

Theological Consultation

Groningen, Netherlands.
Listening Group Notes: Day 1

We learned from sisters and brothers in different contexts, some of which are grappling with teaching in growing churches in developing countries, others teaching a pastoral curriculum for managing decline. We all however saw the need to develop curriculum for a transformative engagement, both within the life of the churches and the cultures of which they are a part, rather than seeing the church life within a culture.

Our theological education needs to be based on the desired outcomes of specific formation. We were challenged to identify what we see as normative within our church life and how we may view others who fall outside those norms.

We were given the tools to move beyond those learned pathologies in church life, by deconstructing it and challenging ourselves to include others. Our transformative education must be both relevant and authentic and must locate itself within the context of people's lives – a pluriform theology, not a uniform one.

The goal of the theological education must be one of societal healing, restoration and reconciliation. We must see the human mind, body and spirit to be a holistic entity, and we must develop indigenous idioms for God, adopting relevant metaphors for Godself in our various cultures and contexts.

Our institutions must also develop leaders of a living and loving faith to nurture the whole person, not merely a church person. A 'central place' should be given to God's realm within traditional theology not a differential one.

We need to develop theological education to develop the whole church – so that we no longer have a divide between an ordained elite, and the majority of the church members. Additionally we discerned the need for critical engagement within spaces where new ideas can be shared safely and bravely by Christian leaders from very varied contexts. It is vital that we can both grow in the space together and allow the students to grow as the spirit leader.

Listening group notes: Day 2

The first thing that is worth noting and perhaps celebrated is how theology/education inspires us in different ways. This resonates with one of the key ideas that came out of today's lecture, that there is no single theology but there are theologies.

If we have that understanding of theologies that embrace diversity, there is a chance of fruitful collaboration. Openness to theology helps us in formulating ways of making theology applicable and transformative to our contexts. It also promotes an interdisciplinary dialogue.

We reflected on the notion of the incarnation, as the heart of theology, the relationship between God and concrete realities. Learning that our theologies are drawn from and are a reflection of our memory, sources, traditions, histories and institutions. However, sometimes, even those ought to be critiqued. The Bible for instance emerges from a patriarchal society and context and it is not always a sweet book about liberation.

We looked into the importance of heritage and how it has shaped us. Highlighting the dangers of idolizing it. By looking at the darker side of the heritage, we were able to explore ways in which we are powerful and powerless in different contexts, and that vulnerability is another form of power.

Questions of power and location were also raised, that needed to be exposed and critiqued. For instance, what theology means for a white, heterosexual woman may not be the same as that of a person from a different location? Our theological education therefore must be cultural relevant, contextual and mindful of intersectionality.

As a critique to power, there is a call for the voices from the margins to come to the center, to bring new alternatives. The questions that stand are where are the margins? How do they access this space? How does the grassroots experiences influence our theologies?

After understanding the nature of our Christian theologies, we need to understand how theological education can triangulate the role of the training institute, church community and those receiving training.

Listening Group Notes: Day 3

Discussions today served to confirm several of the key issues which have been arising during the week. The key question is what are we educating people for? There is a conviction that theological education is at its best when the training institutions, their faculty, and their students are not separate from the churches and communities which they serve and seek to serve. We spoke of a triangulation of theological institutions, churches and local communities. What is studied, and how it is studied, what is taught, and how it is taught, must be directly related to the contexts in which people will live and undertake their ministries. Each theological education curriculum must be relevant, authentic and practical.

We must design our curriculum and the delivery of our curriculum, so as to bridge the gap between theological educations, spiritual and personal formation, and missional practice. A major aspect of this will be the integration into the curriculum of cross-cultural, placement-based learning. Students would benefit from an apprentice type of model, working with a mentor from the placement context who will guide them.

The contexts for these placement programmes will be tailored, as far as is possible, for each student, taking into account each student's personal identity and spiritual journey as well as any sense of calling from God which they have. Theological education must prepare and equip them for effective engagement with a range of communities and individuals. This tailoring of theological education should be applied, as far as is possible, to a student's whole process of training and preparation for ministry. We affirm that all theology is contextual, and therefore each student's personal context, and the context into which they will minister, must be taken seriously, informing their overall theological education.

Our theological education needs to become focused on the issue of developing the students, preparing and equipping them for a life of ministry, rather than on the traditional Western presentation of the traditional Western curriculum. The apprentice type of model will introduce and underline the importance of learning by doing as an enhancement of deep learning, and this would benefit all theological education.

It is also held that we learn more deeply when we ourselves are involved in teaching and mentoring others, and so we encourage the facilitation of students mentoring each other as they journey through the learning experience. We need to encourage theological institutions to approach theological education as a means and responsibility to help students to become able to enable those among whom they minister to themselves become theological learners and ministers in society.

All of this will necessitate the development of skills and competences in students, as well as reflection on historical, biblical and theological knowledge. In this context, our curricula will benefit from insights gained from the social sciences as well as theological disciplines.

We need to prepare and equip students for a lifetime of learning and ministry. This requires us to help them to come to an honest understanding of who they are as persons and as members of communities, and to become resilient and confident in ministry as they face the opportunities and challenges which will come their way. We are always part of a community of learning and a community of ministry, and our theological education must play a part in this lifelong journey of us all.