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# MORE LIGHT ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Paul Bowers

Theological education is widely considered to be among the most strategic factors affecting the future vitality and direction of Africa's rapidly expanding Christian community. Nevertheless theological education in Africa remains among the least documented aspects of African Christianity. In an earlier survey I highlighted a recent advance in profiling the outer structures of theological education on the continent.[1] Here I would like to draw attention to a little known but useful contribution recently made in assessing some of the "inner" structures of theological education in Africa.

To learn about the mood and direction of theological education on the continent, one must reach beyond the external statistical data on theological schools. For the inner dimensions one needs to explore not least the attitudes and values, the opinions and perceptions of those who direct the life and mission of these schools. What do the staff of these schools think? What do theological educators in Africa worry about? What do they feel good about? What do they want changed?

In 1985 the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA)[2] undertook a pioneering survey of the attitudes, values, opinions, and perceptions of theological educators in Africa. Altogether 355 theological educators in sixty-six different theological schools throughout sub-Saharan Africa took part, completing a questionnaire containing 48 questions. So far as is known, no similar survey of this scope has ever before been undertaken in Africa. Though the survey was originally conceived as a preliminary experimental effort, the results proved to be substantial within the parameters set for the project. The responses constitute a new lode of researchable information on theological education on the continent. At every turn the data throws fresh light on the state of theological education in Africa, and suggests new lines of inquiry.

Although the basic results of the survey were published in 1986 (in the ACTEA TOOLS AND STUDIES series, "No. 6: ACTEA Opinion Survey of Theological Educators in Africa"),[3] the implications of this material have yet to be widely noticed. My purpose here is to highlight some of the findings, in order to encourage further attention to this body of data, and to encourage additional research into the areas explored.

All schools contacted for the survey were officially related to ACTEA.
In consequence the respondents tend to represent the evangelical compo-
nent among theological educators in Africa.  All administrative officers
and regular teaching staff of these schools were requested to answer the
questionnaire privately and anonymously.  Neither the name of the person
nor the name of the school appeared anywhere on the individual forms
when completed.[4]

The survey participants represent a healthy cross-section of evangelical
theological educators in Africa in several important respects.  For
example 14.1% of the respondents had doctorates, 45.8% had masters
degrees, 20.1% had bachelors degrees, and 20.1% held lower qualifica-
tions.   (Nearly 70% of respondents "definitely" hoped to pursue further
studies; 5.2% responded to the prospect with a weary "no more").  With
respect to age, those in their 30s and 40s predominated (64.5%);   26.6%
were older, and only 9% younger.  Of the Africans responding, 53.2% had
studied overseas, and 46.8% had not.  Of the expatriates, 53.4% had
served in Africa for ten or more years, while 46.6% had served for less
than ten years.  (Surprisingly, among all respondents only 30.1% had
been involved in theological education for ten years or more.)

A balanced sampling, however, was not always achieved.  40.3% of the
respondents were African, and 59.7% expatriate, whereas the general
figure for evangelical schools in Africa is 48.4% African and 51.6%
expatriate.[5]   90.2% of respondents were from anglophone schools and only
7.5% from francophone, whereas the percentages of anglophone and franco-
phone schools in Africa are respectively 69.9% and 26.5%.  Similarly
85.2% of the respondents were full-time staff, and only 14.8% part-time
staff, whereas the general percentages for theological schools in Africa
are respectively 65.7% and 34.3%.[6]   In these respects the survey
results cannot therefore be probed for reliable data.

One notable finding of the ACTEA survey is that respondents in general
seem to have a markedly positive attitude towards themselves, their work
and their school (at least when answering questionnaires).  Despite the
daunting array of problems faced by theological schools in Africa, a
remarkable 96% felt that their own school was "mostly" or "certainly"
making a worthwhile contribution to the development of leaders for the
church in Africa.   91% believed that good understanding exists between
their school and the church communities it serves.   78.5% felt that they
themselves definitely or at least usually have sufficient voice in the
administration of their school.

47.8% are entirely satisfied with their teaching ability, and another
44.6% feel that, while they could perhaps benefit from some help in
teaching skills, they generally "do okay".  Indeed only a meagre 7.6%
confessed an unqualified need for help in improving teaching skills--
although twice as many (15.1% ) elsewhere stated that they had had no
formal training in teaching or education, and an additional 42% had only

had "some" courses in education. Not all assessments were so deter-
minedly affirming. Whereas 60.2% felt staff salaries and other benefits
at their school were adequate or even generous, 39.8% were willing to
suggest that such amenities were inadequate or very inadequate.[7] And
asked if they were overworked at their school, 31.1% said frequently or
always, and an additional 51% said sometimes, while only 17.8% said "not
at all."

When asked to identify the three major strengths at their school,
respondents gave by far the highest rating to the spiritual atmosphere
(48.2%). This was followed, surprisingly, by the library (33.5%)--even
though libraries are judged by informed observers to be among the great-
est weaknesses in theological schools in Africa (for example, at the
time the survey was taken only 2% of all documented theological schools
in Africa reported library holdings larger than 15,000 volumes).[8]
Teacher qualifications received the third highest rating (22%) as a
major strength at the respondent's school. Indeed only 7.9% thought
teacher qualifications among the most needed improvements at their
school (although nearly 70% wanted to pursue further studies). While
this generally positive and even optimistic attitude prevailing among
theological educators towards their schools and their own work is doubt-
less salutary, some may feel that a certain lapse in evaluative realism
is sometimes detectable.

Realism was more in evidence when respondents ranked the most needed
improvements at their own schools. Finances were rated at the top
(36.6%), followed by academic recognition of the school (27.6%) and by
the library (25.1%!). Also prominently identified as needing improve-
ment were the facilities (24.8%) and textbooks (22.5%). (In a separate
question on textbooks, 63.4% reported that textbooks were too expensive,
57.5% that they were hard to get, and 41.4% that they were not contex-
tual enough.)

When respondents were asked to select the five biggest problems facing
the church in Africa today, perhaps it is understandable that the larg-
est percentage of these theological educators should specify the paucity
of trained church leaders (59.2%). This was followed by inadequate
stewardship (46.8%) and inadequate Christian education of laity (43.7%).
Other church problems receiving prominent notice were poor administra-
tion (35.2%), tribalism (34.9%), theological weakness or indifference
(29.3%) and syncretism (28.7%). Granted that a special sensitivity
towards theological dimensions of church life should be expected among
such respondents, these assessments will nevertheless also seem to many
to represent considerable realism about the church's needs.[9]

Respondents were asked which forms of academic recognition would most
benefit their school, and also which forms of such recognition their
school would most likely be able to achieve. Judged most beneficial
were, in descending order, ACTEA accreditation (65.4%), connection with

a local university (45.2%), recognition by sponsoring African churches
(40.6%), and government recognition (40%). One might have expected
somewhat higher ratings here for government recognition or for a univer-
sity connection. Regarding which forms of recognition were more likely
to be achieved by the respondent's school, the highest ratings went to
ACTEA accreditation (55.8%), recognition by sponsoring African churches
(33.5%), connections with a local university (24.8%), and affiliation
with an overseas school (21.1%). These selections seem to represent
reasonable expectations in the prevailing circumstances, apart from the
option of establishing an effective connection with a local university,
which has in fact rarely proved successful for theological schools in
Africa.[10]

Although among the lowest rated problems facing the African church were,
rather unexpectedly, foreign dominance (9.9%), insensitivity to social
needs (8.5%), and cultural insensitivity (5.9%),[11] respondents were by
no means indifferent to contextual issues. Thus 41.4% stated that their
textbooks were not sufficiently contextual, 54.6% ranked contextualized
theological textbooks a major priority in developing adequate theolo-
gical life in Africa, and 78% ranked contextualization of the curriculum
either a top priority or important for theological education in Africa
(5 respondents felt that contextualization of the curriculum was
"dangerous"!). The areas of the curriculum most needing contextualized
textbooks, according to respondents, were the practical subjects,
namely: pastoral theology, worship, counselling, ethics, and Christian
education. (The majority of respondents did not rank Biblical exegesis,
theology, or church history as priorities for curricular contextualiza-
tion.)

As to Africanization of staff, 77.2% felt that most or at least half of
the staff at theological schools should be African. (1.7% felt that all
should be African, and 14.6% felt that ethnic distinctions should be
irrelevant.) The response was more ambivalent on whether Africanization
of staff was in general going fast enough on the continent: 36.8%
thought it was not going fast enough, whereas 29.3% thought the pace was
about right, and a striking 30.7% didn't feel they knew (by far the
largest "unsure" response for any question in the survey--perhaps sug-
gesting some uneasiness over the question).[12]

Despite the general sensitivity evidenced towards contextual factors,
gaps in the contextual awareness of theological educators were sometimes
surprising. When offered a list of nineteen better known African Chris-
tian leaders, 49 respondents marked that they knew of not a single
individual on the list! Though all respondents were ostensibly evangel-
ical, a full 44.1% had not read Kato's Theological Pitfalls in Africa,
54.3% had never read the EAST AFRICA JOURNAL OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY,
and 34.4% had rarely or never seen the ACTEA BULLETIN--which has been
going regularly for many years to each of the schools participating in

the survey. Keeping contextually current may not be as prominent a practical value as one might expect.

In considering course subjects suitable for the curriculum of theological schools in Africa, respondents lay special emphasis on those non-traditional subjects associated either with the social sciences or with the African context. Thus African church history, African traditional religion, Islam, church and government in Africa, and African culture were all given a high rating (though, curiously, African music and literature did not receive so high a rating, and only the lowest rating went to African art). Psychology, anthropology, and sociology were also rated highly (economics was not, and political science was given the lowest rating in this category--even though both subjects may have unexpected relevance to church operations). In general the responses suggest an encouraging openness to innovation in curricular development, especially in relation to the African social context.

Asked what should be the top five priorities for developing theological life in Africa, the largest number of respondents chose contextualized textbooks and theological workshops for pastors (54.6% each). The other top three priorities selected were scholarships for advanced studies (45.4%), theological journals (44.2%), and consultations for theological educators (43.7%). The lowest ratings went to associations of theological schools, associations of theologians, and theological students fellowships. Nevertheless, when asked in a separate question about the potential benefit of regular contact among theological schools in their area, fully 88.2% said this would be useful or very useful (2.9% reported that there were no schools near them). Perhaps the concrete suggestion of inter-school contacts in their own area generated greater immediate appeal among respondents than did the abstract notion of associations of schools.[13]

The questionnaire may have induced a reaction in some respondents, a "disgruntled" factor, which in turn may have affected the reliability of some of the responses. Thus 7 respondents answered that they were not interested in seeing the results of the survey, 6 that they didn't want to answer such a questionnaire again, and 3 that contact among schools in their area would be "a waste of time." This disaffected mood may help explain some other interesting responses. Thus within an ostensibly conservative Protestant group, 9 respondents chose to affirm that Roman Catholicism has "proved generally consistent with biblical Christianity." In some instances this answer may certainly have represented the respondent's honest opinion, but in the circumstances it seems more likely that this response in most cases represents more a measure of annoyance with the question. This may then help explain why 3 respondents marked that salvation is "frequently" possible by means of traditional African religion, and why at least 16 others felt that salvation was "sometimes" possible by that means. Alternatively this particular question may have proved ambiguous, so that some took it to

be asking whether African traditional religion could ever serve as a point of contact, bridge, or preparation for the Gospel.

The Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) proves itself effective in winning familiarity and acceptance within this key segment of its intended constituency. Offered a list of well-known organizations and movements, 49.3% of the respondents gave AEAM an approved rating (only the Lausanne movement secured a higher rating, 55.5%; WEF came third with 38.6%). Similarly, the AEAM general secretary, Dr Tokunboh Adeyemo, is the African Christian leader whom the largest percentage of respondents (38%) have actually met (23.7% had met Osei-Mensah, 22.3 % Kato, and only 8.7% Mbiti). Adeyemo was also rated among the top three leaders who have made the most beneficial contribution to African Christianity (by 47.9% of the respondents). Kato was so rated by 48.5%, Osei-Mensah by 30.4%, and Mbiti by 19.7%.

It is instructive that approval ratings for various theological traditions were divided fairly evenly among covenant theology (21.4%), the charismatic movement (20.3%), and dispensational theology (19.7%). Given the group being sampled, it is not unexpected that the WCC, AACC, liberation theology, black theology, and liberal theology each attracted less than 4% approval ratings (many will be surprised that such traditions received any rating).

In summary the survey seems to indicate a generally positive attitude among evangelical theological educators towards their schools and their own work, a healthy realism towards improvements needed at the schools, towards problems of the churches, and towards academic recognition. In addition, both an appropriate sensitivity to the issues of contextualization, and an openness to innovative development of the curriculum, are in evidence. Less concern was shown about expatriate influence in the church than might have been expected, though the emphasis on African staffing of the theological schools was appropriately strong. Positive assessments at times seemed less reliable with regard to the theological educators themselves and the strengths of their schools. The degree of actual familiarity with particular elements in the African Christian context was also in some respects disappointing. Despite the evidence of marked theological diversity within an evangelical frame of reference, respondents also showed significant interest in fellowship and cooperation among theological educators and theological schools.

There is more that can be learned about the opinions and attitudes of theological educators in Africa from the data gathered for the ACTEA survey. And of course there is much more that we would like to know, beyond what is available there. The benefits that would derive from further research are everywhere suggested by the material. But here at least is a beginning in sketching out an "inner" profile of theological education on the continent. Here is more light on this hitherto largely-neglected topic in the study of African Christianity.

## ENDNOTES

[1]See my article, "New Light on Theological Education in Africa" EAJET vi.2 (1987) 13-21. A revised and corrected version of this material was subsequently issued under the same title as ACTEA TOOLS AND STUDIES No. 9 (Nairobi: ACTEA, 1989), and an abbreviated version has just appeared in the EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY xiv.1 (1990) 57-63.

[2]ACTEA is a network and support service for evangelical theological education in Africa, now linking more than 170 theological schools and programmes throughout the continent. Approximately one-sixth of the schools are involved in ACTEA's accreditation services. ACTEA, founded in 1976, is a ministry of the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar. Further information may be obtained by writing to: ACTEA, PMB 2049, Kaduna, Nigeria.

[3]Nairobi: ACTEA, 1986. This may be ordered at $3 a copy from: ACTEA, PO Box 60875, Nairobi, Kenya (cheques should be made payable to "ACTEA").

[4]The schools which participated in the survey are listed at the end of the 1986 survey report (see reference in note 3 above).

[5]The age patterns of the survey respondents, however, offered encouraging implications for the future progress of Africanization. Among Africans taking part in the survey 60.6% were under forty years of age, while only 10.6% were fifty years or older. In contrast, among expatriates taking part in the survey 32.4% were under forty, and 38.3% were fifty or over.

[6]For the general statistics on theological education in Africa given in this paragraph, see the reference in note 1 above.

[7]Throughout the survey, the opinions of African and expatriate respondents ran generally parallel on the majority of issues, more so than might have been expected. This makes all the more interesting those points at which the pattern did not hold. For example, of those who ranked staff salaries among the three most needed improvements at their school, 68.8% were African and only 31.3% expatriate. Similarly, when asked regarding the adequacy of salaries at their school, among African respondents 41.3% thought salaries were adequate or generous, while 58.7% thought salaries were inadequate or very inadequate. Among expatriates 73.6% felt positive about salaries, and only 26.4% thought them inadequate or very inadequate. Does the fact that expatriates often do not receive their salary from the school where they work in Africa sometimes render them less sensitive on this issue?

[8]See the reference in note 1 above.

[9]Some interesting disparity is evident, however, between African and expatriate responses on the major problems of the African church. For example, among those selecting inadequate stewardship, 24.5% were African and 75.5% expatriate; of those selecting inadequate Christian education of the laity, 31.4% were African and 68.6% expatriate; of those selecting narrow-mindedness, 76.5% were African and 23.5% expatriate. Among African respondents alone, the top five selections were

(in descending order): too few trained leaders, poor administration, tribalism, inadequate Christian education of the laity, and loss of evangelistic zeal. Among expatriate respondents, the ranking was: too few trained leaders, inadequate stewardship, inadequate Christian education of the laity, tribalism, and poor administration.

[10]African respondents more so than expatriate respondents were impressed by the benefits of affiliation with a local university, and also thought such an achievement possible for their school. This was true as well regarding the benefits and possibilities of being able to prepare students for an external degree examination overseas. On the other hand, expatriate respondents were more inclined than were African respondents to think that their school could secure recognition through affiliation with an overseas school.

[11]However, 20.5% of African respondents marked "foreign dominance" as a major problem, over against only 4.3% of the expatriates!

[12]Regarding the extent to which the staff of theological colleges should be Africanized, African respondents were only modestly more favourable to higher numbers than were their expatriate counterparts. Thus 44.6% of the African respondents felt that staff of theological schools should be "mostly" African, while 35.3% thought that at least half of the staff should be African; the comparable figures for expatriate responses were 38.8% and 37.3% respectively. (12.9% of the Africans and 15.4% of the expatriates thought that such ethnic distinctions should be irrelevant). But with respect to the pace of such Africanization the differences were more marked. 43.5% of the Africans thought the pace was not fast enough, while 32.8% of the expatriates agreed. Only 24.6% of the Africans thought the pace was "about right", matched by 32.4% of the expatriates. (26.1% of the Africans were "unsure" on this issue, as were 33.3% of the expatriates.) Some may have expected even greater differences on this important question, but the degree to which the opinions did differ here should serve as an appropriate warning, and a stimulus to better achievement.

[13]Regarding attitudes towards theological education by extension (TEE), a large number of respondents (38.5%) thought TEE to be less suitable or much less suitable than residential schooling for training church leadership in Africa. An almost equal number (39.1%) considered TEE and residential schooling to be equally suitable. Only 13.3% judged TEE to be more suitable or much more suitable. (Within this sampling, African respondents were less likely to consider TEE and residential schooling equally suitable—31.2%, and more likely to think that TEE was less or much less suitable—42.8%.) Those wishing a rapprochement between TEE and residential schooling in Africa will need to take account of these findings. Regarding impressions among respondents about the availability of post-graduate theological studies within Africa, perhaps existing post-graduate theological programmes need to upgrade their publicity within this strategic body of opinion-makers, since only 51% affirmed that one could find entirely suitable places on the continent for theological studies at masters level (23.2% said such opportunities did not yet exist, while a further 25.8% weren't sure or didn't know.) That these findings were registered in 1985, when many such programmes were relatively new, must of course also be taken into account.