

# Making Community Together: Theological Schools in Concert

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A concert is a lovely thing.

Whether the Hong Kong Philharmonic touching just last week such disparate notes as those composed by the early classical Haydn and the late Romantic Berlioz, or U2 rocking Chicago's Lincoln Park, or a band of street musicians in Cuba turning lunch three-dimensional by adding sound to the day's taste and sights, or the sheer *joie d'vivre* of a South African children's choir causing our jaws to drop and making us feel momentarily a little younger—a bit more like them—a concert is about the pleasing and productive synthesis of otherwise individual and cacophonous sounds.

And speaking of cacophony, you can have solo or cacophony at the drop of a hat. A *concert*, though, requires that its participants subjugate aspects of their own ambition and ability to a larger, greater, more beautiful project. There's the rub. And there's the magic.

A *good* concert—like the proverbial news from afar or the fruit of the grape—gladdens the heart. A *very good* concert draws us closer to transcendent truth, even to our Creator himself. A *superb* concert causes us to feel, to think, to imagine—indeed to *become*—something that our mere individuality could scarcely ever produce. The very *best* of concerts is tribute. It is worship. It draws our attention beyond the artists to the One who alone is capable of creating a world where such nobility and beauty—where such *sounds*—are possible.

A concert is a sub-species of community, a momentary hint at things that can in larger and less artificial contexts endure, sometimes even endure *forever*. Both concerts and community border on the sacramental. That is, they draw us into a reality that points beyond itself to higher, richer, less conditioned, even unfallen and unblemished purposes and realities. Concert and community both assure us that these present limitations are ephemeral and that there is a reality worth waiting for, worth pursuing, worth self-denying renunciation of individuality for the sake of larger, shared truth.

Concerts and community are, at their best, *doxological*. They issue in praise.

Now what ought we to think, in the light of such things, of that more prosaic atmosphere of the seminary, the theological college, the university in which we work out our calling and vocation? Is there anything concert-like, any unrealized potential of deeper community that is available to us just over the horizon? Any there new tonalities just waiting to occur?

I think the answer to this question must surely be 'Yes'.

If I may be allowed to press the metaphor of the *concert* with reference to the topic that has been assigned to me—*Theological Schools in Concert*—I would speak of *music* that my ears have heard and still further harmonies that I *long* to hear. But before I do that, I would like to take the imagery I have been handed in a kind of preliminary direction. I'd like to touch on confidence and motive.

Good musicians create their art out of a proper sense of their own smallness beside the tradition of which they are interpreters. But they also perform best when they perform *with confidence*. It seems to me that in recent years the *confidence* of theological educators like ourselves has been often unsettled, occasionally shaken, and sometimes even shattered. I would like briefly to address this matter.

I believe that our theological schools will find ourselves postured to create community in concert

- to the degree that biblical/theological convictions persuade us that the task is greater than any one of us.
- to the degree that we embrace the ‘shared meaning’ of community with confidence in our calling.
- to the degree that a theocentric, Trinitarian impulse moves us inexorably away from self-aggrandizement and towards community.

Critical self-awareness and the capacity to reflect upon our deficiencies is, of course, a virtue of maturity. Theologians and theological institutions are under attack in our hyper-pragmatic moment with a sustained ferocity to which perhaps few *instruments* in the history of Christian disciple-making have been subjected. It is good that we have quite often displayed the capacity—though sometimes under duress—to pause and reflect upon where we might have gone astray.

Yet I must confess that a constant drumbeat of criticism about theological education and its alleged irrelevance and the ensuing unsettling of confidence in *the thing that we do* has begun to produce in me a certain existential *nausea*.<sup>1</sup> It will be for another speaker perhaps at another time to encourage us to recover our nerve as theological educators but let us do so. My topic is best approached by confident practitioners.

I would also want to ground the kind of community I’ve been asked to address in God himself. Theological colleges need without doubt to act in concert because the survival of our enterprise is in question. But it would be a mistake to begin here. Rather, we will best seek what some (my friend Phill Butler) have called ‘kingdom collaboration’ because it is the right thing to do, because it is how our Creator and Redeemer is and acts. Even if we *could* survive in pristine isolation the one from the other, as Trinitarian believers and as gospel people we would not do so for we know that something far better is on offer: that community which imitates the Triune and revels in the deep satisfaction of what the Apostle Paul calls *κοινωνία εἰς τὸν εὐαγγέλιον* (‘fellowship in the gospel’)<sup>2</sup>.

As I look across a room full of peer learners at table fellowship in the context of OC’s *Institutes for Excellence in Christian Leadership Development*, I can scarcely contain my enthusiasm for the gorgeous vision of community that I observe. My own experience placed me in Central America at a time of remarkable spiritual effervescence. We discovered in the early years of Costa Rica’s ESEPA Seminary that theological education naturally exercised a profoundly *ecumenical* influence upon that country’s then-fragmented evangelical community. Christian leaders of all stripes of Pentecostal commitment—and a few with none—found it possible to gather peacefully around the Scriptures and the leadership-training consequences of their study. They went on to discover robust community as they did so.

If churches do so, it is only natural that theological schools should pursue *concerted initiatives*, sharing resources and harvesting every opportunity for mutual encouragement, long before the pragmatic effects of doing so come into play simply because this is the way Trinitarian communities with reconciliation at the genesis of their being behave. Even more to the point, such *fellowship in the gospel*, does not represent a circling of the wagons against undeniable threats to our viability so much as it does the penetration of gospel dynamics into the warp and woof of our interconnected institutional lives.

Imagine the formative testimony that such kingdom collaboration can sew into the fabric of emerging leaders as they observe and participate in inter-institutional community from the very beginning of their theological studies.

Some might object that collaboration is distracting and should only be practiced—and then with clinical precision—when the clearest of outcomes can be anticipated. Such prudence has its place. Yet I

believe, like all guidelines that come to us from the corporate boardroom, this one must be pressed through the biblical sieve. It must be forced to cede any pretensions to self-evident, doctrinal status. If it is to be a *Christian* word of caution, it will confess that community obeys its own logic and repays dividends of a beautifully unanticipated kind because the Lord—as the Psalmist reminds us when speaking of brethren who dwell together—‘places *there* his blessing, even life forevermore.’

Theological educators who have fought their way to clarity that they serve a tradition greater than any single institution and theological educators who are confident in our shared vocation will seek inter-institutional community as one of the high privileges inherent in the thing we have been called to do. We will feel ourselves to be pulled towards it rather than pushed or driven.

Now by way of this prelude I have already alluded to beautiful music—of *concerts*, if you will—that I have already heard. The activities of the organization I direct and those of the association that has convened us in this triennial conference have been used by God to create community among theological leaders and institutions that just fifteen years ago labored mostly in isolation. I can testify personally to the invigorating and orienting potency of this young community and the impulse and instincts that sustain it. We quickly grow to take good things for granted.

I have watched with pleasure as theological educators have moved from being strangers to colleagues to brothers-and-sisters to *friends*. I believe some of the fruit of this communitarian reality will endure forever.

But I long for what the biblical tradition likes to call a *new song*. I am not satisfied with the old Abrahamic tunes, the psalms of Zion, or the exuberant choruses of redemption’s earliest articulation. Quite frankly, I want to see *more* community among what my given topic names as ‘theological schools’. I believe the music has barely begun, that idea of some glorious new song has already been sketched out on napkin around this week’s tables. We are in the first wave of concerts, really just getting warmed up.

It seems to me that the best contribution I can make to addressing the topic of *Making Community Together, Theological Schools in Concert* is to dream a bit and to do so out loud. In his very fine work entitled *Deep Change*, Robert Quinn writes of leadership as ‘building the bridge as you walk upon it’ and ‘dancing naked before reality’. I assure you that bridges and—in particular—nakedness will remain completely in the realm of the metaphorical for the duration of my talk. Yet, with your permission, I’d like to practice a bit of the unfettered imagination to which Quinn refers.

Most of all, I want to share with you some concerts my soul is longing to hear. Like Simeon of Luke’s gospel, there are some communities yet to exist that—were they to appear before my eyes—might well move me to the *nunc dimittis*: ‘Now, o Lord, let thy servant depart in peace’.

Here are a few of them:

### **A concert of distributed theological education**

Take any one hundred theological schools in the majority world and count the number of them that are attempting to produce theological education in some distributed form. My unscientific survey suggests that you will count more than ninety and probably upwards of ninety-five. The sad reality is that nearly all of them are expensive, mediocre, marginally effective, and distracting. Those most dedicated to producing them tend to be working outside their own strengths and, in consequence, doing fewer of the things that they do well.

This is wasteful to the point of scandal. It is decidedly unmusical.

I imagine a situation where, instead of this amateurish though well-intentioned cacophony, each major language group is blessed with two or three community efforts at distributed theological education. Participating theological schools become stake-holders in the project, though not whole owners. They give up a bit of name recognition—though not that much—in order to participate in a project that models community. That’s the soft outcome. The hard outcome looks like this: the resulting projects are of high quality and well funded. They extend the core strengths of the participating schools to numbers of students that dwarf the combined sums touched by the schools’ conventional delivery systems.

Instead of telling professors who have dedicated their lives to the shaping of human persons in the classroom and mentoring spaces that they must stop doing the archaic, obsolete thing *to which God has called them* in order to start doing something new, these gifted and committed women and men are provided the opportunity to touch five, ten, or one hundred times the lives they’ve grown accustomed to influencing.

The technology and the institutionality exist and the funding, I am convinced, is available. All that is lacking is the will to play a symphony rather than a solo.

### **A concert of formal-nonformal education**

I believe that the reckless, graceless polarization of Christian leadership development into belligerents whose tasks and loyalties we can abbreviate as ‘formal’ and ‘nonformal’ is nothing short of diabolical. It smells of sulphur. It ascends directly from the pit to which all evil shall one day, thankfully, be consigned.

It would be difficult to exaggerate how damaging this false dichotomy has become. I regularly interact with potential funders who have bought into one or the other of these rather artificial models and been persuaded by the militant rhetoric of the visitor who warmed the chair I now sit in that only *formal* education is the real thing or that only *nonformal* training is truly ‘relevant’.

I have listened as the rhetoric of otherwise gentle people has become flavored with the prejudice that disdains the calling of brothers and sisters who are just as committed to making disciples but have taken in hand a tool that doesn’t meet with the approval of this or that speaker.

It is a cacophony. In its sounds can be heard, subtly, the cackle of our enemy.

I long, instead, to hear a concert.

Imagine what it would be like if formal and non-formal practitioners alike were to embrace the reality of life-long learning. Suppose we all were to become convinced that a disciple of Jesus Christ really is, as the gospels tell us, a *learner*, a *μαθητῶν*. Suppose we were to celebrate the fact that formal and nonformal inputs will course through a Christian leader’s life in the most fluid fashion almost from cradle to grave. Imagine that we took seriously that linguistic tradition by which in some of our cultures a graduation ceremony is called a *commencement*, a mere beginning.

Then suppose we who are ‘formalists’ locked arms—or at least had *coffee!*—with our nonformal training peers. Imagine what a robust collaborative impulse among the groups would mean for our generation and the one or two that will follow us.

I can almost hear the music of it.

### **A concert of variegated excellence**

There’s a melody in the air—at least I *think* I hear it—the libretto of which speaks of ‘nodes of excellence’. It sounds just a bit like an intricate Bach fugue.

Imagine, if you will, that we could identify the seven or eight critical areas of training need that our global church confronts. My list would include ‘biblical interpretation and proclamation’, ‘kingdom collaboration’, ‘peace making’, ‘faith and culture’ (or ‘faith and science’), ‘organizational and change leadership’, ‘compassionate ministry’ (or ‘children at risk’), ‘teaching and learning’, ‘business as mission’, and one or two others.

I do not pretend that these are the most universal or the most deeply felt *lacunae*. But my list would begin with them. They are the items I would bring to the conversation. Then suppose we worked *in concert* to establish a center of research and training in each of these areas in each region of the world (define these things as you will) at the highest appropriate level. Your school might be the regional *node of excellence* for ‘kingdom collaboration’ or ‘teaching and learning’ or ‘biblical interpretation and proclamation’. Funding becomes available that opens the door to a selected individual from each of a range of other theological schools in your region to come to your school to complete the course of study for which your institution has achieved recognition as the regional *node of excellence*.

The members of this cadre of graduates then return to their own locales and their own theological schools to become the catalysts that interpenetrate their respective communities with the values and the competencies in which they have been immersed in their *node of excellence* experience. From time to time a local daughter program is birthed, calibrated to the appropriate level.

Like all concerts, this one would require that certain schools give up certain competitive pretensions, that a regional community of theological schools seek to identify and also to cultivate complementary strengths while eschewing the temptation to compete for prestige.

It would be musical. I can almost hear it.

### **A concert of academy-church collaboration**

I am aware that the distance which too often opens up between church and theological school is a topic that is fraught. What is more, rhetoric about closing the gap is often sentimental and sometimes, particularly for educators, an exercise in self-flagellation.

Indeed I bear some scars on this count. As a churchman and an educator, I learned the hard way during sixteen years in Costa Rica that the intransigence that nourishes this divorce is not always on the side of the theological school. Denominational leaders and jealous pastors are, in their own way, capable of acting like *abaddon*, destroyer.

However, I do have an artistic conviction of sorts on this score, one that emerges idiosyncratically from personal experience. It may not be as easily generalized as I imagine. But you’re a kind group, so let me see whether this sings.

*I believe every lecturer in every theological college should be pastoring a church or participating in some equivalent task.*

‘Oh’, some of you might say, ‘how embarrassing! Doesn’t he realize that this is already the reality of many or even most of us whose vineyard is located in the majority world?’

Indeed I do.

Yet too often, especially for those of us who have been trained in well-funded universities in the West but who *work* in the majority world, this is seen as a concession to economic and institutional realities. The model that still suggests itself as ideal is the model of specialization and of the serene life of the academy, undisturbed by parishioners who don’t know text from context, who consume a person’s time like the birds in my Indiana garden consume the mealworms I put out for them, and who insist upon bringing their gritty problems, week after week, into the pastor’s study.

Indeed I have tasted the pleasures of the academy's serenity. They are sweet. They can be immensely productive. Some few people are certainly wired by their Creator to thrive in that place and nowhere else.

But I want to suggest that there might be appreciable benefit in seeing the purely academic life as an *oddy* rather than an *ideal*. This may not be true of all of us, but experience has taught me that it is true of most: our interaction with our students is qualitatively different when our command of a body of knowledge in our area of specialization is surrounded by regular immersion in pastoral duties or, better put, in the very tasks for which we are training our students. I think every theological educator should embrace this bivocational task.

Would a whole-scale adoption of this model have costs? Yes it would.

We would teach fewer classes. We might write fewer articles and books. Our lives might be marginally more perturbed by the ebb and flow of local church life.

Yet we might, as well, be *better* in the classroom and even, in the quiet of our study times as well. I think this would be the experience of most of us.

The benefits would accumulate. Many under-served churches would be led by experienced, thoughtful, part-time pastors. The theological school would in some cases see its employees benefit from a modest but additional income stream. Our students would observe that the inescapable *bivocationality* of their lives is something that we, too, embrace. Some would stop regretting it. Our students might quickly slip into addressing us no longer as 'Professor' or 'Doctor' but as 'Pastor'.

It would be the highest of compliments. It would be music, in a manner of speaking, to the ears.

## Conclusion

These are some modest and hardly revolutionary thoughts about *Making Community Together, Theological Schools in Concert*. They are idiosyncratic because they are merely mine. My purpose will be served if they are in some small way provocative in a redemptive rather than an annoying direction.

Frankly, I could not have articulated these thoughts—I could not have *owned* them—when I was up to my armpits in the rigors of leading a theological college in Costa Rica. They come to me only now, in this moment when my responsibilities require me to survey evangelical theological education from a distance, attentive as I can be to the broader sweep of things, attuned—I should hope—to both the virtues and the deficiencies of our wider *status quo*.

Community as a human achievement is short-lived and often vain. Received as a gift, community is precious, generative, and doxological. May it be so with us, with ICETE, and in the small corners of the vineyard where each of us sweats, groans, rejoices, weeps, and sings to the Triune, who listens to our song and occasionally breaks into the smile of a master who recognizes that song as his own.

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<sup>1</sup> I employ this term with only half-hearted apologies to Jean-Paul Sartre, for our ceaseless angst sometimes approximates to that of the deeply troubled protagonist of Sartre's famous existentialist novel. It would be more accurate to say that I believe we as a community have been overtaken by Sartre's kind of nausea and that it's time to get over it and get on with thinking our Lord's thoughts after him.

<sup>2</sup> Although Paul utilizes the expression with reference to the Philippians' *economic* stake in his apostolic ministry, it seems to me that the *shared substance* that joined church and apostle at the hip went far deeper than material provision. The economic underwriting that Paul's ministry enjoyed on the part of the Philippian community was a *symptom*, I believe, of *κοινωνία εἰς τὸν εὐαγγέλιον* that resided at life's *deep structure*.