

A Giant on Clay Legs? African Theological Education and the Formation of Missiocentric, Missionary-sending Church Leaders

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Abstract

Many theological educators worldwide recognize the centrality of mission in God's purposes for his Church, and therefore for the ministerial training of church leaders. However, African seminaries are commonly engaging with such issues from a disadvantaged position, having inherited fragmented and mission-deprioritized systems of theological training from Western contexts through processes of colonial and postcolonial transfer—to the extent that Rwandan theologian Tharcisse Gatwa calls Bible colleges the “clay legs” on which the African Church perilously stands. This article utilizes Fohle Lygunda Li-M's “Antioch” model to propose one way that sub-Saharan African seminaries might form missiocentric, missionary-sending church leaders through their theological education programs.

Key Words: Africa, Antioch model, missiocentricity, *missio Dei*, theological education

Introduction

In recent years evangelical theological educators have been required to operate in an almost constant state of flux. Rare are the books or articles about theological education that do not include words like “reforming,” “reenvisioning,” “reconsidering,” “revisiting,” “renewing,” and “reimagining” in the title. Vigorous discussions are commonplace about new forms and new structures in theological education, yet up to now there is no unanimity emerging concerning their precise nature. Thus Bernhard Ott's comparison of the field of theological education to a construction site (2016, p. xi) hits home, with its associations of movement (or mess?), clutter (or confusion?), disorder (or disarray?), and the unnerving reality of relentless and unsettling change. Those seeking vocational stability and serenity might be better served elsewhere.

However, Ott's “construction site” metaphor for theological education also carries associations of a plan, a design, and a focused purpose: Who builds something without knowing what it is they are building? For many theological educators, “mission” is stamped across their architectural plans and is central to what they are seeking to (re)build. This article outlines some ways in which evangelical academicians are reflecting on the missional basis of theological education, before highlighting how such reflections are being worked out specifically in sub-Saharan African theological education institutions. The article will close by interacting with Congolese theologian Fohle Lygunda Li-M's significant 2016 monograph “Transforming Missiology” with a view to developing the ongoing discourse concerning the formation of missiocentric, missionary-sending local church leaders through African theological education.

***Missio Dei* and the Theological Task**

The causes of recent upheavals so evident in evangelical theological education are wide ranging, but they can be generalized into two broad groupings. The first consists of those forces of change which are common to the broader sphere of higher-education and thus not specific to theological education. For example, Ott identifies how forces of democratization (student-driven education) and commercialization (market-driven education) are having a profound impact across many types

of North American and European tertiary education institutions - including theological institutions (2016, p. 2).

The second grouping (and the focus of this article) consists of those forces of change which emanate from recent discussions amongst Christian stakeholders concerning the nature and purpose of theological education specifically. Central to these discussions is the nature of the relationship between missiology and theology, and thus the place of mission in the curricular and co-curricular activities of theological education institutions (TEIs). Until relatively recently such discussions were uncommon even within the field of mission studies, to the extent that British missiologist Lesslie Newbigin was able to refer to the role of mission in theological education as 'the Cinderella of missions' (Newbigin, 1979, p. 105). But the times have changed: it is striking today to note the high proportion of scholarly voices contributing to discussions about the future of theological education who do so from explicitly missiological backgrounds and perspectives (e.g., Robert Banks, Christopher Wright, Rupen Das, Bernhard Ott, Fohle Lygunda Li-M).

These mission-centered discourses surrounding theological education emanate primarily from the "Copernican revolution" (Duraisingh, 2010, p. 13) that *missio Dei* thinking represents within mission studies and the broader theological arena. Professor of missional theology Darrell Guder coined the term "Trinitarian missiocentricity" to articulate the criticality of trinitarian ontology as a basis of the church's missional activity and nature (2015, p. xv). However, the concept itself can be traced as far back as the International Missionary Council's Willengen conference in 1952, and even to Karl Barth's seminal 1932 paper "Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart" ("Theology and Mission in the Present Situation"), in which he sought to locate the Church's missionary identity in God's trinitarian being and thus christened the Church as "a human community called to the act of mission" (as cited in Guder, 2015, p. 8). In this line of thinking, the Church's call to mission must be located within the sending nature of God himself. As the Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit, so the Son and the Holy Spirit join with the Father in sending the Church into the world. Mission is thus identified as a divine attribute before a human endeavor, which in turn recenters the Church's mission onto God's purposes, plans, and perspectives over and above human structures, schemes, and strategies.

The concept of missional ecclesiology derives from *missio Dei* discourse because "God's invitation to participate in that *missio Dei*...gives rise to a mission-shaped church" (Duraisingh, 2010, p. 12). Mission is neither a specialized call for some in the congregation nor a program or task for the entirety of the congregation; rather, is the very identity, character, and vocation of each locally gathered congregation of Christ-followers. "Church" and "mission" do not connote two mutually exclusive spheres of divine activity, but rather the former is called to and formed for the latter. This framework emphasizes God's invitation to collective mission participation across the congregational gathering, a democratization of involvement in contradistinction to the specialist approach that has prevailed since 'the great 19th century of mission' in Europe, where a subset of experts were traditionally set apart from the wider body of God's people and assigned almost exclusive agency in mission (Ma, 2016, p. 93). As such, the local congregation is today commonly considered the primary mission agent, and thus mission must be "the fundamental, the essential, the centering understanding of the church's purpose and action" (Guder, 2015, p. 65).

This missional 'chain of logic' can be carried onward from God, to the church, to TEIs themselves, as per Bernhard Ott's table below (2001, p. 82):

	Dimension	Intention
	Missio Dei	<i>God's missionary nature</i>
		<i>God's act of sending his Son and his Spirit</i>
	↓	
	Ecclesiology	<i>The missionary nature of the church</i>
	↓	
	Theology	<i>The missionary nature of all theology</i>
	↓	
	Theological Education	<i>The missionary nature of all theological education</i>
		<i>Specific, mission-oriented training</i>

Lesslie Newbigin argued that the Church should have a missionary dimension that infuses its existence even when not explicitly engaged in intentional mission work (1958, p. 21). Bernhard Ott's model incorporates those concepts into his model and demonstrates how the mission-oriented nature of theological education is a product of God's missionary nature. Thus, the essential purpose of TEIs becomes the enablement of churches to participate in the *missio Dei* by encouraging and equipping their students as ministry leaders who serve in light of God's own mission purposes in the world. As such, theological education is not an end in itself, "but rather a means for God's people to be equipped for God's mission," and thus "the formation of the church for mission should be the motivating force that shapes and energizes our theological labors" (Guder, 2015, pp. 14–15). Thus, TEIs must be formational in inclining students toward participation in the *missio Dei* and mobilizational in equipping them to serve the world in mission. This is clearly expressed in the Cape Town Commitment from the 2010 Lausanne III conference: "The mission of the church on earth is to serve the mission of God, and the mission of theological education is to strengthen and accompany the mission of the church" (Wright, 2010).

Mission in African Theological Education

Christianity in Africa has grown from 9.6 million adherents in 1900 to 667 million by the year 2020, a shift described by missiometrician Gina Zurlo as "the most dramatic religious transformation of any continent over the past 120 years" (2022, p. 6). This remarkable numerical growth of Christianity across sub-Saharan Africa has resulted in the rapid multiplication of churches and the accompanying increased demand for theologically trained church leaders and hence training institutions themselves. A substantial number of African churches seek some form of formal theological training for their leaders, especially those churches belonging to "historic denominations" planted by and descended from Western missionaries, so more TEIs with increased capacities are needed to fill ecclesiastical leadership gaps and nurture ministerial effectiveness. TEIs in Africa are normally acknowledged as being highly influential in the spiritual and vocational formation of African church. But to what extent are they founded upon Trinitarian missiocentricity as described above?

Interestingly, many African scholars appear to be pessimistic regarding the current effectiveness of African TEIs in equipping local church leaders for missiocentric and missionary-sending leadership. Rwandan theologian Tharcisse Gatwa warns that African Christianity is fragile due to its "incapacity to affirm its missionary identity," which he attributes to "the weaknesses of its theological education," equating the African Church to a giant standing on the "clay legs" of its own TEIs (2015, p. 85). He argues that these clay legs of missionlessness have resulted in what he terms "ostracism in the pastorate," a disconnect between the church leader and the people of God,

society, and the wider global context due to a “mediocrity in training” (2015, p. 90). Similarly Congolese missiologist Fohle Lygunda Li-M’s doctoral research concludes that the DRC and other sub-Saharan countries have become Christianized settings without impactful Christianity due to the failure of missiological education in TEIs, so that many Protestant churches are now “mission-mindless” (2016, p. 221). He even warns that this situation can result in the “euthanasia” of the church (139). Marilyn Naidoo’s recent qualitative research in South Africa found similarly that TEIs there “lacked contextual relevance to deal with the spiritual needs of their sociocultural contexts” (2022, p. 227). Quips about theological *seminaries* as theological *cemeteries* abound. In short, many African scholars acknowledge that, although there do exist newer, more contextually-located and missiologically-aware TEIs, many established colleges (often associated with imported Western denominations) are not effectively equipping church leaders to be missionally engaged.

The Developing Relationship between Theology and Mission

In his 1991 magnum opus *Transforming Mission*, South African missiologist David Bosch describes the evolving relationship between theology and mission over time (1991, pp. 489–498). This typology provides important context for understanding why many African theological education institutions find themselves in their present “moment.” There appear to be at least six distinct stages to Bosch’s schema:

- (1) **Instrumental:** Bosch describes how the New Testament was generated from and for a church not resting in comfortable luxury but rather battling to survive and thrive in a minority, sometimes-persecuted, missionary context. Bosch uses Martin Kähler’s phrase “mission is the mother of theology” to demonstrate how the theological development of the Early Church took place within the context of engaging with, and expanding within, surrounding dominant religious cultures.
- (2) **Invisible:** As Christianity emerged not only as a protected religion following the Edict of Milan in the year 312 but even as the established religion of the Roman Empire following the Edict of Thessalonica seven decades later, the amalgamation of church and state in Latin-speaking Europe swallowed up the explicitly missionary dimension of early Christianity.
- (3) **Incorporated:** Influenced by Enlightenment-inspired dualism, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) divided the discipline of theology into the fourfold schema of biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, and practical theology. Missiology was incorporated into practical theology as a minor subdivision, considered a “daughter” of theology, and so subsumed and sidelined by the primacy of its “mother.”
- (4) **Independent:** The response of missiologists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the diminishment of their field was to seek a form of independence from theology. Following the increased Protestant awareness of “foreign mission fields” during global colonization by north European empires, some TEIs accommodated missiology more explicitly as an autonomous “sister” discipline alongside and concurrent to theology. However, such autonomy had an unwelcome consequence: mission studies became an outsider, something isolated from the Church’s broader theologizing and thus ultimately a “little sister” to theology.

- (5) **Integrated:** Following the decolonizing “winds of change” that blew following World War II and the numerical and theological growth of Christianity across the majority world, it became apparent that mission had ramifications for all facets of theological discourse and could not remain detached as a differentiated, discrete discipline independent of theology. Theologians were required to integrate mission thinking intentionally into their disciplines, and to treat missiology as an equal sibling to theology (a twin sister?). Bosch, however, notes that, despite noble intentions this equal standing is rarely enacted successfully because “teachers of other subjects usually are not sufficiently aware of the innate missionary dimension of all theology” (492).
- (6) **Internalized:** Bosch finally proposes a new understanding of the relationship between missiology and theology as part of his “emerging ecumenical paradigm,” with the concept of *missio Dei* at the center. Bosch argues that missiology should be considered essential to theological concerns because “theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the *missio Dei*” (494). This is the context in which he employs his renowned analogy of mission as a “a gadfly in the house of theology, creating unrest and resisting complacency, opposing every ecclesiastical impulse to self-preservation, every desire to stay where we are” (496). Bosch’s emerging ecumenical paradigm thus seeks a return to the mindset of the Early Church whereby missiology is internalized into the very fabric of the theological process as the mother of theology.

Bosch’s entire historical sweep can be summarized according to the table below. The final column of the table shows a quote from recent mission literature describing how each of the different stages of the relationship between theology and missiology can be observed even today.

Relationship of missiology to theology	Theology is	Missiology is	Time Period	Description	Quotation illustrating the model in TEIs today
<i>Instrumental</i>	Daughter to missiology	Mother of theology	New Testament and the early church	Theologizing in the crucible of mission	(See ‘Internalized’ below)
<i>Invisible</i>	Default (absence of missiology)	Rarely considered	Constantine to post-Reformation	Theologizing in Christendom without mission	“A student can graduate without attending a single course related to missions. These trends show a profound malaise afflicting some of our theological colleges and students feel uneasy. . . to involve themselves in missionary activities” (Patmury 1994, 18–19).
<i>Incorporated</i>	Mother of missiology	Daughter to theology	Nineteenth century	Theologizing with scant recognition of mission	Pastors “have been trained in seminaries with elective courses available about missions, but seldom part of the core curriculum” (Horner 2011, 33)

<i>Independent</i>	Big sister to missiology	Little sister to theology	Late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries	Theologizing alongside mission	“We have pastors who possess little vision for the global Kingdom . . . we also have missionaries with inadequate theological training” (Wheeler 2015, 153)
<i>Integrated</i>	Twin sister to missiology	Twin sister to theology	Twentieth century	Theologizing with the mindset of mission	“Some theology professors are struggling with the formulation of a theology of mission” (Lygunda Li-M 2016, 218).
<i>Internalized</i>	Daughter to missiology	Mother of theology	Twenty-first century	Theologizing in the globalized context of mission	“A missional curriculum . . . explores how mission will reframe [theological training] to equip the church for mission” (Goheen 2016, 314).

Bosch’s emerging ecumenical paradigm (the “internalized” phase) has, since the 1991 publication of *Transforming Mission*, become largely entrenched amongst missiologists. This pervasive influence is exemplified by Peter Phan employing the idiom *extra missiologiam nulla theologia* (“outside missiology there is no theology”) at the 2016 Association of Professors of Mission conference before commenting humorously on how he was “preaching to the choir” using a “quasi-infallible pronouncement” (2016, p. 15).

The Relationship Between Theology and Missiology in African TEIs

The apparent consensus among African scholars is that the failure of some African TEIs to effectively internalize mission into their theological education is primarily because, begat from Western mission churches, Western missionaries, and Western denominations, many African TEIs inherited introverted, mission-deprioritized Christendom-based educational paradigms during the eras of colonial (and post-colonial) subjugation. These paradigms reflected Bosch’s invisible, independent and/or incorporated stages. Theological education was replicated across Africa in the image of North Atlantic forms, methods, epistemologies, and theologies, leaving them fragmented and dis-integrated, deprived of well-functioning contextualized theological traditions operating effectively under Bosch’s “Internalizing” paradigm. As Congolese missiologist Lygunda explains, Western theological curricula were “exported to the majority world by missionaries to serve as the required model in seminaries. As a consequence, ministers most often could go out of theological institutions with an introverted view of the church and its mission” (2016, p. 73; cf. Gatwa, 2015, p. 87; Naidoo, 2022, p. 227).

Toward an Internalized Paradigm of Theological Education in Africa

What then are the possible pathways toward a more integrated, internalized model of theological education for training missiocentric and missionary-sending church leaders in Africa?

Former Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School David Kelsey theorized that all approaches to theological education can be categorized according to the bipolar division of “Athens” or “Berlin” (1993). The former approach derives from Greek classical epistemology and emphasizes character transformation and the cultivation of godly wisdom. The latter approach originates with Friedrich Schleiermacher’s enlightenment epistemology emphasizing the critical,

rational application of theology as a science requiring systematic research by focusing on academic rigor and clerical professionalism. The tension between these historical paradigms is partly responsible for the inherent chasm evident in many TEIs between theory and application, or between theology and mission, not least because neither appears to leave conceptual space for mission.

Fuller Theological Seminary professor Robert Banks attempted to fill this gap by constructing a missional model in response (1999). In his model, named “Jerusalem,” mission is the unified, overarching goal of theological education, requiring a more field-based, praxis-oriented, holistic approach. In this way, the pedagogic process is one of “action-reflection” where students reflect on action and act on reflection. Banks argues that we should not just learn theology, but do it (159), not just prepare for ministry, but engage reflectively in it (132), not just consider mission, but insert ourselves into it (161). Banks’s model does not only focus on incorporating missiological content into the theological curriculum but rather points to transforming the entire process of theological education toward internalizing engagement with local contexts and global realities.

Some further models have emerged in addition to the Athens, Berlin, and Jerusalem typologies. These include the “Geneva” (Edgar, 2005, pp. 212–214) and “New Delhi” (Cronshaw, 2012, p. 12) models. However, most intriguing for the purposes of this article comes from Congolese missiologist Fohle Lygunda Li-M in his 2016 book *Transforming Missiology*. The book title itself is acknowledged by the author as a riff off Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*. Lygunda Li-M’s book contains, as with Bosch’s, the seeds of two interconnected ideas: that missiology in Africa both requires transformation yet also possesses transformative potential. He argues that the Athens, Berlin, and even Jerusalem models have been formulated primarily from and for Western contexts and are not relevant enough to African contexts or observant enough of African realities. He thus builds upon Banks’s model by using qualitative research undertaken with TEIs in the DRC to formulate what he terms the “Antioch Model—named in recognition of the fact that Antioch, more than Jerusalem, serves as the primary multi-ethnic, Spirit-led, intentional sending center in Luke’s Acts narrative (2016, pp. 129–134).

Symbol	Antioch
Model	Transforming education
Context	Higher education: Community of learning and serving
Purpose (goal)	Knowing God for his mission Personal development for God’s mission Strengthening the church for God’s mission Challenging any mission-mindless tradition
Expected outcomes	The production of transformed graduates The production of theoretically aware and practically effective graduates The production of missiophiles (with love for God’s mission) The production of graduates who know a nondenominational God
Learning ethos	Personal experience Applied reflection Missional theology Denominational identity in the service of God’s glocal mission
Theology is . . .	The process of experiencing God for his glocal mission

	Thinking about God’s mission purposes and applying theory to the context Missional (that is for the sake of <i>missio Dei</i>) Evaluating and orienting tradition in the light of God’s mission
Missiological education is . . .	The process through which the church and its educational institutions prepare learners for God’s glocal and holistic mission through theory, training, and practice of mission

This Antioch model appears to reflect Bosch’s “internalized” stage, for it is characterized by i) intentional integration of missiology into all aspects of the curriculum, ii) challenging dis-integrated mission-mindless traditions, iii) focused on preparing students for participation in the glocal outworkings of the *missio Dei*, and iv) the centrality of “sentness” in both the ontology of the Trinity and the essence of the local church. As such Lygunda Li-M speaks about seminary training that does not simply study missiology or even merely practice missiology, but rather is transformed through missiological education to produce missiophile graduates. Those graduates will then lead churches that are not only mission-envisioned but will also exist as communities-in-mission, actively participating in God’s plans locally and globally.

Interestingly (and *contra* Bosch) Lygunda argues that the “missional church” concept common to many Western evangelical settings is an unwelcome imposition which excludes African churches from global mission participation by calling the African Church to restrict its gaze only to local, monocultural settings, thus overlooking the necessity of crossing cultural and geographical frontiers. He argues that the African Church has a rich history of such culture-crossing, boundary-transcending ministry, and that missional church terminology should not be deployed to limit such ongoing involvements. Lygunda also suggests that some African theologians have purposely deemphasized missiology for fear of being seen as instruments of imperialism, and he thus calls for an African theology that is a missional African theology, attuned to gospel witness in both local and global settings. This call is Lygunda Li-M’s directive for African TEIs to cultivate a transformative and transformed missiology.

An Application to a Ugandan Context

My own recent doctoral research (see Howles, 2022) through Fuller Theological Seminary employed a multidisciplinary approach (including Biblical studies, leadership studies, pedagogical theory, missiology, and behavioral science) to formulate an applied model for implementing Lygunda Li-M’s “Antioch” approach to my own specific teaching context: Uganda Martyrs Seminary Namugongo (UMSN), a comparatively large Ugandan Anglican TEI where I have lived since 2011. The model’s purpose is not only that the Ugandan Church would be self-missionizing (a term coined as a fourth “self” principle by missiologist and current president of Malawi, Lazarus Chakwera: 2000) but also “self-missilogizing” (Taylor, 2000, p. 6), i.e., engaging deeply in contextualized, missiological reflection. The model is a semester-long, voluntary, small-group, co-curricular fellowship based on principles of holistic, integral training. It has been designed to help UMSN students—future local church leaders—to go through a process of intentional missional transformation. The course is structured around a chronological five-stage process:

- (1) **Recognition:** Stage 1 focuses on recognizing God’s call on his people with a view to educating and exciting UMSN students about the needs and opportunities for our missional engagement in the world today.

- (2) **Restoration:** Stage 2 focuses on restoring God’s authority over us through Bible study, prayer, and worship to develop greater intimacy with God and his own commitment to and commission of mission activity according to his own “sending” character and being.
- (3) **Realization:** Stage 3 is a week-long mission education and discovery trip (not a short-term missions trip) to less-reached parts of Northern Uganda, with a view to enabling students to realize God’s mission purposes for their ministries through immersive learning in the practicalities and possibilities of transcultural mission engagement.
- (4) **Reflection:** Stage 4 focuses on corporate reflection on God’s intentions with us by delighting in God’s promises for our participation in his global gospel purposes.
- (5) **Re-Formation:** Stage 5 focuses on the re-formation of God’s working through his people by implementing action in our lives and ministries that advocates for and advances God’s mission plans.

By proceeding as a community of learners through this semester-long, co-curricular program (which has been planned out in detail week-by-week: See Howles 2022, 191–95), the ambition is to internalize missiology and missiocentricity into the heart of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral training taking place at UMSN, such that Ugandan Anglican local church leaders might enjoy transformational discipleship at a TEI steeped in African contextual realities in light of God’s global missionary purposes.

Conclusion

Amidst a chorus of agreement amongst African scholars that many African TEIs have inherited Western, fragmented, mission-deprioritized systems and structures of theological training, Fohle Lygunda Li-M’s “Antioch” model provides an important starting point in an emerging discourse concerning how the “construction site” of African TEIs can form missiocentric, missionary-sending local church leaders. May African TEIs no longer remain open to the reproach of being the Church’s “clay legs” and instead become a strong and stable foundation for the continued growth of an African transcultural mission movement across the continent and around the world. In turn, may God use the African Church to speak more purposefully into fragmented and dichotomized Western theological endeavors to help them also to construct a missiocentric paradigm of theological training.

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