

Supporting God's Communities: The Role of Theological Education

Daniel Bourdagné

*General Secretary
International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES)*

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A. Introduction

The theme of this meeting has interested me for more than one reason.

(1) I come from a part of the world where institutions for theological education are perceived as evangelical ghettos which not only are separated from the local churches, but also from the rest of the society. For many, studying theology has become the same thing as confining one's self to the warmth of a library and retreating into a specialized world known for its use of a barbaric language and concepts which are misunderstood by the ordinary Christian. So, studying theology has become reserved to initiates, to a restricted group of experts of the ecclesial community. Theological knowledge has become a source of power in the hands of a minority which dictates to the community what it can or cannot do.

If erudition often pushes us to explore things through concepts in order to obtain a precise meaning, it can however lead to a certain confinement. For the evangelical Christian, "theologizing" is primarily telling God to help the believers live an abundant life in Christ who "came that they may have life, and may have it in all in its fullness" (John 10.10b). Thus, when the theological institutions are isolated from the communities, the theologians, the pastors and the ministers who receive training in these schools come back with a head filled with knowledge, but sometimes with an empty heart. The programs are usually conceived in advance without taking into account the real needs of the church. It is usually a few experts who meet and decide on the programs, the scholastic level for the entry, the places and the costs of the training, often without any real dialogue with the people we want to serve. That is the reason why we often hear the communities assess these theological institutions, with a lot of irony, as being factories which produce graduates who are disconnected from reality. Often, the students leave their context, stay many years in the West and come back with a head full of knowledge which they cannot apply in their field of work. The churches end up being suspicious of the theologian and theology and reject everything about them. It's like throwing a baby out with the bath water. We assist at the multiplication of communities without theology, which can be destructive for the life of the church.

Fortunately, this is not the accepted vocation of theological education in our evangelical world. There is a clear demarcation and a constant effort to remember that theological education is and has to be for the church and to serve the latter. To forget this can lead to many deviations and can quickly weaken the church of God. Because when the theology catches a cold, the church dies.

(2) I am broaching this subject with the deep conviction that theological education is of capital importance today for the survival of the church of Jesus Christ. I grew up in a part of the world where Christianity is characterized by an exceptional numerical growth. It is now recognized and established that the missionary initiative of the 18th century has been a success because it has shifted the gravity centre of Christianity to the Southern countries: Africa, Latin America, Asia. So, it is in this part of the world that the fate of Christian faith is being played out. It is also obvious that the theology which counts and which will count is the one that is done where the Christians are. This goes to show just how important the challenge of maturity and rooting of the church is in this part of the world. God needs to see churches that emerge and grow, where the members live and manifest good spirituality, being deeply rooted, and whose correct understanding of the Scriptures helps them to grow and to look more and more like Christ and witness for him clearly without confusion. At a time when everybody notices the shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity to the southern countries, there is a danger for this part of the world which holds the future of Christianity in the world. That danger is to let a superficial Christianity develop which will progressively and maybe rapidly end up perverting itself because no longer a subversive religion. It will then transform itself into a populist Christianity, into a machine producing nominal Christians who have no impact on their time.

But this challenge does not exclusively concern the churches in the countries of the South. We also realize that the dechristianization observed in the western world is maybe the reflection of the decline of Christian faith which has become a religion that is non-subversive, non-pertinent and unattractive for the new society which is moulded by modernism and post-modernism and also conditioned by pernicious individualism. I notice that the biblical culture in the West in general and the western churches in particular is more and more peripheral and marginal. All of this leads us to the conclusion that the maturity of the church, the necessity of making disciples is a world challenge; thus, the importance of theological education today in a world that has become volatile, plural and global. Without a revitalization of theological education that responds to this new context, I am afraid the situation will worsen. Fortunately, we can count on the grace of God who is the Master of the harvest.

Unfortunately, theological education has been progressively subjected to the dictatorship of reason, self-governing and peremptory. It has been contaminated by the unbending zeal of the scholastic period, intoxicated by the arrogance of the Age of the Enlightenment and the ideologies that derived from that period, dominated as they were by the methodology of Aristotelian logic. It ended up cutting itself off from the ecclesial community it was supposed to serve and which in return could refresh it with the fervour of contextualized experience of real-life faith, by a community hermeneutic and by the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit. Theology has become purely intellectual and academic.

It has separated itself from the situation in the New Testament where theology started from the experience and the real-life faith. I truly believe that real-life faith precedes the dissertation when it comes to theology, because God always precedes the theologian and the theology. It is from that real-life experience, from this authentic meeting with the God of revelation that we become able to theologize rightly and clearly. Without this relation, our theology becomes pure speculation, and God is reduced to an idol we can carry, put down and carry again. The essential distinction between theology as a pure science and evangelical theology, one which can serve the church of God, is precisely at this level. Theology as a purely scientific discipline which is disconnected from the church theologizes a God idol which we can subjugate, analyze with criteria that are purely rational.

It is not surprising to note that in such institutions of theological education, actual experiences of faith such as prayer and meditation of the Scriptures are perceived as inappropriate. Life is often absent or cold. How can we theologize without starting to respond to God by prayer and adoration, which are the real appropriate human responses to the Grace of God the Creator? Evangelical theology must distinguish itself by starting from the actual experiences, by prayer and adoration which are authentic expressions of meeting with God. If theology is dying in the West, it is maybe precisely because it has become purely intellectual and academic, and so it has become lifeless. When theological education closes itself in a

lifeless world and cuts itself off from reality and from its ecclesial substratum which serves as a community centre for life and spiritual experiences, it is doomed to become perverted and to die. As a matter of fact, theology without community is dry and a community without theology starts to wander.

B. What should be the role of theological education in supporting churches?

When I was reading through the objectives and vocations of different institutions of evangelical theological training, I was happy to see that all had in common, at least in theory, *the concern to serve the church of the Living God by equipping the servants for the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ*. This vocation clearly outlined in the documents concerning the vision of the institutions of theological education goes to show just how much the service to the church is at the centre of their preoccupations. This concern for the church is an echo to the importance Jesus gives to his church (Matthew 16.18) whose responsibility it is to testify to him and to save souls for him (1 Peter 2.9-10; Philippians 2.15-16).

Someone summarized the role of theological education in the following terms:

- serve the mission of the church;
- to dialog with the other academic spheres;
- to establish dialogue with the society in general and the rest of the community in the larger sense in order to help it take conscience;
- serve as an instrument of adoration of God.

The list above is not exhaustive, but it reflects what should be the mandate of theological education. This mandate is not only missionary in its accompaniment of the church in its role as a presence to the world. It is also pastoral in its role to bring the word of God to the communities which are constantly invited to live rightly. It is prophetic in the sense that it helps the church through reflection and through being constantly put back on the right track in order to avoid the pitfalls of heresy. And finally it is apologetic in the sense that it provides the tools to help the church when it goes into a world often hostile to the gospel. The training of servants for the church has to take all these aspects into account. With all that has been said above, the mandate of supporting the church should be an integral one, in the sense that it integrates theological education not only as a science serving as an intellectual centre and a place of erudition for the church, but also as a place for direct support to the ministry by the training it should offer those who are in charge of the church and Christian institutions. The two poles, academic and direct support to the ministry should be held together in an integrated way.

Anyway, theological education must be oriented towards serving God, the church and the community in general. Theological education, whatever the level and degree of its complexity, should pursue supporting the church by equipping it, reforming it, helping it to always better understand the meaning of being a witness of the Lord in an ever changing world. To accomplish this role efficiently, theology needs a rigorous intellectual discipline and a well thought-out faith. That is the reason why theological teaching has to go beyond delivering diplomas. Not only should it aim at the transformation of persons (the students) in their totality, but also transformation of the entire ecclesiastic community. It should help mould the those in training to be concerned for the church, to love it and to serve it with humility. As a support to the ministry of the church, the teaching should not only aim at acquiring necessary cognitive knowledge, but should also contribute deeply to developing situational competences and character. Character and values are not shaped just by ingesting cognitive knowledge, but often through relationships, models of lifestyle, the openness towards the other, all of this with the blessing of God who, after all is said and done, is the one through whom everything is possible.

Such a vocation can only be correctly achieved when you are involved in a process of listening to what the church and the world we need to serve have to say. If the schools of theology are intent on serving the church, they have to maintain interactions with the churches in an intentional and permanent way.

C. The necessity of interaction between theological institutions and the church

(1) Interaction between the church and the institutions of theological education will create the space and the conditions for what I call *community hermeneutic*. In other words, it is the approach which consists in our appropriation, as an evangelical community, of the revelation which was given to be lived out within the active dynamics of the contextual and cultural changes. It is the community hermeneutic which allows us to validate the discoveries and the personal and collective experiences, through the action of the Holy Spirit and critical reason. It also allows us to experience in common our gifts and wisdom, to correct and rectify our wandering, to discern the dangers and the possible heresies. Maybe the Councils in the earlier centuries had this important vocation of a community hermeneutic in mind which is open to critical dialog, to enrichment and to maintaining creative tension between personal experiences and the necessity of community validation. It is true that theological magazines and publications, theological consultations and meetings such as this one, the diverse theological commissions, all give us today the possibility to maintain a certain community hermeneutic. But they are sometimes so specialized that the only ones participating in the dialogue are the specialists and the experts, who do not always fully represent the views of the community. Many of these specialists have isolated themselves from the community, sometimes because of the requirements of modern academics where efficiency is measured by the number of scientific publications. If we look back in history, during the first century of the Christian era, we realize that very rarely were great theologians disconnected from the real life of the community as is the case today with our experts, who are locked in the warmth of the libraries and held prisoners of the virtual data and connections that computers offer. Those who participated in the Councils almost always had a pastoral responsibility as bishops or pastors, and as such, they had constant contact with their respective communities. One could imagine that their theological elaboration took into account the realities and the concrete experiences of their ecclesiastical communities. Unfortunately, it is not always the case today because the gap between the community and the theological institutions tends to become wider, and theology has become hostage of the academic institutions which tend to reduce it to its scientific dimension without subjecting it to the necessity of actual experiences. Moreover, the constant fragmentation and the sectarianism of the institutions of theological education, the obvious denominationalism in the evangelical world, unfortunately do not contribute to a greater access to community hermeneutic.

However, I would like to outline here the danger that community hermeneutic can represent today. As a matter of fact, living in the era of postmodern ideology, community hermeneutic can easily slip and fall into postmodern hermeneutic. It is with reason that Vanhoozer declares that "postmodernism is the universal calling for all believers without a text to believe in". As a culture of interpretation, where every meaning is in the eye of the reader who has become an interpreter using the projections of his cultural influences, we run the risk of falling into the theological relativism which is characterized by a disconcerting pluralism. This can lead us to a situation where the theological orientation is simply dictated by the agenda of the moment, by the culture and by the spur of the moment. And yet we know that the needs we feel or express individually or even as a community are not always real needs. We also know that what we love or project as a fallen humanity is not always conformed to the will of God. The community project of Babel is a perfect illustration. Thus the necessity to be rooted in the Scriptures which is our guaranty against the possible and easy drifts which are a consequence of the ideologies of our time. It is within the context of an attachment to the Word which is rightly interpreted that we can appreciate the richness of the community and the relational approach.

However, this new situation is at the same time an opportunity for us, because at least it helps us to realize that theological truth is not purely rational and dry, exclusively dependant on self-governing reason, and that it cannot be the monopoly of theology as a science. It can also be apprehended by other ways such as intuitions and emotions. It brings forth the importance of history, relations, and in other words, the community in the process of acquiring knowledge of a personal and Trinitarian God. It

corrects the modern procedures which consider objective knowledge in absolute terms and the divinization of the person through an outrageous amplification of individualism. It puts a stop to the dictatorship of self-governing reason. It allows institutions and churches to be humble at all times and to subject themselves to mutual listening under the direction of the Spirit and the authority of God, in order to give God's people the necessary equipments for the full realization of their mandate in the world.

(2) Interaction between the church and the institutions of theological education also helps in identifying the real needs of the church. We are conscious that the service of churches does not mean there is a dilution of the prophetic mandate of institutions for theological training. As a matter of fact, the needs felt or expressed by the churches are not always the real ones. Sometimes, the needs are real but they are not well theorized. Sometimes the local church is so caught up in its situation that it neglects or forgets it is part of a universal family with contours that go way beyond the local identities. Its history and traditions are genetically related to the history and traditions more universal and ancient.

We are also witnesses of many of the inadequacies between programs conceived in the lab of theological institutions and exported without any concern for the community these programs are supposed to serve, programs which make the service of the institutions towards the churches insufficiently efficient and fruitful. It is within a constant interaction between the church and the theological institutions that both entities can be mutually enriched, and the latter can best serve and support the church in its mission. The positive tension in such an interaction is salutary for the renewal of both entities.

In order to better serve the communities and help them in their process of transformation, one needs to deeply understand the expressions of Christian presence in these communities, the different religious itineraries, their worldview. These things are not always obtained immediately. It is in the context of a relationship that makes an opening for dialogue in depth that it becomes possible to discern the real needs of the church and to conceive a training program which takes into account the real needs. The lack of interaction has often been responsible for putting in place programs that were not always very useful for the church.

In the case of the African church which I know best, the pastors trained in the theological institutions come back to the ministry with very little of the knowledge they will use in the daily management of their community. The competencies they acquire are either obsolete or inoperative in their situation. Quite often those returning lead the church not with what they learnt during their training in the faculty of theology or Bible school, but with what they learn as they go along, as if the training started at the end of the training when they start the pastoral ministry. For instance, as pastors they are called to lead, to manage the church, to settle family or even tribal conflicts, but rare are the structures of theological education that give enough weight to these aspects in their program of biblical and theological training.

I notice that, in the Christian experiences in Africa, the heaviness of traditional African religions goes through and through. If not, how can one understand that an African engineer trained in a German school would come and ask the pastor to come and impose hands on his new car? Isn't it because he is moulded by a particular worldview rooted in him, which determines his reflexes and religious orientations, including his interpretation of the spiritual world? But very few institutions of theological education in Africa have included the study of traditional African religions as an important part of their theological training. They rather spend time studying western thinkers and western theologians. As a consequence, the theology they do does not help them correctly respond to the needs of the members of African churches.

The necessary interaction between the church and the institutes of theological education can take many aspects. It must be intentional, formal and informal. Our experience in Ivory Coast a few years ago showed us that simple initiatives could help create a good environment for dialogue between the institutions and the church. We initiated, with the help of a few other persons, something we called *Forum for Theology for the Church*. Its vocation was to allow leaders of the church and of theological and

biblical institutions to talk to each other, to meet. We realized that it was easier if there were facilitators to help this dialogue succeed. Such an experience can help the churches be more conscious of the importance of theological training. On the other hand, it will help the institutions identify the real needs of the churches.

The needs of the church are not always only related to the content. In Africa, the classical institutions for theological training are very expensive. So they are inaccessible and remain elitist, in the sense that they are reserved to only a few privileged who can afford it. Sometimes, they are not available in the local languages, whereas the majority of believers do not use the colonial languages such as French, English or Spanish. Furthermore, the installation and the maintenance of these institutions require enormous amounts to be run (the buildings, the library, etc...), which the African churches are not always able to afford. And when these structures are financed from abroad, the latter tends to fix consciously or not the agendas and the academic orientations. Acting outside their agenda can lead to the rupture of the source of finance, even if the reform is motivated by a better service to the churches. Serving the church also means entering into dialogue with the communities to find acceptable solutions concerning the cost and the accessibility to theological education. For instance, how can you serve the churches of sub-Saharan francophone Africa, with more than twenty countries but less than ten theology faculties with an acceptable level? The consequence of this situation is that thousands of church leaders in Africa do not have basic theological education. The desire to serve should push the institutions of theological education in Africa to serve these churches through new initiatives which would certainly require a lot of creativity and a change of paradigm concerning theological training. That is the reason why churches appreciate new initiatives in theological training that are non-residential and that are quite flexible and affordable to the believers. These initiatives are rapidly becoming a source of appreciable support for the churches in Africa which thirst for theological education.

D. Which system of education for theological institutions serving the churches?

In order better to respond to the needs of communities, the content of the programs of theological institutions should leave space for a certain flexibility and creativity. The content of the programs needs to be defined by taking into account not only the necessary cognitive knowledge but also the situational competencies. The standard type of classical theological training does not respond well to specific and contextual needs of the communities because the needs are not universal. The churches expect the trained persons to come back being competent in their role within their communities and able to help them grow concerning their testimony and their commitment. They want to see people who possess creativity and adaptability, able to reflect on the courses of their actions and to make constant necessary adjustments. Living in a world which is fluid and ever changing, the training programs need to prepare the servants to take themselves in charge, to be creative in order to facilitate the life dynamic in their community. Already, in the secular world, the pedagogical approach is becoming more and more sensitive to a training oriented towards situational competencies. The pedagogical methods tend to change drastically because we realize that the classical educational approach is inefficient for good service to communities.

The conception of classical training programs which can be schematized like the following (diagram 1) maybe has the advantage of offering a certain security, because organization holds the first place. But it does not fully take into account the constant variations of situations. Products of such systems seem to be unhelpful for the church communities.

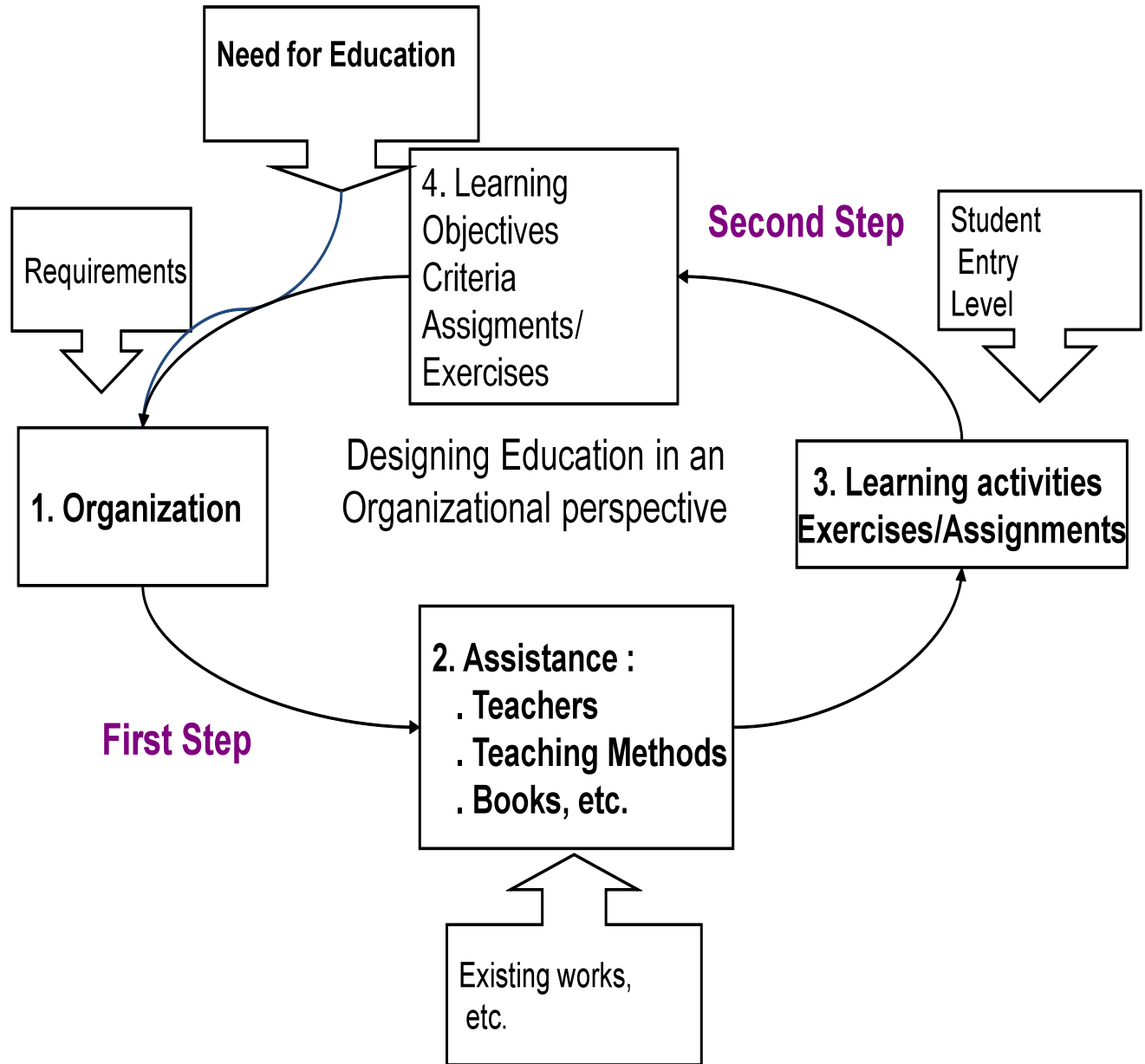


Diagram 1: Designing a classical Education System

I suggest a more dynamic approach where the situations of the communities are taken into account and integrated in the various needs of fundamental cognitive knowledge that a theological education needs, as diagram 2 illustrates:

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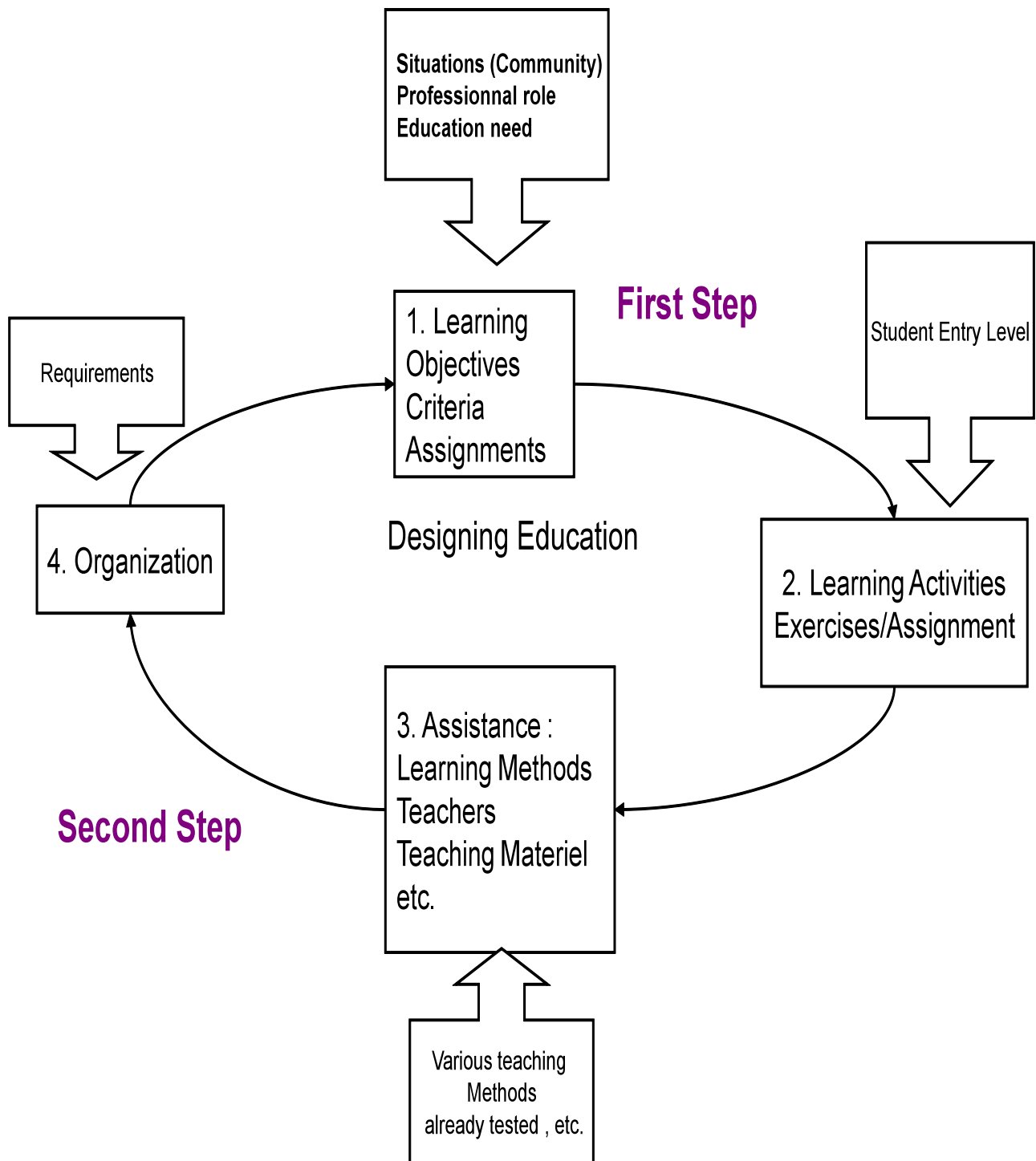


Diagram 2: Designing an Education System which takes into account the needs of communities

E. Conclusion

We are living in an era where theological education has to resolutely serve the communities of God to better equip them, to help them reform in order to be able to face the new challenges our society presents. The communities need not feel alone, but accompanied by the institutions of theological education, given the fact that they are called to respond to new challenges. To do so, theological institutions are encouraged to revisit their first and essential vocation which is to belong to the church and to serve it. And this can be fully lived out only through the perspective of a close knit relationship and constant dialogue with the churches.