

Futures in Theological Education

Linda Cannell, June 2005

“The Swahili word for education (elimu) is equivalent to Western formal education only. The many rich traditional means of training and socialization in the cultures are not considered education (elimu) or real school.”

This limited use of language to convey the meaning of education is not uncommon. Therefore, when one wishes to talk about or understand the meaning education apart from schooling, language itself makes this difficult. Words or phrases that would convey the meanings of learning and lifelong learning are inadequate or absent. In a very real sense, some cultures have to actually reinvent the meaning of education.

Until recently, theological education was synonymous with school. It took place in a specified period of years and ended with a degree or certificate. As time went on, more and more subjects were considered necessary for the *preparation* of leaders who would do their theological education only in this period of time. Therefore, the curriculum became crowded with subjects; and many consider that the theological curriculum is now hopelessly mired in courses and fragmented.

Questions about the nature and purpose of theological education have increased in urgency through the 21st century. Theological education is no longer confined to schools or degree programs. An instructional paradigm is shifting gradually to a *learning* paradigm; theological education is seeking appropriate relationship with the church and the public; and is increasingly seen as a lifelong enterprise.

However, even though there is growing agreement on that which troubles theological education, there is little agreement as to what theological education needs to be for this generation. It has been observed that we are in a new period of renaissance in theological education—where numerous initiatives are underway, often unknown to one another, yet remarkably similar in *values* and key *strategies*. We could lose the promise of this renaissance by moving too quickly to structured programs, or by trying to institutionalize the movement too quickly.

The following impressions with regard to values and strategies have emerged as I have interacted with leaders in North America and different countries:

1. Most leaders involved in change in theological education are intentional (i.e., actively generating strategy) about their role in facilitating the development of other leaders—who will, in turn, develop other leaders. This commitment requires more than offering classes to “train” leaders or simple discipleship. Most of these leaders are aware that if a major outcome of their work is to equip leaders *who are then able to develop others* (see 11 Timothy 2:1-2) fundamental changes in strategy are needed. Several are moving ahead with alternatives: new initiatives within the formal seminary structures, ventures apart from but related to the seminary, or ventures that were begun without any intention to relate to theological schools.

2. Many of these efforts are unknown to other leaders even though they are concerned about similar things and doing some of the same things.
3. The leaders involved in these efforts can be found in various roles: seminary professor or administrator, missionary, pastor, parachurch leader, leader in a relief and development organization, leader of a non-traditional leadership development organization.
4. Certain common commitments seem to undergird these efforts:

A commitment to the church as the starting place for leadership development.

Though acknowledging that the institutionalized church is dysfunctional in many ways, the purpose for establishing leadership development experiences is to build the church.

A common desire, variously expressed, to make a difference in their immediate society. The intent seems to be to further the development of leaders who will influence the country as well as the church.

A commitment to theological reflection. Learning experiences are characterized by the willingness to integrate Scripture and theology with practice—and with other areas of knowledge, including the social sciences.

A commitment to learning. A focus on learning obligates a reconsideration of instruction and assessment; and a commitment to reflection on practice.

A commitment to lifelong learning. However it is expressed, most if not all the leaders recognize that there must be a commitment to leadership development across a life time.

A commitment to mentoring. This value is best understood as the facilitation of intentional, purposeful, non-hierarchical interactions between persons or among small groups of men and women. Typically, these relationships are encouraged in repeated, short term, retreat-like settings that allow people to get away from their daily routine.

A commitment to cultural diversity, to respect between men and women. Further, groups, though heavily weighted in some countries to young people and young adults, affirm and seek to create contexts where younger men and women can interact with women and men who have been involved for an extended period of time in responsible service. This interaction is seldom formal, always relational, often spontaneous and unplanned, and seems at its best when it is dialogical—dealing with questions, issues and perceived needs initiated by the younger leaders.

A commitment to team leadership. In nearly all cases, English speakers learn and use the language of the host country and seek to work in *partnership* with host country leaders.

The value of partnership and networking with other groups is affirmed. Though affirmed, it seems that the developers of non-traditional learning experiences seldom initiate networking—except in their own circle. Most seem to be unaware

of similar ventures that are developing in other areas. Networking is typically described as that which takes place among the participants in the program.

5. Key elements in the strategy of many of the nonformal initiatives include the following:

Some process whereby men and women already involved in leadership activity in the churches are identified by the church as candidates for further development.

These men and women are invited into a process of further development where they remain connected with the church. Through the development process, these leaders are often brought into contact with more experienced leaders who help them reflect on their behavior, attitudes, leadership style, and so on.

Processes that provide for sustained contact among those who are involved in the leadership development experience. The intent is that these leaders will connect, remain connected, and establish linkages with other leaders.

Encouragement in most cases is intentional and mutual. Mentoring at its best is two way not one way. David Sveen suggests that *everyone* needs at some time to be a Paul (being a mentor), a Barnabas (walking alongside), and a Timothy (being mentored) depending on the circumstances.

An intentional, multi-faceted, integrated process of leadership development is envisioned. In some situations equitable conversation between leaders in nonformal initiatives and faculty and administrators in theological schools is beginning.

The continuance of a nonformal initiative is not possible without an intentional strategy for economic development. Resources are needed to sustain and support the infrastructure.

6. There is a clear trend, on a global scale, toward leadership development initiatives that *begin* with nonformal learning experiences grounded in or oriented to the church. The most important realization is that education does not always mean school, and theological education does not always mean theological school.

In May 2003, I was interviewed by the editor of the *Wilberforce Forum*. The interview was an effort to capture insights about futures in theological education.

“Emerging Trends in Theological education”

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WSF *Linda, we met in Knoxville at our Consortium meeting where we discussed ongoing issues and emerging trends in the development of theological education. How long have you been involved in theological education and how did you get started?*

LC Through the 70s and 80s I worked with Canadian churches and theological institutions. With many at that time I developed a growing unease about the effectiveness of churches and theological institutions. In 1990, I accepted the invitation to join the faculty of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, primarily to work with Ted Ward. Through the years of our friendship, and in interaction with leaders from many countries and organizations, my early, admittedly more radically stated concerns have developed into more useful categories. In other words, the issues have become more clearly defined. The solutions? Well, aren't we all still working at that? Today, I find myself among a growing number of men and women from churches and theological institutions who share a common concern for the development and reform of the Church and theological education.

WSF *From our interaction in Knoxville, it was apparent that theological education, for you, means something more than an institution or a school.*

LC Yes, our habit of equating theological education almost exclusively with what happens in school buildings and classrooms has hurt the Church – worldwide. Today, the efforts to watch are the nonformal or nontraditional sectors in every country. These initiatives are often more holistic and, therefore, more productive in helping men and women develop biblical and theological understanding, competency in ministry, growth in spiritual maturity and interpersonal responsibility. Significantly, most of these initiatives are grounded in the Church. And I would agree that without a serious ecclesiology, formed and reformed through dialogue and relationship across culture, social, and gender boundaries, the Christian community will never have the sort of education that is required to develop us all for our “reasonable service” in the world. We will persist in building schools forever engaged in seemingly endless “turf wars” about what to do with the theological curriculum! I remember Ted saying that the Church has given away two of its central responsibilities: education and mission. It has entrusted these vital responsibilities to organizations that have developed institutional forms that may or may not be consistent with God’s purposes for the Church in the world.

WSF *Do you believe, then, that the Church is the more appropriate context for theological education?*

LC The Church is the more appropriate *focus* for theological education whether it takes place in church buildings, in seminaries, in homes, or under a tree. Over the years, three principles have become important for me: The Church is central to what God is doing in the world; neither the Church nor theological education should be understood as synonymous with the institutions that we have created to house the Church and to give shape to its responsibilities; and leaders *among* the people of God help church people understand their identity – they stimulate worship and ways of being in a faith community that reflect and honor that identity, and assist in developing the people of God for their service as the priesthood of all believers. However, these principles have to be worked out against the reality that the history of the Church has been a long struggle with issues of human ambition, organizational inadequacy, interpersonal conflict, immature

relationships, and so on. The observation that the institutional church is like a leaky boat and that we will spend all of our lives bailing is apt!

WSF *Most seminaries today would claim that their purpose is to equip leaders for the service of the Church. Why are we seeing increasing numbers of church-based forms of theological education?*

LC Most churches have begun these ventures out of a perception that the seminary is incapable of producing the sort of leader they feel they require. However, it is as much a mistake to assume that seminaries are primarily at fault for inadequate leadership and dysfunctional churches, as it is to assume that seminaries are primarily responsible for leadership development. If churches believe that a certain type of leader is necessary, what is shaping their conception of leadership? Is it appropriate for the church to demand that the seminary incorporate certain understandings and skills related to leadership development? In a certain sense, yes. However, when churches yield to popular pressure and adopt uncritically certain images of a “successful” leader, or certain images of an “effective” church, who or what will help them evaluate the appropriateness of these images? Similarly, when seminaries adopt flawed perspectives about the role of the leader or pastor, who helps them evaluate the appropriateness of these perspectives? At some point we have to think about better ways for churches and communities of scholar-practitioners to work and think together about the issues that affect the Church.

WSF *What do you think is going to happen to seminaries? Do you think they will become irrelevant or, at best, marginal to theological education in the years ahead?*

LC A distinguished colleague at Trinity once asked, “What would be lost to the Christian community if theological schools ceased to exist? Does the church need a community of scholars and students able to interact with each other and the larger society?” The more cynical ask, What is the point of a seminary education that requires more time than people are willing to give, more money than people are able to pay, more disconnection from family and career than people are willing to tolerate, and that seems to be less than effective in equipping men and women for leadership and ministry? The vultures aren’t circling—yet; but the persisting criticisms and the reality that change in higher education tends to move at a glacial pace, increase the probability that initiatives rapidly coming to maturity will supplant or change forever theological education as we know it.

WSF *What are some of these initiatives?*

LC Church-Based Theological Education, e-learning, mega-church seminars that target areas long part of the traditional seminary curriculum, centers on the traditional campus offering program initiatives that parallel or supplant a hopelessly mired curriculum; institutes and training centers developing outside theological schools to do the job of “training” competent leaders, to name a few. Increasingly, foundations, independent initiatives, and church-based institutes are bypassing the seminaries altogether.

WSF Do you believe something would be lost to the Church if seminaries ceased to exist?

LC Though some would welcome the demise of the North American seminary as we know it, the loss of some suitable framework for a community of scholars would be disastrous for the church. Clearly, the seminary has not presented itself well as an effective *community* of scholars who, with humility, assist congregations to understand their identity and purpose as the people of God; who participate in a shared journey toward spiritual growth and understanding; and who are learning how to engage contemporary issues with members of congregations and society. The academics' temptation to give the final answer and to create controlled settings where those answers can be given, is counterproductive in an era where questions must be heard, where problems must be accurately defined, where presuppositions, perspectives, and practices must be assessed, and where criteria for this assessment are drawn from interacting disciplines of knowledge, the wisdom of experience, and the reasonable discourse among members of communities of faith and learning.

WSF Do you find that faculty and administrators are concerned about these and other problems in theological education?

LC Interestingly, most of the current literature addressing current problems in theological education has been written by faculty and administrators. It also seems to me that an increasing number of men and women, most between 35 and 45 years of age, and most with PhDs in a variety of disciplines, are less interested in progressing through an academic career in traditional institutions. Their vision for education and leadership development isn't easily accommodated in the traditional structures. Unfortunately, vision is often held captive by the need to eat! But, perhaps, one or more foundations, several courageous and skilled academic administrators, insistent and collegial faculty, persistent and discerning students, and a host of committed congregational leaders will one day work together to reshape theological education for the whole people of God.

WSF You mentioned that much of the literature is being written by faculty and administrators in theological education. What are the concerns that are being addressed in this literature?

LC Let me try to give a basic and, therefore, inadequate outline of the concerns as I see them. First, some believe that theology itself has become fragmented, rationalized, and specialized. It is variously defined as the desire to search for God, cognitive disposition toward God, a set of specialized disciplines, a list of propositions, or as wisdom oriented to action. Those writing about the current crisis in theological education suggest that the confusion of identity in theology has resulted in a lack of a coherent purpose, or compelling vision, for theological education. Second, in the absence of a clear theological vision, schools tend to be caught in a maze of stated or assumed purposes such as the formation of Christian character or spiritual formation, formation of a Christian mind, equipping leaders for the service of the Church, equipping the whole people of God, training professionals for agencies in society, and so on. Third, the seminary curriculum, without an adequate definition of the nature and purpose of theology, and without a

coherent purpose, devolves into a more or less disconnected collection of specialized subjects to be completed in two to four years culminating in a certificate or degree. This is sometimes coupled with the concern that education is not sufficiently involved with *learning*. That is to say, concern about how students acquire information and about how they process and use it affects our choices of instructional approaches, types of questions asked, and the ways in which we assess students. Fourth, the resulting specialized and fragmented curricular framework is not effective in equipping leaders, tends to reinforce an unwarranted theory and practice division, and develops leaders that are not fitted for the service of the Church. Finally, there is concern that seminaries are not sufficiently aware that they are operating in a global arena, that there are legitimately different cultural perspectives on an issue, and that theological education should have something to do with issues of justice.

WSF *Does the literature move beyond concerns to constructive alternatives?*

LC In some cases. But we have a way to go before alternatives develop that are seen as viable by most in theological institutions. The conversations, at this point, are preoccupied with concerns and descriptions of purpose and tasks. As I synthesize the literature, I see these tasks organized in five different, though related, categories: In brief, theological education deals with knowledge – as information or as wisdom; theological education is concerned with the professional development of leaders for the church – with an emphasis on the functions and skills of ministry; theological education is reflection on the practice of ministry while one is involved in that ministry – or what some identify as *praxis*; more recently for Protestant schools, theological education is concerned with spiritual formation; and finally, though not as frequently in evangelical theological education, is the view that theological education is the shaping of students’ capacities to understand social realities and respond with acts of justice.

WSF *One of the concerns of theological education among evangelicals has been the largely ‘academic’ model in which learning is often equated with passing tests, writing papers, and taking courses. To what extent can these purposes and tasks be fulfilled in the academic or university model?*

LC That’s an interesting question. I would say that because we have begun with the premise that theological education takes place primarily or only in schools, we spend far too much time agonizing over what should be the purposes and tasks of theological education. I am concerned that we are laboring so hard to focus our purpose and tasks, or to return to some idealized form of something we can only imagine, that we are in danger of paralyzing ourselves. If we broadened our view of what the tasks really are and where and how these are accomplished, we wouldn’t be as stuck in the ‘academic’ model as we are today – or as defensive or protective when it is challenged. The academic model is appropriate but not necessarily for all the purposes or tasks that we have assigned to it by default. Actually, I’m not convinced that descriptors such as academic, professional, formal, nonformal and so on, are helpful today. When we use these labels, the tendency is to get polarized around what we envision as *the* academically credible method. I remember hearing a prominent evangelical theologian say of an eminent educator, “O, he’s just about methods.” The reality is that all of us are about methods – no matter our discipline; and that many of the same ‘methods’ can be applied to the descriptors we use

today for education (academic, professional and so on). I would rather we thought together about such questions as, “What is the nature of learning? What are the social contexts and realities within which learning takes place? How is learning assessed? What institutional forms and attitudes are most appropriate for the learning task?” As we become more comfortable envisioning a number of related tasks and formats for theological education, the protectiveness that some feel for the stereotypical academic model should go away – I hope.

WSF In relation to this, would you agree with those who suggest that the curriculum should be more of an integration of disciplines than what is now described as separate ‘silos’ – each containing their own substance and never connecting?

LC Talk of integrating disciplines has a long history. Some in evangelical circles fear that integration will lead to relativism or to acceptance of all perspectives with no closure around what they see as truth. However, the fears are probably groundless since by pursuing integration we may be pursuing a dream or going at it the wrong way around anyway. If we accept the definition of a discipline as that which has its own subject matter, its own questions, and its own methodology, then integration is not going to be a simple matter. Nor will it be accomplished by simply putting faculty from different disciplines together in a classroom. I believe we made a fundamental error in our construction of the academic curriculum by assuming that a PhD or faculty specialization in a discipline should automatically translate into a course, the creation of a department, or a category in the theological curriculum.

WSF Are you questioning the validity of organizing the theological curriculum around disciplines – or almost exclusively around disciplines?

LC Rick Dunn, a member of the Knoxville consortium, describes theological education as an ‘ecology’ as opposed to ‘silos.’ In other words, what if we envisioned theological education as a synergy of several elements: the Church, the academy, nontraditional learning, participating organizations in society, an individual’s vocational experience, and so on? This would leave the way open for two critical changes in the way we envision theological education. First, we could accept a number of varying purposes for theological education drawing the rationale for these purposes from the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to people for the sake of the Church; and seeing them developed through any number of learning processes in any number of contexts. Second, we could envision defining issues and problems affecting Christianity in our world and create learning experiences where those who have spent a lifetime in disciplined study could productively bring insights from their pursuit of knowledge to bear on these problems. Students in such experiences would be confronted with the claims of a discipline and its subject matter much more effectively and more productively than at present where information is lost as soon as the exam is over! I am not the only faculty member who hears over and over again the lament of graduates, “I wish I had paid more attention to that.” Or, “Most of what I ‘learned’ has little relevance in my cultural context.” Clearly, intellectual and personal categories and capabilities are shaped in current academic contexts; but not as responsibly or effectively as they could be.

WSF So, we are trying to do too much in the seminary as we know it?

LC Possibly. But more to the point, by trying to be all things to every sort of student in the seminary, we are actually rendering serious scholarly development impotent. A different sort of integration would actually be more constructive. Rather than frustrating ourselves by attempting to integrate subjects, let's think in terms of integrating different sorts of learning contexts. For example, the Church is a more suitable context for some areas of learning and development. Nearly everything we do in the professional departments is better accomplished in churches and/or in certain agencies in society. The seminary, *interacting with what happens in churches and agencies in society*, would be the better context for dealing with certain problems that beset those engaged in professional leadership. We can't get at these issues in the academy because there is almost no effective way to bring students and faculty from different program areas together to deal with them. It seems, in light of how difficult it is to change curriculum, that these experiences are happening through institutes and private initiatives created by faculty and students and other entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, these institutes and initiatives are developing without much real awareness that they could be part of an intentional 'ecology.' I could foresee that theological education will, in the future, take shape more and more in relation to these varied ventures 'on the fringe,' and that the seminary as we know it will gradually disappear.

WSF *Are you observing changes in the way theological schools are organizing their curricula?*

LC Curricular reform in higher education typically proceeds at a pace too glacial to be of much impact; and is too often derailed by faculty, administrative, and constituency interests. We are long past the day when a seminary can do all that's expected of it. The curriculum is glutted with programs, littered with degrees, stuck in an "instructional paradigm." It is likely that the pressure from congregations and society, and developments in distance learning, will force major changes such as the shift from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm, the recognition that learning is lifelong, and the internationalization of the curriculum. When this happens I think we will see some constructive models emerging in theological education. But to answer your question: Yes, some schools are experimenting with curricular reform. Some initiatives have to do with replacing older "field education" models, others with linking some courses with others (e.g., Greek and Hebrew exegesis with preaching), and so on.

WSF *Is anything changing in that other problematic area of curriculum development – credentialing – I mean, grades, degrees and so forth?*

LC I do wonder how much longer the perceived need for a degree and institutional credentialing will attract and hold students. Unfortunately, many students and faculty still look to the grade as the measure of their learning and teaching, and the credential as necessary. Information about assessment abounds, but is not taken seriously enough in theological institutions. In some places, portfolio assessment and problem-based learning are being used with great effectiveness; but these initiatives, long part of education generally, are not common in theological education.

WSF *Take a moment to speak to the fact that theological institutions are increasingly concerned about the spiritual formation of students.*

LC Pardon the cynicism, but Protestant evangelical seminaries tend to respond to this issue by adding a course to the curriculum. In some instances, even the addition of a course is resisted because, after all, how does one grade prayer!? The ‘forming’ language, especially where it is translated into a course or a slogan is problematic for me. The ATS Standards for North American seminaries define theological institutions as “communities of faith and learning.” Can we reasonably expect that such communities will develop spiritually through courses if institutional dynamics, attitudes, and practices counter what we say? How about the way we deal with those issues that divide us (academic vs professional, men vs women, different theological perspectives, different views on leadership and ministry, and so on)? These are the arenas where spirituality is challenged and matured. Let’s not talk about adding a spiritual formation emphasis to the curriculum, or writing it up as a slogan, until we have examined how we treat one another and deal with those issues that divide us.

WSF *What are the two or three most encouraging trends in theological education that you are observing?*

LC I would say that the increasing efforts toward more holistic models of theological education represent an encouraging trend. This holism can be described as learning experiences that take account of more than the cognitive – or even the practical; or as the effort to build consortia comprised of different organizations. For example, I will be involved in a meeting in Switzerland at the end of May where leaders from schools from many countries – all of which are accredited by agencies in their own countries – will discuss the feasibility of forming a unique PhD model – one that takes seriously the educational, intercultural, and theological tasks. The increasing resistance of international leaders and scholars to simply continuing patterns from the West is encouraging wherever I see it in the world. At first, it was resistance to anything Western and Westerners feeling that they had nothing more to contribute. Now it seems that there are increasing attempts to form international *partnerships* where we can learn *from one another* across international and cultural boundaries.

WSF *You are hopeful then that change can happen?*

LC In many ways, it is easier to believe that the waves of criticism will pass, and that time-honored structures and attitudes of higher education will prevail. But, change, however it proceeds, is inevitable. The question is will we take some responsibility in the processes of change, or will we be pushed aside by it?

WSF *What advice would you give to churches – such as those in our Consortium here is Knoxville – who want to provide a level of theological education to the people in their community?*

LC My concerns for any group of people or institutions who get together to offer something to others are twofold: First, we fail to involve the people we purport to serve in the process and gradually fall into a mode where we see ourselves teaching *them*. Second, the dangers that threaten the seminary will also infect churches that are concerned about “theological education for the whole people of God.” If churches believe that offering

theological education to laity and leaders is simply a matter of transferring the theological curriculum to churches, the same fragmentation and isolation of subjects, and people, will result. Similarly, if churches do not think through what it means to nurture *learning* communities, then we will soon be reading books about the crises and failures in church-based theological education!