel, including an overnight rest, can help you feel better prepared for the demands of consultancy.*

3. **Feedback**: For those at the school, knowing when to move from speaking to listening requires great wisdom (and, for the consultant, vice versa). Prepare to hear what the consultant says with a spirit of humility and grace. You have invited them to address a problem; therefore, you expect the consultant to advise you, but you should recognize that they need to do so with care, and that you will need to receive their words in the same spirit. Expect the consultant to begin by summarizing the key contours of what they have discovered, to ensure that they understand the situation – and be prepared to give gentle clarifications or corrections as needed. Only then can the
consultant recommend truly helpful strategies. To be ready to receive the consultant’s feedback, you should:

- Be ready to share your own new insights first. The best insights are those generated by the school and its leaders, so the consultant will welcome your thoughtful responses to conversations.
- Prepare for resistance when the consultant gives feedback. The more emotionally costly the project, the more resistance you or others may feel, or the more resistance the consultant may encounter in general. You (especially the school’s leader) must handle this resistance graciously and clearly before an appropriate decision can be made about how to proceed.
- In particular, be aware that particular challenges exist in cultures where those in leadership are seen as “untouchable,” above criticism – and that you may be in such a culture. In these contexts, especially if you are the school’s leader, you may need to prepare yourself and your administrative team to hear hard things.
- Look for a prioritized list of recommendations from the consultant. The consultant should limit major feedback to 3 or 4 actions. If they give a long list of recommendations, that can increase resistance to action. Instead, expect them to list a few key suggestions, followed by a clearly delineated secondary list of other areas that you may wish to consider later.
- **Note to consultants:** Consultants are most fruitful when they rely on the direction of the Holy Spirit in when and what they speak. Especially in contexts where leaders seem to be “untouchable,” affirm the school’s leaders while pointing out positive pathways to the future. You do well to move from “critical thinking” to “constructive thinking” in the way you phrase your feedback.

4. **Implementation:** After hearing the consultant’s feedback, you must decide what to do next. The consultant can continue to help as you plan actions based on their feedback. Often, implementation begins with an “educational” event, in which potential changes are introduced to those who will most likely be impacted, or in which a wider circle of stakeholders is informed of the consultancy recommendations and is given the opportunity to contribute to plans.

- **Note to consultants:** This is the moment in which the consultant must be able to “dance” – to know when to lead and when to follow.

5. **Extension or Termination:** Once the consultancy is completed, you need to decide whether the consultant’s involvement with the school should continue. As noted above, it can be helpful to stipulate the end point of the consultation in the entry phase. Then the decision for continuation would be implicit, a simple yes or no, and if yes, for what period and in what form. Sometimes, in
the process of attempted implementation, deeper problems emerge, and you sense that further involvement of the consultant is called for – either virtually or in person – to pursue key issues at the next level. Or it may be that another kind of consultant is needed for the next phase, and the first consultant can help you identify and pass the baton to someone better qualified for the next phase. If the consultancy was a success, further engagement may be unnecessary, as you believe that you have what you need to move forward. Or if the visit was a “failure”, termination will likely occur, as you do not see value in pursuing the consultative relationship.

- **Note to consultants:** *Whatever happens, the consultant should follow up relationally with expressions of ongoing care, even when future engagement may be limited. Keep in mind that, most likely, some level of benefit occurred, whatever the perceived outcome – if not for the school, then for you.*

## The Value of Being an Outsider

Schools and consultants should recognize the value of having (or being) an outside perspective and should find ways to leverage that gift:

- **Distance:** While the members of a school are best placed to understand that school, over time, systemic blindness can set in. People become so used to the way things are that they are unaware of how dysfunctional their processes can be. Often, negative patterns become self-reinforcing. A consultant can offer alternate approaches.

While finding healthy new alternatives should be the work of the Board, some Boards do not fully understand their role in providing accountability, constructive thinking, and vision to the organization’s leaders, in which case consultancy is often of particular value. However, the Board and other significant stakeholders remain crucial, and the consultant’s work should always involve the Board. Indeed, the Board is most likely to be the group that has a unique inside/outside perspective, as they are part of the school yet have potential for critical distance.

- **Speaking the truth:** The consultant comes and then goes and therefore is in a better place to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Genuinely loving the institution and its people while maintaining distance is one of the greatest challenges facing the Christian consultant. One way to do this is to find the people in the school who are already aware of problems and potential solutions but who do not feel free to speak their minds. A consultant can encourage them, empowering them to use their preexisting expertise to implement healthy change. Bringing in an outside “prophet” can give voice to the “prophets” who are already present within the organization (Mark 6:4).

- **Network of ideas:** Global experience enables a consultant to see broad relationships. A consultant can “give permission” to a group to do
something totally new to their context, but tested and successful in another, that better serves their needs. Often, members of the school may be unaware that comparable approaches already exist elsewhere.

Some Final Words

While a single consultant can offer much, particularly where the school's needs are specific, an even more effective consultancy is “collective consultancy,” in which two or more consultants bring varying expertise to a situation. One example is an accreditation team that ideally includes a variety of process and function specialists. Together, they can assess and recommend new practices across the school. Because the key to accreditation is capacity building, a good accreditation team will not only engage in assessment for quality assurance but will build on this assessment to advise, thereby helping the school to consider ways to strengthen their work.

The success or failure of consultancy hinges on having the right people in the right situation. When this takes place, the possibilities for creative growth are enormous. Both the school and the consultant benefit from an awareness of the consultancy process and from successfully matching expertise to institutional needs. The process of consultancy can play a vital role in guiding schools towards better serving God’s Kingdom purposes.

References


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Introduction

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Recently, significant positive shifts have happened in society in the perception of women and in opportunities given to women. While the evangelical community is catching up with this trend, changes have not been as extensive within as outside. Although women have contributed so much to the Church throughout history, the importance of the role of women in the Church, particularly in leadership, remains trivialized. Women who are blessed with skills traditionally associated with men continue to face challenges of finding places to serve within evangelical institutions because of pressures imposed by culture and by misguided theology. We are often told that only specific tasks can be given to us, and thus, we have to step aside and let men lead. In particular, we are usually told that we cannot be teaching pastors. In addition to these barriers, women who do attain leadership often suffer prejudice, wrong expectations, and stereotypes. As a consequence, the journey of most women who lead in Christian ministry is lonely.

Given this reality, we in the faith community must continue to exert effort to provide spaces where the voices of Christian women can be amplified. We must especially listen to women who hold or have held leadership positions, as their voices can provide a healthy critique of the prevailing culture within the Church. Their voices will also encourage women who are confused because of the incongruity between their skills and the restrictions imposed on them.

The Women’s Forum hosted by the Asian Theological Seminary in Manila, the Philippines, in 2019 was a response to this need for women leaders’ voices to be heard. ATS was a fitting venue for this Forum in two ways. First, as an inter-denominational seminary, ATS has faculty, staff, and students who represent different strains of evangelicalism from different parts of Asia and beyond. The diversity of traditions represented at ATS requires us to practice constant dialogue, especially to engage voices that are usually relegated to the margins. Second, one of ATS’s main goals is to transform harmful trends in the Church and society through theological education – transformation that must include listening to the voices of women. The Forum was historic for ATS because, so far, it is the first and
only forum where all the speakers are women in theological leadership.

Therefore, ATS was more than delighted to provide space for 8 women theological leaders to share their reflections, with the hope that our students and members of our community would listen, reflect, and discern their role in advocating for wider participation of women in leadership. Over the course of an evening, the 8 women were interviewed in panels of 2-3 each on themes that were especially appropriate for their personal experiences. (I served as one of the interviewer-moderators.) The 8 short reflections that follow here are condensed, edited versions of what each woman said that evening (distilled from an audio transcript).

The 8 speakers are from four continents: Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. Their insights reflect some of the unique implications of their cultures for their experiences, showing how women from different cultures may face varying struggles.

All of the panelists are also members of the Women’s PeerLeader Forum (WPLF) hosted by ScholarLeaders (SL). SL initiated the WPLF as a response to the reality that Christian Majority World women leaders in theology face multifaceted pressures, especially loneliness. The WPLF is an avenue for these women to share experiences, counsel, and encouragement.

As a woman who is beginning my own journey in theological leadership, I gained invaluable insights from these women leaders. I, too, navigate complex roles as educator, scholar, wife, and mother, in a culture where the role of women in theology continues to be questioned. I am very pleased that these reflections are now published. Hopefully, they will encourage more women in ministry and will challenge more men to advocate for women’s inclusion – in theological leadership in particular and ministry in general.
Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: Imago Dei

It is important for women to be in theological education because we are all human beings. Human beings are created in the image of God, as Genesis 1:26 clearly states. God made us in his image, both male and female. So I believe that, if we are to see fully the representation of God’s image in life, in service, and in participation in the work of God, we need to have women in theological education. We will not see God’s image fully represented if half of that image is not participating.

The Kenyan Context: Education Is for Boys

In Africa, the hindrances that keep women from participating in theological education are mainly cultural, from a patriarchal context where women do not receive education in general. In the 1950s, when missionaries came and established schools, parents mainly sent boys to those schools. Parents thought that girls would leave home, be married, and not benefit the family. This attitude affects theological education today. Women are not educated in general, so they are not able to pursue theological education.

When girls eventually were able to go to school (and also, now, to theological schools), a new hindrance became a misguided interpretation of theology: women should only teach other women and children and not become pastors for everybody. Denominations in Kenya opened theological institutions, but women who were accepted were not given the opportunity to become pastors or even, in some cases, to receive full training.

When I entered theological education before getting married, people would first ask me where I was from in Africa. Their second question was always, “Are you married?” I would of course say, “No.” “Do you have children?” Again, “No.” They would say, “Something is wrong with you.” So, in addition to the hindrances of African culture and theology, single women have a bigger gap to try to fill.

Personal Story: Overcoming Physical Disability & the Value of Mentoring

My journey in theological education began at home. I was born into a pastor’s family: my father was a reverend in the Anglican Church. My mother was a second generation Christian. I was born with a physical disability, so I have an artificial leg. In earlier days, if my parents had not been Christians, their traditional biases would have been against a child with a disability. Parents used to believe that a
child with a disability should not go into public and must stay hidden.

But because of their faith in God, my parents took me to school. No schools were nearby, so when I was six, they took me to a place where I could access school. They sent me away from them when I was so young because they saw hope in this child who was disabled – and a girl at that. Through that experience, I learned to depend on God because I was very lonely. I didn’t know why I was far away from my parents and couldn’t see them for three months at a time. But when they visited me, they pointed me to God. They told me about God, and they told me that God was close to me even when I was far away from them. So that began my journey of faith. I thank God for parents who were caring, who were able to see beyond cultural and physical barriers. They broke through those barriers so that I could go to school.

As I grew older, I had this feeling that God was calling me to be a teacher – at first, just to be a high school teacher. I went to a public university rather than a theological school. There, I saw that professors, especially those in religion and philosophy, powerfully influenced students. They looked down on students who were Christians; they bashed us for giving in to colonialism.

So I felt I needed to teach at the university level so that I could help students who had faith in God to grow, to withstand these pressures. So that’s why I went to theological school.

During my years of study, I learned that our relationship with God is a key part of our journey. I learned that my walk with God has to be natural throughout, not just on Sundays, but day-to-day. Finding a Christian group at university helped me learn the basics of the Christian life. I learned constantly to be in prayer, to be in the Word of God, to be reaching out, and to have fellowship with other Christians. I learned that I needed to have people in my life who would help me grow, and that I needed to be helping others in their walk as well. Mentoring helped me to continue to grow in my faith.

As a result, I now teach at a public university and help students explain why they have faith. For almost 40 years, I’ve taught Bible and theology in this public university setting.

Advice: Nothing Is Impossible with God

My advice to people who feel a call but face barriers is: Believe in God. Don’t be hindered. You may face barriers of culture, of tradition, of theology. But God is greater. Nothing is impossible with God.
Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: Soteriology

Not only did our God create both men and women at the beginning, but when he planned to redeem humanity, he made the plan of salvation for everyone, for men and women. Jesus Christ died for men and women alike. The New Testament often mentions that salvation is for all humanity, for all human beings.

If salvation is for women as well as men, women must be equipped to fulfill their purpose in the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, within theological education, women’s points of view are necessary because salvation is also for women: salvation blessings flow through women as well as men. Women’s perspectives are God’s meaningful gifts to everyone.

The Latin American Context: “Caudillos”

In Latin America and particularly in Mexico, Evangelical churches are deeply influenced by pre-Spanish and Spanish cultures that were very male-centered. The family (and society as a whole) is led by “caudillos.” A “caudillo” is normally a man who heads the social and/or family hierarchy. He doesn’t allow members of the community or family to give opinions or to take part in decision-making. Decisions are made arbitrarily and authoritatively. This is leadership in Latin American culture.

Though Evangelical churches see Jesus’s model of servant leadership, Latin American cultural influences often overcome the Biblical model. Culture overwhelms Biblical interpretation. So we have pastors who function as “caudillos.” Even if a church says it has congregational government with checks and balances, it often functionally gives all authority to the pastor. Suddenly, the pastor has total power over the church. In that case, very quickly, women cannot speak, teach, or do anything that the pastor doesn’t allow.

So the things that happen in society happen in the Church and the family. For this reason, in Latin America, women don’t work. They don’t have abilities to participate fully in society and the Church. Culture overwhelms Biblical beliefs.

Personal Story: Facing Singleness

I grew up in a Christian family. I received Christ when I was 11 years old. At 15 I received his call to serve full time. But before I went to seminary, I completed university and went to Mexico City to work – I thought I no longer wanted to go
to seminary. I wanted to be a professional. But I give thanks to God for several mentors, my pastors and counselors, who pursued me. They arranged interviews for me with people in the seminary so that I could see all my career options.

Thanks to them, I continued to work but also began to study. When the earthquake hit Mexico City in 1985, I saw God disarranging my organized life. I realized that I had to enter full-time ministry. I earned a Bachelor in Theology. Then, the professors at the institution where I was studying called me to be a professor. That was a surprise. I had never thought that I would serve as a professor of theology. This calling raised questions for me because at that time, only pastors and missionaries were in ministry. I had never thought about professors being in ministry, but God had a plan – and now for 30 years, I have been faculty at that same seminary.

I am still single. Many cultures stigmatize single women (and perhaps singles in general). Furthermore, Christians often stigmatize single or childless women. Recently, my denomination was grappling with writing a statement about the LGBT community. I was part of the commission working on this subject. During the meetings, someone said, “God created marriage, so the purpose of human beings is to be married.” Someone else mentioned 1 Timothy 2:15, which talks about how women will be saved by bearing children. I responded, “Oh, well, then I will be condemned to hell because I don’t have children. And what will happen to the people who cannot have children at all?” So I challenge believers not to say that God created human beings for the purposes of marriage and childbearing. We must think of our sisters’ and brothers’ particular circumstances before we speak.

Women face this kind of prejudice in the Church. When I first started teaching, because I was so new, students thought they could disrespect me for being an unmarried woman. I told one of them, “You can go out of the classroom and come back when you have a better attitude.” That was enough for him. Now that thirty years have passed, these situations are less frequent.

It is worse when your own colleagues disrespect you for being a woman. Such disrespect was especially painful for me: my own Mexican colleagues disrespected me. When the missionary faculty at the seminary hired me, they immediately respected me as an equal. At that same time, they also appointed another Mexican, who was the same age as I – and yet he received more respect than I did from my Mexican colleagues. I was a woman, inferior.

So women in theological education, especially single women, will face many problems. You don’t have a husband, so your colleagues and students may think that something is wrong with you: “You are bossy; you have a bad character.” But they don’t recognize that you are a servant called by God, and they don’t recognize that you have spiritual gifts with which to serve God.

Now, I am nearing retirement. I will return to my hometown, live with my mother,
and diversify my ministry across different institutions. I will dedicate myself to writing. I will also care for my mother because I am an only child. But I am happy to do that. As I reflect, I am satisfied: many Mexican pastors are among my alumni.

Advice: Never Give Up Your Call

My advice to women in theological education: never give up your call. If you are called by God, even if you face many obstacles, never give up, because we will account for ourselves to God, not to people. If people criticize you, if people discourage you, that doesn’t matter. The God who called you equipped you and gave you opportunities to serve him. Nothing else matters – only that you are sure that you are serving God. You are in the place that God wants.

A Filipino Perspective

Athena Gorospe
Asian Theological Seminary

Editor’s Note: The “María Clara” stereotype was developed by Filipino novelist Jose Rizal, as Athena mentions. María Clara is a character in one of Rizal’s most famous novels, Noli Me Tángere, published in 1887. In Filipino culture, she is often held up as the ideal woman – beautiful, courteous, demure, self-effacing, and reserved.

Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: The Church

How many church members are women? In the Philippines, it’s over 50%. Can a male pastor fully understand the needs of the women in his congregation? Will he understand what women go through when they give birth? Or other challenges women face? Future pastors need women teachers who can give them unique perspectives – perspectives peculiar to women – so that they can minister more effectively to the women in their congregations, teach men to begin to understand the women in their congregations, and affirm the women in their congregations.

Furthermore, to whom did God give the gifts of the Church? Just to men? We read Scripture: it’s all given to the whole body of Christ. The gifts of the Spirit are distributed to all, to men and women. Now, let’s say that some of the gifts are given only to some women. If you don’t allow these women to exercise these gifts, then the whole body does not grow into the fullness of Christ. That’s the goal: that the diversity of gifts would help the Church grow into the fullness of who Jesus Christ is. But if some women are not able to exercise their gifts, then the Church will not mature. Therefore, it’s so important for women to be able to exercise their gifts, even in education and formation, for the whole Church.
The Filipino Context: The “María Clara”

The Pauline view of women influences many Filipino Evangelicals. Evangelicals only preach about women from Paul, not from any other part of Scripture. However, Scripture gives diverse views of women, and it’s important for us to look at that range. Even Paul, in Corinthians, says, “Women should be silent in church,” but in another part of Corinthians, he says, “Women can prophesy.” And in Galatians 2:28, Paul emphasizes that as the Church matures, it expresses increasing oneness: all sectors of society – men and women, different races, different economic situations – have the same status in Christ, are affirmed in Christ. So even Paul has diverse views, tied to contextual situations. In addition, Jesus affirmed women. And the Old Testament portrays women prophets. It is a hindrance to cling to one view of women from Scripture.

Yet who is the ideal woman in Filipino society? Because of Rizal’s influence, the ideal woman is the María Clara – one who is silent, meek. She does not speak out. She suffers endlessly even though she faces so much injustice.

But we wonder: Is that really the ideal woman in the Bible? How about Deborah? How about Esther? How about Jael, or Manoah’s wife, or Hannah? Even Mary, the mother of Jesus? None of these women are the meek, silent, suffering type. We need to question our stereotypes.

At the same time, women in the church don’t have to quarrel with everyone. The Church will see our gifts as we exercise the gifts that women truly have, and it will begin to understand that we should not neglect women’s voices, their contributions, their gifts, their leadership.

Personal Story: Called to be a Missionary?

I thought I was called to be a missionary to China, so I started to take extension classes at Asian Theological Seminary (ATS) (not at the seminary itself, but near my home). On an exam for my first class, the professor wrote, “I wish you would go for further studies, lady theologian.” That sparked my interest to go to ATS for residential courses. My first course was Greek, taught by a woman. Looking at her, I said, “I want to go for further studies.” I graduated with an MDiv. Before I graduated, ATS’s Dean told me, “We need faculty in Old Testament. We want to send you for further training and to consider you as future faculty.” So I joined ATS’s faculty.

Now, what happened to my missionary-to-China plan? At the time, I was going to a Chinese church. My Chinese name means “Get China,” “Get Asia.” But my pastor said, “It will take you forever to learn Chinese, when you could actually be in a seminary where you can train many Asians so that they can go back to their home countries.” And indeed, I have had Chinese students at ATS, and they have gone back to China. So my vision broadened: it’s no longer China but all of Asia. That’s
why I’m at ATS.

Over the course of my career, I’ve noticed this assumption that single women have lots of time because they don’t have children. Married women tend to rely on single women for everything. Even when I was still living at home with my parents, my brothers used to drop their kids off and expect me to take care of them, thinking that I had all the time in the world.

Similarly, in the seminary, married faculty expect that their single colleagues will do more work. So single women are often overworked. And the problem is that because a single woman doesn’t have a family, she doesn’t know how to put a stop to this situation. Married people go home, and they have children, a spouse – they play with the children, they do things as a family, and therefore they have a break. But because single women don’t have those demands, they just keep working. And then, because a single woman produces so much, her colleagues think that she’s superwoman. But she’s not really. It’s too easy to neglect one’s spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being because one doesn’t have those rhythms that are present for married people.

**Advice: Spiritual Disciplines**

I find it very, very important to maintain the spiritual disciplines, to have a rhythm in terms of prayer and study of the Word and keeping a journal. For me, the Word is so important; I hunger for it. I have time with God in the morning, as well as evening prayer. I light a candle, and that’s my signal that this is now my time to sit before God.

Nature is also important. It’s good to go away, to spend time with God in nature. Physical exercise – swimming, going for walks – nurtures the spiritual life.

Finally, fellowship is important. **ScholarLeaders** decided to fund a gathering – the **Women’s PeerLeader Forum**, of which I’m a member – to encourage women who are lonely in many ways. We act as peer support to each other – we share our lives, our struggles, our prayers. We learn from one another’s contexts and grow. I hope that other women will find similar peer support.
Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: The Spirit’s Gifts

One of the greatest challenges for women in theological education, whether students or faculty members, is that people ask you why you are there. In no other discipline would you be asked, “Why are you here? What are you doing here? You know that the Bible doesn’t allow women to be this or that. Why are you here?”

The Church should understand that women have the right to serve the Lord. Service is an act of worship, so when the Church denies women the opportunity to serve, it denies women an act of worship. Those who do so will be held responsible by the Lord. One woman, a gifted teacher, wanted to teach, but the elders would not let her teach. She asked them, “Why has the Spirit given me this gift? He has not given it to me to use in the kitchen.”

We have to recognize that it is the Lord who gives gifts. I didn’t ask for the gift of teaching and counseling, but I have both. Why did the Lord give me these gifts? If the Lord gives gifts to women, it means he wants them to serve, so if we have a problem with women using their gifts, we should ask the Lord. Should the Spirit stop giving gifts to women?

To deal with these attitudes, I don’t argue with people. I just do what I’m called to do. I don’t waste my energy and time trying to change people’s minds. I know that I have a calling from the Lord, so I just do what I am called to do, and I try not to get discouraged.

The Ethiopian Context: Family Roles

In Africa, women face certain expectations in the home: cook, clean, take care of the children. That’s our job description, so if you’re a woman who’s a professional, you must also try to uphold these domestic expectations.

But when husbands care for the children or do housework, they shouldn’t think that they are doing their wives a favor. That attitude among men is common. Men want to help, but even the term “help” reveals that they think that household chores belong to women, and men’s responsibilities for the house are secondary.

Of course, I believe in seasons of life. When children are very young, mothers should be more available – that’s natural. But apart from that, housework should
be divided between husband and wife. And when the husband does his chores, he’s not doing a favor for his wife – it’s his household too. When he takes care of his family, he’s taking care of his family. Yet when men do housework, they expect a lot of praise – when women do these backbreaking jobs all the time, and they don’t expect praise and recognition.

**Personal Story: Learning to Let Go**

My parents have six children, three boys and three girls. Our father never showed favoritism, so I don’t feel inferior as a woman. Despite African culture, because I was empowered as a young girl, I never feel inferior. I may feel inadequate in other ways, but never as a woman.

For me, the greatest challenge is not the culture. It’s myself. I expect so much from myself. I used to try to do it all, but when I was preparing to get married, my mother told me, “Seble, don’t do everything. You have to allow your husband to help you. If you don’t let him help you at the beginning of your marriage, for the rest of your life, you’re going to end up doing everything.”

I gave birth to our first boy in Ghana [when I was studying at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute]. My mother traveled to Ghana to help us. She saw that I would not let my husband hold the baby because this is my baby. I would say, “No, no, no, I don’t like the way you’re holding him.” Then I would take over. So my mother said, “Seble, listen to me. You’re going to be holding this baby for a long time. Let him hold the baby. The baby will not die.” She told me to stop criticizing my husband for everything: “Let him be a father in the way he knows.”

Another time, I asked my husband to dress our six-year-old daughter. He put on her outfit, and I didn’t like it. I was tempted to change it. I looked at him and at what he had put on her – and I decided not to do that. We may think that this is a very small thing, but it’s actually huge. If we constantly correct our husbands, they will let us do everything. And why would you ask them to help you if you’re going to end up criticizing them each time?

So most of the challenge comes from myself. I’m learning to give myself a break, to let go. I’m learning to let my husband be a father to our children and help around the house, and not correct him in everything he does. We don’t have to be perfectionists. If the house isn’t clean, that’s ok. If everything isn’t in order, that’s fine. If the kids don’t shower every day, that’s fine too (as long as it’s not humid!). Most of the time, women put the burden on themselves – we want to do everything ourselves, our way, at our time. So I am working on myself to let go and let others help. I encourage other women to challenge themselves in this way also.

**Advice: Remember that the Lord Is With You**
Women are very strong: think about what we – mothers, wives, single women – can do during a short period of time, in one day. But when men are unkind to us, not only our husbands or fathers but also our colleagues, that is so discouraging. So I challenge men to show kindness to women in the household, the workplace, wherever.

To women, I say that it is wonderful to have supportive fathers, husbands, children, or churches. Even if you don’t have any of that, though, remember that the Lord is by your side.

A Palestinian-Israeli Perspective

Rula Mansour
Nazareth Evangelical College

Editor’s Note: Below, Rula says, “Education has come to replace land.” The idea of education replacing land as an inheritance for Palestinian-Israelis is a foundational shift, given the importance of the concept of land as inheritance in the Middle East.

Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: Unique Perspectives

Seminaries should encourage women to publish because women’s voices are key: their perspectives as mothers, wives, and singles feed the way they understand theology, practice it, teach it, and write it. So seminaries must not delete women’s perspectives or discourage them.

Women need time, encouragement, and support to make these contributions. Theological institutions should send women to international conferences and universities; these experiences will in turn enrich the sending institutions. As they have a higher profile, women faculty will grow in teaching, in faith, in perceiving God’s will. Institutions should also recognize women’s gifts – I don’t mean their gifts of the Spirit, necessarily, but personal gifts or skills related to their gender. These gifts differ from men’s, and they can enrich the whole team, so seminaries should give women formal positions and look at them as full, equal partners.

The Palestinian-Israeli Context: Women as Second-Class Citizens in a Three-Fold Minority

When I say that I am a Palestinian-Israeli, people say, “Oh, then you are Jewish.” I say, “No! No! I’m not Jewish. I’m a Palestinian Arab.” Then people say, “Oh, then you are a Muslim.” I say, “No! No! I’m not a Muslim. I’m a Palestinian-Arabic Christian.” Then people say, “Okay, we understand – you are a Muslim who converted to Christianity.” I say, “No. We have been Christian since the beginning. My family has been Christian for centuries.”
Evangelical Christians in Palestine are a three-fold minority. We are a minority within the Jewish community; we are a minority within the Muslim community; and most Christians in Israel are Catholic or Orthodox, so Evangelicals are a minority within the Christian community.

This status affects theological education. Because we are such a minority, not much theological education is available. On top of this, not many women study theology because Middle Eastern culture is patriarchal. Patriarchy shapes the Church as well as society. Women are not allowed to be pastors, even though they are a majority in the church (in our church, 70% of the members are women). Thus, because Evangelical Christian women are second-class citizens in a population that’s a three-fold minority, very few women seek theological education. At the same time, for Evangelical Christians, education has come to replace land. Thus, many women, especially Christian women, are highly educated – but not in theology.

If we look to the future, I think that Christian Palestinian women have great potential to become theological educators. But we face the demands of being mothers and wives. Of course, those roles are a blessing – but they hinder the community from accepting us as theological educators.

How do Christian Palestinian women deal with these challenges? Persistence. Even as a minority, women are so influential. They do almost everything except preach – logistics, Sunday school, etc. Women may not have formal power, but they have informal power.

*Personal Story: A Resilient Marriage*

When God called me to leave my job as a public prosecutor and study theology, I was not looking for a job; I was not looking to study; I already had a Master’s. But because I felt God’s calling, I decided to put all my effort there. Whenever I grew discouraged, I asked, “What’s it all about? It’s God calling. I know that God is with me.” God has supported me at every step.

God gave me the support of my father, who taught me that I could fulfill my dreams through hard work and perseverance. This, too, is related to being a Palestinian woman and a Christian – because you are part of a minority, you must study hard, work hard, so that you can succeed.

The primary support God gave me is my husband, who has always believed in my calling. My church also supported me when I did my PhD, and so did my kids. They understood, “Mom is doing her PhD, so she studies all the time. That’s fine. Someday she will finish,” and thank God, I did. I insisted on working hard so that I could finish before my children became teenagers.
Through my career, I have found that life has seasons. Sometimes, a wife puts more time into the family and the husband less; other times, the husband puts in more time and the wife less, depending on what each one is doing and what God’s calling is for them.

At the beginning of our marriage, we were both working very hard. I was a public prosecutor; my husband started a new business. We worked like crazy. When we started having kids, we had three boys, each three years apart, so they were all very young at the same time. But I couldn’t leave my job and go home because I’m a woman – I have to work hard to make everybody see that I’m a professional. So my husband left his work and ferried the kids to school, fed them, etc. He would go back to work when I came home – we did shifts. This was crazy; it was very hard. Eventually, my husband and I sat down and talked. He said, “It’s either your career or my career. We can’t both have careers and a family.” God seemed to be speaking to us. So when my kids were in elementary school (the oldest was six; the others were still so young), I quit my job.

Yet it seemed that God was preparing me for something new. I started to look for PhD programs. I began my PhD part-time from home, though I did travel to Oxford (U.K.) twice a year. This situation was excellent: I was available as a mom but also working on my PhD. I could study at night, and during the day, I could be with the family. So: life has seasons. I had to accommodate my family. But my husband and I chose this together as we talked, planned, and prayed.

Then when I began my dissertation, I needed focus to write. It was impossible to write with three kids at home. My husband and I talked and prayed again, and God opened the way for me to go to the States: Eastern Mennonite University invited me to be a visiting scholar. My husband said, “If this is what you want to do, and it will let you finish your PhD, then we will all go together.” So we all moved to the States for two years. My husband ran his business from home, and I went to the library for 11 hours a day. At the end of two years, I was done. We returned to Palestine – my husband worked very hard at his business; I had a more relaxed time at home with the kids. So life has seasons, and it’s important to have a healthy marriage in order to plan well together.

Even more important is a right relationship with God because when He plans, everything goes smoothly. Everything is not perfect, but you will see God lifting you up when you face a barrier. I don’t say that there’s no discouragement or tiredness: sometimes I would cry and say, “God, how can I start this chapter?” But I can look back and see God lifting me up, walking with me, and putting His hand on my whole family. So our work starts with God and ends with God. He leads the way, and He is faithful to the end.

Advice: Exercise & Communal Prayer
I exercise three times a week – that’s a must for me. Find something you enjoy, anything that makes you move physically, walking, running, whatever.

Also, I’m committed to a prayer group once a week. When I say “prayer group,” I mean four hours of worship and prayer with precious sisters in Christ. We are committed to support one another, to share with and strengthen one another. We study the Bible, but mostly we pray. Every time, I come out full of energy, stronger spiritually.

A Korean Perspective

Jung-Sook Lee
Torch Trinity Graduate University

Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: The Next Generation

I want to be in leadership in theological education for the sake of the next generation. I want young women to be more prosperous and more active, to express themselves in God’s calling.

When I was a PhD student, I encountered a moment when I considered quitting. I was studying at Princeton Theological Seminary (USA). I had had two babies. After I gave birth to the second, I was very weak. This forced me to stop and consider. I wrote a letter to my professors saying, “Thank you so much. You have done so much for me, but now I have to quit.” My advisor was a pioneering woman herself. When she received the letter (she was the first person to whom I sent it), she said, “Would you think one more time before you send it to everyone else? You can always quit. Just consider one more time.” So I did. My first child is a daughter; the second, a son. I looked at my daughter. She was only 2 years old. As I looked at her, I thought about 20 years later, 30 years later. If she were in my shoes, what would she do? What kind of decision would she make? I realized that I should not give up because of my children.

So as Academic Dean or Vice President or President, I often faced challenges, but I always thought about the people who would come next, especially the women. I wanted to show them that they could succeed. In my career, I was often the first woman to take an administrative role. I was the first woman president of Torch Trinity. As the first woman, I faced many expectations – and some praise as well – but also extra difficulty. Yet now, as I reflect, I find that it was a rewarding experience. In history, we see so many who ran their race, finished, and are now witnesses. I believe that I have become one of them.

The Korean Context: Communications & Decision-Making
Generally, it is said that women are better in communications, better in details, and better in sacrifice. These observations are quite true but not always true. Not every woman is like that – there are personal differences, of course. But usually, we women do believe in verbal communication. We like to make sure that we are understood. Such clear verbal communication can really be a blessing in an institutional setting. Women can communicate discreetly – we can email people or talk to them outside formal meetings so that we can get people’s opinions.

The other side of this strength, though, is that women like to have more meetings. They like to be sure that all the committee members are heard. That’s a good thing, of course, but sometimes, it can also reveal a woman’s lack of confidence in decision-making. A woman might want to be sure that a decision is made democratically by everyone else; she doesn’t want to be responsible for it. And sometimes, male faculty will say, “Just make a decision! Make a decision.”

I had to think about this because when I became Academic Dean, the man in the role before me had been quite authoritarian, and here I was, being very democratic and gentle, seeking consensus. I realized that there was some truth in my male colleagues’ advice: some decisions I had to make by myself. I had to be responsible for what I was building.

Personal Story: A First Woman

I have just finished my term as the fifth president of Torch Trinity Christian University in Seoul. Altogether, I have served as an administrator for almost 15 years. I first was called to be Academic Dean in 2005 at quite a critical time for my school: it was just a small English-language school, but the then-president was a megachurch pastor as well. He had this grand plan of expanding the school by adding a Korean program and a lot of other things. He was quite ambitious. In my role, I worked hard to fulfill his dreams. Perhaps surprisingly, I was very happy to be busy. The school was also transitioning from American leadership to Korean leadership. I was happy to do whatever I could to make the school successful, ultimately, to please God.

I was surprised to find that I had a lot to give. I had never been officially trained in administration or management, and I was already in my 40s, but I had much to contribute. I had been to several different schools and observed many things. So I was grateful to the Lord that he had exposed me to many different schools, administrative styles, and programs.

As I finish my career, I see that change comes slowly. My generation was often the tipping point; many of us were the first women in our areas. Younger women won’t see this. They enter ministry later, and they find more opportunities and more open-mindedness. Still, they will not see as many possibilities as we could wish. So we must be patient. We must acknowledge that if we were in the positions men
have occupied, we might not always find it easy to make changes. We must be patient with others. The work of theological education all belongs to God anyway.

Advice: Be Faithful, Be Fair, & Be Sacrificial

First: Younger generations have more opportunities than I did. You younger women will be surprised by how much you can actually have, and give, and contribute because God has trained you. Yet you must be faithful with every little opportunity and responsibility you have. Be observant. Don't take anything for granted. Be conscientious. Nothing will be lost in God's Kingdom; everything will be used by his mighty grace. So be faithful.

Second: Be fair. Women need to be fair and responsible. Fairness is especially important for administrators. If you are not fair to every person in your organization, you will have to leave sooner or later. So walk by rules, by principles. Be responsible for what you have done, what you have said, what decisions you have made – whether you did these things alone or as part of a team. Maintain this for your whole career.

Finally, as others have said, we must not sabotage ourselves in the name of sacrifice. At the same time, we must not lose the virtue of sacrifice. Jesus wouldn’t be Jesus without sacrifice. So we must not be too afraid of making sacrifices. Sometimes we may be able to say, “You can go over me. You can pass me by,” as long as God’s Word is manifested through us.

An Ivorian Perspective

Eliane Mensah

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Editor's Note: Eliane mentions that she is “not even a member of the Christian Alliance Church in Ivory Coast.” She makes this point because the seminary at which she teaches, FATEAC/UACA, is affiliated with the Christian [Missionary] Alliance.

Personal Story: God Is Sovereign

Our God is sovereign, and He shows His sovereignty in His choices, in the way He provides for everything He wants us to do. We just have to obey. In my case, from the beginning, the Lord’s call on my life was very clear to me. But I didn’t know exactly what to do with that call. I was praying for it to be clear because I had other possibilities, but I wasn’t convinced by any of them. Then, when I met my husband, I knew that God wanted me to serve through Bible translation. So I began training alongside my husband.
Yet my path wasn’t straight. For almost 11 years, I worked beside my husband, not on the Bible translation project itself but assisting him. I think that this situation was what God wanted – for me to help my husband and be beside him. During our work, we shared a burden: the great need for Africans to be trained at high levels as Bible translation consultants. Because of a lack of trained consultants, our project lasted too long. So I felt a burden that I needed to help train more people to be competent with Bible translation. We began to pray for that.

I saw my husband going forward, earning more training, and teaching. We were preparing to move to France so that he could do his PhD. Three months before we were scheduled to leave, I told my husband that I felt that I, too, should get more training and help to equip more Bible translators. So we told our supervisors that I also wanted to do a PhD, and within three months, they had found a full scholarship for me from a church in Malaysia. It was something completely unexpected. So my husband and I both went.

After we finished our PhDs, SIL [Summer Institute of Linguistics International] in Francophone Africa assigned us to be professors in the translation department of our seminary. I served with gratefulness; I really love my job because it is, for me, a way to say thank you to the Lord. So I didn't need to be told to do things officially; I did whatever came to hand with joy.

The seminary’s translation department needed a department head. The president asked me whether I would consider taking this responsibility. After our conversation, I thought that maybe he would ask me to be department head formally, but for a year, he said nothing more. And then one day, he came and asked me whether I wanted to be Academic Dean for the whole seminary. That was very unusual: I'm not a theologian, nor am I a man. I'm not even a member of the Christian Alliance Church in Ivory Coast. I faced so many obstacles. But again, the Lord's call was very clear, saying that what He wanted me to do was not an opportunity to lift myself up or because of special skills I had but because of what He, the Lord, wanted to do. So I prayed and tried to depend on God as I stepped into that responsibility.

I can testify that the Lord has been very faithful. I took the responsibility of serving as Academic Dean at a very critical moment for our seminary because we were preparing to become a university. The seminary was undergoing so many changes; so many faculty needed to gain further training in order for us to earn government accreditation; we had to revise the curricula, etc. Yet now we have succeeded in this effort, and we have earned government accreditation.

Advice: Pay Attention to What God Wants You To Be

Ephesians 2:10 is my life verse, and from it I believe that whether we are men or women, we must remember that God has a plan. God has specific things for each
of his children to do. We have to learn to see our lives through the lens of what God wants for us, of what God wants us to be. To me, the fact of being a man or a woman is not very important because it is God who gives the gifts; God equips us to do our jobs.

We must follow what God wants us to do with our lives. We have to pay attention to what God wants us to be. It’s not a matter of what we can do or what people will think of us. If God calls us to do something and we obey, He provides. So we have to be confident in the faithfulness of God in our lives and let Him glorify His name.

An American Perspective

Meritt Sawyer
Peninsula Covenant Church

The U.S. Context: Men Need to Encourage

In Silicon Valley, you see very few women as executive pastors. This can be very discouraging. I don’t believe this problem has a magic bullet, but I know that a man encouraged me into my first management role as he identified a certain skill set in me. From his position of leadership, he advocated for me. Eventually, he stepped out of power and gave that position to a woman.

So we need to talk about the role of men in institutions. In order for women to step forward, we need women advocates, of course, but we also need male advocates who can help to open doors and then step aside. I’m so excited for this new generation because I’m seeing more men who will hand over power to women.

However, we need to recognize that we must do this in dialogue as individuals, in small groups, and ultimately in institutions. It’s not simply a question of women being qualified and ready to take leadership roles – that’s been true for a long time – but a question of ongoing dialogue with men. For that dialogue to happen, we need to see men who are ready to hand over power.

Personal Story: A Winding Path

About 40 years ago, I was a very new believer. I had not grown up in a Christian home. I was newly married, and my husband and I had just returned to his home state, California. At that time, I began to struggle with the fact that Jesus is the Lord of all nations, not just of me in my moment. When I finally submitted to the Lord, I decided that I was going to be a missionary to India – I knew this for a fact. I told my husband that we were going to India to be missionaries. He had just joined a family business, completed business school, returned to California. Shaking
in his boots, he said, “I’m not feeling it. God just called us back to California, remember?”

That was the first moment in my life where I decided to recognize that God speaks to both of us collaboratively. I had to submit to God’s voice, even as I wondered what was happening. God blessed us as I worked in relationship with my husband, as he spoke to both of us.

Inevitably, God showed me that I would not have been a very effective missionary – I wasn’t up to the language or the culture. Instead, God showed me amazing men and women studying at Fuller beginning their PhDs. So I founded an organization to provide scholarships for these leaders from what people in the U.S. had been calling the “Third World.” Eventually, as my scholarship organization grew, I stumbled onto John Stott, who was doing something similar in the U.K. We merged our organizations, and God just kept growing that ministry, showing me how he could use me in ways that I could never have imagined.

It was an amazing privilege to be in that ministry, but the path was never straight. Women often talk about life seasons, and I fully believe that, but I also believe that the path is never straight.

Through this process, God called me into theological education, so I have dedicated myself to theological education through nonprofits. During this career, I have been a manager of men – at every stage, God has called me into positions in which I lead an all-male team. From these experiences, I have advocated for women. I have sought to hire women into positions of power. It’s a privilege to advocate for women and shine a light on what God is doing around the world.

Last summer, I thought I was moving into semi-retirement, when a church in Silicon Valley called me to be their executive pastor. When the man called me to offer me the position, I said, “No way!” The one thing I knew for sure is that I would never work for a church. But he said, “You’ll pray about it, right?” Here I was again. I thought this was so unfair because then I had to pray about it, and the next thing I knew, God was calling me to this role. So now every week, I run these meetings with the eight men who report to me. I continue to believe that women have a unique calling in these kinds of management positions.

**Advice: Be Confident; Avoid Self-Sabotage**

I encourage women to bring other women around them. I have an amazing group of women who each speak into my life and hold me accountable to what God has called me to be, and I try to do the same for others.

On another point: I am an executive administrator of a church; I have worked for 40 years. I have multiple degrees. I am qualified as someone who thinks strategically.
God has gifted me as a visionary. Does what I am saying make anyone feel uncomfortable? Perhaps I’m sounding too confident. But why is that? As a woman, I say these things about myself, and people become uncomfortable; if a man said these things to a conference of men, no one would blink. So I say to women: lean in to exactly who God has called you to be, and God will be faithful to you.

Why is it that we as women cannot have enough confidence in ourselves to recognize how God has gifted each one of us? I am gifted very differently from most women: I’m not as nurturing as some; I tend more toward the academic. Sometimes my husband is far better with kids than I am.

Women need to be fair with themselves in managing expectations. As women look at jobs, they need to be sure that they are being paid equally to what a man is being paid. They need to get the same administrative support that a man gets. As women, we tend to say, “Oh, I don’t really need that. I can sacrifice that.” But by doing that, we sabotage ourselves. Self-sabotage is one of the worst things women can do. Women should have these conversations before they accept a job.

So I want to encourage women to be confident and not to sabotage themselves.
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Meritt Sawyer

Meritt Sawyer co-founded FACT, which provided scholarships for people from the Majority World to do PhDs in theology. FACT is now part of Langham Partnership, which Meritt served as International Program Director. She is now Executive Pastor of Peninsula Covenant Church in California (U.S.A.). In addition, she serves on the boards of Fuller Theological Seminary, Christianity Today, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, and ScholarLeaders International. She earned a Masters in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. She facilitates the ScholarLeaders Women’s PeerLeader Forum.
Ka Hon Tony Wong

Summary

*Beyond Profession* is a reflection regarding the future of theological education in North America by Daniel O. Aleshire, former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools.

Aleshire begins with his journey in theological education as a student, faculty member, and ATS’s executive director. With post-baccalaureate education as his primary concern, Aleshire pinpoints ongoing changes in theological education. These changes include: kinds of learning required at the graduate level, practices, settings, and standards.

Later, Aleshire traces the history of North American theological education in mainline Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, and historically Black schools. He argues that “the past does not determine the future, but its layers of influence never go away” (30). This historical survey demonstrates that all North American theological education institutions experience “the powerful influence of culture, higher education, and religion on the institutional forms and educational practices of theological schools” (71).

Thanks to this history, Aleshire believes that theological schools need to decide whether they “can reinvent their work to fit the current religious, cultural, and educational realities” (74). Aleshire emphasizes the importance of formation for religious leaders in the coming era as a response to a “declining positive view of the ethics of clergy. . . and declining confidence in organized religion” (77). Thus, the future theological schools should move from a purely professional model that focuses on skills and specialized knowledge to a formational model:

The goal of theological education should be the development of a wisdom of God and the ways of God, fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity,
relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership. (82)

Educational practices need to align to this holistic formational goal. To help institutions achieve this goal, Aleshire proposes the cultivation of “a renewed sense of the vocation of the theological school and faithfulness of faculty for that vocation” (112); a commitment to formational theological education “and [development of ] the assessment strategies the goal requires” (118); enhancement of opportunities for fostering spiritual maturity, moral maturity, and relational integrity; and changes “involving the evaluation of students, the organization of student learning, and the partners that theological schools engage” (131).

Aleshire concludes that theological education is moving (and should move) toward holistic formation of religious leaders who have “a deep identity as Christian human beings” (140).

Assessment

Three major arguments deserve further consideration: 1) theological education needs to respond to the context in which it is situated, 2) holistic formation is key, and 3) faculty and institutional leaders are central to fostering formation.

Respond to context.

Aleshire stresses that educators need to recognize that theological education is contextually bounded – influenced by culture, trends within higher education, and local churches and denominations. This fact described by Aleshire is also true of institutions globally. For example, governments can exercise authority over accreditation in very different ways, so school leaders need to pay attention to how government requirements (or other accreditation requirements) impact their priorities. Theological educators outside the West can use Aleshire’s analysis to spark their own reflections on how their context shapes their school.

Furthermore, theological educators should be mindful of the cultural assumptions that theological education from other parts of the world may insert into their own contexts. During COVID-19, theological schools often use online education platforms, but on these platforms, they may find themselves relying heavily on Western-derived resources. Majority World educators need to be aware of and navigate carefully the differences between their own and Western perspectives. Although Aleshire’s argument comes from his experience in the West, it can encourage Majority World leaders to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of Western-based resources. Indeed, theological education should not be one-directional, from West to Majority World. Rather, the Majority World should cultivate genuine collaboration and wisdom to share with the West.
Recognize the centrality of holistic formation.

Next, Aleshire stresses holistic formation in theological education. He comments that, in North America, “protestant theological education attends to some of these qualifications exceptionally well while it does not attend to others. And while Roman Catholic theological education attends to all of them more fully, it is still learning how to do this well” (97). He sees formation as a major gap in Western theological education.

As global theological schools often pattern their goals and practices on those of the “minority world,” they may experience weaknesses in formation that parallel the problems faced by their North American counterparts. Aleshire’s goal is for formation to serve as a checklist for Majority World theological educators: he encourages them to review their own development and thereby strengthen theological education by paying attention to areas that need to be improved. Particularly, spiritual maturity, moral maturity, and relational integrity are crucial for faculty and administrators. Schools’ practices need to align to these goals to help future religious leaders grow to serve in Christ’s name.

Uphold faculty and other institutional leaders in student formation.

Aleshire emphasizes the vital role of faculty and leaders of theological schools in fostering formation in their context. If holistic formational theological education is a virtuous endeavor for schools, leaders need to commit to changing the educational practices in their schools. Certainly, each school needs to define how it understands holistic formation – as aligned with its particular faith tradition, its institutional history, and its broader cultural/social context. As schools affirm their vocation of forming religious leaders holistically, they need to “steward their theological and religious identity carefully, cultivate institutional practices and disciplines that sustain their identity, and reflect that identity in their educational practices” (114).

One change to foster formational theological education can occur in schools’ curricula. Here, faculty become vital members as they implement a formational learning experience, as they teach and live alongside students. One difficulty for implementing a curriculum that integrates holistic formation is faculty members’ own struggles with this concept. One school attempted to implement an integrative curriculum. One of their leaders found that some of the faculty members lacked the appropriate skills to teach integratively and remained disconnected from the integrative approach (Cahalan and Graham 2017, 100). If this problem happens, how can school leaders motivate and support faculty to learn how to form students holistically? Both leaders and faculty need to commit to this process so that formation can be implemented – another point for reflection from this book for leaders in theological education.
Beyond Profession is written from a North American perspective. However, its main arguments can generate thoughtful discussion about formational theological education globally.

Reference


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