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# A REPORT ON NEEDS OF PRESENT AND FUTURE LEADERS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Contextualized Theological Education: Real Responses Among Real Communities  
Reimagining Theological Education,  
an Initiative of Convergence Network, 2016

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## **Introduction**

The task of this group was to research and respond to the question: what are the needs of present and future church and religious leaders? Admittedly, this task is not as simple as it sounds. It is not as easy as coming up with a list of universal qualifications that pastors and other religious leaders need in order to do their jobs. One cannot come up with such a list of universals because the “field” of ministry in the twenty-first century is anything but universal. Instead, religious leaders today come from and minister to particular communities across a broad spectrum of racial and ethnic backgrounds, economic backgrounds, and contextual settings. Gone are the days (and with good reason) when theological education could be so standardized as to produce roughly equivalently educated pastors (in both quality and content) across the country. If theological education is to respond to the real needs of present and future leaders, then understanding the contextual nature of education and ministry settings will be a

significant prerequisite. This report attempts to name why contextualization is important, what it looks like, and how theological education might respond.

### ***The Importance of Contextualization***

The “2014 Religious Landscape Study” published by the Pew Research Center finds increasing racial and ethnic diversity within Christianity across the board. In each category researched by Pew (Protestant Evangelical, Protestant Mainline, Catholic, Orthodox, Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, and Other), the percentage of non-white participation had grown between 2012 and 2014.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, according to the US Census Bureau, the population of Hispanic Americans is projected to increase by 114% between 2014 and 2060; the population of Black Americans is projected to increase by 63%; while the population of White (non-Hispanic) Americans will increase only 21%.<sup>2</sup> These demographic trends denote the rising population and religious participation of non-white groups and communities. With these statistics in mind, we suggest that traditional and white-dominated modes of education must be innovated, adapted, or completely thrown out in order to make room for education that meets the needs of non-white persons.

At present in theological education, we suspect that we are in a swing back from a focus on pastoral skills, having swung out of the clerical paradigm some years ago and back into an academic paradigm. This academic paradigm appears somewhat like an anemic

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, “2014 Religious Landscape Study,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>2</sup> Colby, Sandra L. and Jennifer M. Ortman, “Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060,” US Census Bureau: March 2015, 9.

Schleiermacher model. The 19<sup>th</sup> century “father” of contemporary theological education divided disciplines into the now-standard categories of Bible, Theology, Church History, Pastoral Education, and Pastoral Counseling. What these fields lack in current modes of theological education is the connection with contextual, real-world application.

Additionally, theological education in North America is embedded in a white dominated educational system in which education and leadership looks same for all communities because we push white forms of leadership into communities of color. This educational system wields an unjust amount of power, given that it is the only game in town and the only option for non-white persons who wish to gain recognition in a white-dominated system.

Both the current theological education system and the funding models within this system are a generation out of sync. We continue to prepare would-be pastors of white steeple churches whose needs, in previous generations, were covered (student debt, housing, etc.). There is also an assumption that we need academics because being an academic gives you more power (in the ordination track and in educational systems). While having highly trained academics is important, maintaining the academic discipline “siloes” of the Schleiermacher model does not allow academics to respond to the contextual needs of real persons in real situations. Moreover, solely becoming an academic means having authority or power but not the relational power that is needed today to affect real change among oppressed or marginalized communities.

### ***Contextualized Education—How Theo Ed Moves Forward***

If the current accreditation system for theological education (the Association of Theological Schools) continues to operate out of a white dominate educational paradigm, then perhaps it is time to establish a different paradigm, one that casts off previous assumptions and begins by seeking solutions from the marginalized communities it seeks to serve. When we begin to envision an entirely different educational model, there are a number of necessary items that emerge. We can name these as “needs of present and future leaders” while recognizing that each item must also be contextualized to a particular setting if it is to have any real educational power within the community.

- **Learning objectives should be generated from the community**, and especially from communities on the margins. In this sense, learners (especially learners on the margins) generate what needs to be learned, not teachers (and the systems that teachers are a part of). This notion goes hand in hand with ideas presented in the report from the pedagogy and curriculum group—student directed learning in which a student sits down with a mentor and designs a learning plan is far more effective than top-down, institutionalized/mandated curriculum. The result is that participants feel more engaged, transformed, and equipped by what they learn and the learning process itself.
- **Models of teaching and learning** are same as the models students will be using in the field. Students will still certainly learn content that is not directly used in the field, but this content must be yoked to ideas and practices used in the field. Indeed, because the field is not universal, but is contextual, specific, and

localized, a high degree of critical thinking must be instilled as a part of the education process in order to prepare students to take concepts and theories gained from theological education and apply them to real-world settings. When theological education is successful, we will be able to go into specific communities and see contextual learning being applied. For instance, when a course on prophetic preaching equips a pastor in a lower-income neighborhood to preach a message of justice and equality, then we will be able to see that community being transformed by the skills gained in the learning environment.

- **Contextualized content is key to deconstructing white dominant educational paradigms.** As Edwin Aponte reminds us, we must undo the encyclopedia of theological education because it is unredeemably colonial. Instead of continuing to deliver the same content to marginalized communities, we must begin to deliver content that speaks to the situations of those communities. Doing so will result in transformed communities with leaders that are well-equipped to speak to and work within those communities. Oftentimes such contextualized learning means including practice from the beginning of the educational process, rather than learning theory and then having to apply that theory on one's own in a foreign setting. This doesn't mean that contextualized content will not include theory, but the theory will always be yoked to a set of specific practices. For example, learning hermeneutical theory for Biblical interpretation goes hand in hand with the requirement of writing sermons for one's own community in which one must make the Bible make sense for the recently out of work single mother or for the family whose son committed suicide.

In this way theory is tied to context and practice all along the educational process, rather than at the end or in a separate field-education environment.

- **Contextual learning is transformative** and is related to socialization. Students of theological education are formed in the world and learn to see the world in the way they are trained and socialized to see the world. This is a reality that we should take seriously. And rather than fleeing from this reality, we should embrace it as a chance to form religious leaders in ways that they can experience and relate to their own contexts, rather than asking them to move hundreds of miles to attend X seminary and become skilled in practices predetermined by an accrediting body far removed from the students' contexts. By training a student to see and understand her own context, education becomes transformative for both the learner and the community of which the learner is a part.
- **Content is readily available but must be contextualized by a new type of teacher.** Today we all understand that content (even good content) is relatively cheap. Interested individuals can easily find lectures, podcasts, YouTube videos, and other online content from a multiplicity of content providers. Since this is the case, we envision the rise of another kind of profession: the academic equivalent of a guide or mentor. This new vocation assumes that we are beyond the age of academic specialization. Instead of teachers being trained solely within the academic discipline corresponding to traditional fields of theological education, a teacher's specialization needs to be in teaching more so than content knowledge. To be sure, we still need content generators (experts), but fewer of them will be

required. We will certainly need more teachers who specialize in mentoring and guiding students through the learning process. Because we are advocating for individualized and contextualized learning plans, these mentors must be savvy enough to navigate multiple worldviews and sensitive enough to understand something about the context of the student with whom they are working. Additionally, these teacher/mentors should be able bridge the theory/praxis gap by constantly reminding students of their context or the field in which they work. Theory applied to practice along the way requires teachers who are knowledgeable about various contexts and who are able to aid students in applying their knowledge to specific situations. In this way, students also gain the critical thinking skills necessary to continue their education in contextually-based ways after leaving the mentor/student relationship or after completing a specific theological education program. Teachers are not reproducing themselves or training students in utter mimicry, but rather they are forming students through critical thinking and through careful attention to the students' own contexts.

- **Serving those who need it in a financially sustainable way** must be a hallmark of theological education from this point forward. Because the number of white steeple churches with large endowments is shrinking, many churches cannot afford to pay their leaders a wage that overcomes the amount of student debt accrued from graduate theological education. Add on to this the fact that many seminary graduates are seeking employment in other non-profit positions or are starting their own community-based non-profits, and the student debt crisis becomes one of the most significant issues facing theological education today.

We suggest that lower-overhead financial models should be considered in order to keep student costs from rising beyond what we will call a sustainable level. A sustainable level would be a reasonable amount to ask a student to pay commensurate with her or his income or expected income. By instituting an alternative credentialing system for theological education or by encouraging sustainable programs outside of the traditional accrediting system means that these programs will not have access to Title IV funding. We take this dilemma seriously and argue that we must remain justice-minded in terms of equity and accessibility. It is possible that we can do a better job of attending to justice concerns without Title IV funding and requirements, but we must hold each other's feet to the fire and must come up with creative funding solutions and business models in order to maintain low costs for students.

### ***Steps Toward Implementing Contextual Theological Education***

The type of contextual education outlined here is already being done in a handful of programs around the country. We suggest first identifying these programs and bringing them together in order to learn what is working well, what is not working well, and what resources these programs need in order to thrive.

Second, as we move toward proliferating these types of programs, we anticipate adding a host of new practices to the traditional disciplines that are a part of theological education. Some of the new practices might be: community organizing, explicitly faith-

based activism, 'secular' non-profit creation, contextually situated Bible study, public leadership, and doing academic work for the community (becoming a public academic/intellectual). These new practices and new models for learning have significant implications for educators. In addition to those mentioned above, teachers/mentors would now be able to work in community, rather than as the expert in isolation, and they would have the chance to prove their own skills by working not only with students but also in the communities that their students serve.

Our hypothesis is that these new programs will become highly focused, since they will be contextually driven. This removes the idea that you must teach or facilitate all fields in order to exist as a program (contrary to current accreditation requirements). Moreover, this is where the function of a network comes in. Programs can send their students to other programs in the network that specialize in whatever form of training they cannot provide. If sites of theological education arise from places where practices are being done well, then a learner might gain skills in community organizing from one program particularly well suited to teach community organizing, while also honing their Biblical competency through another program with quality teachers and mentors in Biblical studies. The result might look something like a distributed seminary, or a system of stackable credentials, in which the student gains competencies from various organizations and programs especially focused on those specific competencies.

When programs operate outside of the traditional accrediting structure, then proof of stability is not a requisite for accreditation. While we hope that many programs will be

sustainable for a long period, this new model of education eliminates the assumption that every program should last forever. Some programs might be more project-based or might come into and out of existence based on needs that arise or evolve.

### ***Conclusions***

Because theological education does not consist of universally prescribed curricula or a set of given theories applicable across the board, the needs of present and future leaders of faith communities cannot be distilled into a simple list. Nevertheless, we feel that this report highlights some of the elements necessary for shifting theological education toward a robust contextually-based educational model that better fits the needs of a growing population of non-white religious leaders. In fact, this type of contextual theological education will serve the needs of all leaders, inasmuch as it will equip each person to respond to the situations and challenges facing us in this twenty-first century.