

# Innovations for Theological Education in Post-Pandemic Africa

## Fulfilling the Missionary Task through Faithful Teaching

James Bledsoe

The International Mission Board holds that “One of the measures of completion of the missionary task is the development of those who can train other leaders, and even systems for training those trainers, within the churches in a given people group or place.”<sup>1</sup> Their goal is to “leave behind a self-sustaining system of theological and pastoral training.”<sup>2</sup> Towards that end, a group of IMB missionaries appointed to serve across Sub-Saharan Africa in theological education were called together in 2017 to envision how to best impact healthy churches and influence sound doctrine and practice across the affinity. That vision gave birth to what would become the Africa Baptist Theological Education Network (ABTEN).

This endeavor is yet another example of the contributions Baptists have made to the broader Christian tradition—“We are living and making the his-

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<sup>1</sup> International Mission Board, *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2018), 101.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

tory of the future. What we teach and do today will be what future Christians consider to be their heritage.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout their history in Sub-Saharan Africa, Baptist missionaries have provided theological teaching and training through Bible schools, decentralized theological education, theological education by extension, and seminaries. These programs have had in view not merely the preserving of Baptist heritage, but the maintaining of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Theological education of church leaders must be held as an essential task of the missionary for the development of a movement of God among a people or in a place.<sup>4</sup> The Africa Baptist Theological Education Network was established with the ambition to move churches towards health and practice as defined by Scripture and for the glory of God.<sup>5</sup>

The first ABTEN conference was held in 2018 in Nairobi, Kenya. Seeking to build momentum, a second meeting took place the following year. Participants voted to charter ABTEN as a cooperating body of Baptist theological institutions and committed individuals who long for and work toward healthy, biblically sound churches that exhibit both Baptist and African identities. The mission statement of ABTEN clearly establishes that the network exists

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<sup>3</sup> Jason G. Duesing, “Baptist Contributions to the Christian Tradition,” in Matthew Y. Emerson, et. al., eds. *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B & H Academic), 348, urges his readers to remember this remark made by L. Russ Bush in his 1994 presidential address to the Evangelical Theological Society.

<sup>4</sup> Gailyn Van Rhee, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 147, also names evangelism that leads to planting new churches and nurturing of believers toward maturity as essential tasks towards this end. International Mission Board, *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2018), 96, calls us to recognize “Biblical leadership is essential to the well-being of every local church.” A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 253, also place a high value on theological education—“Whatever the means, though, the need is ever present and must be a significant part of healthy sending-church mission endeavors.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 174. Van Rhee laments, “The purpose of missions is frequently nebulous to untrained missionaries. They go to the mission field to do whatever they were sent to do. It is sad that frequently, whenever missionaries fail to prioritize the essential tasks of missions, little is left after they depart.” Thus, he proposes that a blending of formal, nonformal, and informal modes of training is needed to train different types of church leaders.

to impact local African churches through Baptist theological institutions, by strengthening and promoting sound, missional, and contextual theological education that is rooted in the Bible and responsive to African socio-cultural realities. ABTEN seeks to accomplish this mission by:

1. creating pathways for collaboration, consultancy, and communication of “best practices” among member institutions,
2. advocating and modeling doctrinal and academic integrity and development,
3. promoting systems of diversified missional theological education across Africa to better serve the local church and to prepare more laborers for the mission field,
4. identifying and disseminating teaching methodologies, “best practices” and curriculum development that are effective, biblically sound, and contextually relevant,
5. facilitating scholarly theological research, discourse, and dialogue.

ABTEN was to meet every two years for a continent-wide meeting and hold regional meetings during the off years. The Steering Committee looked with much anticipation toward the next continental meeting to take place in 2021. However, when the pandemic spread across the globe, everything changed.

Across the continent, everything from basic training for village pastors to high-level theological education came to a halt. How would these institutions survive? More importantly, how would pastors, church leaders, and missionaries be trained? Such questions compelled the Steering Committee to focus on innovations in theological education as the theme for the next ABTEN continental meeting. The meeting itself would have to be innovative in order to take place amid lockdowns and restrictions. In 2021, the next meeting was conducted virtually. A few members of the Steering Committee living in Nairobi set up the conference using Zoom. Presenters submitted a 30-minute pre-recorded presentation and then connected after its airing for

a period of live discussion. Participants also were separated into breakout sessions to discuss issues raised in the presentations. French and Portuguese language channels were created to assist those living in non-anglophone parts of the continent. Though there were glitches along the way, overall the event was successful.

Fortunately, limitations were eased and restrictions were lifted in many places across the continent as the pandemic reached an endemic stage. As a result, this year's regional meetings were able to be held in person. Leadership for each region conducted the meeting in different formats to accommodate the aftermath of the pandemic. It is worthwhile to note some positives and negatives concerning the way ABTEN operated during and after the pandemic.

### **Innovations in Theological Education through the Pandemic**

Theological educators, administrators, and consultants from Western, Eastern, and Southern regions assessed how ABTEN and theological institutions in their areas have operated since the onset of the pandemic and as it becomes endemic.<sup>6</sup> Understandably, the greatest challenge was that everyone had to shut down operations for such a long period of time. The response to the challenges, however, reveals important lessons for the future of theological education across the affinity and perhaps beyond, by providing some constructive suggestions moving forward not only for the network but also for individual institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> The author is grateful to the reviews given by Chris Schilt (Country Catalyst for Malawi, Theological Education Consultant for Central Africa Cluster, and Faculty at Baptist Theological Seminary of Malawi), Trevor Yoakum (Faculty, ESBTAO Seminary and Theological Education Consultant for West Africa Cluster), Eric Lockhart (Academic Dean, Uganda Baptist Seminary), Ronnie Davis (Senior Lecturer, Cape Town Baptist Seminary in South Africa and Theological Education Consultant for the Southern Africa Cluster), and Daniel Lowry (Instructor, Baptist Institute of Theology and Missions, Kenya).

### **Evaluating ABTEN through the Pandemic**

When the pandemic forced many institutions and organizations to cease activities, ABTEN pressed forward. The Steering Committee moved to try to stave off the loss of momentum. They utilized WhatsApp to maintain contact and communication with network members. Additionally, they offered the 2021 continental meeting fully online, gathering participants virtually using the Zoom online meeting app and pushing dialogue on relevant topics—namely innovations in theological education. As the pandemic began to abate, ABTEN initiated regional meetings both in person and online. In all, ABTEN operated well within its financial and technological capacities.

Still, there were some negative reflections. For example, the loss of personal contact allowed for a bit of an “out of sight out of mind” way of thinking to develop. Even ABTEN was thrust into a survival mentality instead of a push toward development, especially at a time when the pandemic seemingly would continue indefinitely. ABTEN’s use of online platforms for its meetings wasn’t without challenges. For example, the attempt to create breakout sessions for smaller groups using Zoom’s applications did not go as well as planned. Namely, the sessions had low member participation due to IT complications, lack of understanding of the technology, and failure by session leaders and participants to follow the general rules of the discussion.

Again, ABTEN is a network of institutions and individual members who choose to participate in annual events. Additionally, the organization operates “virtually” having no physical headquarters or paid staff. In any fledgling organization, hiccups are bound to occur along the way. Perhaps the nature and structure of ABTEN contributed to its ability to weather the storm of the pandemic, so to speak.

### **Evaluating Theological Institutions through the Pandemic**

But what of the individual institutions and ministries dedicated to the day-to-day implementation of theological education programs? How have they

adjusted to a post-pandemic world? What innovations did COVID force them to make in their ministry/theological education that will probably be continued in the future?

The pandemic pushed individuals and institutions toward increased use of technology, particularly online and distance learning platforms. In Kenya, educational ministries and agencies, which had been somewhat resistant to accrediting such educational options before the pandemic, have realized the potential and viability of these technological avenues. A significant shift in pedagogy has occurred, as all across Africa, governments imposed regulations that prohibited in-person learning.

As a result, some educators employed the use of WhatsApp, Zoom, or Google Meet to teach their classes. At the Baptist Theological Seminary of Malawi, Schilt formed a WhatsApp group for each course, then gave the students short PDF lessons that concluded with discussion questions. Students had weekly fixed times of interaction. He explained, “Much like other distance education options, this gave the students who are more passive in person a chance to speak out more. The discussions were usually lively. Now, I still form WhatsApp groups even for in-person classes to send supplementary material or even continue in-class conversations.”<sup>7</sup>

In South Africa, the Department of Education and Council on Higher Education relaxed some of the restrictions of “contact delivery” which allowed for live streaming of lectures. The administration and faculty of Cape Town Baptist Seminary decided to capitalize on this opportunity and moved to have in-person lectures live streamed instead of simply hosting meetings on a video conferencing platform. This decision required an upgrade of technology including the installation of cameras in each lecture hall. One result of this development was the seminary continued to reach communities outside of Cape Town. In addition, the practice of live lectures has resulted in an additional mid-term intake for the first time since the pandemic began. When

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<sup>7</sup> Chris Schilt, email to the author, 27 July 2022.

upsurges of COVID cases took place, which halted the plan to return to in-person learning, the school continued its online approach. The seminary has expanded its footprint by providing training beyond the campus. For example, they hosted a Church Planter's Conversations for the Baptist Union of South Africa that was also live streamed. Davis lamented, "The hardest element has been maintaining good contact with students. As a result, we have been more intentional in student meetings."<sup>8</sup> That intentionality includes checking in with students regarding mental health. The seminary added an online chapel service to try and maintain a sense of community. They continue to have music together and then sermons by lecturers, students, and guest preachers. Even when in-person meetings resume, they intend to continue to live stream the chapel services.

Likewise, the pandemic forced institutions in West Africa to expand their reach. The ESBTAO seminary in Togo increased its level of online education. Some instructors also taught online courses for the Liberian Baptist Theological Seminary. The pandemic also pushed individuals to do more beyond the classroom. Yoakum shared how his outside ministries expanded: "I signed up for more writing projects during the pandemic, including working for organizations outside the IMB . . . and other clusters. In ministry, we increased our level of humanitarian projects."<sup>9</sup> He expects these efforts will continue even if they may not be at the same level as during the pandemic.

For those serving in East Africa, moving forward through the pandemic took more of a survivalist identity. Whereas one could argue that the pandemic providentially closed schools that were struggling with doctrinal integrity and fiscal management, some healthy institutions also faced difficulties moving forward, particularly with regard to online education. The administration at Uganda Baptist Seminary talked about how to move for-

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<sup>8</sup> Ronnie Davis, email to the author, 21 July 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Trevor Yoakum, email to the author, 22 July 2022.

ward with an online education system. What some might call a lack of action on their part is actually due to a lack of resources. However, the hesitation to jump on board with an online method is also due to the administration not being completely sold on the idea that such a method is the best for them. Lockhart confessed, “Sometimes it felt as though the push [towards online education] was at the expense of brick and mortar, and I find that negative.”<sup>10</sup>

Difficulties often push people towards reflection, evaluation, and modification of systems and methods. Each practitioner and program of theological education ought to continue to look for ways of improvement so that biblically healthy programs are made accessible to the majority of church leaders. Charles Van Engen argues, “We need to draw selectively from all the paradigms of the past, for not one of them alone has prepared us for what lies ahead. Our paradigms of ministry formation must be fluid and creative, seeking to remain faithful to the basics of being God’s people in God’s world. Yet searching for radically new ways to form new leaders for Christ’s church.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Proceed with Caution**

Indeed, technology continues to bring exciting opportunities and possibilities as it becomes more and more available across Africa. And it is important to be innovative rather than to grow stale and stagnant in delivery style and substance. At the same time, however, it is important to be cautious. As with all areas of ministry formation, some pitfalls should be avoided.

First, theological educators, institutions, and networks should regularly monitor and adjust in innovative ways in order to increase the effectiveness in reaching the goal of healthy, missional churches. Yet, missionaries must be careful not to give into the tendency toward paternalism in part-

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Lockhart, email to the author, 20 July 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 252.



nership. Van Rheenen sounds the alarm when he writes, “This tendency towards paternalism is amplified when Western missionaries and agencies initiate a partnership and feel responsible for its success and continuance. As puppeteers control marionettes, Westerners frequently pull the strings that guide decision-making processes.”<sup>12</sup> Missionaries ought not push an innovation that can (or will) only be sustained by them.

Related to this warning it is equally important that missionaries hold high a standard of biblical excellence to which all followers of Christ must adhere. In utilizing technological innovations, they must not lower expectations for anyone in any circumstance. While issues of personal and/or academic integrity such as plagiarism and cheating are evidence of depravity shared globally, the transactional dynamic in relationships and utilitarianism (or consequentialism) in Sub-Saharan Africa exacerbate the practice. The former is the manner of relating to others for the purpose of receiving something. The latter is the ethic whereby people say or do whatever is perceived as necessary to get something—that is, the end justifies the means.<sup>13</sup> Thus, there is a danger in rushing to the use of technological innovations when they only create easier avenues for continuing fallen tendencies towards falsehood and dishonest gain, like plagiarism mentioned earlier. Missionaries ought not be indifferent, whether subtly or blatantly, to the lack of integrity that is pervasive among students in higher education across the affinity. While believers ought to show mercy and grace, they must never confuse charity for compassion. Otherwise, missionaries will perpetuate the soft bigotry of low expectations toward African Christians.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Van Rheenen, 199.

<sup>13</sup> John Stuart Mill and Oskar Piest. *Utilitarianism*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 77. They postulated “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”

<sup>14</sup> Terry Stoops, “Overcoming the Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations” *The Carolina Journal*, 2018, <https://www.carolinajournal.com/opinion/overcoming-the-soft-bigotry-of-low-expectations-for-black-males/>. Accessed 18 July 2022. The phrase “soft bigotry of low expectations” coined by President George W. Bush has been used by theologians such as

Second, those invested in church formation and leadership development must be aware of the tension between innovation and patience. Perhaps the most innovative approach for theological education across the region today is to exercise patience, even to resist some innovations. Lowry argues, “In a global culture that expects and demands newer/better methods (innovation), patience and trust might be the actual innovation. Seeking newer ways of doing things is the method of our day. Thus, it’s sort of a change of method to be patient. Resisting innovation is in fact innovation if your culture demands the new.”<sup>15</sup>

Third, theological educators and institutions must wrestle with whether a given technology is the best way forward. Just because a technological innovation or avenue arises doesn’t mean that using it is automatically effective or is to be preferred over traditional modes. The reality remains that many students across the affinity do not have the capacity (access) or competency (skill) to transition to technological platforms for education. Lowry urges that, in light of this realization, missionaries recommit themselves to what has been best practice for all but a tiny sliver of church history.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it’s necessary in theological education to resist the temptation to see technology as *the* path forward. Certainly, doing so carries the risk of moving more slowly, but it also avoids the risk of not leaving behind the technologically least of these. The caution to theological educators is to balance progress with pragmatism. Therefore, it is wise “to remain committed to doing what the church has always done and to believe that this de-innovation is a valid and valuable ministry despite the way it limits our reach. This requires us

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Anthony B. Bradley in combating the paternalism and infantilization practiced by many evangelicals in the USA in their attempts to reach black communities.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Lowry, email to the author, 21 July 2022. Such caution is also reflected in “Christmas Broadcast 1957”, accessed 9 September 2022 from <https://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1957> in which Queen Elizabeth II commented on the significance of technological innovations: “. . . it is not the new inventions which are the difficulty. The trouble is caused by unthinking people who carelessly throw away ageless ideals as if they were old and outworn machinery.”

<sup>16</sup> Lowry.

to believe that the Spirit is the one who will spread his work, and we can be content with our small part in it.”<sup>17</sup>

Could some innovative technology potentially extend the reach of a teaching team or institution? No doubt. But caution should be exercised or they might expand their reach at the expense of impact. Indeed, urbanization and globalization continue to reshape the African landscape, bringing greater accessibility to technology that allows students to connect with theologians and ministers of the gospel from around the world in a way unseen a decade ago. Yet, as mentioned already, large swaths of Sub-Saharan African peoples continue to live in rural areas without reliable access to such technology.

The missionary pursuit to invest in the theological and spiritual health of churches, individuals, and institutions is a noble endeavor that requires careful consideration of the best avenues for guarding doctrinal integrity and missional focus. For theological educators, the task is to equip students so that they might be approved workers who rightly handle the word of truth, knowing how to interpret it clearly and able to communicate the sense to others so that the people may understand and be doers of it. The hope is that students will be examples of the Chief Shepherd to the flock of God that is among them in the manner in which they pursue holiness and exercise oversight in humility, contrition, and fear at God's word. The ultimate goal of theological education is to mobilize pastors and missionaries to be faithful practitioners of the gospel in the mission of God and his church. These objectives are derived from the Scriptures and will be brought to completion by the Spirit.

The pandemic serves as a reminder that God is sovereign over his work, faithfully completing in his church the good work he has begun and powerfully preserving his gospel and his people. A virus cannot thwart what God

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., The Kenya Theological Education Team re-committed to what some may deem an anachronistic, non-digital delivery system, by travelling to students for face-to-face teaching and discipleship whether they are in a major urban university, a small rural town, or a remote tribal mountain top.

is doing in the world. Individuals and institutions need to rely on the One who does not need anything and who supplies everything needed for life and godliness. Though there is much to praise about technological advancement, the levels of accessibility and technological literacy of participants must be a significant point of consideration in each context.

Moreover, innovations and technology must never replace reliance on the Holy Spirit and must always be kept in submission to the Word of God. Being innovative for innovation's sake, or valuing technology as the higher good because it is new/powerful, is idolatry. Lowry, in his email message to the author, sums this up well:

We are in a moment when it is very easy to stumble into idolatry. Money mimics the Father's care, so we seek money instead of relying on Him. Technology mimics the Spirit's ubiquity and immediacy, and so we grasp at technological innovation instead of being content in our limitations and trusting in the unlimitedness of the Spirit . . . It is easier to find ways to extend ourselves beyond the need of God, rather than to recognize our limits while we trust in a God who has none.<sup>18</sup>

The higher good is faithfulness and perseverance in the trials and preserving the gospel in the trenches. May theological educators be found faithful.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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