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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE MODERN AFRICAN CONTEXT

Stephen Talitwala

We who are engaged in training leadership for the church in modern Africa must continually examine whether our programmes are truly relevant to the needs of that church in its contemporary context. In order to ensure that our programmes are preparing leaders who may serve their generation in Africa effectively after the will of God, we must constantly give attention to the modern African context in which we minister. What, then, is the context of theological education in Africa today, and what implications might this have for our training programmes?

I. The Context

We Serve a Fast Growing Church

The church in Africa is still very young, in most cases dating back less than two centuries. Only the churches in Egypt and Ethiopia have a longer history. The African church has however grown very rapidly in recent times. At the beginning of the present century the church was less than 9% of the African population. By the end of the century it is expected to reach over 50%, representing over 400 million members. It is rated as the fastest growing church in the world. As a result of fast growth, the church has many exciting problems. In many urban areas, church buildings are not big enough to hold those who attend church services on Sundays. New believers do not have enough teachers. The church does not have enough trained pastors to staff the churches. Many new Christians remain babies in Christ. Many cannot read and all they know is what they have been taught in catechism classes. Many cults are cashing in on this and deceiving young Christians into becoming members.

We Serve a Divided Church

In 1973, Dr David Barrett listed over 6,000 independent Christian church groups in Africa. There have been many new groups formed since then and it appears that many more are going to spring up. The church is divided on many fronts. Firstly the large denominational groups such as the Anglicans, Methodists,

Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Baptists, are not always able to work together. The divisions have sometimes been magnified by tribal differences, because many denominations evangelised only certain tribes. So one ethnic group may be predominantly Methodist and the adjacent ethnic group Friends. Recently, there have been signs of denominations working together but only on social projects. Much outreach work is left undone because the denominational groups are not willing to pool their resources together and get certain things done, and many needed interdenominational projects have had to be abandoned.

There is also much duplication of services. This is true not least in the the area of leadership training. Each denomination is trying to set up training institutions that are too expensive to maintain. The result is that some groups that are too small to have their own training institution do not train their personnel.

Allied to divisive denominationalism are the strong links between the local churches here in Africa and their "mother" churches overseas. Any efforts to encourage joint ventures at the local level in Africa are often frustrated by the influence of the overseas churches and organisations. One example would be Christian ministries amongst the youth of Africa. Thus in Kenya the Kenya Students Christian Fellowship, Youth for Christ, FOCUS, and the Teachers' Christian Fellowship have been unable to forge a common effort in reaching the youth in Kenya. It seems that so long as overseas links remain, efforts to combine overlapping local endeavours will usually fail.

We Serve a Church That Has Not Learnt to Give

The poverty of the church of Christ in Africa is not an issue many African Christians wish to discuss. The problem is not that church members are poor, but that church members do not give support to the very programmes they themselves have approved. One would think that at least the rural pastors should not have any trouble in raising their support, since they are usually supported at the same level as their church members. However, it is not unusual for even rural pastors to go for two or three months without their salaries.

The question of giving towards God's work is an urgent matter that the churches in Africa have to face squarely. Many pastors fear to teach about giving. "Why should they be the ones to raise this issue?" is the question which arises. Whenever a pastor has to address the topic, he feels very apologetic. Perhaps it is not something that should be left to one Sunday sermon a year. We need to teach church members to give in support of their churches.

The problem of poor giving might be a result in part of traditions the church itself has helped plant and water. From the very beginning, the church was the donor to the community. When there was need for a school, the missionary wrote back home and the funds came pouring in. It is very difficult to give back to one who seems richer than you are. It is possible that the average Christian still believes that the church has some money stored away somewhere.

The other issue is that of extended families. Often many of our African Christians give first to the extended families. If anything remains, the church might be considered. God is not given the same priority as the extended family. Many congregations do not bother to find out how their pastors make ends meet. This may be a carry-over from the missionary era when the congregation did not have to be concerned about the welfare of the missionary.

Traditionally, no one went to visit a diviner without a gift. Some of the gifts were very costly, such as a spotless white chicken or goat - and yes, it had to be without blemish. In some tribes, the diviner's garden was cared for by the people in the village. Members of the village took turns to attend to such duties. The church threw out many of these traditions but did not replace them with others which taught people to give towards God's work. We serve a church that has not learnt to give and indeed believes itself poor.

We Serve a Church Existing in an Unstable and Violent Environment

One leading African evangelist and bishop has described Africa as an "active volcano." How correct that description is. From the early 1960s there has always been at least one country shedding the innocent blood of the sons of Africa.

The process started in Congo, now Zaire. We had civil war in Nigeria and then the Uganda holocaust. Of course the Sudanese civil war and the Chadian civil war have been only part of the strife in Africa. South African oppression of the blacks continues unabated. Oppressive colonial governments in Mozambique, Angola, and Ethiopia gave way to regimes unsympathetic to the Christian church. Only time will tell whether Christian churches in Africa will weather these storms. The persecution of the church in Ethiopia and the imposition of Islamic Sharia law in Sudan are suggestive of an even harsher environment in the future.

It is not only repressive governments that the church has to face. Corruption, nepotism, tribalism, racism, nationalism, the re-awakening of Islam, poverty, famine, diseases and many other evils confront the church in its context. Most of Africa is trapped in what one publication called a "chain of poverty." The links in the chain are poor health, high infant mortality, excessive population growth, rural impoverishment, urban migration, unemployment, low income, food shortage, clean water shortage, malnutrition, rising cost of living, and spiritual poverty.

II. Implications for Theological Education

This then is the environment in which our students are being equipped to shepherd God's flock to maturity. Centres for leadership training which aspire to train godly men and women to serve in this context cannot avoid being affected by such conditions. How might these contextual factors impinge upon our training programmes?

1. Africa will continue for some time to be a fragmented continent. Political ideologies, border disputes, civil wars, racism, tribalism, and religious animosity will remain with us for a while to come. Travel and transfer of funds for students training outside their own countries may be one of the major obstacles to be faced in the future. For example, a student from Uganda will have to raise over U.Shs 37.5 million to be able to pay one year's costs for graduate theological training in Kenya. To appreciate the real situation, one needs to note that a university professor earns about U.Shs 2 million a year. Large funds for scholarships will have to be raised if students in Africa are to be trained at graduate levels outside their own countries.
2. There is a resurgence of Africa traditional religions and Islam. These are also usually tied in with nationalistic sentiments. Sudan has recently introduced Islamic law and applied it to all Sudanese. One has to remember that the southern Sudanese are mostly Christians or traditionalists. A civil war is already in progress and only God's intervention will save the situation from becoming a long drawn out conflict. Our students must be trained for times of testing ahead.
3. Industrialisation, urbanisation, education, and the accompanying secularism are producing a new Africa. The church has to be effectively prepared to reach the new African. A number of university professors are anti-church and are having wide influence on the youth of Africa. The church cannot sit back and just hope. It must train its workers and prepare them for the new challenges. Training centres must develop appropriate programmes for this. Unexamined, outdated programmes will hinder in penetrating the new Africa with the Gospel.
4. High population growth, unemployment, urbanisation, and inflation will create slum ghettos in urban areas. A new class of people is being created by the environment. There will be detribalised, landless and unemployed people. The crime rate is bound to increase out of necessity. Perhaps the church needs to start offering alternative channels of self-employment. Community development programmes will have to expand. Our students must be effectively equipped to deal with these non-traditional challenges facing the church.
5. High growth rate of church membership, accompanied by scarcity of trained Christian leaders will lead to secularism, syncretism, and fragmentation of the church. Training centres must identify areas of desperate need where the investment of God's resources will yield maximum results. This calls for flexibility, keeping closely in touch with the felt needs of the church and sometimes being willing to take risks to provide for these needs. There must be involvement by training centres in the grassroots level of the church, and responsiveness to that level.
6. Foreign influence and the financial dependence of the African church on churches in the developed countries necessarily produce a proliferation of service organisations. Training centres must be prepared for awkward competition from these many organisations, especially those engaged in the same kind of ministry as they are. They will have to retain the uniqueness of their ministry and excel in

what they do if they are to survive this competition. They must also not be surprised if other bodies set up institutions which duplicate what they themselves are doing. To survive in this competitive atmosphere the ministry must be truly relevant to the African situation.

7. Time, energy and prayer must be invested to establish new local sources of financial support. We must develop local support from within Africa while simultaneously cutting back on expenditures. Our training costs must relate to the standard of living in Africa. The challenge before us is to tap that 90% of the Christian community which does not regularly contribute to Christian ministries beyond their local church. Innovation, hard work, and prayer are the necessary tools.

8. We must strive to make known to our constituencies what services we can offer. To gain credibility and acceptance, excellence and relevance must characterize our services. Only excellent staff can give excellent service. We must struggle for excellence and be committed to our goals. Our motto should be "Only the best is good enough for use in the service of our God." We must pray and work with a clear vision, determined to succeed, committed to our divine calling, and trusting in Almighty God.