

Serving Contextual Communities: The Bond Model

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This year I taught an intensive course at the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Cairo, Egypt, on the book of Proverbs and Arabic wisdom and how to employ them to have impact in our churches and societies.

One evening I took a walk on the streets surrounding the seminary. On my left, I passed by the Italian hospital, the Greek hospital, then Ain Shams hospital and couple of private medical practices. On the other side, there were several military sites, including the main training site for watchdogs and drug dogs! During my time in Cairo the war on Gaza was still blazing with homes being destroyed and civilians being wounded and killed. I thought how much the children of Palestine and Israel are in need to live healthy and secure lives.

As I walked around I reflected on the location of the seminary in the context of health (hospitals) and security (military sites) and thought of how this seminary for more than 146 years has been bringing hope, health, and security to the people of Egypt. I thought of my 65 enthusiastic students and their zeal to proclaim the gospel of peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness to their fellow citizens.

Are our seminaries conscious that they are functioning in societies that have various crucial needs? Are our educational systems and curricula geared towards meeting these needs? How are we equipping our students and future leaders to face the communities that are affected by war, poverty, disorder, and disaster? These are some of the issues that I will attempt to address now.

My talk is in two parts. In the first part, I would like to discuss four issues related to serving contextual communities. In the second part, I am suggesting practical ways on how to be more effective in serving contextual communities.

A. Serving contextual communities: The issues

1. The church's primary mission

What is the primary mission of the church? I am aware that this is an old question, but it is important to start with it due to its foundational nature and practical implications. To sum up, there are four main positions in response to this question: a. the primary mission of the church is to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ and to reach out to the lost; b. the primary mission of the church is to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ, but its secondary mission is to address the social needs; c. the primary mission of the church is to address the social needs of society as an expression of working out the gospel (liberation theology); and d. the primary mission of the church is to advance the gospel and to care for the social needs. We often use the verse, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Mt. 9: 38), in order to point to the need of having workers - meaning preachers, pastors, teachers, and

evangelists. However, in many cases we overlook the context of this verse. Here is its context: "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. **Then he said** to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Mt. 9: 35-38, emphasis added). We are asked to pray for workers who reflect the model of the preaching and social ministry of Jesus.

It is noteworthy to observe in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah how the restoration of the community in all its aspects was done hand in hand with the restoration of the community's relationship with YHWH.

The Lausanne Covenant has put it well when it affirms:

Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless ***we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.*** For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ (emphasis added).¹

It is my conviction that unless theological institutions are convinced of the "one Christian duty" they will remain ineffective and inefficient in serving contextual communities.

2. Seminary-church borders

What, however, has a seminary to do with social action? Is it not the ministry of the *church* to take care of issues of justice, human rights, and poverty?

I have one memory as a child crossing the Lebanese border into Syria with my parents; my heart was beating rapidly due to fear and uncertainty of what would happen next. As I approach age fifty, I thought I would be over this by now, but such is not the case. In some countries of the Middle East or North Africa, I still have rapid heartbeats as I cross borders!

I have met presidents of theological institutions whose heart rate increases, as they fear crossing the borders between the seminary and the church. Such fears could lead the seminary to avoid engagement in serving contextual communities, thinking that this is purely the church's domain.

We have often cut a sharp divide between the respective roles of the seminary and the church. We want to be certain that the seminary does not usurp the church's role and that the church does not interfere with what the seminary is doing. This sharp dichotomy is unrealistic for both pragmatic and conceptual reasons. It is valid whenever the seminary does not regard itself as an institution that exists to serve and equip the church, or when the church sees no need for theological education. The seminary and the church should be interdependent and exercise partnership in all matters related to their respective missions.²

3. The 'invisible' seminary

I am not here speaking about those invisible and virtual seminaries where one can obtain a Doctorate in Divinity, a Doctorate in Biblical Studies and History, and a Ph.D. in Trauma Psychology based on a ten-day experience! I am talking here of a different kind of invisibility.

In one of my courses on non-profit management, I asked the students to find out how much their seminary is visible in its community. My surprise was not to hear from them that the seminary was indeed almost invisible, but even more that the students did not think that a visible seminary was important. According

to the Auburn Study Center, “Seminaries are virtually invisible to leaders of secular organizations and institutions, even those in the seminary’s own city and region.”³ Timothy Weber adds: “Most civic leaders do not understand what seminaries do and they do not view them as either civic or educational assets in the community.”⁴ The situation is worse when the seminary is not even visible within its constituency or denomination!

I was delighted to see at this consultation the presence of Micah Network and Jubilee Center in the Expo corner, but I hope to see in the future more of such presence and active participation.

If the seminary is invisible, then it is difficult to be engaged in serving contextual communities. The communities neither know much about the relevance of the seminary to their needs, nor is the seminary certain that it could be of benefit to these communities.

4. Strategic planning

Strategic planning is defined as “a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it.”⁵ It is beyond the scope of this talk to discuss the importance and process of strategic planning for theological institutions.⁶

Unfortunately, many institutions “function” without a strategic plan. However, other institutions that have active strategic plans are inefficient in serving their contextual communities, because community service has not been reflected in the core values, SWOT analysis (mainly external needs assessment), priorities, goals and objectives of their strategic plan.

It is noteworthy here that “Cultural Appropriateness” is the first of the twelve values in ICETE’s *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education*. Cultural appropriateness means that “training is referenced to the traditions, conditions and need in the local society, and is responsive to shifts in social norms and values.”⁷

B. Serving contextual communities: A way forward

Before I suggest ways to foster service to contextual communities, I would like to share with you some good news from various theological institutions that are serving their communities.⁸

1. The good news

Health: In Africa today 10 Overseas Council International (OCI) partner seminaries have courses on HIV/AIDS, two of them offer masters degrees in the subject in order to equip ministers to be more effective. ESSA, in South Africa started a separate organization to train local congregations in the care of ill and dying AIDS sufferers. To date about 130 congregations have been trained and 40 projects have been started.

Conflict: Since 2007 Asia Graduate School of Theology in co-operation with Peacemakers Ministries, USA, is offering a Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Peacemaking. In Africa, twelve seminaries now teach the Peacemakers material. A seminary in Western Kenya got involved in the inter-tribal conflict (over grazing land) in the Mt Elgon region and even petitioned the State President to intervene. During the war on Gaza strip, Bethlehem Bible College in the West Bank initiated a fundraising campaign to help the war victims in Gaza. The Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon, hosted and served a wave of refugees during the 2006 summer war.

Community care: The Central American Theological Seminary (CATS) in Guatemala celebrates this year its 80th anniversary. CATS has a current enrollment of 1,175 students. One of its emphases is reaching the

community through innovative programs, such as: The Bread and Chocolate Ministry that reaches out to drug addicts, and The Strength of the Fragile Ones, a ministry caring for young men and women of special needs, including Down syndrome. Chapel programs have been held to help CATS' students better understand the life of these young people, who in turn do volunteer work for the seminary.

Through its Counseling Center, students and graduates of the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology (CGST) in Jamaica conduct workshops on such topics as positive parenting and grief management to inner city families.

Poverty: An increasing number of seminaries in Africa now offer courses and even complete tracks in Community Development. A seminary in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has bought a 45-hectare farm to teach fishing, forestry and farming and in the first year had 500 people sign up. They sent a group of students out to a village to do 'participatory community development'. As a result, the community got organized and built 17 houses. This has led to the conversion of 5 Muslims!

Students and graduates from the Evangelical Seminary for Pastoral Education (ESEPA) in Costa Rica minister to abused and unemployed single mothers. The women are trained to develop small businesses while receiving emotional, spiritual and psychological support as well.

We praise God for this good news, but the needs are enormous. We need to keep on finding ways to foster our service to contextual communities.

2. The Bond model

Yes! It is the Bond model, Bond as in Bond, James Bond! In his creative and interesting DVD, *Imagine how we can reach the UK*,⁹ Mark Greene, Executive Director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, refers to James Bond in a church context. Greene enumerates Bond's characteristics: courageous, persevering, resourceful, decisive, patriotic, strong, agile, multi-skilled, intelligent, witty, cultured, and honest. We desire these characteristics for our students, our seminaries, and ourselves! However, for Bond to act efficiently he needed four things. He needed to be briefed, trained, resourced, and supported. I would like to use the Bond model in reference to theological education as it relates to serving contextual communities.

a. Briefed

Bond was first briefed and well informed. He knew the story of where he is going and what to do. Daniel Aleshire writes: "[The communities of faith need] pastors and teachers who know the story, who have learned a theological wisdom pertaining to responsible life of faith, and who are capable of leading communities in pursuit of God's vision for the human family."¹⁰

Briefing our seminary students depends to a larger degree on the curriculum that we adopt in our seminaries. I discuss briefly the organizing principle, content, and outcome of our curricula.

- *The organizing principle*

Linda Cannell writes: "The congregation conceived as the organizing principle for the curriculum would necessitate new decisions with regard to educational strategy." She argues that theological education should focus on the church's identity, nature and purpose.¹¹ I would add that in addition to the church, the society has to be seen as another organizing principle for the curriculum.

A major issue in not having the church and society as the organizing principle for the curriculum is due to the absence of indigenous textbooks and books that address the social needs of a given society. It has

been pointed out by Lee Wanak that Erickson's 1300 pages *Evangelical Theology* has two pages on poverty, three pages on justice (justice of God), and six pages on healing!¹² The need is to develop contextualized theology books written by national theologians is crucial, hence the need for faculty members who do research and write. With the support of Langham Partnership International (Literature Department), the first ever volume of 534 pages on contemporary Arab theology was published in Arabic in 2007.¹³ It is my hope that more books and textbooks would continue to appear in many countries and languages to enable the society to be an organizing principle.

- *Content*

The China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong offers a course entitled "The Gospel and the Hong Kong Society". The students are made aware of the involvements and participation that the Church has made and continues to make to our society in the areas of education, social service, medical care, relief and development.

For seminaries to serve their communities better and to train effective leaders there is a need to have a paradigm shift in the courses that the seminaries offer. It is good, but insufficient to have one or two courses on community development or social engagement. There should be a way to integrate the concepts of social ministry into other courses. An interdisciplinary approach is very much needed. Seminaries need to focus on courses that touch life realities.¹⁴ Interdisciplinary courses that are based on the requirements of the Torah for a just society, or on the prophetic books particularly Amos, or books of everyday wisdom like Proverbs should take priority in the selection of the curriculum content.

- *Problem-based learning (PBL)*¹⁵

In today's circles of higher education there is a strong emphasis on learning outcomes where there is a shift "from the traditional teacher-centered or institution-centered perspective" to a learner-centered approach.¹⁶ In his unique *Manfredian* way, Manfred Kohl writes: "It is time for our curricula to be based on what is needed for the graduate to enter, or to continue, his ministry, rather than on the hobbies of professors based on their own dissertations and research."¹⁷ The briefing of seminary students should aim to develop the necessary attitudes and skills to be able to face the social issues that he or she will encounter in the ministry.

b. Trained

An Eastern European theologian once suggested that: "if we train Christians to serve society they will be better prepared to serve the church."¹⁸ Effective training to serve contextual communities needs to be done inside and outside the seminary.

Inside the seminary, it is achieved when students see their faculty as a model in practice and research.

- *Faculty as practitioners*

During my study at Regent College, Vancouver I was impressed with one of my Old Testament professors. He was a gifted teacher, superb in Hebrew and in Old Testament theology. But that did not impress me much! What impressed me the most was his engagement in serving the poor and the homeless in downtown Vancouver during evenings and weekends. I was impressed to see my friend, Paul Sanders, ICETE's International Director, devoting his energy to co-found, *TAHADDI*, a humanitarian organization that serves the refugees in one of the poorest areas of Lebanon. For many years, I was directing a German-Lebanese humanitarian organization and at the same time, teaching Old Testament studies at the seminary in Lebanon. To understand the humanitarian and social needs in the light of Old Testament

theology and to communicate this to my students was such a rewarding challenge and an enriching experience!

My point is not to see our faculty becoming executive directors of social organizations, but their engagement in such actions will be reflected positively in the life and ministry of their peers, seminaries, churches, and students.

- *Faculty as researchers and writers*

The seminary should encourage and support its faculty to research and write on issues related to serving communities. Moreover, faculty members need to encourage their students to do likewise.

In August 2006, a joint conference between the European Christian Environment Network (ECEN) and the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Prague resulted in the publication of an excellent guide for seminaries and universities on the place of environmental theology.¹⁹

However, I do not think that faculty members should only write academic books on such and other related issues, but also popular books and articles in newspapers and magazines. Publications that could be read, understood, and put into practice by members of society to motivate them to be more actively engaged in ministering to their communities. This is not an easy task! According to Daniel Aleshire, one of the major threats to proper research is the communication of research written in technical language to nonscholarly audiences.²⁰ Having written a technical book that was published by Brill Academic Publishers in 1999, I am still trying to find a way to write on the same topic to be understood by the man or woman in the pew or on the street. However, with practice, patience, and experience this can and needs to be done.

- *Revisiting our internship practice*

“Theory without correction from practice risks irrelevance; practice without correction from theory risks narrow vision and inconsistency.”²¹ As for training outside the seminary, there should be a review of the practice of internships to focus more intentionally on serving communities.

The German “dual system” of vocational training even at a high school level is based on dividing the weekdays between theory and practice. Half of the week is devoted to training in outside workshops or factories.

Students of the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong spend 6 weeks of their summer after their first year to serve as interns in local churches that run community centers. They are able to get in touch with people outside the church on Sunday and understand better the needs of the community.

c. Resourced

James Bond was resourced with innovative and creative inventions to carry his mission forward. Creative inventions in the seminary could be books, e-resources, but most importantly new and creative ideas. FIET Theological Institute in Argentina is training prison inmates to be pastors in order to lead and disciple other inmates in the Christian faith (400 trained in 2008). *Community Children's Library BINCO* is a program of the University Foundation Biblical Seminary of Colombia that aims to foster and promote reading in the community. From 2005 to 2009, the BINCO program has done 22,838 visits to the children of the community.

Overseas Council International (OCI) values in its partner schools holistic ministry that addresses both spiritual and physical/emotional needs of society in proper balance. As a way of resourcing seminaries to

serve their communities, OCI has recently asked its partner seminaries to propose “Compassionate Care Projects” for funding by an OCI donor foundation.

d. Supported

The task of theological education does not end; it commences every day as it takes various phases. The commencement exercises that we enjoy at the end of each academic year are a reminder to us of the fact that unlike degrees, education is never done.

It has been 13 years since I completed my PhD as a Langham scholar. Even after these years I still feel the support of Langham International Partnership whether through regular communication, encouraging messages, personal touch, the writers’ program, and not to forget the thirty pounds book grant every year!

I do hope that graduated students of our seminaries will have such support from their seminaries as they engage in serving their communities. The Central American Theological Seminary (CATS) in Guatemala has the Pastor’s Monday ministry that draws together 230 pastors to receive a practical course in ministry or theology. There is a need to be proactive in developing lifelong learning processes to empower graduates “to move in and out of higher education throughout their lives for different purposes.”²²

C. Conclusion

The road of serving our contextual communities is not easy. It requires hard work, time and resources investment, and perseverance. The task seems to be a daunting one.

However, any seminary is able to start somewhere even in a modest way.

In the movie *Akeelah and the Bee* we meet an eleven-year-old girl, Akeelah Anderson, who is discovered to have a talent for words. In spite of the objections of her mother, she enters a spelling contest. Her gift takes her to compete in the National Spelling Bee, the most famous competition of its kind. In the following clip a teacher, Dr. Larabee, explains to Akeelah that she *can spell any big word if she learns the meanings of small words*. Please watch this... (02.09 min.).

(after the clip)

**Changing the world... one word at a time.
Serving contextual communities... one step at a time.
You’ll be a champion in serving contextual communities!
Are you ready?**

¹ <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>. Retrieved on September 18, 2009.

² On the relation between theological education and the church see, for example, D. Werner, “Challenges and Opportunities in Theological Education in the 21st Century: Pointers for a new international debate on theological education.” Edinburgh 2010 – International study group on theological education. World Study Report 2009. September 9, 2009, p. 6; L. Cannell, *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church* (Newburgh, IN: EDCOT Press, 2006), pp. 102-24.

³ See E. Lynn and B. G. Wheeler, *Missing Connections: Public Perceptions of Theological Education and Religious Leadership*, Auburn Studies, no. 6 (New York, NY: Auburn Theological Seminary, September 1999), pp. 4-5.

⁴ T. P. Webber, “The Seminaries and the Churches: Looking for New Relationships.” *Theological Education*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2008), p. 72.

⁵ J. M. Bryson, *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995, 2004), p. x.

⁶ For a good treatment see, for example, S. Hardy, "Strategic Planning for Theological Education." In M. W. Kohl & A. N. Lal Senanayake, eds., *Educating for Tomorrow: Theological Leadership for the Asian Context* (Bangalore: SAIACS/ Indianapolis: Overseas Council International, 2002), pp. 50-64; D. L. Tiede, D. Draper, & W. Yates, "The President's Role in Defining Mission and Strategic Planning." In G. D. Lewis & L. H. Weems, Jr., *A Handbook for Seminary Presidents* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 59-71.

⁷ R. W. Ferris, *Renewal in Theological Education: Strategies for Change* (Wheaton: Billy Graham Center, 1990), p. 34.

⁸ This news comes from my team, International Partnerships of Overseas Council (www.overseas.org).

⁹ Published by The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. London. 2006, 2nd edition 2007.

¹⁰ D. O. Aleshire, "Making Haste Slowly: Celebrating the Future of Theological Schools." *Theological Education*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2008), p. 9.

¹¹ L. Cannell, "When the Future Asks Our Name." *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*. Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, April 16-18, 2009, p. 10.

¹² L. Wanak, "Theological Education and the Role of Teachers in the Twenty-first Century: A Look at the Asia Pacific Region." In M. W. Kohl & A. N. Lal Senanayake, eds., *Educating for Tomorrow: Theological Leadership for the Asian Context* (Bangalore: SAIACS/ Indianapolis: Overseas Council International, 2002) p. 168.

¹³ A. Zaki, ed., *Towards a Contemporary Arab Theology* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa, 2007) [Arabic]. I contributed a chapter on the understanding of covenant in a Middle Eastern context.

¹⁴ A good example is The Evangelical Missions Center (EMC) in Viçosa, Brazil, an interdenominational mission-training institute that seeks to offer students a solid theological and missiological formation with an emphasis on contextual realities at a national and cross-cultural level.

¹⁵ For a good treatment of this theme see, H. Madueme and L. Cannell, "Problem Based Learning and the Master of Divinity Program." *Theological Education*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2007), pp. 47-59.

¹⁶ *BOLOGNA beyond 2010: Report on the development of the European Higher Education Area*. Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference, 28-29 April 2009. Published by Vlaamse overhead and Education and Culture DG, 2009, p. 15.

¹⁷ M. W. Kohl, "Theological Education: What Needs to Be Changed." In M. W. Kohl & A. N. Lal Senanayake, eds., *Educating for Tomorrow: Theological Leadership for the Asian Context* (Bangalore: SAIACS/ Indianapolis: Overseas Council International, 2002), p. 33.

¹⁸ Quoted in L. Cannell, *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church* (Newburgh, IN: EDCOT Press, 2006), p. 269.

¹⁹ J. Weaver and M. R. Hodson, *The Place of Environmental Theology: A Guide for seminaries, colleges and universities* (Oxford/Prague: Whitley Trust, UK & International Baptist Theological Seminary).

²⁰ D. O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 77-8.

²¹ C. Barrigar, "Whither Academics? Wither Academics?" In M. W. Kohl & A. N. Lal Senanayake, eds., *Educating for Tomorrow: Theological Leadership for the Asian Context* (Bangalore: SAIACS/ Indianapolis: Overseas Council International), 2002, p. 157.

²² *BOLOGNA beyond 2010: Report on the development of the European Higher Education Area*. Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference, 28-29 April 2009. Published by Vlaamse overhead and Education and Culture DG, 2009, p. 11.