

Theological education, spiritual formation and leadership development in Africa: What does God have to do with it?

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Theological education, spiritual formation and leadership are all contested issues in the Church, especially within the African context. Although these topics are thoroughly discussed, the relation and the interdependence are not always clear. This article discusses these topics in relation to each other and in relation to the One who calls servant leaders to guide his church for her service in the world. The importance of the local church as missional church is emphasised in the article. Thus, what the faith community believes and teaches about God determines our ecclesiology, theological education and leadership. What does God have to do with theological education, spiritual formation and leadership development in Africa? The answer is everything! The article used a literary study to research the relationship between the different topics and the church and concluded that dependence exists between them.

Contribution: Much is written on theological education in Africa. However, students come into theological education with an already established spirituality formed by other agents. The article contributes to the discussion about the relation between formal theological, spiritual formation and leadership. It emphasises the relation between the theological institution and the local church.

Keywords: theological education; missional church; spiritual formation; leadership; Africa.

Introduction

Paas (2018:1) reflected on a succinct statement made by Bill Hybels: 'the local church is the hope of the world. And its future rests primarily in the hands of its leaders'. He then continues to say that this focus on leadership is mobilisation rhetoric rather than good theology. Unfortunately, I am of the opinion that much of this mobilisation rhetoric is functioning (in the church), on the continent of Africa and beyond, without any attention being given to the calling of leaders. For this reason, this article attends to the following question: what does God have to do with it? Some theological principles will be discussed in relation to leadership and spiritual formation, which will bring us to theological education.

By now it is well known that the centrality of Christianity has moved from the north and the west to the global south. Many publications refer to the exponential growth of Christianity in Africa and that it currently forms the centre of Christianity (Tarantal 2020:1). Some authors are more positive than others about Christianity in Africa (Tarantal 2020:1–5). Some talk about Christianity in Africa, which is a mile wide and an inch deep, maybe because of the mobilisation rhetoric or maybe we also speak of the social rhetoric. The question that needs to be asked is this: what criteria are we using when pronouncements like this are made? In my opinion the main concern is that there is a lack of formal theological education in Africa that links with the spiritual formation of Christian leadership. This is clear from the fact that 85% of all church leaders on the African continent have no formal theological education. On the other hand, this might be one of the main reasons for the rapid increase in church growth or growth of Christianity, because it flourishes through the witness of the laity. At least, we also need to acknowledge that there are many sect and cult leaders who involve and misuse their followers in sexual misconduct and money-making schemes.

Paas (2018) argued that leadership is a contested issue in the church all over the world. Most people involved in mission in some way or another will agree that human leadership is

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crucial in the *missio Dei* [mission of God]. Many people who are negative or suspicious about leadership in the church relate to the associations of 'leadership' with power, domination and corruption. This is even more true within some African countries (Tarantal 2020:2–5). This immediately brings to the fore the following question: how do we define a leader? Niemandt (2013:51–55) makes a clear case that a missional leader is nothing other than a disciple or a follower of Jesus Christ. A missional leader is not in control; she or he is a follower of Christ, who is the only head of the church. Remember the first words of Jesus to his disciples: 'Follow me'. Jesus was not looking for leaders but followers. True discipleship is a life of *diaconia* [service] and sacrifice from a faith community *on behalf* of the world. Missional leaders are called to be obedient (to the Lord Jesus Christ) and not to be successful.

How then would we define a church? The simplest definition of a church can be found in Matthew 18:20: 'for where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them'. Niemandt (2013:17) used the proverb: 'what you see is what you get'. He then argues that this is also true of the church. We are picking the fruits of our views of the church. As 'the church *does* what the church *is*, and we *organise* what the church *does*' (Niemandt 2013:17, italics in the original). Living on a continent that is well known for its farming communities, the metaphor of the shepherd looking after his sheep, feeding and taking care of them, is one of the most memorable metaphors for church ministry and leadership. Looking at Matthew 18:20, the church is more than an institution; it is a movement of followers gathering in Jesus' name and acting on behalf of the world. The problem with the mentioned metaphor of the shepherd is that it may no longer refer to *one* leader – except if that one leader refers to the Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Otherwise, every follower is called to be a shepherd in this world, especially with all the challenges the world is facing. If a church has only one shepherd – the pastor or leader – that needs to attend to everything, she or he is not able to take care of anyone, and more problematically, how does the church then care for those who are living in the world? We must find a new way or other ways to be church and talk about leadership in the church. The effect, in many instances, is that we evangelise the church and take care of the world, instead of taking care of our brothers and sisters and evangelising the world through words and deeds.

This brings us to the next question: where does the church learn and teach? This is a short overview of the problem the global church is facing and particularly the church in Africa. We will now attend to the following topics: theological education, missional church, spiritual formation and leadership.

Theological education

What does God have to do with theological education?

Let my teaching fall like rain
And my words descend like dew,

Like showers on new grass,
Like abundant rain on tender plants. (Dt 32:2)

This article only focuses on formal theological education and its relation to spiritual formation in (South) Africa. Formal theological education takes place at different higher education institutions (HEIs), such as public universities, seminaries, Bible colleges and even Bible schools. At the different institutions, the academic level of theological education differs, and so does spiritual formation. However, we must acknowledge that people are busy with theological and spiritual formation throughout life, in families, schools, congregations, peer groups and society at large (Naidoo 2012:9). When people enter formal theological education institutions, they do not enter as clean slates. They already have preconceived theological views from a spirituality formed through the different influences in their lives. These preconceived theological ideas will influence the choice for or against a specific theological institution the student chooses, because theological institutions, although ecumenical, are mostly deeply rooted in local and denominational subcultures with general outlooks on other living faiths, race, gender and socio-economical views. Students, churches and denominations realise that theological education at a specific theological institution will either confirm and/or change the student's current spirituality because it is part and parcel of spiritual formation. With some denominations, especially Pentecostal and indigenous churches, it is this fear that the spirituality of the student will change if she or he is theologically trained. This prevents them from having any formal theological training from any theological institute formally accredited with higher education (HE).

Naidoo (2012:10) identified at least three different expressions of institutions that provide theological education. The first is theological education at a public university. In Africa, many of these public universities may also be called Christian universities, presenting courses as is performed at any other public university, such as, for example, humanities. Interestingly enough, some of these Christian universities do not have a Faculty of Theology or even Religious Studies. In South Africa, it was not until 1997 with the implementation of the Higher Education Act that theological faculties and institutions were challenged to shape their programmes to comply with the law of the country (Dunsmuir & McCoy 2015:27). Public universities are (now) open for those who qualify academically, because their focus is on developing critical and research-based scholarship.

[I]n this context theological studies are not necessarily equated with theological belief; there may be little advocacy for particular stances and there may be neither specific requirement nor expectation of a commitment to the belief system being studied on the part of either student or teacher. (Naidoo 2012:10)

Although the student's spirituality will be influenced by what she or he studies, no attention is given to spiritual formation or development by the institution.

[T]he question arises: Is a programme leading to a qualification in theology able to both fit this framework [*higher education*]

and to meet the requirements of preparing people for ministry roles? (Dunsmuir & McCoy 2015:30)

However, at the South African universities with faculties of theology where the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions train their students, the lectures are complemented with devotional formation practices on campus in agreement with the faculties, but these are run and performed by the different denominations themselves. This is known as 'church own' training.

Second is theological training at a theological college or seminary. Usually these are owned and managed by a denomination or interdenominational churches. The training is mostly directed at church leadership for full-time ministry in a congregation or local Christian community. The emphasis of theological education at these institutions is not necessarily academically focused but to equip students professionally and vocationally. Where training at these institutions is residential, spiritual formation is usually part of the official programme.

Third is theological education at Bible schools or colleges. These include a wide range owned by denominations or congregations, or they are private schools or colleges. Theological education at these institutions focuses on training people for lay ministry or believers who want to be better equipped to integrate their faith into everyday life. Bible schools or colleges usually run their programmes through an extension learning programme.

Burger and Nell (2012:20–24) discuss the following points as important to theological training with a focus on ministerial formation: ministerial skills, spiritual formation, contextuality and curriculum. The importance of theological education was emphasised by four major ecumenical gatherings between 2010 and 2013 with the close awareness that the church is in dire need of new forms of theological education. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced institutions and churches to resort to new forms of theological education, which are mostly online. However, Cape Town 2010 clearly states that theological education must be intentionally missional 'since its [theological education] place within the academy is not an end in itself, but to serve the mission of the Church in the world' (Niemandt & Pillay 2013:44). The conference continues to ask for a 'missional audit' of curricula, structures and ethos to make sure it complies with the challenges and opportunities of the church within different contexts. The World Council of Churches (WCC) formulated the following common convictions of theological education (Niemandt & Pillay 2013:45):

- The basis of theological education is studying the Bible as the word of God.
- There is a need for a multitude of different contextualised forms of theological education.
- Church, Christian mission and theological education are inseparably interlinked, and there is a deep solidarity between theological education and Christian churches.

- Theological education is an ecumenical task of all Christian churches together.
- Mission-minded theological education needs to have a concern for children's ministries and children's theology.

The WCC's (2013) discussion on theological education emphasised the importance of leadership, which led to the rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers. This clearly relates to the discussion of the different theological training institutions as mentioned above. Leadership will be revisited in a later section of this article.

All the theological institutions who survived COVID-19 made use of some form of electronic-based education, whether online or via mobile phones. COVID-19 has also changed the way in which spiritual formation was presented at the different institutions (Knoetze 2022; Smith 2021). For the context of this article, we will now focus on theological institutions that are registered with accredited programmes at HE.

Spiritual formation

What does God have to do with spiritual formation?

Therefore, I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed', and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor 12:3)

Spiritual formation is a contested issue in theological education discussions, but with the different definitions of spiritual formation this is not unexpected (Hoffman 2015). What is referred to in this article as spiritual formation is not only the formation that is taking place when information is conveyed, although this is a clear indication that spirituality is an integral part of theological education. This article understands spiritual formation 'as the intentional providing of opportunities to deepen the spiritual journey of students (and faculty) through the integration of the intellectual, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of life' (Hoffman 2015:87). One of the questions regarding this understanding of spiritual formation is who must take responsibility for this? Is it the HEI? Is it the denomination the student is from? Is it the individual lecturers? Is it the student himself or herself?

Hoffman (2015:89–95) groups the contestations of spiritual formation into four categories, namely conceptual, institutional, operational and communal. Discussing the conceptual issues, she observed the importance of whether more attention will be given to the human or the divine aspect of the process, because this will establish the conceptualisation of spiritual formation. Another important factor is to remember that students come to theological studies not as clean slates but with an already established spirituality formed by their household, school and congregation, etc. It must also be remembered that spiritual formation will not be completed during theological education because it is a life-long process. With these few remarks we must

also temper our expectations of what theological education can achieve regarding spiritual formation. However, if we conceptualise spiritual formation as important to theological education, we need to include it in the curriculum.

Being aware that the Department of Higher Education expects curricula to attend to Work Integrated Learning (WIL) credits in modules presented, I would argue that it is possible to include some form of spiritual formation in all the different modules. This is based on the principle that spiritual formation also takes place through theological information.

In the secular day and age we live in, the debate of whether theological education must take place at public universities is held in almost all denominations. In the book *A Critical Engagement with Theological Education in Africa* (eds. Knoetze & Brunson 2021), this is argued from different denominations and different contexts. In South Africa, theological education takes place at public universities, seminaries and Bible schools. In other parts of Africa, there are many Christian universities without any theological education or faculty, which according to my understanding function as public universities. An example is Daystar University in Kenya. However, each of the different institutions has its own challenges towards spiritual formation. At the institutional level of the university, there must be an understanding that rigorous theology can only be performed within the context of 'a love affair with God and his community', which will influence the rigour of the discipline (Hoffman 2015:91). Thus, there must be an 'institutional will' to participate in the spiritual formation during theological education, as it will intensify the student's learning experience. As such, intentionality in spiritual formation is non-negotiable. Hoffman (2015:91) raised the question: 'Is it possible to think about a "generic spiritual formation"?' In the light of the pluralistic society, with all the different denominations, I would at least argue for an 'ecumenical spirituality'. But 'ecumenical spirituality' will only contribute to the enhanced learning experience of a student when the sending church – as institution – participates in ecumenical relations within her specific context. Spiritual formation is not only the responsibility of the theological institution, but also the different institutions to which the student belongs (see Knoetze 2020) and more specifically, the local church. When classroom-based (in)formation is not backed by congregation-based formation, even the best theological curricula will be wasted. Much critique is received from churches in Africa about universities and seminaries that produce well-skilled 'theologians' who are clueless when it comes to congregational ministry. This is one of the results when students attend theological institutions but do not participate in any church ministries. This emphasised the importance of the involvement of the church as an institution in theological education and spiritual formation.

When there is an agreement on the importance of spiritual formation, the question remains how this must be operationalised within the student's theological education. There are indeed many ways that spiritual formation can take place within the academic curriculum; for example, written assignments can help to connect knowledge and application, service learning (SL) or WIL credits in a module and through mentor–mentee relations. An important question is whether the academics at theological institutions are suitable mentors. As HEIs have certain requirements for academics and spiritual formation is not one of them, the question remains whether academics are suitably equipped to act as spiritual mentors. It is also true that there are many theological educators at HEIs who never served as ministers in congregations. At HEIs, the work performance of lecturers focuses on research and teaching responsibilities. Is it fair to expect them to do the spiritual formation of students, or is it the responsibility of the denomination? If spiritual formation forms part of theological education, how is it measured, and what would the purpose of measuring be? HEIs only award academic qualifications; so, in that sense, the responsibility for the assessment of spiritual formation must be with the denomination. The implication is that a student might receive a theological degree, but his or her denomination might still find him or her unfit for the ministry because of a lack of spiritual maturity.

One of the most important aspects of spiritual formation is relationships. The Trinitarian God we serve is a relational God who exists for and in communion with himself and with the whole of creation. Spiritual formation can only happen in communion with God, the church and creation. Therefore, one of the aspects that needs further deliberation regarding spiritual formation is the place of informal education and the church's own education, as we find with the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa is running its church-own education parallel to the academic curriculum at the HEI. Focusing on the importance of the faith community, we will now attend to the missional church.

The missional church¹

What does God have to do with the missional church?

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pt 2:9–10)

The church is in a barrage. The church faces distinctive challenges in diverse contexts. Within the developed world context, the church is challenged by secularisation and the *intelligentsia*. From the majority world context, especially in Africa, the church is challenged by decolonisation and indigenous theologies. These challenges force the church to

1. The purpose of this section is not to give a full description of what the missional church is, but rather to describe the church I had in mind writing about theological education and leadership.

continuously reform and go back to its origin: the Trinitarian God. The biggest challenge to the church is to be aware of what God is busy doing in the world, so that they may participate in the *missio Dei*, declaring the praises of him who called them out of darkness.

As the church is God's chosen people, the identity of the church is not found in her calling or in her faith or in her members but in the merciful being of God himself. Therefore, it is not strange that many of the metaphors used for the church link them directly to God: 'body of Christ', 'bride of Christ', 'people of God' etc. It is generally accepted that God is a missionary God (Bosch 1991; Wright 2006) who is actively involved in all that is happening with and around us, for example, globalisation (Myers 2017). As such, God's church does not have a mission; God's mission has a church. 'Mission as an essential "being" of the Church has not yet been properly recognised' (Kirk 1999:20, italics in original). If God is a missional God, then God's church is a missional church. The book of 1 Peter calls us strangers in this world, and Paas (2019) contended that we are pilgrims and priests. The missional church does not belong to this world, but it acts on behalf of this world. With this understanding of the church, the question that arises is: What kind of leaders do we need?

Leadership

What does God have to do with leadership?

Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'. (Mk 10:42-45)

We need leaders who can help communities to sustain themselves and 'move forward', whatever this may mean. This is also in line with Niemandt (2013:17) who stated: '[T]he church *does* what the church *is*, and we *organise* what the church *does*' (italics in the original). This organising of 'what the church does' requires a continuous process of action-reflection-action. The church identifies its challenges and then enquires to try and understand the causes; this enquiring includes the people and systems involved in these challenges. Thereafter, the church organises an action to address the responsible entity. Theological education needs to develop leaders with these 'soft' skills to help (faith) communities to discover and notice the presence and the work of God in the community.

Therefore, theological education must equip leaders with the following skills: *networking* – build relationships and trust; *coalition building* – address community needs identified by the people; *action-reflection-action* – use a dynamic continuous learning process to understand and address the current context, being aware of what worked or did not work in the past; *leadership empowerment* – as local leaders emerge and

gain respect, they need to be empowered through training; *birth of community* – when issues are addressed successfully, it builds trust and a sense of community emerges (Myers 2011:254).

The missional church needs leaders who can develop and build faith communities. One important aspect of this process is the development and creation of power for the powerless. Although development and creation of power (empowerment) is essential, it may never be the final purpose of building (faith) communities. Therefore, the well-known slogan 'power to the people' is not a biblical concept either, for the poor or the nonpoor or the powerful or the powerless, because ultimately all power belongs to God (Myers 2011:255).

Myers (2011) argued:

The focus on power leads to the most serious weakness of community organizing; that is, its effectiveness is derived from setting one group within a community over and against another group. This confrontational, win-lose approach, while often successful in the short term, can work against sustainability, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. (p. 255)

In the light of the given remarks, let's do a quick *action-reflection-action* exercise. At Edinburgh in 1910, the church and mission societies viewed themselves as a triumphant army who were going to conquer the world, but then World War I happened and later World War II, and the church became 'softer'. No longer viewing themselves as a conqueror of the world but as part of the broken world, as salt and as light, they reflected on their own part in the brokenness (see Knoetze 2017). However, in many local contexts, we find that church leaders still have a confrontational style and win-lose approach, especially regarding evangelism, which might be successful in the short term, but it does not contribute to sustainable building of the kingdom of God with a clear focus on reconciliation and peacebuilding. Niemandt (2013:51) made an important remark when he said that the essence and identity of the church – the missional community – determines the purpose and effectiveness of the church and the leadership in the church. Therefore, the importance of the local (faith) community and the presence of God amongst them and in their society is the determining factor for leadership in a specific context. The question is not where the leader or the faith community wants to go; leadership is not taking people places. Instead, leadership is helping faith communities and societies to discern the presence of God and his actions amongst them and in their context and then leading them to obediently participate in what God is already doing.

Conclusion

To recap, the title of this article is: 'Theological education, spiritual formation and leadership development in Africa: What does God have to do with it?' It was argued that almost every concept in the title is a contested issue, especially in Africa where theology, the church and leadership are burdened with colonialism. However, if we accept that there

is a direct link between spirituality and leadership, I will argue that African spirituality (oppose to Christian spirituality) is also a burden to church leadership in Africa. One example may be the absolute authoritarian leadership style of some church leaders. As such, the article wants to draw attention to the importance of spiritual formation, which can be part of theological education but is first and foremost done by the local faith community. It is also the local faith community who determines what theological qualification is needed for pastors within the church. Thus, what the faith community believes and teaches about God determines our ecclesiology, theological education and leadership. What does God have to do with theological education, spiritual formation and leadership development in Africa? The answer is everything!

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters. (Ps 24:1)

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