

## SHOULD NORTH AMERICAN SEMINARIES BECOME GLOBAL? A Case and Some Cautions

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Critical readers will immediately notice a glaring ambiguity embedded in this article's title. They will rightly demand that the author define what is meant by "become global." Fair enough. Exploration of the "become global" characterization will indeed comprise a substantial portion of this essay. Let us, however, defer that question for the moment.

A prior matter, representing an even more basic consideration, demands address. Does the title's question even remain relevant as the first quarter of the 21st century rapidly expires? Arguably, the article poses its question at least three decades too late. Many have rightly observed:<sup>1</sup> "That ship has sailed."

Thus, before attempting to define "become global," wisdom dictates that we briefly set forth a *case*, delineating salient realities and reasons that call upon North American seminaries to become more globally mindful, informed, and engaged. After setting forth that case, we will attempt to illustrate the *extent* to, and the *manner* in, which some North American seminaries have elevated their international attention, noting a variety of commonly observed *means* by which seminaries have sought or might seek to become global. We will then posit alternate *frameworks* through which seminaries might contemplate and pursue becoming global. In that connection, we will commend for careful consideration some cautions which lead to the commendation of potentially fruitful *patterns* and *principles* through which to become global.

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<sup>1</sup>Consider, for example, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 47.3 (2023) featuring pertinent articles by David S. Dockery, D. A. Carson, John D. Woodbridge, Nathan S. Finn, and Bernhard Ott.

## THE CASE FOR “BECOMING GLOBAL”

Even a cursory understanding of Scripture’s grand story<sup>2</sup> makes the global and polycentric nature of God’s redemptive project undeniable.<sup>3</sup> Such landmark twenty-first-century declarations such as *The Cape Town Commitment*<sup>4</sup> and the ICETE Manifesto<sup>5</sup> elegantly and ardently affirm that this understanding of the biblical storyline is as central to an authentic confession of evangelical faith as the ancient creeds’ affirmation of the church’s catholicity. North American theological seminaries’ existence and essence lack biblical legitimacy and missional relevance to the extent they fail explicitly to affirm and faithfully abide by this central tenet upon which orthodox evangelical soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology are grounded.

A multitude of church historians and missiologists, among them Philip Jenkins,<sup>6</sup> Andrew Walls,<sup>7</sup> and Lamin Sanneh,<sup>8</sup> have documented two tectonic twentieth-century phenomena concerning Christianity’s scale and changing global distribution patterns. First, the acceleration of global Christianity’s growth rate and reach are breathtaking. *Frontier Ventures* (formerly US Center for World Mission, USCWM) founder Ralph Winter and colleague Bruce Koch document this staggering gospel progress in their landmark publication, *Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge*.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding some legitimate quibbles over definitions of nominal (even heretical) and truly authentic Christ-followers, the following general observations bear respectful consideration:

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<sup>2</sup>Mark S. Young, *The Hope of the Gospel: Theological Education and the Next Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 96-97.

<sup>3</sup>Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 20-21.

<sup>4</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, ed. *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Commitment*. International Congress on World Evangelization, The Third Lausanne Congress (October 2010); <https://lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-Cape-Town-Commitment-%E2%80%93-Pages-20-09-2021.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>Bernhard Ott, “Shaping the Future of Theological Education: Introducing the ICETE Manifesto II,” in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 47.3 (2023): 250-273.

<sup>6</sup>Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>Andrew F. Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

<sup>8</sup>Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, “Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge,” <https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.frontierventures.org/pdf/FinishingTheTask.pdf>.

- One of every 8 people on the planet is a “practicing Christian, active in his/her faith.”
- This compares to a 1:200 (0.5 percent) Christian to non-Christian ratio by the end of the first century.
- Over the following centuries until the beginning of the twentieth century, this ratio grew five-fold, to 2.5 percent of the global population.
- From 1900-1970, the percentage of practicing Christians *doubled*, reaching 5 percent of the world’s population.
- Astonishingly, the next 40 years saw world Christianity’s growth accelerate exponentially, more than doubling again such that practicing Christians represented 12 percent of the world’s population by 2010.

Second, and perhaps even more consequentially for North American seminary educators, Christianity’s map has been radically altered. Europe and North America can no longer claim to be the church’s locus of concentration and epicenter of influence. Both designations now belong to the Global South. Consider the following excerpts from this summary wrap-up<sup>10</sup> of the 2006 *Global Consultation on Evangelical Theological Education* in Chiang Mai, Thailand—nearly two decades ago—at which both Walls and Sanneh delivered keynote addresses.

Walls asserted that the twentieth century has witnessed the greatest shift in the demographic and cultural contours of Christianity since the first century. During the great European colonial migrations of the past 400 years, Christianity’s broadest extent and fullest cultural expression were associated with and emanated from the West. Westerners have tended to view themselves as the *only* Christians—at least the *only authentic* ones. Moreover, Walls asserted, Western Christianity, including its institutions of theological education, have too often been unwitting handmaidens to certain influences of the Enlightenment upon theological and world view formulation, imbibing, among other things, the Enlightenment bias toward compartmentalization or exclusion of the supernatural realm and its inhabitants and phenomena.

At the same 2006 ICETE consultation, Sanneh asserted that one of

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<sup>10</sup>Some sections of this paper are drawn from the author’s previously unpublished address, “Wrapping Up and Going Forward,” delivered at the 2006 International Council for Evangelical Theological Education’s Global Consultation on Evangelical Theological Education in Chiang Mai, Thailand. An abridged text can be accessed at <https://icete.info/event/icete-c-06-chiang-mai/>.

Christianity's primary features consists in its capacity to cultivate indigenous ethical and cultural root systems. He proposed that the current worldwide expressions of the Christian church may usefully be regarded in two major groupings: "heartland" Christianity (the receding Western paradigm of Christendom) and "frontier" Christianity (the nascent Christian churches of the majority world). Sanneh posited that a major global challenge for Christianity—and thus for theological educators to contribute to—is mediation between "heartland" and "frontier" Christianity. He commended an exchange of "frontier" Christianity's sometimes paradoxical resources and strengths (poverty, weakness, persecution/suffering, war,<sup>11</sup> and communal identity, to name a few) with those of "heartland" Christianity (individual liberties, wealth, scholastic, and cultural achievements, to name a few).

To summarize, since the middle of the twentieth century, global humanity has undergone a dramatic upheaval in patterns of demographic and cultural migration, accompanied by sometimes violent worldwide social and political repercussions and realignment. Simultaneously, we have witnessed the unprecedented growth of the church in the majority world according to patterns and by means largely unanticipated by Western missionary strategists. Christianity is declining in its former territorial heartlands but spreading such that it is now a predominantly non-Western religion—and it seems poised to continue this demographic and cultural reorientation for some time to come.

Recent shifts in the global church's size, distribution pattern, and character cannot be ignored by North America's seminaries. They must do more than offer token acknowledgement and undertake marginal adjustments. The question posed in this article's title, *Should North American Seminaries "Become Global"?* demands in answer a resounding and unequivocal "Yes!" Both our connected and interdependent world and North America's radically altered position in global Christianity propels and compels us ever increasingly to "become global." Properly, the question is not *should* North American seminaries "become global" but *in what ways* might North American seminaries do so?

Seminaries that decline greater global church orientation, engagement, presence, and participation will inevitably diminish themselves, their

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<sup>11</sup>Roman Soloviy, "Theological Education in Wartime: Ukrainian Evangelical Seminaries as Communities of Compassion, Reflection, and Hope," in *Insights Journal*, 9.1 (2023): 1-18; <https://insightsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Theological-Education-in-Wartime-Soloviy.pdf>.

students, and their stakeholders. Perhaps unwittingly but nevertheless undeniably, they are modeling and in danger of producing myopic, parochial, impoverished, and tragically impotent gospel workers who will reproduce themselves in the North American evangelical movement's churches and institutions that are presently declining in numbers, vitality, and influence.

### THE CURRENT PICTURE: BOLD, BUT BLURRY

The implications of global Christianity's realignment outlined above demand profound recalibration. North American seminaries and graduate theological schools typically have earned accredited membership in either the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) or the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), both limited in scope to accreditation of institutions legally incorporated in Canada or the United States of America. ATS membership comprises 279 institutions. ABHE's 163 member institutions, with some level of Commission on Accreditation status, are historically primarily undergraduate in scope. In recent years, however, many have expanded their degree offerings to include graduate and seminary ministerial degree offerings. Some other graduate-level evangelical institutions have chosen for a variety of reasons, including ABHE's confessional circumscription, to pursue ABHE accreditation instead of ATS accreditation. In fact, ABHE's aggregate student enrollment growth—rendering it an outlier among North American higher education sectors—is largely attributable to member institutions' initiation and expansion of graduate program offerings.

ABHE-related institutions have enjoyed both global structural ties and organic global engagement since the 1980s through their status as a founding and active regional member agency of the International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA), later renamed the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE). ABHE representatives actively participated, for example, in drafting and disseminating ICETE's 1983 *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education* and the 2022 *ICETE Manifesto II*;<sup>12</sup> ICETE board governance; ICETE's triennial Global Consultations on Evangelical Theological Education; ICETE formal agency recognition; and formulation of such global policies and principles

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<sup>12</sup>Bernhard Ott, ed., *International Council for Evangelical Theological Education*, <https://icete.info/resources/the-icete-manifesto/>.

as the Beirut Benchmarks<sup>13</sup> and Bangalore Best Practices<sup>14</sup> relative to global doctoral education, Standards and Guidelines for Global Evangelical Theological Education,<sup>15</sup> and other collaborative quality assurance and professional development<sup>16</sup> initiatives.

For its part, ATS officially resolved more than a decade ago to mandate that its members demonstrate global engagement. The ATS website features a special Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative page<sup>17</sup> that offers a historical overview of the measures it has taken to encourage its members to “become global” in their outlook and engagements. When two decades of ATS efforts to advance interagency and member institution global engagement through the World Council of Churches’ World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) bore inadequate fruit, an ATS board working group discussed options during its 2012-2014 biennium. A September 2013 letter to the ICETE board from then-ATS Executive Director Daniel O. Aleshire, outlined the contours of ATS’s consideration of globalization’s implications for their members’ learning resources, curricula, and scholarship, among other things.<sup>18</sup> In the wake of those overtures, ATS and ICETE pursued and ultimately secured an agreement in the form of The ICETE-ATS Playa Bonita Affirmations, the preamble of which states:

Acknowledging the importance to theological education of global awareness and engagement informed by the principles, values, and virtues of educational quality and improvement, mutual respect and collegiality, cooperation and collaboration, intentional networking and support, pluralism and diversity, and sustainability and contextuality in the light of their particular ecclesial and faith traditions and commitments—The International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) and The Association of

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<sup>13</sup>The Beirut Benchmarks (October 2010); [https://icete.info/educational\\_resource/the-beirut-benchmarks/](https://icete.info/educational_resource/the-beirut-benchmarks/).

<sup>14</sup>Ian J. Shaw, Scott Cunningham, and Bernhard Ott, *Best Practice Guidelines for Doctoral Programs* (Cambria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2015).

<sup>15</sup>Marvin Oxenham, ed., *Standards and Guidelines for Global Theological Education* (March 2022); [https://icete.info/educational\\_resource/sg-getel/](https://icete.info/educational_resource/sg-getel/).

<sup>16</sup><https://icete.info/resources/education-resources/>.

<sup>17</sup>Association of Theological Schools Global Awareness and Education Initiative; <https://www.ats.edu/Global-Awareness-and-Engagement-Initiative>.

<sup>18</sup>Daniel O. Aleshire, letter to ICETE International Director Riad Kassis (September 25, 2013).

Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) relying on God's grace, commit to seek God's help, pray for and accompany each other, and continue to share their hope to be faithful to the work to which they are called: the improvement and enhancement of quality theological education in the service of ministry, to the glory of God and for the fulfillment of God's purposes.<sup>19</sup>

A joint ATS-ICETE task force (which included ABHE representatives) was formed and a measure of fruitful dialogue and mutual presence, participation, and collaboration based upon these Playa-Bonita Affirmations has been evident. Leaders of each entity have consistently reaffirmed and exhibited mutual commitment and hopefulness.

ATS, moreover, has developed specific directives and accreditation standards requiring and providing guidance concerning greater global engagement. Global awareness and engagement is one of five themes that runs through the ATS Commission's Standards of Accreditation, and it is explicitly defined in the General Institutional Standards:

3.1 Theological teaching, learning, and research require patterns of institutional and educational practice that contribute to an awareness and appreciation of global connectedness and interdependence, particularly as they relate to the mission of the church. These patterns are intended to enhance the ways institutions participate in the ecumenical, dialogical, evangelistic, and justice efforts of the church.

3.3.4.2 Global awareness and engagement is cultivated by curricular attention to cross-cultural issues as well as the study of other major religions by opportunities for cross-cultural experiences; by the composition of the faculty, governing board, and student body; by professional development of faculty members; and by the design of community activities and worship.

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<sup>19</sup>The ICETE-ATS Playa Bonita Affirmations (November 2022); <https://icete.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/The-ICETE-ATS-Playa-Bonita-Affirmations-Final.pdf>.

3.3.4.3 Schools shall demonstrate practices of teaching, learning, and research (comprehensively understood as theological scholarship) that encourage global awareness and responsiveness.

Despite such documented, sincere organizational aspirations, however, neither ATS<sup>20</sup> nor ABHE<sup>21</sup> publishes much readily accessible data concerning the nature and extent to which their accredited North American graduate/seminary member institutions have sought to “become global.” Inquiries to professional colleagues in both ATS and ABHE yielded only a sketchy and incomplete picture.

ABHE reported merely that seven of 125 accredited member institutions operate approved international extension sites and that unduplicated, “non-residential alien or temporary resident” graduate students rose from 10.4 percent in 2022 to 11.9 percent in 2023. ABHE does not have aggregate data concerning which of its accredited members’ approved distance education programs are available internationally though, ostensibly, distance education courses and programs would be available for delivery anywhere in the world.

Specific ATS aggregate data documenting their member institutions’ global engagement and deployment has also proven difficult to ascertain. The scope of this article and the capacity of its author did not permit a deeper dive into ABHE and ATS member databases or the National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) through which, presumably, a less blurry picture might emerge. This data gap presents an excellent doctoral research opportunity. In the meantime, simple observation warrants the impression of accelerating interest and sharp increases in North American seminaries’ global interests and programming. To what extent is this observed uptick in North American seminaries’ attention and activity good for the gospel cause and the global church? That brings us back to the definitional question with which we began.

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<sup>20</sup>See, for example, ATS 2022 Annual Data Tables; [https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/2022-2023\\_Annual\\_Data\\_Tables.pdf](https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/2022-2023_Annual_Data_Tables.pdf).

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, ABHE 2022 Annual Institutional Update Summary Report; <https://www.abhe.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2022-AIU-Report-ALL-MEMBERS.pdf>.



## FRAMING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In what specific *ways* have North American seminaries undertaken initiatives to become global? Examples might be grouped into at least four categories: (a) hiring elite international scholars to “globalize” the faculty; (b) substantial international resident student recruitment and scholarship funding investment; (c) proliferating and promoting distance education degree programs targeted (if not actually tailored) to international students; and (d) establishing multiple international extension sites and branch campuses.

While each of the above may merit consideration and could yield some dividends, the uncritical pursuit of any of these strategies has the potential to demean, demoralize, and diminish *both* the global church in its various ethnic and national expressions *and* the seminaries that pursue these endeavors with zeal not tempered by wisdom and humility. One observer characterizes such measures as, at best, “a mixed blessing.”<sup>22</sup> Simply put, we must not view global Christianity’s shifts as opportunities for expansion and exploitation. Instead, we should embrace them as opportunities for transformation and participation. Prior to assessing specific means of global engagement and offering cautions relative to their implementation, let us consider three alternate frameworks through which to view global opportunity.

*The Entrepreneurial Framework.* Unfortunately, far too many of North American seminaries’ entrepreneurial forays into global engagement may amount either to unwitting or indifferent exploitation. Seminaries have added to their ranks world-class theological scholars from every global region, resulting in what has been widely observed and lamented as a scandalous “brain drain.”<sup>23</sup>

North America’s traditional prospective seminary student pools are diminishing<sup>24</sup> due to demographic cliffs,<sup>25</sup> alternate pathways<sup>26</sup> to church

<sup>22</sup>M. R. Elliott, “Globalization in Theological Education: A Mixed Blessing,” *Christian Education Journal*, 1.3 (2004): 130-139; <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989130400100313>.

<sup>23</sup>J. McGill “Furthering Christ’s Mission: International Theological Education,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 32.4 (2015): 225-239; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378814537761>.

<sup>24</sup>Anthony T. Ruger and Barbara Wheeler; “Sobering Figures Point to Overall Enrollment Decline,” *InTrust* (Spring 2013); <https://www.intrust.org/in-trust-magazine/issues/spring-2013/sobering-enrollment-figures-point-to-overall-decline>.

<sup>25</sup>Bryan C. Harvey, “Teetering on the Demographic Cliff, Part 1: Prepare Now for the Challenging Times Ahead,” *Planning for Higher Education* 49.4 (2021); <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A680989841/AONE?u=anon-27b70a8c&sid=googleScholar&xid=16524d5>.

<sup>26</sup>Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Baker, Brazos

ministry leadership placement,<sup>27</sup> and constituent church declines.<sup>28</sup> Some North American seminary leaders reason that we may offset these deficits by bolstering our international student enrollment. One respected long-term educational leader observed that at a recent international gathering, many Latin American theological education colleagues bemoaned the extent to which North American seminary representatives were unrestrained in promoting their study programs in the presence of respected Latin American educational institutions that offer similar programs. What chance did our Latin American institutions have when their offerings were compared to the shiny objects dangled before prospective students by prestigious North American seminaries?

In such cases, might North Americans not only be guilty of insensitivity to relatively lower-resource counterparts but also might they be guilty of devoting little or no consideration to the actual relevance of our curricula to the international students we attract and the unintended decimation of Majority World theological schools that struggle to compete? In our “flattened” world of global connectivity and learning management platforms, international student enrollment in North America’s seminary programs has become a highly lucrative possibility. North American seminaries’ international student resident or distance program enrollments have the potential to eclipse that of students from the home country.

Alas, advances in contextual applicability have seldom kept pace with technical accessibility. Questions of cultural and linguistic context and comprehensibility, as well as curricular content and instructional methodology, are largely glossed over by educators who should know better. Making distance education programs more available to students anywhere around the globe may be expedient, but the practice deserves careful examination lest it become yet another tragic example of exploitation of our Majority World church brethren.

When global reorientation follows typical North American cultural impulses to which our seminaries are in no way exempt, recognition of new realities too often takes forms merely superficial and hideously detrimental to both the institutions and the global church. Professional theological

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Press, 2016).

<sup>27</sup>Juan Francisco Martinez, “Preparing Leaders for God’s Work in a World of Adaptive Challenge,” *Theological Education*, 51.2 (2018): 11-18; <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/2018-theological-education-v51-n2.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup>George Hawley, *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America’s Christian Denominations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

education and missiology literature are replete with lament and calls for reform.<sup>29</sup> In her address to a 2014 Brazil Lausanne Consultation gathering, then-president of Biblical Seminary of Colombia, Elizabeth Sendek, offers the following biblical observations and admonitions for those who dream of pursuing international partnership.

Biblical partnership ...  
 ... recognizes and celebrates ... the universal character of God's mission and the global character of His church.  
 ... means coming alongside not to teach [Majority World partners] how to reproduce the proven model but to *build capacity* [emphasis added].  
 ... allows new things to develop under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, *even at the risk of losing control* [emphasis added].  
 ... humbly recognizes that we really need each other in order to remain faithful.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever it means for North American seminaries to “become global,” it must not merely, exclusively, or primarily consist of reflexively opportunistic, capitalistic, and colonialist strategy, and resource reallocation. We need to be preserved from the unforeseen devastation of a global educational tsunami contaminated by exploitation.

*The Equity Framework.* Disparities between North America and other world areas are undeniable. Such disparities are evident in every institution, including churches and theological schools. Marxist ideology and its contemporary intellectual stepchildren frame those disparities largely, if not exclusively, in economic terms.<sup>31</sup> Some have much; others have little. Those with much have been presented as exploiting and oppressing, indeed as gaining their advantages through exploitation and oppression. Redistribution is then assumed to be required.

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<sup>29</sup>Tito Paredes, Vinay Samuel, Colleen Samuel, Gervais Angel, John Bennett, Ruth Callanta, Fiona Beer, et al., “Institutional Development for Theological Education in the Two-Thirds World: Summary of Findings of the 1995 Consultation at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 12.4 (December 1995): 18-33; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43070177>.

<sup>30</sup>Elizabeth Sendek, “Towards Biblical Partnerships in Global Theological Education: My Dream for Theological Education in Partnership” (unpublished address, Lausanne Movement Latin America Consultation, June 2, 2014).

<sup>31</sup>Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for Church and Society* (Eugene, OR: Harvard House Publishers, 2023).

If we understand the church's dramatic global realignment in terms of equity, we might pursue one of two courses. We might glibly continue our exploitation and oppression by strategies that extract human and material resources from the global church to enrich and expand our endeavors. On the other hand, we might seek to compensate for our "oppressor" status by redistributing some of our comparatively lavish material and human resources to a "mendicant" global church. Either of these strategies impoverishes both parties because equity constitutes a flawed and sub-biblical frame through which to view reality. To follow either trajectory, among other things, absolves our international church counterparts of agency. In the words of Paul the Apostle, there is a "more excellent way."

*The Equability Framework.* Christopher Wright,<sup>32</sup> among others, posits that a better frame through which to view these matters is *equability*. He appears to appropriate a term that surfaced in the early half of the nineteenth-century relative to seminary pastoral education reforms.<sup>33</sup> His application of the concept seems novel, though intuitively sensible. It holds great promise as a helpful framework for viewing the asymmetry between "heartland" and "frontier" Christianity. Wright asserts that in the global church, wealth and poverty should not be viewed exclusively or primarily in terms of appalling economic disparities. Rather, we should come to realize that Western Christianity may be comparatively rich in economic terms yet deeply impoverished in ways the global church is stupendously wealthy.

In a 2006 ICETE plenary address on this subject,<sup>34</sup> Wright issued seven strategic reflections regarding the North/South divide. In so doing, he cautioned against the tendency toward extremism. He emphasized that the North/South divide is not merely economic. Rather, while the South may tend toward material poverty, the North suffers extreme spiritual poverty for which the South may offer resources and help. Meanwhile, economically privileged Christians should be educated regarding scandalous economic disparities so that they may receive the grace that is available only through their reciprocal attitudes and involvements.

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<sup>32</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, "An Upside Down World: Distinguishing Between Home and Mission Field No Longer Makes Sense," in *Christianity Today: Outreach* (January 18, 2007); [https://stage.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/An\\_Upside-Down\\_World.pdf](https://stage.cru.org/content/dam/cru/legacy/2012/02/An_Upside-Down_World.pdf).

<sup>33</sup>Abdel Ross Wentz, "A New Strategy for Theological Education," *Christian Education*, 20.4 (1937): 291-318; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41173073>.

<sup>34</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, "Addressing the North-South Divide," (plenary address, ICETE Global Consultation on Evangelical Theological Education, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2006); <https://icete.info/event/icete-c-06-chiang-mai/>.

Wright observes biblically that the issue of resource disparity has been a factor in the life of the church since its inception. Citing numerous New Testament references, he illustrates that the principle of reciprocity is embedded in Christian theology. Gross disparity in terms of any attribute or asset is a biblical and theological scandal. He also observes that current manifestations of global mutuality in the body of Christ mark a wholesome return to the polycentric, multidirectional nature of New Testament Christianity. Citing the polyphonic nature of New Testament theology—that theological and ethical problems and errors are addressed prophetically *across* cultures—Wright calls for a charitable but faithful prophetic North-South address of such errors as sexual ethics, prosperity, and Christian citizenship responsibility.

Wright offers notable examples of progress to celebrate in terms of the global divide over the past 20-30 years. Areas of progress include: (a) the narrowing divide in terms of access to advanced educational opportunity; (b) awareness even among secular Western media of the vitality and significance of majority world Christian movements; (c) biblical and missiological re-centering of the majority world church; (d) useful and robust forums (e.g., ICETE, Langham Partnership, Overseas Council, Lausanne Movement, World Evangelical Alliance) through which North/South disparities may receive attention and address. As progress is noted and celebrated, however, we cannot ignore that there persists uneven progress toward equity within the majority world, including virtually adjacent nations and communities.

### **FRUITFUL POSSIBILITIES: BETTER WAYS TO PURSUE “BECOMING GLOBAL”**

Assuming, then, *equability* as the more commendable and useful framework through which to understand and address how North American seminaries might most constructively pursue ways to “become global,” the track into the future rests on two rails: mutual partnership and meaningful exchange.

Previously, we observed several ways in which North American seminaries have increased their global posture and programming. Let us now return to the four categories cited above as to how seminaries typically seek to “become global.” Let us explore how the principles of mutual partnership and meaningful exchange might produce dividends in the global church.

*International Faculty.* The ranks of many prominent North American

evangelical seminary faculties include international scholars of the highest order. By virtue of those global church and, in many cases, “frontier Christianity” colleagues, many institutions are not merely reputationally richer, they are economically richer. Without any intent to judge the merits or motives in specific cases, however, North American seminaries would do well to consider the extent to which escalating the addition of Majority World scholars to their faculty ranks should constitute a primary strategy. When a celebrated international scholar is deposited into the ranks of a North American seminary, arguably there occurs a corresponding withdrawal from the native region’s ecclesial and spiritual reservoir, potentially depleting its intellectual and theological scholarship capital.

In the spirit of mutual partnership and meaningful *exchange*, international faculty exchange at least merits genuine consideration as an alternative to international faculty *employment*. Too many of North America’s most laudable native theological scholars are, dare we say it, ignorant and impoverished to the extent that they have little or no direct engagement with “frontier Christianity.” They are in danger of equipping students to look backward and myopically rather than looking ahead for global ministry. Sabbatical policies and faculty development priorities should emphasize and incentivize substantial faculty international experience for those who lack it. Fruitful, indeed mutually transformational, agreements should be sought for long-term partnership and faculty exchanges between North American seminaries and their counterparts in other global regions.

*International Students.* Just as students (and parents!) from around the world seek degrees from elite North American universities, so also students and their families may seek the benefits of enrollment in North American seminaries. Such endeavors allow North American institutions to extend internationally, leverage institutional brand equity, and exploit the universal “reserve currency” status of our accredited courses and degrees—scarcely realizing that what we have done may be at the expense of the global church and its nascent institutional infrastructure.

Discerning seminary leaders will devote care to developing and implementing international student admission, recruitment, and financial aid policies and incentives. International student sponsorship represents an attractive donor proposition. Absent careful planning and guardrails, however, such sponsorships can devolve into unhealthy long-term patron-client relationships. Students too often acclimate to Western economic standards

and decline upon graduation to return to their homelands. Moreover, inadequately considered international student recruitment can function according to a kind of “legacy admission” value system that privileges students with influential family connections over such more global, missionally consequential considerations of personal character, mission fit, and ministry potential.

What elements of a more globally humble and wise approach to increased international student enrollment might merit consideration? First, North American seminaries should limit recruitment and scholarship incentives (if not imposing actual admission restrictions) to aspiring ministerial students who have exhausted the best available theological education and ministry formation opportunities in their local region. Articulation agreements between North American seminaries and flagship institutions in other regions would make economic and educational sense for both students and institutions.

Second, admission policies should prioritize “in-service” students (i.e., ones with a proven ministry track record) over merely intellectually gifted “pre-service” students. Prospective students should be admitted (or, again, at the very least, scholarship support should be allocated) on condition of official commendation for advanced education by the applicable home country ecclesial entity or credible ministry organization. When North American seminaries offer full scholarships or sponsorships to academically elite, culturally advantaged, and well-connected international students, no one should be surprised when they remain in North America after graduation. Return to ministry in the homeland can be incentivized when the “commending” entity has financial skin in the game proportional to local material means.

Plenty of missiological strategy attention has been devoted in recent years to the phenomenon of Diaspora Christianity.<sup>35</sup> In not a few cases, the number of a country or ethnic group’s genuine Christ-followers residing in North America far exceeds the number in the home region. Missionary vision is often embedded into the psyche of these diaspora churches. Potential for “international student” enrollment among the diaspora churches’ emerging generation offers great promise absent many of the risks and frequent unintended consequences of large-scale international student importation.

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<sup>35</sup>Sidiri Joy Tira and Tetsuano Yamamori, *Scattered and Gathered: A Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology* (Cumbria, UK: Langham Publishing, 2020).

Finally, grounded in the values of mutual partnership and meaningful exchange, North American seminaries might well consider partnering with international theological school counterparts to embed study abroad, international exposure, and service learning into all their ministerial study programs. Such features hold high promise for enriching students and participating institutions in both directions. Every North American seminary should have a core commitment to producing “world Christian” graduates. Ministry education leaders must have no part in permitting or perpetuating the cultural, ecclesial, and missional ignorance and insulation that too often characterizes seminary graduates.

*Distance Education Programs.* Google Translate and other AI platforms dazzle with their capability to render our spoken and written words into a foreign tongue efficiently and accurately. Software transcribes video lectures and inserts audio translations or subtitles. But how much is “lost in translation” in terms of cultural milieu and contextual relevance? Superficial overlay of our North American seminary curricula—embedded with epistemological frameworks, intellectual and Christian scholarship history, psychological, and sociological landscapes—onto the cultural and ecclesial realities of our global church counterparts represents an expedient but inadequate approach. Translatable program content does not equate to transferable student learning outcomes.

Andrew Walls’s 2006 ICETE address,<sup>36</sup> may seem perhaps too scathing, but it is nevertheless worthy of humble consideration. Walls presciently asserted that too much of what passes for theological education in the West and, through its pervasive residual influence upon emerging majority world churches, the educational philosophies and curricula of non-Western theological schools characteristically consist of transmission of intellectual content and theological dogma that is heavily Enlightenment-laden. Simply put, too often theology poses and answers questions that are irrelevant to constituent churches in many areas of the world while at the same time failing to address biblically urgent questions with which their constituent believers are confronted.

Walls calls for an awakening of theological schools to the true task of theology, namely, to bring the whole of Scripture to bear upon the questions and choices with which ordinary believers are confronted in

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<sup>36</sup>Summarized in Shaw, “Wrapping Up and Going Forward” (International Council for Evangelical Theological Education’s Global Consultation on Evangelical Theological Education, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2006); <https://icete.info/event/icete-c-06-chiang-mai/>.



their calling to live out the Gospel in their native context. Rather than memorizing *theolog-y* formulated in and for a distant context, scholars and their students must hone the discernment and skills of *theolo-gizing*. Moreover, theologizing must go beyond the enlightenment notion of a theology that engages and shapes the mind, to a more relevant and biblical notion of theology that forms the person and facilitates his living in and through Christ in community. Global theological scholarship and theological education must pursue reorientation according to this calling.

*Extension Sites and Branch Campuses.* Two cases with which this author had direct involvement may serve to highlight alternative ways of approaching international extension site possibilities.

In one case, more than a decade ago, this author was invited to participate in a think tank along with more than a dozen church and educational leaders to consider how to fortify, refine, and accelerate plans to establish a large-scale, advanced global extension program of theological and pastoral leadership studies with an accompanying commitment to developing a large-scale digital learning resource repository. Participants represented elite pastoral, lay, and educational leaders from one of North America's largest and most mission-minded church networks. Their passion was palpable. Their ambition was admirable. It soon became clear, however, that their awareness of and connection to existing global ecclesial and international theological education networks was truncated.

I do not recall that a single representative of "frontier Christianity" was present that day. Group members were unaware of the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE). Their plans were admirable and sincere, but their educational goals and values lacked deep consonance with ICETE's Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education. They were largely unaware of the existence of and not at all in dialogue with ICETE's regional accrediting agencies and its richly developed international quality assurance standards and existing global learning resource coordination efforts. Thankfully, these eminent North American seminary leaders were humbly receptive to an awakening to existing global networks in which they have become active partakers and contributors. They have re-envisioned and reshaped their efforts, viewing and conducting themselves as global partners, not presumptive pioneers.

Another extension/branch campus initiative directly familiar to the author illustrates many commendable mutual partnership and mutual exchange features worthy of consideration. A credible existing educational

institution in another global region reached out to a North American institution some four decades ago. They sought to explore a partnership that would permit their graduates to obtain accredited international degree recognition precluded by their homeland's educational system and governmental regulation of degree-granting authority. They were looking neither for financial subsidy nor corporate takeover. They wanted a true partner. They sought a partner institution that was compatible with core biblical/theological commitments, ethos, academic rigor, and international credibility. They desired to continue to offer instruction primarily through their committed cadre of resident and visiting faculty, in the home country's language, with the freedom to negotiate curricular and degree program requirement adaptations to suit their context.

That was a tall order. The initial reaction by accrediting agencies resembled the proverbial seven last words of a church: "We've never done it that way before." A years-long process ensued, marked by baby steps, setbacks, and not a few surprises. Ultimately, however, humility, perseverance, mutual trust-building, delicate and determined accrediting agency negotiations, and novel forays into shared governance overcame the seemingly endless obstacles. Today, the partnership endures. Scores of graduates studied under faculty members from each institution, completed contextually adapted course work reflecting degree program integrity in the native languages, and received diplomas that carry internationally recognized secular and theological school accreditation. Each institution is infinitely richer because of this partnership.

### **AN APPEAL FOR MORE HUMBLE ENGAGEMENT**

Should North American seminaries become global? Absolutely. A biblical understanding of the redemptive narrative and the present-day capabilities and conditions of both the world and the church demands we do so. To what sorts of transformation, then, does the Lord of our global church call us? What kinds of global participation offer seminaries the greatest potential for mutual edification and hastening of the eschaton? Alternate trajectories present themselves. Pathways based on exploitation or equity will ultimately be at best inadequately helpful and, at worst, insidiously harmful. On the other hand, the path of equability grounded in mutual exchange and mutual partnership offers practical guidance to institutions that take the initiative in globalizing faculty and students

and expanding curricular availability through technological mediation or campus extension.

For those North American seminaries that answer the call to “become global” in the coming days, let the admonitions of The Cape Town Commitment resonate and regulate:

Partnership is about more than money.... Let us finally prove that the Church does not operate on the principle that those who have the most money have all the decision-making power. Let us no longer impose our own preferred names, slogans, programmes, systems and methods on other parts of the Church. Let us instead work for true mutuality of North and South, East and West, for interdependence in giving and receiving, for the respect and dignity that characterizes genuine friends and true partners in mission.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Wright, ed., “The Cape Town Commitment.”