

# TRANSFORMING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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In 2006 my world fell apart and I had a complete breakdown. While a number of factors contributed to this personal crisis and the anxiety, and depression that ensued, a substantial element was my disillusionment with the world of theological education to which I had devoted much of my life's energies. By God's grace and with help from friends and the medical profession, my health recovered in less than a year. But many questions remained.

My reading pointed to the fragmentation and contextual irrelevance of most ministerial training programs. My own experience had seen student after student entering theological college passionate for ministry and leaving passionate for academia, with little idea how to empower the church and often with no genuine desire to do so. I seriously considered giving up completely on institutional theological education, seeing theological schools as counterproductive for preparing effective leadership for the church. However, it soon became evident that, for better or for worse, churches in much of the world still looked to theological colleges for their leaders, and consequently the solution lay not with rejection but with seeking change from within.

The years since this crisis have offered me multiple opportunities to be involved in just such creative work. Beginning with my hands-on experience of the extraordinarily innovative work embraced at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Lebanon, I have seen an increasing number of programs and colleges striving to transform traditional paradigms into approaches that are transformative. In what follows I will present some of the basic principles for transforming theological education, and some significant models of missional curricula.

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## THE CHALLENGE OF RECONCEPTUALIZING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Paul Sanders, former executive director of the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), has observed that “the problem with much of theological education is that it is neither theological nor educational.”<sup>2</sup> Several factors contribute to this anomalous situation.

One is the increasing pressure from secular governments that are forcing theological schools into university frameworks of humanities education. The result is a growing emphasis on publication with an accompanying focus on sometimes esoteric cerebral concerns. Quality formation for mission and ministry can easily be sidelined, and the pressures on faculty are such that spiritual and character formation become increasingly unnecessary appendages. It is not surprising that many churches and Christian organizations have started their own training programs, often in the non-formal sector, simply to keep their DNA alive.<sup>3</sup> In reality, however, most regulatory bodies are not as restrictive as perceived, and most are open to innovative curricula that are well argued as addressing the goals of the sector.<sup>4</sup>

Another factor is historical. The classic shape of theological education—with its “silos” of biblical, theological, and historical studies as well as (subsequently) ministerial studies or applied theology—emerged in a context where the relationship between the church and the wider society was largely in a “Christendom” paradigm. The assumption was that the church could and should have a level of power and influence in society. This pattern became virtually “sacred” at a time when the church in Europe was completely introverted.<sup>5</sup> If mission was even considered, it was usually incorporated into practical theology, as if it were largely a matter of technique or practical application, or it was offered as a separate subject, as if it had little to do with the “important” fields of Bible, history, and theology.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Paul Sanders, “Evangelical Theological Education in a Globalised World,” presentation delivered at the Centre for Theological Education, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 17 November 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Ashish Chrispal, “Restoring Missional Vision in Theological Education: The Need for Transformative Pastoral Training in the Majority World,” *Lausanne Global Analysis* 8, no. 5, September 2019, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2019-09/restoring-missional-vision-theological-education>.

<sup>4</sup>Les Ball, *Transforming Theology: Student Experience and Transformative Learning in Undergraduate Theological Education* (Preston: Mosaic, 2012), 89.

<sup>5</sup>David J. Bosch, “Theological Education in Missionary Perspective,” *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (January 1982): 26.

<sup>6</sup>Bosch, “Theological Education in Missionary Perspective,” 17-19.

This pattern of theological education was exported to the rest of the world in the wake of the missionary expansion of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and uncritically adopted and implemented in the formation of generations of local Christian leaders in the Majority World.<sup>7</sup> The “Christendom” paradigm has never been relevant in the Majority World and is no longer relevant in most of the Minority World.<sup>8</sup> Hence the urging from theological educators such as Robert Banks and Linda Cannell for a missional foundation to theological education. As Cannell puts it,

A structure formalized in the medieval period, modified to suit the theological shifts of the Reformation, influenced by the scientific methodology of the Enlightenment, shaped by the German research university, deeply affected by modernity, and assumed to define true theological education today is likely not adequate for the challenges of contemporary culture and the education of Christians who have been shaped by that culture.<sup>9</sup>

The major barrier to transformative theological education, however, is generally internal not external. Most faculty members in higher education have done little if any serious study in educational theory, and many have no desire to change. Frequently, the dominant voices in our theological schools are faculty who are more comfortable in the academy than they are in the local church, and who are theoreticians more than practitioners. Many academics are fearful of approaches that require them to move outside their specialist areas or that challenge them to emphasize the practice of ministry as well as academic excellence. In addition, theological faculty are generally those who have succeeded in the system and are consequently very reluctant to question the system to which they have devoted so much of their lives. It is therefore difficult for established

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<sup>7</sup>Michael McCoy, “Restoring Mission to the Heart of Theological Education,” in *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa*, ed. Isabel A. Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 523-29.

<sup>8</sup>Throughout this essay, I will use the term “Minority World” rather than the more common “West” or “Global North” to emphasize that the perspectives that so often are taken as normative actually represent minority, culturally driven assumptions as to the appropriate underpinnings of educational priorities.

<sup>9</sup>Linda Cannell, *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church* (Newburgh: EDCOT, 2006), 306.

faculty to initiate curricular reform. As Parker Palmer so candidly puts it, “Changing a university is like trying to move a cemetery. You get no help from the inhabitants.”<sup>10</sup>

As far back as 1994, John Woodyard observed,

Within the present paradigm professors—the faculty—have control of their courses, their classes, the curriculum, faculty hiring and tenure decisions. This existing structure is reinforced by tradition, the accrediting associations and bureaucratic government structures. It cannot be changed by trustees, denominations, or administrators and donors. Yet, in many cases, what is needed is a realization by seminary boards, administration and faculty that they will not survive if they continue to look to past successes and old paths rather than deal realistically with the changes needed to assure that their graduates will give leadership to the churches of the next century.<sup>11</sup>

Another major barrier to curricular reform is the lack of meaningful models. It is difficult for us to break out of traditional patterns with which we are familiar, and we are all prone to teach as we have learned and to develop schools along the models of the schools where we were trained. Consequently, there are scattered across the globe a plethora of little Trinitys, Fullers, Dallases, and Princetons, and occasionally Oxfords, Edinburghs, and Tübingens—despite the fact that these models are generally irrelevant to the context of the Middle East, Africa, Asia, or Latin America, and are no longer relevant in the contemporary context of the Minority World.<sup>12</sup>

## WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO ANYWAY?

Asking the right questions is the foundation for creative and innovative approaches to transforming theological education. As I visit with schools

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<sup>10</sup>Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal: Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 127.

<sup>11</sup>John M. Woodyard, “A 21st-Century Seminary Faculty Model,” in *The M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust Review of Graduate Theological Education in the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust, 1994), 3.

<sup>12</sup>Jeffrey D. Jones and Robert W. Pazmiño, “Finding a New Way: A Call to Reconceptualize Theological Education,” *Congregations* 34 (2008): 16-21.

and ask them about their approach to curriculum review, generally the conversation remains fixedly focused on “What?” and “How?” As a result, curricular discussions often devolve into arguments over the fine points of territorial boundaries, each faculty member vehemently defending the allocations to his or her discipline, rather than the faculty together seeing the big picture and working towards the accomplishment of the divine purpose to which we are called. While the questions “What?” and “How?” are important and must eventually be answered, they are in fact not the beginning but the end of planning for transformational theological curricula.

Educators tend to work backward, beginning with the end, by asking the foundational questions of why exactly do we exist and what are we trying to accomplish. To this end, the Bologna Process for European higher education has helpfully coined the phrases “Fitness of Purpose” and “Fitness for Purpose.”<sup>13</sup> Any effective educational program must first establish an appropriate self-understanding of why it exists—in other words, a fit purpose. Once this is in place, the institution and its curriculum should then be shaped to best fulfill that purpose—fitness for purpose.

In response to the question of fit purpose, a recognition that God’s mission through his people must be foundational to our shared telos has moved recent discussion beyond Kelsey’s “Athens–Berlin” dichotomy to advocacy for a missional–ecclesial foundation as the integrative basis for theological education.<sup>14</sup> As articulated in the Lausanne Movement’s Cape Town Commitment, “The mission of the Church on earth is to serve the

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<sup>13</sup>European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 3rd ed. (Helsinki: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2009).

<sup>14</sup>Robert J. Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Cannell, *Theological Education Matters*; Darren Cronshaw, “Reenvisioning Theological Education and Missional Spirituality,” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 9, no. 1 (2012): 9-27; Steve de Gruchy, “Theological Education and Missional Practice: A Vital Dialogue,” in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys*, ed. Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, and Joshva Raja (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010), 42-50; Allan Harkness, “Seminary to Pew to Home, Workplace and Community – and Back Again: The Role of Theological Education in Asian Church Growth,” presentation at OMF International Consultation on Ecclesiology and Discipleship, Singapore, 2-5 April 2013; David Hewlett, “Theological Education in England Since 1987,” in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Regional Surveys*; J. Andrew Kirk, “Re-Envisioning the Theological Curriculum as if the Missio Dei Mattered,” *Common Ground Journal* 3, no. 1 (2005): 23-40; Bernhard Ort, *Beyond Fragmentation: Integrating Mission and Theological Education: A Critical Assessment of Some Recent Developments in Evangelical Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Peter F. Penner, ed., *Theological Education as Mission*, 2nd ed. (Prague: IBTS, 2009).

mission of God, and the mission of theological education is to *strengthen and accompany the mission of the Church*.<sup>15</sup>

In reality, the church across the globe struggles to fulfill this mandate. Both internal and external challenges to the church blur our vision and stifle our effectiveness. The church is in desperate need of faithful men and women who can guide the people of God to confront and overcome the challenges they face, and courageously and clearly fulfill their missional mandate.

This is where our institutions play a role. Why do theological schools and programs of ministerial training exist? A missional–ecclesial foundation for theological education suggests that our schools exist in order to prepare men *and women who are capable of guiding the church to be effective in fulfilling the mission of having Christ acknowledged as Lord throughout the earth*. Note that the preparation of men and women is not the ultimate goal, but a significant means towards the accomplishment of the greater goal of seeing empowered churches that significantly impact their communities, such that the marks of the kingdom of God are evident in the world.<sup>16</sup>

While our role as providers of programs of study is important in preparing faithful men and women for Christian service, in point of fact our time with students is extremely limited, and we do well to acknowledge our limitations. Few of our programs of study have access to emerging leaders for more than a handful of years, but the divine work of leadership formation continues throughout life. The whole process can be represented diagrammatically as shown in figure 1.

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<sup>15</sup>Cape Town Commitment, II.F.4, emphasis added. See <https://lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/The-Cape-Town-Commitment--Pages-20-09-2021.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup>Enrique Fernández, “Engaging Contextual Realities in Theological Education: Systems and Strategies,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 38, no. 4 (2014): 339–49.

## The Pilgrimage of Faithful Men and Women

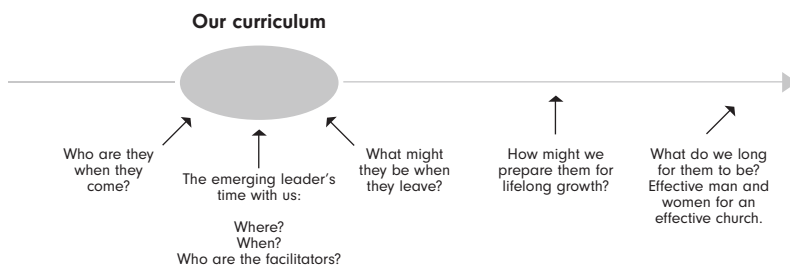


Figure 1. The Pilgrimage of a Christian Leader<sup>17</sup>

There is a tendency in many schools to attempt to deliver in three years everything that an emerging leader might need for the remainder of his or her life. The end result is a dense and demanding curriculum that focuses on content, with little time available to train students in reflection on practice and to prepare them for lifelong learning. Transformational theological education recognizes that a student's sojourn with us is simply a part of his or her lifelong pilgrimage of growth toward maturity in servant leadership.

Given a missional—ecclesial foundation of theological education, and a recognition that a student's time with us is limited, a series of significant curricular questions emerges naturally:

1. *What is the ideal church in our context?* What would the ideal church look like—one that is sensitive to God's mission and able to empower all of God's people to be significant ambassadors for Christ and his gospel?
2. *What are the contextual challenges?* What are some of the challenges that confront the church or hinder it as an effective agency for the proclamation of Christ? Consider both external challenges (how the societal context hinders proclamation) and internal challenges (what chronic weaknesses exist within the Christian community).
3. *What might an ideal Christian leader look like?* For your specific local context, what are the chief characteristics of the ideal Christian leader, the sort of person who would be able to lead the church through its contextual challenges toward

<sup>17</sup>Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 32.

the accomplishment of the general goal you have articulated? What sorts of character traits, skills, and knowledge would be needed to best accomplish the task of Christian leadership in your context? Based on these reflections, develop a “profile of the ideal graduate.”

4. *Who are the learners?* What kind of communities do they come from (urban, suburban or rural; monocultural or multicultural)? What level of religious maturity do they have? What sort of churches do they come from?
5. *Where do the students go?* What kinds of roles do your alumni have? What sort of people do they serve? Are they wealthy, middle class, or poor? What level of education do they have? Are the people urban, suburban, or rural? Are they individualistic or communal, religious or a-religious? What are the greatest challenges your alumni have faced? The greater the diversity in alumni ministry contexts, the greater the need for diversity in the curriculum.
6. *When? The time frame.* An endemic problem in curriculum design is allocating too much “what” for the “when.” The “when” includes all potential formal times (classroom or equivalent), non-formal times (structured but non-classroom; e.g. mentoring, discipleship groups, internships) and informal times (e.g. general time over meals, trips together, and casual encounters that hold potential for informal learning).
7. *Where? The learning environment.* What are your material resources? To what extent does the physical context help or hinder learning? How do physical limitations impact educational possibilities?
8. *Who will facilitate the learning?* Who are your human resources? How many people are involved in facilitating the learning? What is the nature of their training? How much do they know about teaching? Capacity is a highly significant element in curriculum design.
9. *What and how?* Once the initial eight questions have been answered, you will be in an adequate position to consider what the actual curriculum might look like.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 52-53.



As can readily be seen, engaging these questions takes time and effort, and a thoroughgoing development of a genuinely transformative curriculum demands a posture of learning and research.<sup>19</sup> Each of the curricular models presented later in this essay began with months and in some cases years of preparatory reflection, discussion, and envisioning. In the process, it was almost inevitable that the traditional humanities–education approach to theological education was put aside in favor of more engaged approaches to curriculum development. The commitment of time and effort was costly, but in each case, the end result has been rich, exciting, and impactful.

### RE-LANDING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The shape of theological education that continues to predominate today is rooted in the university model developed in Europe and North America in the early nineteenth century. Within the rationalist framework of that day, it was important that theology find its place within the general schools of knowledge. Theology was consequently “landed” within the humanities, as is readily observed through the close parallels between traditional theological disciplines and dominant fields in the humanities: biblical studies (literature), theology (philosophy), and church history (history). It is not surprising that in many cases, the “professional” component of preparation for ministry, often titled “practical” or “applied” theology, has been seen (either consciously or unconsciously) as peripheral or even irrelevant. Do both the title and the position of ministerial studies in traditional curricula imply that “true” theology can or perhaps should be “impractical” or “esoterically theoretical”?

Fundamental shifts have taken place over the past fifty years that raise questions about this normative model even in the Minority World, let alone in the Majority World. In this vein, Sunquis challenges the theological academy to rethink its paradigms:

We have little in common with Christians of the 1950s and almost nothing in common with 16th-century European Christians. But we have much in common with 2nd century West Asian, 19th century South Asian or 20th century North African Christians. They lived in a world opposed

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<sup>19</sup>Rupen Das, *Connecting Curriculum with Context: A Handbook for Context Relevant Curriculum Development in Theological Education*, ICETE, ed. Riad Aziz Kasis (Carlisle: Langham, 2015).

to their faith. They understand that the church (*ecclesia*) is a “called out” community.<sup>20</sup>

I recognize that many graduates value the personal intellectual growth that comes through a greater appreciation of our heritage, and the critical–textual skills that are gained in a classic approach to theological studies. However, many also find their studies disconnected from real life, providing only minimal preparation for addressing the challenges of the contemporary world and helping people understand how to follow Christ in daily life.

How would our theological education be shaped differently if we began with grounded reality rather than ideas? De Gruchy’s comparison of medical and theological education challenges us to see as imperative a continual process of assessment, review and curricular revision:

In the former [medical education], the education of the next generation of health professionals is driven by constant attention to clinical practice, drug trials and technical breakthroughs. It makes no sense, and in fact endangers lives, to train students in procedures which are no longer up to date. By contrast, theological education often proceeds on the basis that we have learnt nothing new about the Christian faith in the last centuries, and students can be educated solely on the basis of the wisdom of the ages. Without negating the importance of history and tradition, the truth is that missional practice provides an ongoing contextual laboratory for theological reflection raising new issues and new perspectives on old issues almost daily. Our commitment to life, and to being on the cutting edge of responding to life, should be as profound as that of medical educators.<sup>21</sup>

Along with writers such as De Gruchy and Ball, I believe that a more adequate location for theological studies is not in the humanities but among professional fields such as medicine, education, and social work.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Scott W. Sunquist, “Wrong Time, Wrong Place, Wrong Courses: The Dangers of the Unconverted Seminary,” Unpublished paper, 28 June 2008.

<sup>21</sup>De Gruchy, “Theological Education and Missional Practice,” 45.

<sup>22</sup>De Gruchy, “Theological Education and Missional Practice,” 42-50; Ball, *Transforming Theology*,

While there are often philosophical and ethical studies in these fields, there is also a clear understanding that every element should be designed to prepare more effective practitioners. If we were to re-land theological education within professional studies, then there would be several implications for practice:

1. *Faculty recruitment and development.* Within a humanities paradigm, the fundamental credential for teaching is a library-based Ph.D. within a highly specialized field of research. Field experience may be valued but is rarely seen as necessary. In contrast, within the medical paradigm, particularly in the latter phases of study, faculty are predominantly reflective practitioner-experts. For theological education this would mean that most instructors would need to have had substantial field experience and schools would look for faculty whose research had a strong contextual component.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, when ABTS shifted away from a humanities–education paradigm to a more integrated framework inspired by medical education, our Ph.D. track faculty members changed the focus of their research to topics that were more interdisciplinary in nature with a strong Middle Eastern slant. These interdisciplinary and contextual choices were not directed from above but were rather the natural outworking of the missional culture of the school.
2. *Awareness of student personalities.* It has been found in many of the so-called “people” professions that the best students often make poor practitioners, as they are more comfortable with books than with people. Consequently, many schools of medicine, nursing, education, and social work are now conducting extensive psychological testing and personal interviews as a key aspect of the admissions process. In some schools of medicine, a portfolio of community service is an essential component of the application process. Likewise, many theological schools have already intuited the need to account for the personal maturity and communication skills of prospective students. This should also mean that we are willing to “fail” people who do not have the necessary holistic skills necessary for Christian ministry and will likely be a

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87; Perry Shaw, “Relanding Theological Education,” *InSights Journal* 2, no. 1 (2016): 20–26.

<sup>23</sup>Brian E. Woolnough, “Purpose, Partnership, and Integration: Insights from Teacher Education for Ministerial/Mission Training,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 33, no. 4 (2016): 249–61.

liability to the church, even if they have successfully “passed” all their courses.<sup>24</sup> I experienced something of this while completing my basic teaching qualification in the early 1980s. Our cohort of prospective mathematics method trainees included one candidate who achieved high grades in the theoretical component of the program but failed as a classroom teacher even after substantial mentoring. Although she successfully passed the formal courses, this student was not granted the teaching degree because she was deemed a liability to the teaching profession. If we genuinely believe that our role is to prepare men and women for the crucial role of Christian ministry, we should have the courage to do the same in theological education.

3. *Problem-based learning.* The final measure of quality professionals is not what they know but their competence in intelligent reflection on practical problems and challenges. Within theological education, the goal would be to develop “theological leadership,” a vision that goes far beyond the classic idea of developing “scholar pastors.”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, a shift to Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has become common in virtually all fields of professional education. The strength of PBL lies in its demand for students to integrate material from multiple disciplines in addressing specific and real-life situations.<sup>26</sup> Students are thus better empowered to develop skills in reflective practice. PBL also opens the possibility for engaging knowledge that ordinarily “falls through the cracks” of the traditional disciplines. PBL, which is focused on life issues, inevitably raises questions that a traditional curriculum ignores. It takes students into areas that are highly significant for effective practice but do not naturally fit traditional boundaries.
4. *Early and continuous supervised experience in hands-on practice.* It is becoming increasingly common for medical schools to place

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<sup>24</sup>Woolnough, “Purpose, Partnership, and Integration,” 249-61.

<sup>25</sup>Evan R. Hunter, “A Context Conducive to Innovation: How Changes in Doctoral Education Create New Opportunities for Developing Theological Leaders,” in *Challenging Tradition: Innovation in Advanced Theological Education*, ed. Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharamraj (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 21-42. A primary justification for the traditional humanities-education paradigm for theological education has been the development of “scholar-pastors.” In reality, the paradigm does well in developing “scholars” but its efficacy in developing “pastors” is highly questionable.

<sup>26</sup>John Jusu, “Problem-Based Learning in Advanced Theological Education,” in *Challenging Tradition: Innovation in Advanced Theological Education*, 209-32.

their students in hospitals from the first year of their studies, and for schools of education to expect student teachers to be in the classroom from the very beginning of their training. These practical components are carefully supervised and are granted a substantial amount of “academic” credit. In my own training to become an educator, for instance, one-third of the credits in my program were devoted to these practical components. Many programs of theological education already have a strong emphasis on in-ministry training, but too often this training is largely divorced from what takes place in the text-based courses and is perceived as peripheral to the “real” classroom studies. In many cases, only a minimal amount of “academic” credit is granted for these significant learning experiences and supervision is exclusively in the hands of local-church leaders. A more “professional” approach to theological education would place a greater emphasis on theological reflection on life and ministry and would grant substantial “credit” for field education, in recognition of the strategic role that reflective practice plays in formation. There is much we can benefit from the growing number of teacher training programs in which students spend two to three days a week in field experience at schools, and two to three days a week learning at the college. Such an approach brings the theoretical components of the curriculum into constant dialogue with students’ actual field experience.<sup>27</sup>

5. *Professional standards and continuing education.* In many parts of the world, students are not granted graduation in fields such as medicine, education, or social work until they satisfy the professional requirements of the respective “guilds.” Moreover, continuing education is seen as a mandatory element in sustaining membership of the guild. While the process of ordination provides something of this sort of “guild accountability” to theological education, in many cases the college is so distant from church networks that there is no meaningful accountability for the quality preparation of practitioners. Moreover, while many schools offer “continuing education,” too often these programs offer the same humanities-based courses that emphasize the theoretical, rather than providing curricula that are sensitive

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<sup>27</sup>Ball, *Transforming Theology*, 46; Woolnough, “Purpose, Partnership, and Integration.”

to recent insights in pastoral ministry, insights that can better empower practitioners in the field.

Across the globe, a key element emerging in professional training programs, particularly in the training of doctors, is a two-tiered understanding of training. Students undertake a period of foundational studies in a more traditional format, often called a “pre-professional” period. This is then followed by substantial clinical experience and case-centered learning, in which the foundational knowledge is applied to real-life situations.

This two-tiered approach, focused on the development of quality reflective practitioners, is at the heart of the curriculum we built at ABTS from 2008 onwards: a year of foundations followed by two years of integrated theological reflection on practice. Gradually other schools have followed suit. The China Graduate School of Theology (CGST) in Hong Kong has also adopted this philosophy. At the heart of the CGST vision has been a shift in the fundamental emphasis from the previous focus on developing “scholar pastors” to the new vision for developing “reflective collaborators.”<sup>28</sup> This revised focus calls for a stronger emphasis on integrated reflection on practice and the nurturing of teamwork between faculty and students. More recently the newly established Flourish Institute of Theology (FIT) of the ECO Presbyterian Church in the United States has likewise embedded into its training program a mix of foundations with subsequent context-driven integrative courses. At ABTS and CGST, the integrative courses tend to examine more general issues such as peacebuilding and mission through multidisciplinary lenses. In contrast FIT builds its integrative courses on contemporary issues confronting churches in the USA in the 2020s: the Christian citizen, sexuality, race, etc. Given the urgent need for churches to deal in depth with these issues, the positive response of students has been overwhelming.

What is noteworthy in the ABTS, CGST, and FIT curricula is that while the foundational year is fairly specific, the second and third years are more general, with module/course titles that necessitate team teaching and provide significant flexibility for adaptation. Two factors change regularly for any training program: the faculty and the contextual reality. Having a general direction rather than defined specifics enables responsiveness to changing circumstances. In addition, a good curriculum does not look for faculty to teach courses, but for courses that respect the passions and

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<sup>28</sup>B. Wong and R. Lai, eds., *Reflective Collaborators: Re-envisioning Theological Education* (Hong Kong: CGST, 2023).

expertise of the existing faculty. This is the advantage of team-taught modules: they can be adapted according to the people available to teach.

### **MISSIONAL CURRICULA FOR COMPLEX MINISTRY CONTEXTS**

While ABTS, CGST, and FIT have sought to learn from medical education, missional engagement has led to other innovative approaches. Some of the most creative curricular models are those that respond to seemingly overwhelming contextual challenges. The work of these programs points to the need for responsive flexibility to the “right” questions of who, where, and when, while seeking to address the significant missional issues that arise out of the contextual challenges.

In Cuba, for example, movement around the country is complex and physical resources are limited. Consequently, innovative schools such as Escuela Cubana de Estudios Teológicos Evangélicos (ECETE) and Seminario Evangélico Metodista (SEM) have developed structures that minimize the residential component through the development of dozens of local learning centers. Both schools incorporate substantial elements of problem-based learning in which reflective thinking is nurtured through dialogue between limited textual resources and case studies rather than through the more traditional approach of the critical comparison of texts. In each case, the curriculum embraces some more traditional studies in the Bible, history, and theology, but sees these as a basis for reflecting on local contextual issues. And so we see at ECETE courses in Biblical Interpretation and Postmodern Realities, Personal and Organizational Communication, and Implementation of Missionary Strategies, as well as a very substantial component of Reflection on Ministerial Practice, in which students are required to dialogue between their courses of study and their experience of ministry. The reflective practice component is particularly significant in the Cuban context where the church is experiencing unprecedented renewal and a consequent shortage of leaders who are competent to think theologically about life and ministry.

Another creative access approach to missional curricula is seen in the various online programs that have emerged in the member schools of the Middle East and North Africa Association for Theological Education (MENATE), accessing the resources developed in the TEACH/LEARN project. The project began in 2008 in response to two critical factors: (1) the rapid growth of the church in North Africa, and the inability of the theological schools to meet the urgent need for leadership training

through traditional residential programs of study; and (2) the awareness that increasing levels of instability and security surveillance raised questions for the long-term viability of current approaches to theological education.

Materials in the form of multimedia online resources were developed over the period 2009-2013 cooperatively through the member schools of MENATE. The curriculum team immediately recognized the need to take a “menu” approach to access: that is, just as clients in a restaurant will choose the items that best suit their tastes, so the potential “clients” of the online theological programs would likely be highly selective in their choice of the materials they would access, and this selection would be rooted in immediate felt needs. Learning that is linked directly to felt needs is typical of adult learners but is minimally applied in traditional approaches to theological education.<sup>29</sup>

Due to the felt-needs focus, course development needed to be context-to-text, starting with contextual issues and then bringing appropriate textual materials to bear on these issues. This stands in contrast to the more traditional emphasis on text-to-context, in which we begin with “heritage” studies (Bible, history, and theology) where the connection with the contemporary context, while desirable, is not seen as imperative. The newer, conceptual framework taken by the TEACH/LEARN project followed a cycle of life and reflection, as shown in Figure 2.

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<sup>29</sup>Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton, and Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6th ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005).



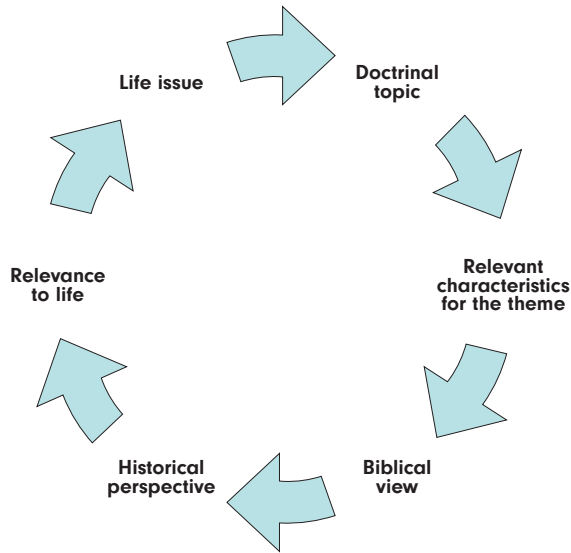


Figure 2. TEACH/LEARN Cycle of Life and Reflection

The starting point for curricular conceptualization was the discussion of two hypothetical students Saïd and Mariam, reflecting the sort of students that potentially would engage with the materials. We then sought to develop a series of courses that would best serve the needs of Saïd and Mariam, while maintaining an appreciation of our heritage of theological thought. Many of the participants in the MENATE courses live in extremely conservative communities, with a passion for missional living that is refreshing and challenging. The key to the effectiveness of this process has been the context-driven and missionally oriented emphases in curricular development, and a deep sensitization to the life realities of the students.

Each of the models presented in this and the previous section is different. However, some shared themes seem essential in the development of quality transformational curricula:

1. The context is a driving force in both the content and the methodology used in the curriculum.
2. The focus is more on the “how” of thinking theologically than on the “what” of content. The great heritage of Christian thought is taken seriously but seen less as a body of knowledge to be transferred and more as providing the foundational lens for critical reflection on the context.

3. The focus is less on traditional pastoral training than on the development of theological leadership. While pastoral formation is often an optional track, other vocational emphases such as marketplace ministry, counseling, mission, and public Christianity are equally valued.
4. Delivery challenges are never seen as definitive barriers but rather as an opportunity for creative expression.

## **CONCLUSION**

The global church is witnessing dramatic change. The remarkable growth of the church in the Majority World and the counterpoint struggles of the church in the Minority World make imperative the need for paradigmatic rethinking of how we prepare men and women for Christian service in the twenty-first century. However, foundational systemic change is difficult, particularly when the key gatekeepers have a vested interest in preserving the status quo.

Several schools and programs have shown the courage and vision to think differently. These schools have developed feasible models that seek better to address the challenges confronting the church in its context as the church pursues its missional calling. The transformation in theological education that is increasingly taking place around the world is proving transformational not only for the students but for the churches and communities where they serve. May their number increase!