

Theological Education for Social Transformation

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Introduction

The history of formal theological education in the Pacific/Asia is about 200 years. During the last three decades, there has been tremendous development in theological education - an increased number of institutions, degree programs, and promotion of contextual theological education emphasizing issues like climate justice, indigenous people's concerns, women's studies, development and poverty, LGBTIQ+, and other related fields that have brought about significant changes in theological education.

Christian missionaries have brought the most extraordinary social transformation among indigenous communities through education, literature, and health sectors all over the global south. Theological education has also contributed much to sustaining and nurturing faith communities. But, unfortunately, in recent years, we have been experiencing unhealthy competition. We also see theological institutions divided into ethnicity, language, and denominations. Some even established the theological school as a business enterprise. This trend is promoting fundamentalism and unhealthy relationships. This trend needs to be addressed.

Purpose of Theological Education

Does theological education contribute to social transformation? We can summarize the purpose of theological education into three categories:

- (a) Conversion. The other world is perceived as “dark” and must be replaced by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, young men and women are trained to plant churches and convert the “heathen” to Christ.
- (b) Train denominational leaders. During the missionary era and subsequent years, theological education was designed to train native denominational leaders to preserve a particular denomination's doctrines and traditions.
- (c) Contextualization of theological education with ecumenical vision. With the initiative of the ecumenical movement, many new contextual issues in theological education were integrated into theological education but primarily confined to Christian denominations.

Therefore, the primary focus of theological education and movements was to train Church leaders. Theological education exists for the church. Very little attention was given to the social transformation of the larger community. The present paradigm of theological education is narrow and cannot contribute much to community transformation.

The problem of theological education in the global south

Why is Theological Education not becoming a force for social transformation? A few problems need to be addressed:

1. The present theological research emphasizes academic excellence but is detached from the people's real-life experiences and does not provide much scope for community transformation. Even liberation theology and indigenous theology (theology of

coconut, kava, etc.) have not significantly changed social life, especially among rural communities.

2. In other words, theological research emphasizes cognitive development and “clerical paradigm”, especially to serve the Christian community, but not skill-oriented education for community development and transformation of the larger society.
3. Theological education is still under the sway of the theology brought in by the missionary movement, though many things have been changed in the West. Some theologians in the global south have attempted to reform curriculums within the “Western frame of reference” characterized by foreignness, foreign theological concepts, content, methodology, and languages. But one will notice only a few cosmetic changes here and there. “Curriculums are prepared mostly by a few middle-class theologians trained in the West and living in the urban contexts.” This is one of the reasons why many theological schools produce unemployable graduates in rural places. Instead of becoming an agent of social transformation, such theological education reimposed the elitist mindset.
4. We measure the credibility of our education by Western affiliation/accreditation policies. However, a more serious one is - Upholding the Western university system as normative - the other forms of education are relegated as primitive and unimportant for academic pursuit.
5. The present theological education system is highly commercialized, costly, and located in the cities. It is like a free market mushrooming in all places.
6. The present pattern of theological education brings a sharp division between urban and rural, rich and poor, and privileged and underprivileged people. Rural places are seen as a place of punishment.
7. The theological education system is geared toward white-collar job orientation. Graduates who cannot get placement in the urban context are considered incapable.

Despite many development initiatives and educational reforms, many Asian countries have not overcome the following problems:

- Unemployment or unemployable problem
- Growing poverty, illiteracy, and different forms of violence
- Continuing marginalization and exclusion of the poor
- Globalization, climate justice, and migration due to different forms of injustice
- Gender inequalities
- Racial discrimination
- Religious fundamentalism and violence against minority
- Human trafficking
- Urban-rural divide
- One-sided development activities
- Climate justice,
- Corruption in public life, etc.

Theological Education committed to justice should contribute to solving those community’s problems, especially among poor and marginalized communities. Looking at the context of the global south, social and economic sustainability must also be taken seriously in theological

education. Addressing these issues in theological education will significantly contribute to community transformation.

An Asian theologian, Wesley Ariarajah says, "The content of theological education in Asia is yet to emerge. We are unhappy with what we have received and are grouping for what theology in Asia should be." I am sure the context will be the same in the Pacific, too. We have yet to develop authentic content for the Asian/Pacific context.

The relevance of theological education should be judged both from the needs of urban and rural contexts and perspectives. Theological institutions must equip young people to serve the poor, powerless, and exploited community or the neglected people. Sadly, the elitist, urban-biased theological education system is promoted by many accreditation agencies. We teach our students, which is alien to their ministerial context and lived experiences. We must re-examine the existing theological curricula from the excluded, poor, and oppressed context and perspective.

If we aim to make theological education an instrument of social transformation, we need to take a bold step to change the existing curricula. We need a paradigm shift from the theology-philosophy approach to the theology-social analysis-community transformation approach in theological studies. This will equip theological graduates to serve in the church as pastors and open up opportunities to work in diverse community transformation works.

An Alternative Curricula?

The Association for Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM) teachers conference released a press note suggesting an alternative theological education affirming social transformation. It reads:

Theological education has to be an agent of transformation, especially for marginalized people struggling for life due to injustices. Theological graduates today are seekers of white-collar jobs in the urban context. Many graduates do not want to serve in rural places due to wrong theological orientations. Theological colleges in Myanmar want to reverse this trend – “Theological graduates must become a provider of jobs in rural communities.” Most theological students in Myanmar come from the countryside and belong to farming communities. But many pastors do not know how to help the rural community because of the wrong curriculums. Theological education must equip young people to serve the poor, powerless, and exploited community. It is scandalous to send a pastor to a rural congregation without basic knowledge of community organization, community development, health care, and farming skills. Considering the complex context of Myanmar, it was visualized that along with foundational courses in biblical studies, theology, church history, and practical theology, more courses need to be taught relating to Christian social work, social analysis, and community development, and other skill-oriented courses. This will equip theological students to serve as pastors who will nurture their member's spiritual growth and the community for social development and change. (See www.facebook.com/people/Association-for-Theological-Education-in-Myanmar)

Affirming the importance of social transformation in theological education, ATEM has developed the following courses:

- Colonization and Decolonizing Process
- Social Analysis from the margins
- Bible and Social Transformation
- Community Bible Study Tools
- Theology of Life, Land, and Water
- Jesus Movement and Marginalized People's Liberation
- Theology of Community Spiritual Formation
- Christian Mission and Agri-production for Community Development
- Christian Education for Community Transformation
- The Bible and Christian Leadership in Multi-faith Context
- Theology of Transformative Diakonia and Christian Spirituality
- Christian Ethics, Dignity of Labour and Entrepreneurship
- Management of Care Centres and Support Mobilization
- Management of Land Resources and Community Development
- Christian Enterprise Development
- Peace Initiative for a Just Society and Integrated Living
- Indigenous Spirituality and Eco-theology
- Migration and Human Rights
- Christian Social Work for Community Development

While acknowledging the importance of inherited theological education and scholarship from the West, we must remodel and redesign our curriculums to become an agent of community transformation and contribute to sustainable social development. In a multi-faith context like ours, we must see that Christianity becomes a force for social transformation on all fronts, not only for the exclusive Christian community. It will also open up opportunities for our graduates to work in diverse community development works, not only as priests/pastors. We do not need denominational leaders but transformational community leaders.

Conclusion

Today, many people in rural places and vulnerable communities in cities/towns are experiencing worsening poverty, hunger, and unemployment. In collaboration with the corporates, the government is trying to take away the common resources – land, water, forests, seeds, traditional medicine, people's knowledge, and culture. Can theological institutions/colleges, strongly motivated by the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, offer alternative theological education for community transformation? If we decide to opt for the neglected rural masses and oppressed ones as Jesus did, we need to develop radical curriculums responding to our people's needs and economic problems. FTEAP is committed to partnering with theological institutions committed to work for community transformative theological research and curriculums' development.