

TRAINING AFRICANS IN CONTEXT: A BRIEF SUMMARY OF WHAT EVERY TRAINER SHOULD KNOW.

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Introduction

The first part of this paper urges the need for highly trained African Christians in order to relevantly and effectively address the many and complex spiritual and non-spiritual problems that the church in Africa is faced with. In this section I also highlight practical steps that the trainer must engage in, in order for effective training to occur. The second part of the paper, which is the main section, is an attempt to suggest what the Bible trainer working in Africa should do and the kind of things that he/she should be teaching for effective church ministry.

Section A.

Training: A desperate need for the African Church

1. Embracing a Rich History and Heritage

I wish, right from the onset to submit to the reader that Christian Education for the African church must be grounded in the Bible and in African history and culture. Christian Education in African Churches has a double responsibility that many other Churches do not recognize or else pass over as unnecessary. It must not only introduce Africans to God and men and women to the Bible and to the meaning of faith for their lives, but also interpret their spirituality and become a part of the church's community outreach to the masses of destitute and poor in our communities.

African Christian education needs to be deliberate about including pictures, curriculum, posters, stories, traditions and the like that reflect the African experience for an African perspective. It should be committed to the development of publications that address the specific plights of African men, women, the elderly, children and the family unit. It should also establish forums and invite opportunities for discussions related to Africans' common problems. I suggest that the training program includes the following components:

- Make available both written and technological data related to the study of African history, culture and religion.
- The development and conducting of leadership-training events for all levels of church leaders.
- The equipping of Christians with applied theology and ministerial skills to effectively undertake their Christian responsibilities.

Harry Sawyer puts it this way:

This means that the Church in Africa should endeavour to hold within the ranks of her ministry men (*and women*) [italic mine] of the highest standard of education and training who can stand cheek by jowl with the nuclear and theoretical physicists, the biochemists, the eminent jurists, economists, historians, sociologists and indeed the large host of specialists who are making their presence felt increasingly in Africa today, and will do so all the more in the future.

(Sawyer 1961:7)

2. The Challenges

Africa is beset by a number of challenges today in many areas of Christian life. One such challenge is the non-preparation or lack of sufficient training for those in ministry. This is one challenge which threatens the very existence of the African Church and subsequently deserves the attention of both the African Church as well as the participation of the Western Church.

It is common knowledge that under the present stress of political, social and economical changes evangelical spirituality faces disintegration at the core while seemingly expanding at the circumference. It is therefore important that a church be led by well trained leaders otherwise the church faces the danger of being spurned and ignored by the educated minority who may turn out to be the future political leaders. One African church leader has commented, "We must take serious note of the picture of the gap between university students and their church leaders".

3. Proposed response

Working from the premise that the Church in Africa, in general, lacks in well-trained leadership with theological and ministerial competence, this raises the urgency of paying particular attention to the following:

- a) Identifying potential leaders
- b) Recruitment
- c) Training

a) **Identifying potential leaders:** There is an urgent need for a concerted campaign to encourage and challenge young men and women who combine Christian commitment and zeal with the calling, propensity, and potential for theological and ministerial leadership in the church.

b) **Recruitment:** There ought to be a deliberate effort to pay attention to a selected target group of those with God's call and distinctive abilities. This would ensure the training of leaders who are well prepared and better placed to help steer the struggling Church in its ministry. Eph 4:12. Commenting on the need to train such leaders Du Bois writes:

How then shall the leaders of a struggling people be trained and the hands of the risen few be strengthened? There can be but one answer: The best and most capable of their youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land. All men cannot go to college but some must: every isolated group or nation must have its yeast, must have the talented few [in] centres of training where many are not so mystified and befuddled by the hard necessary toil of earning a living, as to have no aims higher than their bellies, and no God greater than Gold.

(Du Bois 1982:20)

In addition Du Bois (1982:26) envisaged the springing up of "colleges and college-bred men; not a quantity of such colleges, but a few of excellent quality; not too many college-bred men, but enough to leaven the lump, to inspire the masses..."

c) **Training:** This should be of a high standard which is part of the invaluable equation which will assist to engender a measure of competence and capability. This is very crucial in our contemporary times when there is a desperate need for deeply committed Christians with fervent devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, with the relevant high level of academic attainment. In line with what is happening in other academic and professional disciplines, the Church should undertake a determined and sustained programme of training for those who are called and whose high potential and aptitude for leadership singles them out as best suited to guide and direct the church in its various ministries. Critical to this need is the rediscovery of training as preparation *in* ministry rather than preparation *for* ministry.

A small percentage will need to be trained abroad, not just, as may be the case, that there isn't a sufficiently high level institution in their country but also to interact with those of similar levels of learning from other cultural backgrounds. We do live in a global world, however you may wish to define or delineate global, and Africa's Church leaders need to be able to communicate in all international forums meaningfully. Africa has much to offer in the arena of world leaderships. Its key leaders need to be equipped to communicate at that international level, and one way to enable that is for some to study internationally.

Studying abroad however for the majority of university level students is an expensive affair and can be severely disruptive to both personal and family life, from both the cross-cultural and marital side. The majority of such potential students are not likely to be called to do cross cultural work, indeed are desperately needed within their own countries. So a high priority should be given to ensuring that each nation in Africa has at least one high quality Bible College/University with a committed Evangelical Statement of Faith basis which can take students right through to PhD level. The investment of the capital needed to develop such in each country would actually be a net saving compared to the combined financial and people-cost of students having to train abroad. It will go some way also to plugging the "theological brain drain" that has been occurring from Africa to countries historically possessing high level colleges¹

4. Grass root leadership

It is important to bear in mind that whatever other category of theological and leadership training the church may be involved in, the Church must not ignore the maintenance and encouraging of grass root leadership training. There can be no substitute for grass root leadership. This is so because the Church in Africa is served and maintained by a host of

¹ Plugging the Theological Brain Drain. Evangelical Missions Quarterly Vol. 28 Jack Graves 1992

people without 'formal Bible school' training but who use imaginative approaches to Christian ministries based on their long years of experience and on their limited biblical hermeneutics. It is indeed largely through the efforts of such individuals that the African Church has won the admiration of many in the world.

It is therefore important that a trainer continues to strengthen the ongoing informal programmes to better equip the church for leadership and Christian ministry. As a matter of fact through this kind of training the Church has constantly developed natural leaders who are key people in the church. It is true to say that this category of church leaders will always remain an indispensable part of the Church in Africa. If this is the case it is therefore vital that well-organised, frequent, formal sessions of varying duration and varied levels be deliberately incorporated in the plans of the church. This is an important complimentary activity of theological and ecclesiastical leadership training. This program can also be of added advantage for those who have already been trained as this would act as a refresher course.

Section B

What the trainer needs to know

1. Effective training of Africans

The trainer must focus on the development of the trainee's intellectual, spiritual, and practical formation. That is to say he must be concerned with knowing, being, and doing: what the trainer wants the student to know, what he wants the trainee to be, and what he wants the student to do within a given cultural context.

The *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education* reiterates the above statement by stating, "Our programmes of theological education must combine spiritual and practical *and cultural* [italics mine] with academic objectives in one holistic integrated education approach... we are at fault that we so often focus educational requirements narrowly on cognitive attainments, while we hope for a student to grow in other dimensions, but leave it largely to chance".

A trainer must be concerned not only with the communication of a body of knowledge and the development of the practical skills i.e. those of Christian living and ministerial function – but also of the formation of the student's spirituality and character within an African context. In other words there ought to be a joining of the head, the hands, and the heart in a way that is African and yet not unbiblical. The question for the trainer should not just be, "What am I teaching the students? But, "Can the students perform in the desired way when they've completed training? What is the impact of the training?" Indeed ministry training whether for church or mission, must be concerned with effectiveness, with fruit, with impact; not just patient, persistent faithfulness.

2. Some important features of sound evangelical training

2.1. Make theological education African but Biblical.

The content of what you teach must be based primarily on the Bible. This however, does not negate the possibilities of referring to other sources of information such as cultural beliefs, oral tradition, symbols and values as long as these are not inconsistent with the Bible. Indeed one of the great challenges of inculturation in the Christian training programmes today in Africa is to make a correlation between African culture and Christianity, and to express this in pastoral theological reflections that specifically speak to the students in every day life. It is common knowledge that culture is an essential part of constructing a local 'African theology'. One man puts it this way:

The theologian's task consists in re-thinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in an African cultural milieu. It is the task of confronting the Christian faith and African culture. In this process there is the interpenetration of both...There is integration of faith and culture and from it is born a new theological expression that is African and Christian.

(Quoted by Ukpong in Martey 1993:68)

Indeed the challenge for both the uninitiated Western trainer in African culture and the African student is not a matter of taking the traditional customs of African culture and making the best ones fit into 'Western Christianity'. It is not a matter of African culture being mediated through Western culture and thought patterns. On the contrary, it is to start from the reality of the African context and see how theology can become a leaven to it. Simply stated, the priority is to be an African Christian rather than a Christian African. This way the students are challenged to discover the richness of African Christianity and to share with other peoples and cultures in the universal church. Indeed, deep African values,

such as community, hospitality, regard for elderly, spirituality etc bring something new, and enrich world Christianity and the universal church's spirituality.

2.2 Contextualise your training

This is similar to the point raised above but is in another way different in that here I seek to argue that in most cases the current training being given to students goes to great lengths to answer questions that neither the students nor the African churches nor our communities are asking. For example, just now, while the Church in the West is battling with the issue of postmodernism, this is not really a problem in most African countries. This is not to say that the church in Africa must not be made aware of this discourse – it has to be made aware, as this phenomenon is slowly affecting the Church in Africa.

To the contrary, the questions that need response are ignored or are treated superficially, leaving the students and indeed the church to look for answers in other places. Take for example the issue of demonisation and fear of witchcraft. These are crucial issues that the church in Africa is grappling with. The trainer must therefore bear in mind that the best methodology is not one learned in a classroom and exported to a faraway mission setting, but a contextualized approach that takes seriously the biblical text, the cultural context, and the local community.

2.3 Understand the peoples' experiences

In addition, one has to face the fact that the social-political scenario, in general, in many African countries, leaves much to be desired. Africa is faced with countless problems of HIV/AIDS, poverty, hunger, high rate of infant mortality, lack of jobs, lack of even basic medical care and lack of good education as well as lack of good political leadership. These have burdened many African people such that the people have become fatalistic in their approach to life as they feel that their destiny is not under their control. They have lost their sense of security in life. Many of these people feel that they cannot affect the forces of society, the government, the political situation or fate. They have a low self image when they come in contact with people not of their class and this causes them to feel uncomfortable with new environments and to fear failure. Often these people have a present time orientation, that is to say only the present and the immediate future really matters.

It is therefore important for the trainer that he/she prepares the students to understand such dynamics at play within the community. The trainer would do well to know that many of the people in the category described above seldom think in terms of abstract concepts and theories but more in terms of models and cases. They learn more from practice and contextual illustrations and not from necessarily understanding the theoretical framework.

2.4 Holistic approach

The Church is there to give hope to the hopeless. To give a sense of security and hope in Christ and in the community; to give a new sense of confidence and optimism; a new sense of mission, indeed a sense of empowerment from above. Our training must therefore be aware and sensitive to the culture it is ministering to. The trainer ought to have one eye on the scriptures and the other on the world of his students, i.e. one eye on the text and the other on the context – including the felt needs of the community. I am saying that the unchanging truth of God need be dressed in the clothes of changing culture, communicating in the contemporary idiom of the education context. Indeed the trainer must be made aware that it is not simply a matter of communicating timeless truth in the language, concepts and thought-forms of our context; good training must also respond to the challenges and questions of contemporary African society.

Issues of poverty, hunger, disease and displacement cannot be addressed on a purely spiritual level. The trainer must highlight the interlocking causes of poverty, oppression and hopelessness. Biblical training in Africa must embrace both evangelism and social responsibility in fresh and spiritually powerful ways. This means trainers must understand how their work fits in with digging wells and distributing food and economical empowerment of the community.

One of the advantages of holistic approaches in training is that it will challenge churches to work more closely with Christian relief and development agencies, to design more useful accessible learning experiences and training in holistic ministry. At a minimum, students must be conversant with biblical holism, the integration of evangelism with social concern and action, and be able to explain how their specialty relates to the broader picture of spiritual and physical hunger.

2.5. Be practical

As already alluded to above, the training must be an integrated process incorporating a balance of both theoretical and the practical. Being practical goes beyond just including on the curriculum practical subjects such as preaching,

counselling, evangelism and church planting. It is more than simply preparation of students for ministerial responsibilities. The training must be related to the students' spiritual formation and behaviour as believers. Theology is not something to be memorised so the student can pass the exam neither is it something simply to be believed; theology is also to be lived. This must be a top priority in training and hence this has to be done deliberately and consistently. A good Christian training programme should facilitate sanctification. The trainer must be aware that there may be some students who are in training solely to obtain a paper qualification to enable them get a job. It is also crucial to be aware that some students come into training carrying a lot of baggage that would need to be dealt with while in training if these students are to become effective in ministry upon completion of their training programme. The dictum 'Ministry flows out of being' captures the essence of this practical approach to training for Christian ministry.

Conclusion

In view of the above stated reasons I would strongly argue that trainers and training programs must be conducted in the light of the personal, situational and contextual demands of the Biblical norms and the cultural discourses. A trainer of potential church leaders in Africa would need to focus on the training programs' culturally relevant demands on his trainees without ignoring the influence that the global culture has on training and ministry.

Indeed, though a knowledge of cultural changes, technological innovations, and instructional developments can make our training easier, the trainer that is needed must own more than the latest computer, and most recent books on training. We need trainers who themselves have been taught by the Lord of the work, who can see clearly God's sovereign hand moving in the affairs of Africa, and who burn with a passion to raise up other workers who long to share and live the gospel among the nations. It is my sincere prayer that no trainer will retreat in disgust in the name of affirming the traditions of the saints once delivered; that none will recoil in fear that the sacred essentials are being desecrated; that none will attempt to defend the status quo. I pray however, that some trainers will attempt to engage with the issues and adapt them to their setting; that some will critically examine the trends and begin slowly to develop appropriate responses. Nkosi sikelel' iAfrica. God bless Africa.

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