

**The challenges of theological education in the  
Assemblies of God, Nigeria:  
A critical analysis**

*Williams O. Mbamalu*<sup>1</sup>  
Faculty of Theology, North-West University,  
Potchefstroom Campus, Potchefstroom, South Africa

*Abstract*

The establishment of Bible institutions by the Assemblies of God, Nigeria (AGN) is based on the immediately felt needs of its clerics. This Pentecostal denomination still struggles with the perception of theological education as the seedbed for the renewal of churches and the intellectual development of its clerics. Evidently, the three tiers of the theological programmes of the AGN, that is, the diploma and the bachelors and master's degrees in theology, lack cohesive curriculum articulation. This article argues that the AGN's style of theological education is ontologically based on old knowledge organisation, largely influenced by centuries of ingrown and inbred Pentecostal academic tradition that discourages the heuristic intercourse of charisma with academic institutions. The article argues that the problem of curriculum articulation in the AGN's theological education is responsible for the educational crisis currently besieging the church. The article suggests that the AGN needs a critical rethinking of its theological education programme to compel a redefinition of its twenty-year-old vision and mission in theological education.

**Introduction**

The growth of the Assemblies of God, Nigeria (henceforth identified as the AGN) during the Decade of Harvest (1990–2000) is without a doubt one of the most dramatic developments of the Church in West Africa. From a small, exclusive movement in the early 1940s, the church has grown to be a signi-

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<sup>1</sup> Williams Onwuka Mbamalu is an extraordinary lecturer at the Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, Republic of South Africa. Email: mbamalu\_christethics@hotmail.com.

ficant Pentecostal denomination in West Africa. In spite of this phenomenal growth, the future of the church in terms of its theological education calls for a renewal. The AGN Bible schools were established by expatriate missionaries. With the exit of expatriate missionaries, the church is faced with the challenges of charting the path of its own theological education for training future generations. The article engages with the historical background, the AGN's Education Department, AGN and theological education before and after the Decade of Harvest, the functions of the AGN's Education Board and the AGN's politicisation of academic certificates, and makes conclusions and recommendations.

### A brief historical background

The Pentecostal churches are ubiquitous and have adherents in all parts of the world, of which the largest denomination is the Assemblies of God, with more than a million members in the USA.<sup>2</sup> The USA General Council of the Assemblies of God was formed in April 1914 in Hot Springs, Arkansas, as a result of a grass-roots Pentecostal movement designed to effectively fulfil the Great Commission of Matthew 28.<sup>3</sup> In the Assemblies of God (henceforth the AG), USA, "activities overseas depended almost entirely on individual initiative of the missionary"; this situation made it possible for William L. Shirer from Ghana to join Everett Phillipson to open AG missions in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> The AG foreign mission policy with respect to an indigenous church model was the *indoctrination* of converts called to minister to their natives.<sup>5</sup>

The AGN was founded between 1931 and 1935 – barely 17 years after the AG in the USA was established. The AGN started when a group of young men in Old Umuahia, in the then Eastern Region of Nigeria, through reading Pentecostal Evangel magazines published by the American AG literature department, became motivated to seek baptism in the Holy Spirit. They received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by the speaking in tongues as they fasted and prayed to have the experience. From that point, they established some churches that went by the name "Church of Jesus Christ" (CJC). By 1939, they invited American AG missionaries from Ghana as mentors. Modalities of affiliation were finalised and the CJC accepted a

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert J. Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission: A Panoramic View of Missions from Pentecost to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 148.

<sup>3</sup> Gary B. McGee, *This Gospel Shall Be Preached: A History and Theology of Assemblies of God Foreign Missions to 1959* (Spring Field, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1986), 13.

<sup>4</sup> McGee, 146.

<sup>5</sup> McGee, 149. See Maynard L. Ketcham, *Pentecost in the Ganges Delta: Being an Account of the Birth and Development of the Assemblies of God Mission Work in Bengal, India*. It is pertinent to note the following keywords in Ketcham's letter quoted above: "indoctrinate" and "a call to minister", both of which point to an entry qualification to Bible School – are you called?" – the philosophy of Bible School training – "indoctrination".

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change of name and became the AGN. Why did the CJC not struggle to carve a niche for its own existence but instead went on to affiliate with the American AG? What implications did their choice of affiliation have for future generations' theological education and leadership? Answers to these questions revolve round Nigerians' perception of "the doctrine of white superiority".<sup>6</sup> Duncan's and Kalu's insight was that the hostility posed by mission churches to indigenous efforts made the need for foreign assistance an imperative.<sup>7</sup> This perhaps explains why foreign missionaries acted as General Superintendent (GS) of the AGN from 1939 to 1960.<sup>8</sup>

The AGN affirmed a three-fold mission statement which defines the reasons for its existence to be (1) an agency for the evangelisation of the world;<sup>9</sup> (2) a corporate body in which man<sup>10</sup> [*sic*] may worship God; (3) a channel of God's purpose to build a body of saints being perfected in the image of his Son. In this regard, the AGN's reason for being links to its functions, which are to (1) develop, promote and co-ordinate the various programmes of the AGN; (2) provide information, training through seminars, workshops, conferences or conventions, rallies, et cetera; and (3) monitor, evaluate and improve on various operations and components of the church to make them more efficient.<sup>11</sup> What is the implication of these affirmations for the AGN's education programme? How and why?

The *how* retrieves the AGN's laid-down conceptual world views and traditions,<sup>12</sup> which are responsible for its lax in erecting educational institutions along its charismatic expressions and visibilities. The AGN operates

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<sup>6</sup> James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan Graham and Kalu Ogbu, "Bakuzufu: Revival Movements and Indigenous Appropriation in African Christianity," in *African Christianity: An African Story*, edited by Kalu Ogbu (Pretoria: Department of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005), 278–307.

<sup>8</sup> The list of foreign missionaries that served as General Superintendent of the AGN are in this order: Reverends Williams Lloyd Shirer, Everett Philips, Clarence Goudie, Elmer Frink, Rex Jackson, Harry Pennington and Robert Carlson. See R. I. Ebuade, *Evangelism in Assemblies of God, Nigeria: Past, Present and Future* (Nigeria: Darling D Services, 2004), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 1<sup>8</sup>; Matthew 28<sup>19-20</sup>; Mark 16<sup>15-16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> (1 Corinthians 12<sup>13</sup>) Pentecostal male-centred epistemology remains a social malady that has not received reformed hermeneutical interpretation in African theology, especially in Nigeria where cultural male dominance is not separated from biblical theology and homiletics. The social language, written or spoken among Pentecostals, especially in Africa, has been observed to be gender insensitive and inclined to look at social and other realities from a male-centred view point.

<sup>11</sup> Assemblies of God, Nigeria, *Current Facts* (Enugu: Donze Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Pertinent traditional issues in the AGN are polygamy, head covering, women using make-up and wearing necklaces, earrings and trousers in public and church settings, education and philosophy, etc. In this regard, the AGN is divided into two: the traditional and the modern worshippers. The General Council's pronouncement on most of these issues, except polygamy, was that it should be left to individual discretion.

rigid doctrinal orthodoxy and ordained hierarchy quite indifferent to advanced theological education of its clergy. It is a state of affairs that needs a revolutionary paradigm shift. Thomas Kuhn, in his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, argues that scientific advancement is not evolutionary but rather a “series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolution” and that in those revolutions “one conceptual world view is replaced by another”.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, the AGN’s rigid pragmatic orthodoxy and ordained hierarchy tend to resist any anticipated revolutionary approach to remedy the crisis in its education sector. In short, the AGN has not taken seriously the fundamental ontological and epistemological commitment at the base of its constitution.<sup>14</sup> The present situation calls for a redefinition and revisiting of the AGN’s entire ministry philosophy. The revisiting of a programme actually suggests a change and the term “change” implies a transition from the old to the new, the obscure to the familiar, and this involves risk ... if it is hoped that something new must emerge. If there is openness towards a desired change, then something that was good and meaningful and traditional in its own time and place must completely give way.<sup>15</sup>

In this regard and given the context for change to take place, the general framework of the systemic and arid intellectual disposition of the AGN towards theological education must be analysed. This is because Pentecostals dread theology, for “the clergy will more naturally describe themselves as ‘in the ministry’ than ‘in theology’”.<sup>16</sup> As far as theological education is concerned, the future of the AGN remains *uncertain and ambiguous because without a strong theological foundation, the church is bound to evolve in other directions*.<sup>17</sup> This ambiguity stems from the fact that from inception, the AGN disregarded secular education in philosophy and social engagements, all of which flowed from theology. From inception, the AGN did not overtly emphasise theological training and academic qualifications. The church was never known as a theologically minded denomination –

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Constitution here speaks of the strength, vitality and health of the AGN as an entity situated in a context.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Lwaminda, “The Teaching of Theology and Philosophy within the Realities of Africa” in *Doing Theology and Philosophy in the African Context*, edited by Luke G. Mlilo and Nathanaël Y. Sodédé (Frankfurt: IKO – Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2003), 7–23. One may not fully subscribe to such keywords as “experimentation” and “trial and error” as it is dehumanising to apply all of these to human emotions and intellects in any field of human or scientific investigation.

<sup>16</sup> Russell P. Spittler, “Scripture and the Theological Enterprise: View from a Big Canoe” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, edited by Robert K. Johnson (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 56–77.

<sup>17</sup> William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 9.

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although it practises its theologies critically. This lack of emphasis on theological qualifications among Pentecostals to reach an advanced level in theology is a phenomenon which McCain aptly illustrated from personal experience:

I have been teaching Pentecostal students for the past 23 years. I currently teach on an adjunct basis at both West Africa Theological Seminary, Lagos (WATS) and Evangel Theological Seminary, Jos (ETS), both of whom enroll primarily Pentecostal students. I have found them to be very eager students and often very good students but as a general rule, I have found them to have less general knowledge about theology and hermeneutics, in particular, than their counterparts in the mainstream churches. Because of this limitation, there is a tendency within Pentecostal churches to preach textual sermons in which the preacher focuses on just one phrase of Scripture.<sup>18</sup>

The validity of McCain's experience rests on the fact that the choice of ministry formation and orientation normally begins in the seminary. It is in the Bible school that the educational and moral character of ministers and, by proxy, their congregations are formed and shaped. If the Bible school is theologically deficient, its graduates most likely remain theologically deficient and the church's knowledge of the Bible and Christian ethics suffers the crisis of maintaining a solid rationale for their belief and practice. Very often church growth translates into growth in the number of candidates entering Bible schools for ministry training. This statement appears hypothetical, but it yields the ground to stand and critically investigate the basic foundations of the AGN's theological institutions from the prism of the church's growth during and after the Decade of Harvest, 1990–2000.

**The AGN and theological education before and after the Decade of Harvest (DOH)**

The AGN is traditionally structured from the local churches, the sections, areas and districts to the General Council. Within these, there are varieties of polity that stress limited local autonomy of churches and allow local districts to elect their superintendents who oversee a certain number of churches. Foreign missionaries that mentored the AGN's growth discouraged secular and advanced theological education. A church member could be excom-

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<sup>18</sup> Danny McCain, "'Us and Them': Pentecostal and Other Challenges and Learning from Each Other" (unpublished paper presented at the Theological Education in Africa Conference, Jos, TCNN, 2011), 16.

municated for attempting to further his or her education. Attending any secular school for higher education was regarded as a sure sign that such a Christian has backslidden and was no longer fit to preach the Gospel of God's Kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

The disruptive aftermath of the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970 and the various military regimes (1967–1979, 1984–1999) that ruined the national economy forced people in Nigeria to seek for a redefinition of their spiritual and material lives. It was during these periods that prosperity gospel preaching began to flourish in Nigeria. The Pentecostals quite fitted in the front burner of such ministries through preaching deliverance messages and physical healing services in all places. The General Council of the AGN in its vision of church growth planned the evangelisation of Nigeria from 1990 to 2000 – a period of ten years in which Christ may have physically returned to earth.<sup>20</sup> The Assemblies of God worldwide teamed up with like-minded evangelicals to declare the period 1990–2000 as the Decade of Harvest. The tempo of the time resembled the declaration of a full-scale war and the slogan that characterised the evangelistic actions of the time was:

What is the target? It is the whole world. It is the tribal world, the world of the poor, the world of Islam, the Buddhist world and the Hindu world, the world of the nominal Christian, the urban world, the world of the deaf and the blind and the sick, and the world of the very young. Most specifically, it is the world of those peoples who have never heard the gospel enough to make a decision for Christ.<sup>21</sup>

To key into this overarching target during the Decade of Harvest, the AGN's specific target was to convert 5 000 000 people and to establish national AG churches in 30 African countries.<sup>22</sup>

In 1988 the General Council of the AGN was constitutionally due to elect its General Superintendent with other officials to form a new Executive Council. The incumbent, Rev Matthew Ezeigbo, retired as the General Superintendent of the AGN and precisely on 18 May 1988 Rev Dr Charles O. Osueke, former General Council Evangelist, was elected General Superinten-

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<sup>19</sup> Mike N. Mbe, *The History of Assemblies of God in Northern/Central Senatorial Districts of Cross River State, Nigeria* (Kaduna: Sayka Printing and Publishing, 2013), 45–46.

<sup>20</sup> See Reuben Ezemadu, ed., *Towards the Evangelisation of Nigeria by AD 2000 and Beyond* (Ibadan: Nigeria Evangelical Missions Association and The AD 2000 Movement (Nigeria), 1990), 191–203.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Wang, ed., *Countdown to AD 2000: The Official Compendium of the Global Consultation on World Evangelisation by AD 2000 and Beyond* (Pasadena, CA: AD 2000 Movement/William Carey Library, 1989), vii.

<sup>22</sup> Assemblies of God, Nigeria, *Current Facts*, 27. Apparently, the list did not include the establishment of theological institutions of higher education and training for AGN clergy.

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dent of the AGN. It was during Osueke's time that AGN churches nationwide began to experience the influx of educated Nigerians into AG churches. The AGN became much more open towards and collaborative with other churches by extending the right hand of fellowship to a large number of neo-Pentecostals and other evangelical churches and their leaders for partnerships and participation in the Decade of Harvest in Africa. These positive overtures to other churches were in strict acknowledgement of the worldwide vision of the Decade of Harvest, which was tagged *Towards 2000: A time for the participation of all*, with the call:

World evangelisation by the year 2000 will require the commitment of denominational leaders, para-church executives, mission agency leaders, and theological educators. In addition, the training and participation of churches, pastors, young people, women, and lay people will be needed.<sup>23</sup>

The Decade of Harvest was officially inaugurated nationwide and worldwide in 1990. Osueke spearheaded the mobilisation of 150 000 Christians who were trained to form a Prayer Force nationwide. A media department was established with six divisions: the press, publications, bookshops, radio/TV, public relations and resource centres. As observed, nothing about the upgrading and expansion of theological institutions was part of the DOH programme. The evangelistic mode of operation was highly aggressive and within ten years (1990–2000), the AGN gained 1.2 million new members, ordained 5 026 new pastors and established 4 044 new churches in Nigeria alone.<sup>24</sup> At present, the AGN has a population of 2.6 million adherents and members worshipping in over 14 300 churches in Nigeria. Consequently, and as a result of the astronomical population growth of the church, courtesy of the Decade of Harvest, the General Council of the AGN was overwhelmed by the crisis of qualified teachers, pastors and space. There were few trained theological educators to give vital directives to the church on the educational administration before and after the Decade of Harvest as not many AGN ministers actually possessed BA/BTh degrees.

It is pertinent to recall that the 1970s and the 1980s were periods in which neo-Pentecostal churches adapted and amplified their churches' structure and programmes from the organisational manual of the AGN. In short, they innovatively modernised most of the AGN's organisational structural plans and mission mandates, and their present established structures emerged from these.<sup>25</sup> For a church to boast having theologians

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<sup>23</sup> Wang, vii.

<sup>24</sup> Available at <http://www.pastornet.net.au/renewal/journal16/16hGlobal.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Almost all the mainstream and neo-Pentecostal churches have moved on to establish their own universities, which do not have departments of theology: Redeemer's University for

and theological educators, it must have seminaries that run master's and doctorate programmes in missiology, systematic theology, divinity, ecclesiastical sciences, education, et cetera. The AGN nationwide did not have theologians with advanced theological qualifications and the expertise to design a postgraduate degree curriculum that engages different levels of study. It soon became obvious that the church needed to accommodate and train educators and administrators at the highest theological level to meet the demands of the rapidly growing Nigerian literate and educated converts now pouring into AGN churches. The challenges associated with establishing graduate seminaries defy the usual pneumatic imagination of leaders that "the Holy Spirit will overtake the church's inadequacies and inefficiencies" even when all rational indices point to an acute poverty of knowledge coupled with abysmal relegation of the human intellect to reasonably plan for the future. What provokes scholarly research is the AGN's lack of adequate planning for the future theological education of its young emerging intellectuals.

Two reasons could be offered for the AGN's lack of planning for future expansion during and after the Decade of Harvest. Firstly, the AGN did not fully understand the dynamics of the centre-periphery relationship<sup>26</sup> in the socio-economic development of the urban environment in relation to church mission and seminary establishment. This lack of a centre-periphery relationship has been exemplified over the years in the AGN's symbolic accommodation of its church buildings in the periphery of cities and in corners behind someone's block industry. Secondly, the AGN did not have an informed and effective department of education and experts to guide it in

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RCCG, established in 2005; Covenant University for Winner's Chapel; Joseph Ayo Babalola University for Christ Apostolic Church; Benson Idahosa University for Church of God Mission; BOWEN University for the Baptist Convention, established in 2002; Babcock University for the Seventh Day Adventist; Bingham University for Evangelical Churches of West Africa, ECWA; Crawford University for the Apostolic Faith Mission; and so many others belonging to the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion. It is pathetic that the AGN which established its first theological institution (AGDS) in 1940, eight years before Nigeria's first university in Ibadan was established in 1948, opened the gates of its university, Evangel University, to students in 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Klaus Nürnberger has discussed the structure of the global system from the perspective of causes of economic discrepancies and noted that the centre is a concentration of economic power and the periphery is its relatively powerless and remote surroundings. Knowledge of the centre and periphery dynamics cannot be overemphasised in any church's entire existence and mission. The Assemblies of God from the outset concentrated all its mission efforts and church establishments in the periphery. It was during the Decade of Harvest that the church saw the need to maintain its presence in the centre. However, the dividends of maintaining its presence in the centre have been too little because the Assemblies of God did not have highly trained theologians and ministers to meet the intellectual needs of the educated elites who live in the centres. See Klaus Nürnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty: Managing the Approaching Crisis* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999) and Klaus Nürnberger, *Beyond Marx and Market: Outcomes of a Century of Economic Experimentation* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1998).

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matters of theological education. The Education Department failed to serve as the counselling organ of the church by furnishing the office of the General Superintendent and the Executive Council with vital information regarding academic quality control, the general philosophy of theological institutions and the desired quality of its products for the church and society. Furthermore, the Education Department was subsumed under the busy office of the General Secretary who doubles as the chairman of the Education Board.

A national director of education was appointed to work under and report to the chairman on matters of education. This type of arrangement is like the proverbial man who functions as the drummer, the dancer and the judge of his choreography.<sup>27</sup> During this period, the Education Department suffered general neglect and became politicised from the beginning of Dr Osueke's tenure and beyond. The main reason for this phenomenon was Dr Osueke's *laissez-faire* leadership approach in almost all departments of the church administration. This leadership style left some political space for the Education Department to manipulate educational issues without censorship from affected AGN stakeholders.<sup>28</sup> The issue raised here will be revisited anon.

#### **The AGN's Education Department and Bible school organisation**

The objective of theological education or any education worth the name is to seek to develop to the fullest the physical, mental and spiritual personality of the student. Education empowers individuals with specific skills required by any organisation, church or field of demand, so that the main mechanism for developing human skills and knowledge is indexed on education.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, education is the fundamental basis and cornerstone of any development programme of the church. Seen from personal and church perspectives, theological education targets the whole person who is able to acquire knowledge and exercise the ability to reason and make a sound judgement. The problem that has always confronted the AGN is the lethargy to differentiate literate clergy from educated clergy, and literacy from education. This assertion is supported by the fact that the AGN has always maintained a fundamentalist position on its theological training based only on the ability to read

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<sup>27</sup> The General Secretary is a member of the Executive Council and could by all means defend and justify identified aberrations within the Education Department brought before the Executive Council. The Director of Education could bypass the General Secretary's office and take instructions from the General Superintendent on serious matters such as the transfer of teachers. Thus the department became deeply politicised so that the Director of Education and the chairman of the Education Board operated at variance and at the expense of the church's education programme.

<sup>28</sup> The AGN did not have a consultation committee of educators to advise it on the curriculum development of its seminaries. The church suffers acute shortage of trained theologians.

<sup>29</sup> World Bank, *Education and Development* (New York: World Bank, 2008).

scripts without the proper educational training to interpret the scripts. Elizabeth B. Keefe and Susan R. Copeland remarked: "How literacy is defined affects the classroom instruction, community services, and the literacy opportunities offered to students and adults."<sup>30</sup> In this regard, the philosophy of AGN Bible schools from inception has been to help students develop the ability to read and write, and acquire physical skills to work in the ministry of the church.

Paulo Freire's view of literacy is at once practical and all-encompassing, one that moves from a strict decoding and reproducing of language to issues of economics, health and sustainable development.<sup>31</sup> The literacy rate in the AGN is a good measurement of the overall intellectual capital of the organisation and the foundation on which an edifice of sound education may securely be built. But at the same time it serves as a huge superstructure on which abysmal ignorance may be erected.<sup>32</sup> In this regard, the truly educated person is open-minded and willing to reconsider, and equipped with the skill to interpret, analyse, evaluate, explain and make inferences.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, the AGN's type of theological training produces a large population of literate clergy indoctrinated to view things only fundamentally regardless of truth and facts. This is actually a form of programming, not education.

Recourse is often made to expatriate missionaries who designed the AGN Bible schools' curricula, moderated and headed most of its theological institutions. From 1939 to the late 1970s, few nationals in the AGN were able to earn first-degree certificates in Bible and Theology. The American AG mission established two degree-awarding institutions in Africa: the West Africa Advanced Theological Seminary (WAST) in Lomé, Togo and the East Africa School of Theology (EAST) in Nairobi, Kenya. Travelling to these countries to study for the BA degree was possible only for district superintendents and those politically connected to the General Council executives. Woefully, most of those officially sponsored to attend WAST in Lomé for BA studies or to go to the USA to obtain a master's degree returned home to

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth B. Keefe and Susan R. Copeland, "Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities," 36(3 & 4), (2011): 92-99.

<sup>31</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra B. Ramos (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Obafemi Awolowo, *Voice of Reason. Selected Speeches of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*, vol. 1 (Akure: Fagbamigbe Publishers, 1981), 163. The AGN's perpetual theological and Christian education problems are locatable in the quality and the kind of "education" or "literacy" its ministers receive in Bible schools. When a charismatic person with little learning rises through the ranks to a leadership position, he ignores all the indices of education because those were not instrumental in his becoming a top leader in the organisation. Under such administration, the educated are perceived as threats, and in most cases the leadership comprises, in terms of educated minds, leaders who maintain an ambivalent position on theological education and spirituality.

<sup>33</sup> Peter A. Facione, *The Delphi Report: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction* (California: The California Academic Press, 1990).

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run for elective offices. Quite a few, from personal volition or by default,<sup>34</sup> moved to teach in AGN Bible schools. From 1940 till the 1980s, all AG Bible schools in Nigeria functioned as institutions awarding a three-year diploma. The implication for the church was that for this entire period, the AGN had a majority of its serving ministers with only a diploma in theology. The Assemblies of God Divinity School (AGDS), which was established in 1940, started its degree programme in 1984, that is, 44 years later. This foremost AGN theological institution had produced the majority of the members of the General Council which is the highest decision-making organ of the AGN in matters of education and church governance. It was, therefore, a difficult and draining task beyond the cognitive level of these leaders to cogitate the establishment of seminaries awarding a standard first degree and a master's degree for the national church cognisant of their ontology<sup>35</sup> and epistemology.<sup>36</sup> Conscious of this glaring inadequacy, the national church often declined to appoint expatriate missionaries to design and head its theological education programmes.

By the time expatriate missionaries serving under the AGN left the country owing to incessant political problems in Nigeria, AGN seminaries began to affiliate their programmes with state and federal secular universities. In 1996, the AGDS started a four-year degree programme affiliated with the University of Uyo. Graduates from this programme could now proceed to any university within the federation for an MA in non-theological disciplines. No public university in Nigeria offers academic degrees in theology. With the introduction and proliferation of affiliation with universities, the AGN began to compound its existing altered patterns of theological training for its clergy. Quite a number of AGN pastors have begun to obtain postgraduate university qualifications that are not relevant to the important practical needs of church ministry and mission. Hard to explain is the AGN's state of ambivalence towards the worldwide AG's Global University which offers theological programmes from certificate to doctorate level. It is important for education researchers to find out why the AGN's Education Department accepts secular degrees as the standard qualification to teach at theological institutions. Most events in the Nigerian society introduce parallel crises in the AGN's search to

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<sup>34</sup> In most cases, when an incumbent minister fails a district election to a leadership position, the Education Department contingently moves such a fellow to a Bible school as a teacher. This has not augured well for Bible schools and students, as most of these church leaders were never prepared, trained or ready to make positive academic impacts on students and faculty.

<sup>35</sup> The AGN's ontology refers to the internal reality of its subjective experience viz its anti-intellectual stance in matters of education and learning, impelled by a self-appropriated pneumatic interpretation of the world based on indoctrination received in the Bible schools.

<sup>36</sup> The AGN's epistemology, in this regard, simply refers to their knowledge of the world and how that knowledge was received. It has been established that knowledge passed in the Bible schools tended towards indoctrination rather than education of the clergy.

identify its evangelistic task; hence the church often replicates a sufficient measure of the complexities of the Nigerian nation.<sup>37</sup>

For example, institutions of higher education in Nigeria are often confronted with numerous complex challenges that manifest in decreasing quality and inflexibility in course selection. The AGN lacks qualified theologians to make informed decisions about theological education within the framework of the philosophical, epistemological, ecclesiological and missional destiny of the church in a volatile global and national context. In opting to affiliate its theological institutions with distressed Nigerian universities, the Education Department demonstrates an intentional refusal to take seriously the deplorable state of Nigeria's lowly place of higher education among national priorities.

According to the current web ranking of universities by Webometrics, the University of Benin, the first Nigerian university, is 31st in Africa and 2 485th in the world, followed by the University of Ibadan which is 45th in Africa and 3 215th in the world ... Curiously, the first five universities in Africa ... are all based in South Africa and among the first 750 in the world.<sup>38</sup>

Why is the AGN's Education Department far removed from the reality of Nigerian universities where no provisions are made for capacity-building opportunities for existing lecturers and the training of new ones? Why is the AGN feigning ignorance of the fact that no fewer than 75 000 Nigerian students are currently studying at three Ghanaian universities incurring a total expenditure of N160 billion<sup>39</sup> annually? It was only in 1973 that four Nigerian universities were rated among the best 20 in Africa. Today, none of them is among the best 30 in Africa, while none is among the best 1 000 in

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<sup>37</sup> The author's observation is part of the content of ongoing research with the title "Angels in Politics: Tracing the Patterns of Leadership in AGN."

A passenger who obeys the instruction to buckle up during a long flight in an aeroplane is at the same time buckling himself or herself against the same danger; to buckle up or not does not stop the aeroplane from crashing if it must crash. Almost all public universities in Nigeria are in general distress of dropping academic and infrastructural standards in all faculties and departments. Affiliation with these universities may never salvage the practical crises in the AGN's theological education; all of its affiliated training institutions will experience a worse state of distress with the nation's universities.

<sup>38</sup> Uche Igwe, "The Decay in Nigerian University System," <<http://www.punchng.com/opinion/the-decay-in-nigerian-university-system>> (24 October 2012).

<sup>39</sup> The expenditure is a little less than the Federal Government's total budget for all its universities in the last few years.

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the world.<sup>40</sup> This situation has resulted in poor teaching and learning outcomes in public universities, yet this is where the AGN theological institutions are begging to affiliate their programmes. This behaviour calls for urgent scrutiny of the functions of the AGN's Education Department in relation to its general vision for the national church.

### **The functions of the AGN's Education Board**

The Education Board was constitutionally established by the Executive Committee of the AGN and presumably mandated to serve as the sole coordinator of AGN Bible schools. In that regard, the board functions to make recommendations to the Executive Committee on the following matters:

[a] All ministerial training that shall serve the fellowship, [b] Christian education, [c] Secular education, [d] Curriculum, [e] Remuneration and allowances of teachers, [f] Duration of courses and length of classes, [g] Co-ordination of Christian Education within the various departments of the General Council, [h] Approval of new Schools, [i] Guidelines for the operation of Schools. The Board of Education meets twice a year as the need arises.<sup>41</sup>

In sum, the Education Department claims the mandate to set standards for ministerial training and to oversee the existing ten Bible training institutions of the AGN.<sup>42</sup> A critical study of the vision and mission claims of the Education Department shows that its responsibilities are in nature mosaic and clueless, hence each AGN Bible school runs its own vision and mission

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<sup>40</sup> Adekunle Jimoh, "Nigerian students spend N160b in Ghana varsities, says Babalakin," <<http://www.thenationonlineng.net/2011/news/60856-nigerian-students-spend-n160b-in-ghana-varsities-says-babalakin.html>> (19 June 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Assemblies of God, Nigeria, *The Constitution and Bye-laws of Assemblies of God, Nigeria* (Enugu: Dulaces Printers, 2002), 24–25. The Education Board has not been able to interpret what is meant by ministerial training and its articulation; what is meant by "secular" in relation to the state and federal universities that the AGN now patronise to affiliate its Bible schools; what is meant by "curriculum" – is it the faculty or courses merely listed on paper? These and many other educational matters remain vague and lie within a mystical borderline beyond the interpretation of the Education Board of the AGN.

<sup>42</sup> What is apparent is that the Education Department does not have a nationally approved working document to guide its operations or the national church in educational decision making. Furthermore, the Education Department has an arsenal collection of the education policies and ideas of other theological seminaries within and outside Nigeria, which it inordinately collated as ideas and policies for the AGN. The mosaic nature and character of these educational materials coming from the Education Board suggest that they were all uncritically put together and presented to an unsuspecting audience for approval as a public document.

statements. AGN theological institutions do not operate a unified national standard accreditation status, certification or peer review of faculty and student performance, among other things. The following strategic planning questions are in order: Why do we exist? Who is affected by our work as theological educators? What are the needs of the community we serve? Where do we want our seminaries and their graduates to be in 4–6 years? What are our organisational values and principles? Does our national church strategic priority support that of our schools and seminaries? These questions encompass the mission, vision, strategic analysis and strategic priorities of any serious organisation and its education department. The questions presuppose comprehension of the philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics and axiology of Christian education. The Education Department is non-committal to the standardisation of a national curriculum for the AGN's theological institutions and this is responsible for the inordinate affiliation of AGN theological institutions to various Nigerian universities. The AGN stakeholders know that the responsibility of the Education Department should be to harmonise the curriculum of AGN theological institutions. It should ensure that the disparity between Bible schools is reduced to the barest minimum.

The unfortunate and negative impact of this neglected task is the manifestation of deficiencies in cognitive and emotional intelligence and character formation for the AGN's body polity. In such a situation, Kagema reminds us that it is the curriculum of any theological institution that determines the kind of its products. The clergy produced in theological institutions with haphazardly planned curricula often turn out to be "half-baked" church ministers.<sup>43</sup> Structured classroom testing of the intellectual capacity of AGN seminary BA/BTh<sup>44</sup> graduates taking MA courses reveal that they are less exposed to the contents of Arts and Theology. In addition, these courses were not designed to articulate postgraduate studies.<sup>45</sup> This is because each programme was established in isolation to meet the felt needs of the moment and not planned to articulate upwards. This dysfunctional nature of the Education Department is responsible for the politicisation of AGN theological degrees.

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<sup>43</sup> Kagema has done good work in analysing curriculum issues with regard to any learning institution. See D. N. Kagema, "Leadership Training for Mission in the Anglican Church of Kenya" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Unisa, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> A Bachelor of Arts (BA) is exhaustively offered at universities and includes the study of the humanities, social and cultural studies, languages and music. The humanities deal with the histories, literatures and cultures of human civilisation, while the social sciences study sociology, anthropology, political behaviour and other forms of human behaviour and organisation. Most of these courses are not offered at any AGN Bible College and they have not produced lecturers capable of teaching these courses at graduate or postgraduate levels. Why then continue to collapse and award a BA in Bible and Theology instead of a Bachelor of Theology (BTh); and why make the single degree Bachelor of Arts in Bible and Theology [BA/BTh] appear as two different degrees earned in two different programmes of study?

<sup>45</sup> This is the researcher's experience as a lecturer at the AGN's postgraduate seminary Evangel Theological Seminary, Jos.

### **The quest to establish a postgraduate seminary**

The AGN at some point in time felt the need to establish a postgraduate seminary to train its ministers and academic workforce to propel the church's development engine. Without exploring pertinent theological education questions, the AGN Executive Council in 1993 approved the establishment of a postgraduate seminary (the Evangel Theological Seminary, henceforth ETS, Jos) with an expatriate missionary as the founding president. The seminary came into existence to serve the needs of busy ministers desiring to have a master's degree for social prestige. For this reason, the academic objective of the seminary was not the cognitive and scholarly empowerment of its graduates to fit the demands of practical theology in the AGN's main and subsidiary institutions. The seminary came into existence after a close-ended questionnaire was sent out to some selected pastors desiring to register for a master's degree. After responses had been obtained, the ETS programme was outlined on the following grounds:

1. Courses and class sessions must be accelerated so that students would not have to leave their ministry posts for an extended period of time [all MA courses including Elements of Greek 1 and 2 taught for five days (7:45 A.M. to 10:45 A.M. morning period and 2 P.M. to 5 P.M. evening period)];
2. Accreditation/affiliation of the Seminary must be with a local university rather than universities outside the country;<sup>46</sup> and
3. Establishment of four concentrations in the area of Christian Education, Theological Studies, Missiology, and Church Administration.<sup>47</sup>

In this regard, ETS runs an accelerated two-semester module, with the first semester running from February to April and the second semester from August to October. The second academic year is used to write a non-resident

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<sup>46</sup> The AGN leaders claim that ICI and Global University materials are Western based and therefore not contextualised to suit the African context. But since its establishment in April 1994 to date (2014), the seminary has never had an African as its president (or rector?). One wonders what difference it makes to have an expatriate as the head of a seminary that objects to the use of academic materials authored by Westerners and published in the West. What does it mean to contextualise? And does AGN theological institutions possess the academic ability to critically analyse and evaluate the arguments of Western authors who were influenced and shaped by their surrounding complex forces to write academic textbooks?

<sup>47</sup> Evangel Theological Seminary, *Academic Catalogue 2011–2015* (Jos: Evangel Theological Seminary), 7.

MA thesis. The problem with this arrangement is that less class contact hours and lack of academic materials make students deficient and unequipped to conduct scholarly research. Once out of the seminary environment, thesis writers become unmotivated to engage their research. Many complain of being overwhelmed by socio-church activities that consume their thinned time to conduct scholarly research. The seminary MA courses remain a microcosm of larger claims that the educational system in the AGN has sunk in a rising tide of mediocrity. Furthermore, it has been observed that ETS has no stiff graduation requirements, no established higher achievement standards and, in terms of course delivery, no time devoted to the basics. Most importantly, neither the Education Department nor ETS ever solicited educational services from constituent churches of the AGN. In this regard there is a complete absence of community and church input in curriculum development and implementation.<sup>48</sup>

#### **The AGN politicisation of academic certificates**

The AGN Diploma in Bible and Theology has been offered since 1940 and is a basic qualification that empowers pastors to teach, preach and pastor churches. Recently the AGN introduced in its national constitution “a minimum of a first degree or Higher National Diploma or its equivalent from a religious or secular institution recognised by the Assemblies of God, Nigeria” as a required qualification to stand for election.<sup>49</sup> The inclusion of this academic qualification clause for elective offices in the AGN national constitution fired up in many pastors the desire to acquire the first-degree certificate. The BA/BTh degree offered in some AGN theological institutions became a hot-cake credential for ministers nursing the political ambition to contest for district offices. Many AGN ministers now project that the national constitution might be changed overnight with the required qualification into elective offices raised to a master’s degree. As a result, the AGN ministers started pouring into the AGN’s MA-awarding seminary, Evangel Theological Seminary, Jos for their master’s degree. Others opted to get theirs from any

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<sup>48</sup> A recent unscientific survey of ETS graduates shows that two-thirds of AGN leadership are products of ETS. From all indications, however, the physical or academic impact of these leaders on the general health of ETS remains elusive and unfelt; just as many ETS graduates exhibit a fundamental ambivalence towards the institution’s existence. See “ETS at 10: A Brief History.” *ETS Panorama* (2005): 13.

<sup>49</sup> This pronouncement marked the beginning of the politicisation of theological education in the AGN. The BA, MA and PhD degrees became instruments of privilege and a power and status symbol in the AGN. Those who could not afford to study or do not have the mental capacity to study went to the market for honorary degrees and paid in cash to have it bestowed on them. In Nigeria, everything is business and business is everything, and there are many organisations in Nigeria that specialise in conferring a doctorate on any Dick and Tom at cash and carry.

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accessible institution.<sup>50</sup> Any godly academic knows that this is an unfortunate turn of events in the AGN, as not all of its ministers who aspire to obtain a BA or MA degree are mentally prepared to do degree-level work. In the long run, it became apparent that most of these candidates could not generate thesis topics or produce decent MA theses. Under pressure to finish and graduate, some students now contract their thesis projects to internal or external professional writers at a negotiated fee.<sup>51</sup> This discouraging scenario bears significance for theological students, lecturers and the AGN's Education Department to review its responsibility for cultivating in students biblical ethics and values, which the Scriptures declare normative for church leadership.<sup>52</sup> There is no need for a task force to tell the AGN that the problems of its theological education stare the world in the face.<sup>53</sup>

The above analysis shows a serious academic defect from inside the AGN's Education Department, evident in its paranoia of higher education planning. The establishment of an isolated MA-awarding institution that does not articulate upwards to a doctorate is a serious disconnect with the contextual realities of theological education worldwide. Apparently, ETS has not fully developed the pattern of a postgraduate institution with departments capable of marshalling out pedagogical insights applicable to teaching highly relevant courses in the context of a postgraduate institution. The situation is pathetic given that the AGN forefathers' pneumatological penchant greatly emphasised hedonistic trust in the transcendental as the basis for giving meaning to life. Such meaning for modern-day AGN leadership has turned out to be the dilution of any form of quality theological education, academic excellence and intellectualism. What is most disheartening is that the AGN's Education Department does not believe in quality theological training and so the choreography of preaching and teaching is that anything goes. Worse still is the penchant of leaders, who are not prepared to subject themselves to the

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<sup>50</sup> When confronted to explain the reason for this mad rush to get a degree from any institution, one of the ETS faculty members said: "All degrees are the same, irrespective of where one got it."

<sup>51</sup> What is happening in Nigerian Christianity, and especially in the AGN, is the promotion of cultural values that glorify honour status at all cost, but these are ignoble and anti-biblical values.

<sup>52</sup> B. Victor Cole, "Jos ECWA Theological Seminary," in *Renewal in Theological Education: Strategies for Change*, edited by Robert W. Ferris (Wheaton: Billy Graham Centre, Wheaton College, 1990), 79-87.

<sup>53</sup> In the AGN, a district superintendent is equivalent to a Roman Catholic or Anglican diocesan bishop. The election of district officers is conducted triennially. And because of the difficulty experienced in remunerating or relocating district superintendents' duty posts when they failed to win an election, the Education Department simply assigns them teaching positions in the Bible schools. Given that these people are not academically and mentally prepared to teach, many of them use the platform of classroom lectures to discourse AGN politics and thereby lobby to regain lost district chair.

rigours of study, for the academic title “Doctor”.<sup>54</sup> Like Macbeth, the AGN made an ignoble decision in making materialism and politics the efficient cause of other negative decisions in its theological education. The protagonists of this drama are the men to whose hands the education ministry of the AGN was committed. It was in their hands that quality theological education was never designed or implemented. They orchestrated the politicisation of theological degrees and marred ethical values and academic standards in the AGN’s theological institutions.

### Conclusion and recommendations

Lack of definition has bedevilled the educational enterprise of the AGN right from its inception. This lack of definition translates into issues of lack of target, where education is offered with only short-term benefits in view. The Diploma in Theology programme that was sufficient in 1939 when Nigeria had no university of its own is still the basic level of theological education with little or no change or modification of its content almost 80 years later when each state of the federation has at least two higher institutions.

The AGN occupies a strategic position in Pentecostal discourse in Nigeria. The ills observed in its educational system are perhaps symptomatic of what is observable in other Pentecostal outfits in the country. This article invites the AGN to strategically and critically midwife its own inner renewal and in this way influence the course of Pentecostalism in this giant of a country – Nigeria. At present, theological education in the AGN is in danger of death. Through its Education Department, the church must revisit, review and renew its theological education with particular attention to its epistemologies and ontologies.

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<sup>54</sup> I have had quite a number of these title-obsessed pastors as students in class, most of whom I mistook to be medical doctors who had abandoned their lucrative vocation for the ministry of the church. I later found out, as they claimed, that they took the title “Dr” by faith and must begin appending the title to their names to terrorise the devil and its mortal cohorts. The General Council of the AGN ought to have questioned this outrageous lampooning of the title “Dr” which is the zenith of academic achievement worldwide.

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