

Addressing the ‘North–South’ Divide: Issues in Global Theological Education

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As I pondered the reasons why the leadership of ICETE had asked me to tackle this subject, I assumed that it must be because the Langham Partnership is one of several organizations that is seeking to address the inequalities of resources and opportunity within the world church. The three programmes of LPI owe their origin to the vision of John Stott who responded at various levels to the facts of such inequality over the past 40 years.

- His was first of all a *heart response*, simply touched by the needs of individuals whom he met – men and women who were clearly gifted by God, academically and spiritually, but lacked access to the kind of resources and facilities we take for granted in the churches of the north and west.
- John Stott’s was also a *strategic response*, seeking to counteract the money and programmes that were pouring into the then-called Third World, from very liberal quarters, with deleterious effect on the spiritual life and theological orthodoxy of the churches there.
- But there was also a strongly *biblical and theological* dimension to John Stott’s response, which has informed the Langham Partnership ever since. That is the threefold conviction that God wants his church to grow up to maturity; that such growth can only come through the Word of God; and that the Word of God comes to ordinary believers mainly (though not exclusively) through preaching. So all three Langham programmes aim at raising the standards of biblical preaching, and thereby fostering church growth with depth. The maturity of the church is our goal, just as it is of all theological education.

So, with this background, I offer in this paper some tentative and often rather impressionistic responses of my own. These will include some biblical and theological dimensions of the issue; some historical and contemporary observations; some strategic reflections; and some practical suggestions.

A. SOME BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

The fact that there is a ‘divide’ within the church, in wealth and resources, is not new. Recognition of such a divide can be seen as early as the New Testament church itself. There were plain economic aspects to it, of course, then as now. At some point in the New Testament era, the believers in Palestine were experiencing poverty; while the Gentile churches were more wealthy (but not excessively so, recalling Paul’s observation that the Macedonian churches had given to his appeal out of their own poverty – 2 Cor. 8:2)). But we should remember that there were cultural and theological aspects too. Jewish and Gentile forms of being Christian and running the church had all kinds of diversity and controversy – resulting in some of Paul’s most impassioned writing (such as Romans 14-15). How did the earliest Christian believers respond to such things? Note some aspects of early Christian response to disparity and diversity.

1. The commitment to economic equality among believers

Acts shows us that from the very beginning followers of Jesus understood that they should express their spiritual unity through economic equality. This was not compulsory, but a voluntary, Spirit-led response to poverty in their midst. It was not necessarily universal, either in the sense that *all* those who were wealthy did what Luke says some did (sold property and gave the proceeds to the church for the needs of the poor), or in the sense that those who did sold *everything* they owned. Nor was it equalization, in the sense that everybody had to have exactly the same. Rather it seems to have been a simple recognition (with deep roots in Old Testament law and eschatology) that the people of God should not tolerate or perpetuate endemic poverty or extremes of inequality among themselves. Some believers should not have more than enough while others had material needs.

We are familiar with Acts 4:32-37, and Luke's first description of the outworking of this economic initiative. But then in Acts 6 we have another interesting example of this spirit at work – and in this case it pre-dates the Jew-Gentile divide. The problem was within the earliest Jewish church, but between Hebrew and Greek-speaking believers. And at this very early stage, it was the latter who were at a disadvantage and losing out in the charitable support being given out, according to custom, among the Jewish believers. What is interesting here is that, to address this unfair discrimination the apostles established a body of men, *selected from within the disadvantaged community itself* (they all have Greek names), to oversee the better arrangement of the food distribution.

In Acts 11:27-30 we have the reverse of Acts 6. This time it is Jewish Christians who are suffering the effects of famine, and Gentile Christians who have the means arrange material relief, and send it 'to provide help for the brothers.'

Then, of course, there is the major matter of Paul's collection of money from the churches of Macedonia for the benefit of the Jerusalem church. Judging by the extent of Paul's reference to this, it was clearly of great significance to him – practically, missiologically and theologically.

- In Romans 15:23-33, Paul uses it to teach the equivalence of spiritual and material principles.
- In 1 Cor. 16:1-4, he insists on a systematic, voluntary and accountable process
- In 2 Cor. 8-9, he builds a whole theology of giving around it. Christian giving is a matter of imitation of Christ, of obedience to the gospel, and of practical fellowship. Notably, he insists three times in 8:13-15, that it is a matter of equity – *isotes*. This might be better rendered by 'reciprocity'. Paul wants an equalizing of Christian resources over time – not the permanent dependence of one part of the world church of his day on another part.

In the light of these New Testament standards (and their Old Testament roots), we can confidently affirm that gross disparity between different parts of the world church (in theological education resources, as in economic wealth) is a scandal that *needs* to be addressed.

2. The poly-centric nature of the church and multi-directional nature of mission

We can easily overlook just how polycentric and multidirectional the early church very quickly became. One reason for this oversight is the great emphasis placed on Acts 1:8 in countless books on mission. Jesus' instructions that the disciples were to be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' have been seen as a series of concentric circles, reaching out like spreading ripples from Jerusalem at the centre, and providing the programmatic structure for the book of Acts. There is a certain truth in this, but in fact it is just as quickly subverted within Acts itself. Jerusalem soon ceases to be central to the church's mission, or the only centre of New Testament Christianity. It is in Antioch that the followers of the Way of Jesus first get called Christians. Soon Antioch becomes the centre of dynamic mission. Paul reports back to Antioch, not to Jerusalem. Ephesus becomes the centre of outreach into Asia Minor. Thessalonica is the radiating centre for Macedonia and Achaia. Eventually Rome becomes the focus of attention of Paul's missiological strategy.

Furthermore, mission is never just going out from one centre, whether Jerusalem or Antioch. Again we get that impression because the maps at the back of our Bible show us in splendid colour coding all the missionary journeys of Paul – but nobody else. In fact, Acts shows a criss-crossing pattern of Christian travel, mission, and even of theological education (e.g. in the training of Apollos by Priscilla and Aquila, and the training of Paul’s disciples in Ephesus).

Look for a moment at who goes where in Acts.

Ch	Travels	Activity
8	Philip goes from Jerusalem to Samaria, then to Gaza, Azotus and Caesarea	Evangelism
9	Peter goes to Lydda, then to Joppa, Caesarea and ends up in Antioch	Evangelism, healing
11	People from Cyprus go to Antioch, witness to Greeks there, and first attract the nick-name ‘Christians’	Evangelism, church-planting
11	Barnabas goes to Tarsus to find Saul, and they both go to Antioch	Teaching
11	Barnabas and Saul both go from Antioch to Jerusalem	Famine-relief
15	Barnabas and Mark go from Antioch to Cyprus	Evangelism
16	Timothy, from Lystra, goes to Ephesus, while Titus goes to Crete	Pastoring, teaching, leadership
18	Aquila and Priscilla go from Italy (probably Rome) to Corinth, and then go with Paul to Ephesus	Church planting and teaching
18	Apollos comes from Alexandria to Ephesus (where he receives better theological instruction), and then goes to Corinth	Evangelism, apologetics, teaching

What is clear, then, is that Jerusalem is no longer the only centre, but one centre among many in a rapidly proliferating movement.

How did this first generation overcome the inevitable potential for division and distrust and disorder in such a confused context? Mainly, it seems, through personal visits, reciprocal travel, crossing the boundaries of ethnicity, language and culture, letters of recommendation from trusted friends (e.g. the Letter to the Romans was carried by Phoebe, deacon of the church in Cencrea in Greece – Rom. 16:1), – and by highly relational commitment to being one fellowship within the body of Christ. There is, it seems, some precedent for the international relationships fostered across the world church by bodies such as ICETE, Lausanne, the WEA, Langham Partnership, etc. (!).

Such itinerant link-people were not always welcome, though. The little letter of 3 John was written to commend Gaius for welcoming such itinerant missionaries and teachers (‘the brothers’ who were being ‘sent out’ ‘for the sake of the name’). But in the same letter he denounces Diotrephes who refused to show hospitality and fellowship to these representatives of churches elsewhere, and rather hindered their work. 3 John is a sadly neglected tract for our times, in my view.

So the point in all this is, as Andrew Walls has said, that the emergence in our day of a genuinely world Christianity, with the ending of western hegemony and the tendency of western Christians to think of themselves as the radiating centre of the church and its mission, and the reality of a

multinational, multidirectional church and mission – is simply a return to ‘normal Christianity’. It is much more like the realities of the church in the New Testament than Christendom ever has been.

3. Theology and ethics across the divides

Our title asks about the role of global theological education in addressing the North – South divide. We tend to think of that as a mainly economic divide between the rich north and the poorer south. And indeed we need to address that divide, with full scriptural authority, as we saw above. But there are many other ‘divides’ – including in the realm of theology and ethics itself. And this was just as true also in the New Testament church. If there was a polycentric dimension to New Testament church and mission, there was a corresponding polyphonic dimension to New Testament theology.

Part of the reason for this lay in the rapid expansion of the church from its Jewish roots into Gentile cultures. Early Christians were faced with new questions from new contexts of mission and all the issues they raised. Sometimes these were questions that they had not faced in their more conservative and circumscribed Jewish community in Palestine, and they were questions that were not answerable with a single OT text. Yet they sought to bring the weight and thrust of the Old Testament scriptures to bear. So they had to find new answers to new questions for new contexts, but within the overall framework of scriptural revelation.

- In Corinth, Paul has to deal with the related questions of idolatry and whether meat bought in the city’s market could be eaten by Christian. He throws at the problem the full weight of the Shema – Israel’s great affirmation of the oneness of the Lord God, now co-inhabited by Christ (1 Cor. 8:6-10), along with a new application of the significance of Psalm 24:1.
- In Corinth also, he faces problems of sexual behaviour that would not have been an issue (probably) in Jewish culture. But the teaching he gives, while not quoting Old Testament texts, is fully consistent with the ethics of Genesis and Leviticus.
- In Athens, he faces polytheism and its civic sponsorship. He counters it with a speech that never quite quotes the Old Testament (though he does quote pagan poets), yet is rich in the teaching of Genesis and Deuteronomy.
- In Ephesians and Colossians, he builds on the familiar ‘household codes’ of Graeco-Roman society, but with counter-cultural injections of scriptural teaching that are actually radically subversive.

In the world church of today, we have to wrestle with many issues, and with divided voices. Part of the task of theological education must be to equip church leaders and indeed ordinary believers, to be able to hear one another across these divides. The world church, as much as the local church, is the body of Christ. And each part needs the other and contributes to the health of the other.

Where is the needed correction and counter-balance going to come from, if not from other parts of the body of Christ?

- Who is going to counteract the pervasive false teaching of Prosperity theology? It poisons both the church in the west and the majority world church – in somewhat different ways, but with the same kind of ‘sanctified’ selfishness and covetousness.
- Who is going to bring reformation to some of the culture of ‘los Evangelicos’ in Latin America? I am told by Latin American friends about some mega churches that operate like pre-reformation mediaeval Catholicism: with very powerful and very wealthy ‘big men’ (like mediaeval bishops); multitudes of ordinary Christians living with no Bible teaching (one even hears of ‘evangelical’ churches where they never preach the Bible), in all kinds of syncretism and superstition (even if Protestant superstition); with their lives governed by a legalism entirely dependent on the say-so of the pastors or ‘apostles’; with a contemporary form of indulgences – buying blessings with money (making the leaders rich), in a manipulated and

exploited hope, not for release from purgatory in the future life, but for release from poverty and sickness in the here and now.

- Who is going to speak across the divide that exists across the evangelical spectrum as regards a biblical and theological response to international politics? The perception of and response to the launching of the Iraq war, for example, was diametrically opposite among the majority of evangelicals in Latin America to the support it received from the majority of evangelicals in the USA. Was anybody listening?
- And, since this paper was first presented in the summer of 2007 at the height of the crisis between Israel and Lebanon, dare I ask whether Majority World evangelicals will be able to voice a massive and persuasive groundswell of protest and corrective to that particular brand of claimed evangelicalism in the USA that found it possible not only to support what was inflicted in July and August 2007 on Lebanon, but to justify and exult in it, out of a particular form of apocalyptic eschatology with more roots in popular fiction than in careful study of the Bible?

We need voices that will cross our divides in all directions, bringing needed mutual correction and critique, and dispelling the ignorance which allows our prejudices and ethno-centric blinkered theologies to persist in imposing themselves and universal orthodoxies.

B. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY OBSERVATIONS

1. Positive changes in last 40 years

We should not underestimate the enormous changes that have taken place in the past few decades. They could be fully documented elsewhere, but just a few examples spring to mind.

- In 1965, Rene Padilla tells me, he returned to Latin America with his PhD from Manchester - the only member of the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL) with a PhD. Now, he says, there are lots of Latin American doctors of theology – (the problem now is that most of them are teaching in the United States).
- In 1983, I went to teach at the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India. At that time there was nowhere in India where you could do a PhD in theology in an evangelical context. But next door to me lived Ashish Crispal – a Langham Scholar with his PhD from Aberdeen. Since then Ashish has spent several years as the Principal of the Southern Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies – a seminary with several other Langham Scholars on its faculty, which is itself now offering doctoral level study.
- In 1983 also, the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology was founded, in some chicken huts, outside Nairobi. At that time it was the only evangelical institution offering Masters level study in Anglophone Africa. In March 2006, I was there as a visiting lecturer, working with a group of doctoral students – a cohort of 13 drawn from several different countries of Africa (and one American, whom I was delighted to see). This has become possible because several of the NEGST faculty have doctorates, about six of them as Langham Scholars. In 2008, NEGST will be sponsoring a major consultation on doctoral level programme development in other parts of Africa.
- At the August 2007 meeting of ICETE in Chiang Mai, they celebrated 25 years of that body's existence, and how it has grown now to include eight member associations from all over the globe. The growth in quantity and quality of evangelical theological education is just one part of the phenomenal growth of the majority world church over the half-century.

So things have changed substantially. The 'divide' is not what it used to be. We should give thanks to God for these things.

2. Majority World Christianity getting 'noticed' in the west

The phenomenal shift in the centre of gravity of world Christianity from the north and west to the south and east has at last drawn the attention, not only of Christians in the former regions, but of the secular media as well.

- Philip Jenkins' book, *The Next Christendom* told the world what some of us had been trying to communicate for the previous 10 years. There's a new world out there, and the old paradigm of a 'home church' in the west, and 'the mission fields' in the rest of the world, simply no longer makes any sense at all. The only quarrel that many of our friends in the majority world have is with the title itself. They have no interest in being another 'Christendom' – seeking territorial solidarity and hegemonic power.
- The publication of the *Africa Bible Commentary* in 2006 was not only a milestone in African Christianity, but was an event noticed in surprising places. Not only did it make a splash on TV news in Kenya, but it was also featured by the BBC, and reviewed in *The Guardian* and *The Times*, in the UK.
- On 2nd August 2006, the BBC premier Radio 4 news programme, Today, featured the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to China, and found it necessary to explain to listeners that there is actually a rather large church in communist China. They didn't actually say that there are more Christians in church every Sunday in China than in all of Western Europe, but that's a fact too.

3. 'Seeking a new equilibrium'

We should not allow the misperception that the divide is simply between the wealthy north and the poor south. The divide can be found all over the place, including widely within the global south itself. In 2004 I sat around a table in Uganda with theological educators from different parts of Eastern Africa. We heard with joy of the major investment that was happening in the library of NEGST in their move towards being equipped to offer doctoral studies. A six-figure dollar amount was involved. The next brother was from Sudan, and he told us that he had had to refuse an offer of books, because the small hut that his college had to keep them in did not yet have a roof, and he could not afford the \$500 needed to buy the tin sheets. Two countries side by side, but a world apart on this measure. And even within the same country there are enormous differentials. Visit, for example, the fine developments at the Uganda Christian University at Mukono, Uganda, and then go and see the Bishop Allison Theological College, at Arua, in the same country. Different worlds, though happily and beneficially connected with one another. Nor are such differences within the global south. I can confidently say that there are evangelical communities in Western Europe (e.g. in Greece and Italy) who would look with great envy and longing on the wonderful facilities and faculty of NEGST in Kenya and consider them far beyond their reach at present.

A Langham Scholar in Singapore put it like this. 'It is incumbent on the non-western world to recognize the huge economic divide among ourselves and how we are to be responsible. How are we, in Singapore, for example, to respond to the needs of Indonesia, Malaysia and the rest of Indo-China? How can we support Christian churches and institutions there, to form stable Christian communities witnessing to Christ in difficult circumstances?' Happily, we do know of many ways in which Singaporean institutions are doing just that, often in quiet, unpublicized, but very effective ways.

One of the great benefits of an organization like ICETE and its constituent member associations is that there can be greater awareness of one another's needs within the major global regions, and a greater degree of mutual help. Thus, as we engage in 'seeking a new equilibrium' (a phrase that Doug Birdsall used to describe the process and goal of our efforts at this conference), we need not look only to the north or west for resources and help. There are other bridges, other sources. Dick Hart from the

Middle East Association of Theological Educators gave us an example of how Christians from South Sudan had their view of Arabs radically challenged when Christian Arabs from Jordan sent them assistance.

ICETE and similar groups have a role, then, in helping all of us (North and South) to see where our most needy sisters and brothers are, and to devise appropriate means of bridging and sharing across the multi-faceted divides. We must beware of working merely to remove the disequilibrium between the North and the South – and ending up merely moving the divide further South, and so re-distributing the disequilibrium *within* the South itself.

C. SOME STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS

I offer the following thoughts in no particular order of importance, and with considerable reticence, merely as some reflections from much interaction with those who are more actively involved at the sharp edge of theological education around the world.

1. Build on strength, while strengthening the weak

I am glad that we don't need to accept Leonard Cohen's pessimistic analysis of human society.

Everybody knows the fight is fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich,
That's how it goes, and everybody knows.

No, for us as Christians, we believe in a countervailing force – the grace of the kingdom of God and the efforts of those committed to it. So we rejoice in places where, from relatively humble beginnings, there has been significant growth, investment, and development. There has been 'success' insofar as that can be measured from the limited perspectives we can have on the measurements of the kingdom of God. So we need to see such places, in each continent, as models and 'light-houses'. They are, of course, very far from perfect, as those who lead them and work in them would be the first to tell us. But they have grown strong, and have the capacity to strengthen and encourage others, and make their resources and experience available for the benefit of their wider region.

And yet, at the same time, we must not forget those who are now in the weaker place that some of these 'success-story' institutions were a few decades ago. We know what the Bible teaches about God's concern for the last and the least and the needy. Presumably it applies to the realities of theological education and all those struggling against great odds to train others for the service of God.

Accordingly, the new John Stott Global Initiative, recently launched by the Langham Partnership International, has two primary thrusts:

- A '*momentum initiative*' – to build on what has already been achieved and invest further in what has demonstrably worked well. This is particularly so in the development of doctoral programmes in majority world contexts.
- An '*opportunity initiative*', to take up fresh pioneering opportunities to help those who are struggling in the place where many of those Langham helped 30 years ago used to be, but whose hearts are for the kingdom of God and have great potential for the coming decades.

This, as I have said, is no longer a task for the North to think it can scope and accomplish alone. We have established regional councils precisely for the purpose of gaining the insights of local and regional leaders, facilitating the cross-country contacts, and enabling our partners to help each other – with or without our resources from outside.

2. Recognize that the 'divide' is more than merely economic

One of the easiest things to do in the west (north), is to portray the primary difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as one of wealth vs. poverty. This markets well among compassionate donors. It is easy to understand because it is simple:

‘we are rich;
they are poor;
they need us to give to them’.

But this is not only demeaning, and counterproductive relationally, it is also only a very partial perspective, and a seriously distorted one.

Both sides of the alleged divide need to think differently, in some respects.

- The rich west needs to see its spiritual poverty, tied up as it is in the cultural idolatries of consumerism, and to see the riches of the churches in other parts of the world whom they regard as poor.
- Some majority world churches and institutions of theological education need to move beyond the poverty paradigm and re-discover the Macedonian principle of the joy of giving – even out of relative poverty – rather than always being in the recipient posture. In this respect it was so encouraging to see some evangelical seminaries taking a lead (at considerable cost of human and material resources) in relief for the desperate and homeless in the wake of the tsunami and the recent bombing in Lebanon.

In place of our polarized and stereotyped view of the world church, we need to ask, How does God view the church? It was to a church that thought of itself as wealthy and self-sufficient, and quite possibly capable of great generosity to their poorer neighbours, that Jesus spoke the following words, cutting like a two-edged sword:

You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (Rev. 3:17).

I often wonder if that is not the sobering verdict of God on much of the church in the west. Certainly, one has to say that it is now many of our sisters and brothers in the majority world perceive the delusions of western Christianity.

3. Educate the West / North – for its own long-term good

Have you seen the movie, *Educating Rita*? It is a film ostensibly about helping a poor and underprivileged working-class mother from Liverpool to get a degree in English Literature at Oxford University. But it ends up showing that it was the Oxford professor who had a lot to learn that he had never known before in his rather sheltered existence. Who needs the education? Who was educating whom?

Those of us within ICETE who lead and represent western-based networks, agencies and institutions, and thus have the ear of the western church, need to engage in a major educational task. We need to take the message that we know so well - the message that we hear from writers and teachers like Philip Jenkins, Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh about the realities of Christianity in the global south, and the massive shift of the centre away from the west to the south - and keep ramming it home to churches and institutions of theological education in the west.

And we have to do this for their own good!

The old message that they have heard for so long is the typical stereotyped one: ‘Please take pity on the poor Third World church’. But the reality is, ‘Don’t miss the party! Don’t allow yourselves to become a peripheral ghetto of a moribund Christendom. Get where the life is, learn from it, and receive from it. Your future may depend upon it.’

Far from the subliminal message of Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, the majority world church is no *threat* to the church in the west. It may ultimately be its salvation. So, part of our task in educating the west is to help the church in the still materially wealthy part of the world to understand that investing

in churches and theological education in the majority world, is not a matter of charity or paternalism. It is a matter of survival – its own.

There is, it seems to me, a latent paradox in coming to realize this. As Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh reminded us in Chiang Mai, the future of Christianity, in the next major phase of Christian history, lies in the South and the East. The church is declining all over the North and West (though we gladly acknowledge resurgence and growth where it is happening). Where, then, will the resources come from for fresh evangelism and theological engagement with the world and its issues? Living theology always comes from living churches.

It is not only, as Andrew Walls put it, that the great European migration of the past 500 years has now moved into reverse; so has the great flow of spiritual and missional movements also.

The irony is particularly sharp, in my view, as I think of the work of the Langham Partnership. There is no doubt that John Stott did what he did in founding these ministries out of concern for poorer sisters and brothers in the majority world. He wanted to come alongside them, with a humble spirit and benevolent heart, and out of true Christian fellowship, to help them with financial resources. But in the longer term plans of God, it may well turn out to be the case that, by investing in the poverty of the majority world church, John Stott will have made a major investment in the survival and regeneration of the western church. As a result of the flow of blessing from Majority world churches, led and taught by a new generation of Bible believing and kingdom-motivated people. The givers will become the receivers. And how like God that is! How like what Jesus said about ‘first and last’ (not to mention first world and third world).

4. Accept mutual prophetic critique – offering judgment *and* hope

At the ICETE conference, Carver Yu spoke about the importance of mutual critique within Christian fellowship, and how it needs to combine both judgment and hope. Can we give one another the freedom to do this, and to listen? It is so easy to engage in uni-directional criticism, to point the finger without seeing the other fingers pointing at oneself.

There are the familiar criticisms of the west by the non-west: colonialism, dominating attitudes, ethnocentric assumptions of superiority, etc.

There are the familiar criticisms of the majority world by the west: poor standards, corruption, nepotism, etc.

But can we get beyond this level of mud-slinging, and do so without retreating into a kind of apophatic paralysis of any legitimate critique at all? I recall a Tanzanian student at All Nations, and archdeacon in the Anglican church, who said that he found some newer western missionaries far too reticent to speak the truth in love. ‘They never speak a word to criticize or correct us, at least not to our face, for fear of being thought colonialist,’ he said, ‘and that is not real brotherhood in Christ.’ On the other hand, an Indian friend of mine, living in the UK, never seems to have a good word to say about the west in general or the western church in particular. I once said to him, ‘Can you not learn to love us just a little too?’

One of the great values of ICETE is to help western theological educators learn the value of the many different contexts, cultures and approaches of majority world theological education (where it is not just a clone of western ones). We need to work far harder at this, and to encourage majority world institutions and leaders to be much more confident in developing their own culturally appropriate models of training – and for the rest of the world to be willing to recognize them when they do (of which more later).

At the same time, one hopes that there are some aspects of the forms and norms of theological education developed over the centuries in the western context that are not entirely without value – even though we certainly don’t want to idolize them or be captivated by them. It is fashionable to criticize the harm that the Enlightenment did to Christian theology, and I endorse such insights. It is

absolutely right that many of our African colleagues point out that Enlightenment categories are simply not big enough to include the totality and reality of their religious experience. Western theology does not have answers to African issues because it doesn't even have the questions to begin to do so. Agreed.

Nevertheless, presumably all cultural transitions and shifts (which the Enlightenment was until the postmodern reaction initiated another), have some value – positive as well as negative, in the providence of God. Not everything in the legacy of Enlightenment impact on western education has been deleterious. There are surely positive values in such things as rational enquiry, analysis and synthesis of data, evidence-based research, the recognition of some degree of objective truth independent of the student's opinions. Of course, these things can be exalted to idolatrous levels of rationalism, reductionism and the exaltation of the autonomous self. But they do embody values that, in my view at least, are not far out of line with some biblical affirmations about the nature of reality and truth. Are there ways in which they can be redeemed and appropriately used within the enterprise of theological education while allowing for great variety of cultural expression?

5. Define and discern excellence in theological education, with generic constants and cultural variables

'Excellence' is something that all the member associations within ICETE are committed to, since it lies at the heart of all accreditation procedures that are themselves credible. We want to know what constitutes a good, valid, credit-worthy programme of theological education and training – at whatever level. We aim at excellence. But what does it look like?

The temptation is simply to assume that whatever has been done in the west for centuries must, by definition, be excellent. West is best. So established patterns and structures, inherited curricula and semester systems, even the most detailed forms of grading by numbers, letters, percentages and averages, are all adopted wholesale. So institutions seeking accreditation – i.e. the respect of the rest of the world, either simply replicate the western model in their own language, or (the easiest route of all), offer themselves as a mere franchise or clone of a willing western institution.

At the last ICETE triennial conference at High Wycombe, in 2003, I shared with the delegates the discussion that was happening in the Langham Partnership at that time as to whether and how we would start to invest in doctoral programmes in the majority world itself, after three decades of bringing Langham Scholars mainly to the UK and the USA for their doctoral studies (this is a direction in which, I'm happy to say, LPI has decisively moved in the past three years). I asked then: Could ICETE be instrumental in working on what excellence in theological education should mean in a cross-cultural perspective? That is, could we discuss and see if there could be any agreement on a set of generic standards and values, which are seen as non-negotiable in any culture. What, for example, would we want to say that 'Doctor-ness' should be, wherever it is claimed? If someone is introduced to us as 'Dr Somebody', in the theological world, what should we be able to assume about the criteria by which he or she gained that title – wherever it was achieved? And, at the same time, what are those aspects that can and should be culturally variable in any programme of theological education – including the gaining of a doctorate.

I think we must also allow room for *discerning* such excellence, as well as *pre-defining* it. Sometimes we can be surprised by what confronts us, and it may not be what we would have ever thought of doing, or how we might go about doing it, but instinctively we feel, 'this is good'. I often admire the open-mindedness of Barnabas, who when he was confronted with a form of Christian expression in Samaria that must have been utterly different from what he knew in Jerusalem, nevertheless, 'when he saw the grace of God, he was glad'. For myself, and other UK more senior professors in the UK, I know that we have visited and taught in the NEGST doctoral programme and thought, 'This is different, this is not the way we do it in Britain, but this programme has its own well-crafted rationale, and it is aiming at the highest quality it possibly can.'

Of course, we must be prepared for new centres of excellence to arise and decline, to fail as well as to succeed – just as they do in the west. We must not idolize, or glorify the latest 'stars'. But let us also

give room for experiment, creativity and initiative, and practise what Kwame Bediako, in another context, called ‘the principle of recognition’, by one part of the body of Christ of another. One way, then, to address the ‘divide’ is for there to be a greater willingness in the west especially to recognize what is happening elsewhere, and wherever possible to welcome it, bless it, and benefit from it.

6. Celebrate our diversity and capitalize on it in theological education

A major emphasis of the paper Lamin Sanneh presented in Chiang Mai was that ever since Pentecost, diversity has been of the very essence of the gospel and of the Christian church. Whether cultural, ethnic, or linguistic, the gospel *affirms* difference. The postmodern rediscovery of the significance and value of all cultures was already a profoundly Christian insight and gift. What might this mean in theological education?

Perhaps it urges us in every culture to ‘find our niche’. What is it that your own rich culture and history can contribute to the wonderful diversity of the Body of Christ and its theological treasure chest? Sitting with Atef Gendy in his study in the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, of which he is principal, I remember him saying first, ‘We cannot compete with Oxford and Cambridge and the libraries and resources they have built up for nearly a thousand years. And why should we? We here are sitting on a heritage of Arab Christianity, with its ancient texts and commentaries on the Bible, stretching back even further through nearly 2000 years.’ Then he talked with excitement about the seminary’s plans to create an institute for the study of this great storehouse of Middle Eastern Christianity, to offer conferences, research facilities, a degree, and eventually the possibility of doctoral research in *that field*. Why mimic the west when you have gold mine of resources in your own back yard? I have heard Kwame Bediako talk about the ‘living data’ of African Christianity in the same way, while Andrew Walls at the Chiang Mai conference spoke of the riches of Syrian-Chinese Christian history waiting still to be explored.

It will be tragic if majority world theological education continues merely to clone the well-worn topics of western theological research and discourse. Let us think creatively and maximize the utility for theological education of our diversity.

D. SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. At student level

It would be very helpful to facilitate much more interchange at student level. And by this I mean not just majority world students going west for a while (or going west permanently). Rather, we need to see more western institutions allowing (and even demanding) a period of study in the majority world *as an accredited part of their own programme*.

Rene Padilla tells of how students from Wheaton College have been coming for a period of work and study at his Kairos Centre in Buenos Aires: sharing in learning and teaching, living in Argentinian homes, having in depth exposure to Latin American realities. ‘And they were not the same when they left’, he added.

Actually many secular schools in the United States do have precisely such overseas study programmes built into their credit system. The seminaries are lagging behind.

In working with several institutions in the majority world that are developing their own doctoral programmes, the Langham Partnership is strongly encouraging (and is willing to help to fund) one or two periods of study in the west as a built-in part of the programme. This is an integral part of the doctoral programme at NEGST. At the same time, I rejoiced to see an American student at NEGST who had chosen to do his doctorate there. I told him and the NEGST faculty that I regard him as the first fruits of a vision I have for the Langham Scholar programme – namely that eventually it will seem as natural and unsurprising for somebody from the USA or Europe to decide to go and do their

doctorate in Africa, as it has been for Africans to think that they have to go to the west to do their doctorate. This is the kind of 'new equilibrium' for which we strive.

2. At faculty level

As with students, we need more interchange at faculty level. It is good to know of theological schools in the west that routinely invite non-western faculty as visiting lecturers for a semester or two, especially if they have opportunity for in-depth interaction, pastorally and theologically, with students. This happens at All Nations Christian College and Redcliffe College in the UK, and I'm sure there are others. Gordon-Conwell has a scheme offering a sabbatical term for those from the majority world who fit one of three categories: *emerging scholars* (who come for a first experience of teaching in a western institution and benefiting from its resources); *experienced scholars* (who come to share and teach from their store of life experience); and *exhausted scholars* (in need of rest and refreshment in a conducive academic environment). NEGST, in its doctoral programme, is developing regular links with specific senior evangelical theologians, of the stature of Howard Marshall, for example, to help ensure high standards of critical review as well as giving their students access to globally recognized scholarship.

I would hope that ICETE could be instrumental in facilitating this kind of exchange in all directions.

3. At institutional level

It is indeed a matter of great rejoicing to see the development of higher levels of theological education taking root in the majority world, the global south. One simply longs that this should be Relevant and adequate for local realities in a way that western models often are not.

At the same time, I would urge patience! We all know that the rush to accreditation at lower levels has resulted in some very dubious degrees being awarded by places that shouldn't really be printing certificates let alone having graduation ceremonies. It will do the world of evangelical scholarship and theological education no favours at all simply to inflate the currency at the doctoral level by flooding the market with sub-standard courses and awards. Let us be willing to invest in long-term quality and contextual excellence. This is where ICETE can play a major role in holding all its constituent parts to serious mutual accountability in this area.

4. Dissemination of theological discourse and its fruits

We need a much wider sharing of the fruit of theological reflection and of models of theological education, through the dissemination in the west of books, journals and research from the majority world (since the reverse dissemination is already a flood). It is still tragic and scandalous how the western academy is so ignorant of the theological life and thought of the rest of the world. It is changing slowly, and there are luminous exceptions.

And of course there are enormous practical difficulties. Langham Literature is often asked to make non-western literature available in its catalogues, but the logistical difficulties of delivering on the promise that a catalogue implicitly makes are huge. All I can say is, we are working on it! Perhaps by the next ICETE triennial conference, we may have good news to share on this matter too.