JOURNAL OF ASIAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION.

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MANUSCRIPTS AND BOOK REVIEWS are welcome. For submission guidelines, please contact the Editors at their email address, jates.ata@gmail.com.

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From the Editors

It is with great excitement and gratitude that we welcome you to the very first issue of the **Journal of Asian Theological Education and Spiritual Formation (JATES)**. This journal is a reflection of our collective mission to enhance the practice and knowledge of theological education and spiritual formation in Asia. Our aim is to stimulate reflective thinking, share best practices, and provide meaningful insights that impact the field of education in Christian communities across the region.

In today's rapidly changing world, the importance of theological education and spiritual formation has never been greater. Theological education is not simply the transmission of knowledge; it is also about nurturing spiritual, personal, and relational development and preparing lives for service and commitment to God's mission in a diverse, complex world.

Now, let us guide you through the rich offerings of this inaugural issue:

1. Perry Shaw's article, *The Educational Imagination*, explores how the paradigms we unconsciously adopt shape the dynamics of theological classrooms. Shaw challenges educators to adopt a missional approach that aligns with the church's broader mission,

2. Melanie Lim's article, *A Theological Reflection of Malaysian Millennials' Church Paradigm*, explores how millennial Christians in Malaysia view the church as extending beyond institutional boundaries and fostering authentic, loving relationships. She suggests these perspectives offer a prophetic invitation for renewal within the Malaysian church, encouraging a deeper integration of academic learning and practical ministry.

3. In *Perceived Dynamics that Help Children Thrive*, a collaborative work by Nativity Petallar and colleagues, the authors examine what children need to flourish in their environment. They also bring valuable insights in how theological institutions can engage and encourage church leaders in holistic discipleship for children, amplifying the voices of various community stakeholders to better nurture the next generation.

4. Lastly, Brian Woolery's piece, *Developing a Curriculum for Christlikeness*, highlights the use of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as a foundation for spiritual formation. Woolery developed a 24-week curriculum that systematically helps congregants grow in Christlikeness, illustrating how a focus on practice-based learning transforms the church.

In addition to these articles, this issue also features a section called **Community of Practice (CoP)**, which highlights the real-world application of theological education. The CoP section provides a platform for seasoned practitioners to reflect on their work, offering readers insights into how

theology meets practice in the Asian context. This section is crucial because it showcases how innovative approaches to theological education can foster significant learning outcomes and spiritual growth.

1. Allan Harkness, in *Intentional Integration—Modeled and Applied*, highlights his innovative *Word World and Witness* module, designed to help students integrate theology, context, and faith and life response. The article emphasizes the importance of integrative learning in theological education to prepare leaders for effective ministry.

2. Grace Al-Zoughbi, in *My Experience Designing a Course on Middle Eastern Christianity*, shares her experience of designing a course that explores the rich history, present challenges, and global influence of Christianity in the Middle East. Her course encourages students to engage with the diverse traditions of Middle Eastern Christianity, pray for the persecuted church, and reflect on the importance of including the voices of Eastern Christian women in articulating theology.

3. Jessy Jaison's article, *Regional Training Hub South Asia*, will appeal to theological educators because it tackles the gap between theological education and the evolving needs of the church. The RTH approach involves (a) listening to the church on the ground to assess needs, (b) collaborating with both the church and educational partners, and (c) fostering sharing and partnership. This model of a community of practice challenges the way we think and do theological education.

The seven articles in this issue collectively emphasize the themes of integration, collaboration, and contextualization, reinforcing the vital role of theological education in equipping leaders to meet the church's needs in Asia. We also see the necessity of reflection, a call to deeper spiritual formation, and the integration of theology with practical mission.

The final section of this journal features the dissertation abstracts of recent graduates from theological institutions across Asia. These abstracts highlight fresh research and emerging perspectives in the field, offering valuable insights into the ongoing development of Christian thought and practice in our region.

As theological educators, we are called not only to impart knowledge but to transform lives for the sake of God's kingdom. We hope this inaugural issue of *JATES* will inspire you as you continue your own journey of teaching and spiritual growth.

Grace and peace,

Sooi Ling Tan and Justin Peter
Co-Editors

ARTICLES

The Educational Imagination

Perry Shaw

Abstract

Whether consciously or unconsciously our educational imagination—our attitude towards our students—shapes the classroom dynamic, our instructional methodologies, the tasks we give our students, our assessment practices, our course syllabi and lesson plans, the way the administration of the school functions, and the extent to which the faculty have a shared or disjointed vision for what they are doing. Moving toward a missional educational imagination best serves the kingdom mission of the church in the contemporary world.

Keywords: teaching, learning, students, mission

Introduction

What is your "educational imagination"?[1] When you enter a class how do you view the students? What is your vision for their future? What is your understanding of the purpose of what you are doing?

Whether consciously or unconsciously our attitude towards our students shapes the classroom dynamic, our instructional methodologies, the tasks we give our students, our assessment practices, our course syllabi and lesson plans, the way the administration of the school functions, and the extent to which the faculty do or do not have a shared vision for what they are doing.

Of course, most of us affirm a missional focus and, if pressed, would claim that our core beliefs and values align with a missional vision for theological education. However, our practice belies this claim. When we take an honest look at our organizational culture and pedagogical practices, a

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[1] See Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson, 2001).While drawing on Eisner's seminal text, I take a slightly different take on the term. For Eisner the term "the educational imagination" alluded to how the aims of education were reflected in curriculum. In this article I am investigating how our imagination of the students and our relationship with them rolls out in practice.

different story may emerge, one which reflects an educational imagination at dissonance with a genuinely missional outlook.

In this brief article I want to suggest some common types of educational imaginations seen in the world of theological education. Through this journey, my hope is that you will become increasingly sensitized to your approach to teaching and learning. I will conclude by advocating for a move towards a missional educational imagination which can better serve the kingdom mission of the church in the contemporary world.

From the outset, it needs to be noted that while I will be viewing the different paradigms as somewhat discrete, our approach in practice is generally a mixture of paradigms. However, recognizing our own biases and preferences can better direct us to an intentional understanding and application of our educational imagination.

Paradigms of Educational Imagination

The Battle

The "battle" is a common paradigm of the educational imagination—perhaps most notably in elementary and secondary schools, but also found in higher education. Within this paradigm, the students are viewed as fundamentally lazy, out to get a grade for the minimal amount of work. The classroom is therefore viewed as a battlefield in which the role of the teacher is to act as a staff sergeant or perhaps as a police or prison officer seeking to control and enforce more than to promote quality learning in community.

The "battle" classroom tends to be in a traditional layout with the teacher at front and students sitting at individual tables facing the front. Generally, the teacher will speak from behind a lectern or table, providing both a dominance and a physical barrier which communicates authority and distance. Lecture is the preferred methodology with only minimal and very controlled opportunity for students to ask questions. Any form of talking between the students is seen as unacceptable. The mood of the classroom is tense or even hostile.

Learning tasks will tend to be either examinations or term papers, in which students are expected to reproduce the substance of the class lectures and demonstrate their careful attention to all that the teacher has presented in

class. Grading tends to be rigid and non-negotiable. In course syllabi, there is a focus on policy and penalties, in which the instructor seeks to cover every possible contingency for student behavior. Students will generally take a negative view of the instructor and the course, and they will often seek ways to disrupt the class flow or bypass the regulations.

Inconvenience

Sadly, the nature of doctoral studies and the "publish or perish" orientation of much of higher education can create faculty whose dominant interest is research and publication. And yet these same faculty are required to teach as a part of their contract. Faculty who follow the "inconvenience" paradigm have no real interest in teaching and they see the classes they are given and the students they encounter as little more than an annoyance that must be endured to keep their job. Their real passion, often combined with a drive for promotion and career development, leads to the pursuit of personal research interests and the publications that can ensue. Teaching is required but is undesirable and time-consuming, and students are an inconvenient necessity for keeping one's position.

These teachers will do the absolute minimum to keep students quiet. Often, they will exploit student ideas and efforts to further their personal career and research output. The content of the course is focused on the teachers' own particular areas of interest, and often the classroom is used as a location for spouting forth their latest only-partially-formed ideas as a way of field-testing concepts before putting the ideas into writing. Some of these types of instructors set assignments which are designed to get students to do research for them. The tasks tend to be research-focused, or alternatively follow a very traditional design in easy-to-correct formats. Course syllabi tend to be sketchy and assessment is minimalist.

I remember taking a class with a world-famous scholar who held an endowed professorial seat at the seminary where I was studying. His publication record was superb, but he was unquestionably the laziest teacher I have ever encountered. He would walk into the class without any preparation whatsoever. Every session would begin with him asking, "What was I talking about in the last class?" He would then ramble all over the place, throwing in Hebrew, Greek, German, French, and sometimes other languages, which

displayed his erudition but left the students not having a clue what he was talking about. Of the eight students in the class, five were non-native-English speakers who were even more confused than I was. Being by nature a systematic thinker, I would keep detailed notes as he was spouting forth, and then spend hours trying to make something meaningful out of what he said. I then shared my notes with the other students, several of whom said that they would never have passed the course were it not for these notes. On my final exam, the teacher wrote "A" but absolutely nothing else. I suspect he simply scanned the work, read little, and gave the grade he did because I had actually listened to his ramblings. For this "teacher" students were very much an inconvenience to his career ambitions and research interests.

Children

Within the "children" paradigm, students are viewed as young, immature, and in need of the guidance and direction of the teacher. The students' life experiences are perceived as too limited to be of any real value to the class. The teacher's voice is the only one that carries significance. In many ways the "children" paradigm is a softer and gentler version of the "battle" paradigm. The teacher totally dominates the classroom, but with a more caring and parental concern for students.

The "children" paradigm is particularly prevalent in contexts where the public-school system promotes unidirectional instruction or where the students entering theological education are fresh out of high school. Of course, we all encounter students who exhibit immature behavior, which naturally elicits a paternalistic response from teachers. However, when teachers systematically embrace the "children" paradigm, students will generally respond accordingly, which profoundly undermines the goal of theological education to prepare men and women for Christian service and leadership.

Teachers who follow the "children" paradigm view the students as ignorant—passive receptacles awaiting input from the wise and experienced parent-expert. The classroom will tend to be laid out in a traditional format, with the teacher at the front. The preferred teaching methodology is lecture, and as with the "battle" paradigm, there is only minimal space for student questions and comments. The posture of the teacher is patronizing and condescending. The students have nothing to teach you; they are there to

learn from your wisdom and knowledge. In some cases, the teacher takes on a nurturing posture which seeks to protect the students from discomfort. The instructor seeks to keep things simple and, at times somewhat doctrinaire, avoiding the spaces of cognitive dissonance that are the foundation of transformational learning.

In terms of substance, there is a focus on content, often with students being given "busy work." The teacher wants to get a particular result rather than explore. The course syllabus will tend to be very detailed and directive, with little or no room for flexibility. Examinations and assignments tend to be traditional and simplistic and are often designed to determine whether the students have adequately "owned" the teacher's "wise" instruction. The assignments have nothing to do with the students' life experiences because the students are "too immature" to bring anything of value to their assigned work. Assessment tends to be right-or-wrong, although often with opportunity for students to retest so that they can satisfactorily attain a passing grade.

Consumers

Across much of the Minority World ("the West") the past few decades have witnessed the closure of a notable number of theological schools. Even with those that remain, there has been a strikingly steady decline in enrolments and increased financial strain on the colleges. Within this environment, some schools have responded by accepting anyone and everyone who shows even the faintest interest in studying, so long as they are willing to pay the fees. It matters little whether these prospective students show any interest or potential for future Christian ministry, so long as they bring money with them.

The posture of these schools is that the students are "customers" paying for a service. The "consumer" paradigm is often driven by the sheer desperation of the school's leadership and administration, which has become so focused on paying the college's bills that they will push to accept any student by any means so long as they are willing to pay.

When this is the dominant paradigm, huge expectations are placed on the instructors to do whatever they can to please the students. Teachers are often required to allow students to come and go as they please. Often instructors are expected to provide full written notes or PowerPoint slides and other resources, and multiple modes of engaging. Genuine learning entails

feedback, accountability, discipline, and challenge, and often these are limited or absent. The onus is on the teacher with only minimal expectations from the students. The instructor is an employee of the college and hence of the student. Teachers are disempowered and limited. Accountability is based on student satisfaction with the product rather than a genuine assessment of the outcome of the learning.

It is also an issue with an increasing percentage of students (who often pay higher fees) coming from other countries, who we are expected to pass though not having even sufficient literacy to grapple with the university level education. Any notion of preparing students to support churches in the mission of societal impact is lost to the presentation and delivery of a "product."

The "consumer" paradigm is often seen in schools where instructors are expected to deliver in a tri-modal format, with physically present, synchronous remote, and asynchronous remote all in the one class, even though tri-modal delivery totally undermines quality instruction. Students can choose which delivery method and even choose each week through which format they will engage. When teachers come to a class session, they have no idea who will be there through which modality. As such, there is little in the way of a genuine community of practice in which a level of trust can be established as a basis for quality peer-to-peer learning. The instructors have no choice. The students are paying for the service and hence can take the service in whatever form they choose.

Within the "consumer" paradigm, the best teachers are those who are perceived as "entertaining," and classrooms are expected to be light-hearted and even frivolous. Assignments are limited to what students are willing to do, often with multiple options given so as to cater to individual student tastes. Course syllabi tend to be focused on attractiveness, even including a level of "hype." Often, instructors will promote their particular units in competition with other faculty members, undermining the community of trust needed for the faculty team to engage in innovative and creative thinking. Assessment tends to be minimalist, and grading policy will be generous whether or not it supports actual learning. If the student is a paying "customer," then the "customer is always right." High grades make for happy "customers" and failure is anathema, with the institution leaning not on the students, but on the faculty, to pass everyone.

The Game

Confession time. As a supervisor of doctoral students, I frequently find myself talking to my doctoral candidates of "playing the game" of doctoral academia. To have the examiners pass your thesis-project you need to "cooperate in order to graduate." Many of you no doubt have had the experience of finding the first period of doctoral work a stimulating process of learning and insight, and then the final stretch being of little or no genuine educational value. You simply need to "play the game." Of course, I experienced a more extreme version of "playing the game" in the years I was teaching senior secondary mathematics in Australia in the late 1980s. I knew the system, and I knew what the students needed in order to do well in the system, and I did a great job of coaching my students to "win" in the game known as the Australian public education system.

But such is often the case in regular theological classrooms as well—particularly where the teacher and students are part of a much larger system. As teachers, we view ourselves as coaches, encouraging and supporting and guiding the students as they participate in the competitive game of completing their degree to the satisfaction of the wider system. Under this paradigm, instructors see their role as ensuring that the students develop quality test-taking and essay-writing skills to get a good score in the system. There is a focus on grades and graduation and oftentimes succeeding in the system and getting good grades is more important than learning. Both teacher and students see the system as a series of "hoops that have to be jumped through," and the teacher's role is to coach the student how best to jump and get the best result possible in the system.

In the "game" paradigm, there is a tendency towards traditional assessment practices. The syllabus is geared to helping the student get good grades, with clear and detailed instructions as to how best to succeed. Where there are tests or examinations, clues are given as to what will be on the test, or the student will be outright told the substance of the examination. Teachers will place a high emphasis on fairness, but the rules are the rules of the game, not actual learning.

Budding Scholars

We all feel gratified when in response to our teaching a student expresses a desire to follow in our footsteps. If we are honest with ourselves, it feeds our egos to know that we have so impressed students that they see our field of specialization worthy to pursue. Given that we have spent many years focusing on our area of specialization, it is natural to seek protégés who we can mentor into becoming the next generation of experts in our field. This seems good, healthy, and natural, but all too easily we can forget the broader missional purposes of what we are seeking to accomplish in theological education. I have seen the devastating impact of this in schools where students enter their program of study passionate for service in church and the world and leave passionate for the academy.

Within the "budding scholars" paradigm, the role of the instructor is as an exemplary mentor-scholar in the particular field, a role model of academic scholarship, seeking to raise up the next generation of scholars in "my field." The instructor is potentially proud of, disappointed by, or threatened by the students, depending on the extent and way in which the students engage with the material. There is a desire for high quality Christian scholarship-apologetic in the academic arena, with a focus on the academic concerns of the discipline. Instructors expect from themselves and their students high standards in content and academic methodology. However, the connection with anything in life or ministry is deemed of secondary importance or irrelevant, and neither the instructor nor the students see much need to apply the material in any practical way. The vision is for the academy, not the church's mission in the world.

Mordor

One of the most famous pieces of literature in the English-speaking world is Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. The chief protagonist of the story is Frodo, who must enter the land of Mordor and destroy the Ring of Power in the volcano at Mount Doom. Mordor is surrounded by insurmountable mountains with only two entrances, both guarded ruthlessly by creatures of unspeakable evil. Mordor itself is a land of complete desolation, with no food and only small outlets of barely drinkable water. With every step, Frodo draws closer to the great Fortress tower of Barad-dûr, where dwells the

evil Dark Lord Sauron. As the wizard Gandalf declares, "It is only a fool's hope" that Frodo can succeed (Tolkien 2020, 815).

Some instructors enter the classroom carrying such a negative view of the church and the world that they view the possibility of the students' future success in ministry as "only a fool's hope." This "Mordor" perspective on the church and the world is particularly prevalent where people who have failed in ministry move into the academy and the seminary. The professor's personal history of pain and disillusionment in life and ministry provides the trajectory. The view of the world and ministry and the church is overwhelmingly negative, and this perspective is passed on to the students.

In "Mordor" classrooms, there is great personal pastoral care and encouragement for the student, but the focus is on problems and preparing students for the worst. The lessons often include numerous stories and case studies filled with problems and difficulties. Assignments demand realism and connection with the problems of life and ministry. But even with these practical components, there is a certain gloomy view of the "world out there" that leaves little hope for overcoming the plethora of challenges and problems the students will encounter in the future.

Mission

The "mission" educational paradigm embraces a perspective on theological education that sees the students as the hope for the church in its mission in the world. Instructors who embrace the "mission" paradigm view students as pilgrims on a journey, already with experience and/or potential for ministry, which is to be embraced and enhanced in the classroom towards the future. The instructor is realistic but inspiring, encouraging students in a community of practice to face potential challenges with faith and hope. There is a posture of expecting and attempting great things for God.

The lessons are seen as a location for experimentation and thinking outside the box. The experiences of students—both positive and negative— are viewed as a crucial dialogue partner in the learning process. Case studies are used to wrestle with genuine challenges, but always in the search for realistic and constructive responses. Assignments will seek to connect theory with practice, often involving a practical experimental component. Academic

demands are respected, but these are always seen as servants to the process of training in mission.

Biblical and Theological Foundations for the
Missional Educational Imagination[2]

The Scripture has a missional posture from the beginnings of Creation to the end of the age. It opens with God and his declarative acts, "In the beginning God" (Gen 1:1), and close with the hope of consummation (Rev 22:20–21). It is not surprising, therefore, that systematic theology texts across the confessional spectrum routinely begin either with a discussion of the meaning of revelation or with theology proper. In either case, the realization—whether intuitive or intentional—is that the starting point of theological understanding is not with humanity seeking God, but with a God who reaches out to us to be known and loved and worshipped. This "reaching out" of God is missional in scope, and throughout the biblical narrative, God invites his people to participate in his missional activity. As Wright describes it,

> the whole canon of Scripture is a missional phenomenon in the sense that it witnesses to the self-giving movement of this God toward his creation and us, human beings in God's own image, but wayward and wanton. The writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God. (Wright 2006, 28)

The central message of the Scriptures is of a God who reaches out in creation and redemption, and who invites us to participate in his great missional work individually and corporately. This should be the essence of all that we do—understanding God and his acts and responding accordingly. As Cronshaw so eloquently expresses the missional nature of the church and seminary, "If we want to be in step with the Spirit, then we want to be part of [the] Trinitarian movement of being sent into the world" (Cronshaw 2011, 225).

The mission of Godis the starting point of our identity and calling. The important thing is not what we are doing but what God is doing in this world, and then us getting in tune with his agenda (Moltmann 1977, 64). God's

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[2] This section is adapted from material I have presented in Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrated Learning,* 2nd ed. (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2022).

creative and redemptive agenda is the consummate restoration of the good. In the revelation of his divine triune character of love and holiness, and inasmuch as we are attuned to his nature, we are able to discover our true identity. God entrusts us to partner with him in the accomplishment of his mission—the extension of his shalom kingdom.

Our current approach to theological education has largely been shaped by Christendom presuppositions. The classic shape of theological education, with its "silos" of biblical, theological, historical, and (subsequently) ministerial studies or applied theology, emerged in a context where the relationship between the church and the wider society largely assumed a "Christendom" posture—that is, the assumption was that the church could and should have a level of power and influence in society. This pattern became virtually "sacred" at a time when the church in Europe was completely introverted (Bosch 1982, 26). If mission was even considered, it was usually incorporated into practical theology, as if it were largely a matter of technique or practical application, or it was offered as a totally separate subject, as if it had little to do with the "important" fields of Bible, history, and theology (Bosch, 17–19). This pattern of theological education was exported to the rest of the world in the wake of the missionary expansion of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and uncritically adopted and implemented in the formation of generations of local Christian leaders in the Majority World (McCoy 2010, 523–29).

It is for this reason that missional elements in content and methodology are barely evident in the classic approach to theological education and the emphasis has been on the study of texts from the past (Guder 2010, 51–55). The "Christendom" paradigm has never been relevant in the Majority World and is no longer relevant in most of the Minority World. Hence, the urging from theological educators such as Robert Banks (1999) and Linda Cannell (2006) for a missional foundation to theological education. As Cannell puts it,

> A structure formalized in the medieval period, modified to suit the theological shifts of the Reformation, influenced by the scientific methodology of the Enlightenment, shaped by the German research university, deeply affected by modernity, and assumed to define true theological education today is likely not adequate for the challenges of contemporary culture and the education of Christians who have been shaped by that culture. (Cannell, 306)

Rolf Hille (2017, 196–208) suggests that the primary focus on abstract ideas evident in much of theological education is rooted in the long tradition of philosophical idealism that has shaped Minority World thought since the time of Plato and Plotinus. The heart of this spiritual heritage is the deep conviction that the world of ideas is the genuine reality; "everything else that we have in mind…is only a shady, unclean, and, in fact, already defiled reality." Hille continues,

> The contrast [with historical revelation] could not be greater. On the one hand there is the pure world of ideas, which is unaffected by all material earthly events, and, on the other hand, the down-to-earth tangible stories reported by the Bible. The God of the Bible is revealed in history; that is, he limits himself to a concrete place and a concrete time, and engages in a specific historical situation. Therefore, Paul can say, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law" (Gal 4.4). The eternal comprehensive truth is thus bound to a tiny province of the Roman Empire in remote Galilee…The challenge is that, with this condescension of God into a historical context, the abstract claim of philosophy is rejected. God has not at all been subtracted from, but is bound to the conditionality of earthly existence…Precisely because the revelation of God is historical, mission cannot abandon material reality abstractly in the sense of an idealistic purity, but must engage with it, indeed enter into it. (Hille, 200)

I recognize that many graduates value the personal intellectual growth that comes through a greater appreciation of our heritage, and the critical–textual skills that are gained in a classic approach to theological studies. However, many also find their studies disconnected from real life, providing only minimal preparation for addressing the challenges of the contemporary world and helping people understand how to follow Christ in daily life.

Rozko and Paul (2012, 3) observe, "Incremental changes and clever adaptations to these current systems only serve to distract from the opportunity we have before us to develop a…missional, vision of theological education… [which is] praxeological—aimed at training reflective practitioners, mobilizational—aimed at training missionary leaders, and spiritual—aimed at training Kingdom citizens." The role of theological education is to equip not merely those preparing to serve *in* the church, but those called to serve *as* the church in the world (Sherlock 2009, 111–12), to prepare people who are

able to claim the whole of private and public life for Christ and his kingdom (Newbigin 1989, 231).

Implications of a Missional Educational Imagination

The focus of this article has been the educational imagination that individual instructors bring to the classroom. However, the imperative of a shared missional educational imagination presses us as whole college communities to look beyond ourselves to the missional calling of theological education so clearly articulated in The Cape Town Commitment: "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" (Lausanne Movement 2011, II.F.4). The implications of such an affirmation for theological education are numerous (Shaw 2016, 205–16):

- Our shared understanding of the purpose of our institutions and programs should clearly express God's mission and character. If our "vision statement" focuses on our students or even on the church, then something foundational is missing. Yes, we want our students to learn and grow and we want strong churches, but these are merely means to an end—which is the acknowledgement of the Triune God and his kingdom. The preparation of men and women is not the ultimate goal of theological education, but a significant means towards the accomplishment of the greater goal of seeing empowered churches which significantly impact their communities, such that the marks of the kingdom of God are evident in the world (Fernández 2014, 339–49).

- On the path to facilitating the students' personal and corporate understanding and growth, instructors need to be attuned to what God is doing in and through the learners in the class they are leading. As such, prayer and listening to God are appropriate elements in the classroom.

- Leaders in theological education need to be aware of what God is doing in this place and at this time. If God is truly at work in this world and not simply a distant and inscrutable deity, then we need to be able to read the signs of the time (cf. Matt 16:1-3).

- God's missional character means that we must take context seriously. Curriculum cannot be generic but needs to be responsive to what God is seeking to do in the specific context in which the education is being delivered. There also needs to be flexibility in the curriculum such that it can respond to what God is doing today in response to the changing

world over which he is sovereign. This would probably imply a shift in focus from the current tendency to focus on "text to context" courses to an increasing number of "context to text" courses.

- The central missional message of the Scriptures is of a God who seeks to reconcile and restore. Consequently, our curricula should give substantial space to training students to lead God's people in being restorative agents in this broken world. The theory and practice of peacemaking should therefore, be core to our curriculum. Moreover, in contrast to the highly competitive nature of much of the academy, theologically grounded theological education needs to ensure that our educational institutions have in place quality processes of peacemaking and conflict resolution that encourage and sustain hospitable community (Shaw 2011, 8–26; Soh 2016).

Some Concluding Comments

The educational imagination we bring to our classes shapes all we do in our teaching. While most of us desire to bring a missional paradigm to our instruction, our actual practices frequently indicate otherwise. In reality, most of us end up having a mixture of paradigms, often shaped by our context and our own experiences of theological education.

It requires reflection and intent to align our educational imagination to the purposes of God. A healthy starting point is to acknowledge openly and honestly what we are doing and what that communicates about our actual educational paradigm. By bringing our current practice into conversation with the broader vision for theological education—to strengthen and accompany God's mission for the church in the world—we can begin the journey towards a missional educational imagination.

It is as we embrace a missional educational paradigm both individually as teachers and corporately as schools that we can have hope for God to work in us as teachers, our students as servant-leaders, and our churches as they seek to impact the world for Jesus Christ.

Questions for Reflection

- Which of the different paradigms of the educational imagination do you find yourself most gravitating toward when you prepare to teach? What are two or three of the most significant factors that you find impacting your paradigmatic inclinations?

- Which paradigms do you believe that your school promotes—not so much in word but in the expectations of teachers and the ways in which promotion takes place?
- Describe at least one specific action you personally could take to better reflect a missional educational paradigm in your approach to teaching and learning. Name one practical step that your school could take to better promote a missional educational paradigm in its ethos, structures, and faculty expectations.

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A Theological Reflection of Malaysian Millennials' Church Paradigm[1]

Lim Xin Min (Melanie)

Abstract

This paper develops from a desire to understand faithful millennial Christians who are struggling with church and to discern their creative and constructive potential for ecclesial renewal. By employing theological ethnography to examine the struggles of the millennials, their struggles are described in terms of incongruity between the existing ecclesial paradigms and that of the millennials. Two collective narratives emerge from the stories of the millennials and they unveil two key divergences in their ecclesial paradigms: (1) church extends beyond the institutional boundary; (2) church is primarily about loving relationships. The discussion demonstrates the theological nature of these ecclesial paradigms by reflecting on how they mirror the incarnation of our Lord Jesus and call for participation in the Trinitarian love relationship. These dissenting voices may represent invitations from the Holy Spirit to the Malaysian churches.

Keywords: Ethnographical ecclesiology, church paradigm, church renewal, Malaysian millennial Christian

Introduction

There is an increasing number of faithful millennial Christians in Malaysia who seek to love and serve God with their whole life yet struggle with existing structures and understandings of "church." Those who are struggling with the current church paradigms have difficulties forming meaningful communities that enable them to embody their faith communally. This difficulty grows out of the fact that they are not recognized as legitimately following Jesus because they are at odds with the church. In the same way, they are not freed to imagine embodying church in ways that are faithful to God's story while being outside the prevailing church structure.

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[1] The study, on which this article is based, was the focus of my Master of Theology dissertation at AGST Alliance.

There is a need to investigate why these millennial Christians are dissatisfied with church, how they perceive what church is, and how this generation embodies their faith individually as well as communally. This research hopes to pave the way to find sustainable structures that can support this generation's communal embodiments of faith that encourage their continual maturation. Moving beyond merely meeting needs or pragmatic re-arrangements of programs and activities, the more important challenge is to reflect theologically on these understandings of church in order for us to discern and respond to what God may be doing in our midst today.

In this article, I will first disclose how the research is done and present the findings as two diverging ecclesial paradigms of the millennials. Thereafter, I reflect on the two ecclesial paradigms theologically and demonstrate their endeavor to mirror the incarnation of our Lord Jesus and to call for participation in the Trinitarian love relationship.

Methodology

This study employs theological ethnography,[2] to hear and document voices of the faithful millennial Christians who are struggling with the existing structures and understanding of church in Malaysia, "on the ground" and "from the margins," by being careful to allow "found theologies" to be revealed "based on systematic observation and a reflexive consideration of assumptions" (Marti 2016, 161). This project also seeks to discern, in the dissenting voices of the faithful, the invitations from the Holy Spirit, through a posture of practicing "Ethnography on Holy Ground" (Campbell-Reed and Scharen 2013, 232–59) by reimagining the data collection (interview and focus group) process.

The qualitative research explores the question: "*What is church according to Malaysian millennial Christians and why do they struggle with*

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[2] Ethnography is originally a social science method for gathering data, but its meaning has evolved as it migrates into the theological discipline. Theological ethnography acts as a cover term for qualitative research that honors the integrity of the process of attentive study of a field site by gleaning from the cautions and disciplines of the social sciences, yet remain unapologetically theological in its assumptions and questions that shape its methodologies according to its own regulative ideals. Timothy Snyder traced the "ethnographic" turn in contemporary ecclesiology in his essay "Theological Ethnography: Embodied," *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology & Culture* 23.5 (May 27, 2014), https://tinyurl.com/49x5v6t7.

existing church paradigms?" The main source of data is collected through engaging in individual interviews and two focus groups with eight millennials who are struggling with church. I seek to understand how these millennials understand church, and how their understanding of "what is church" and "how to do church" impels their struggles in their own church experience. From my analysis using Moschella's "literal reading" and "interpretive reading" method (Moschella 2008, 172), I see two collective "thematized narratives" (Moschella, 179) emerge. In presenting the findings, I have retained the voices of the interviewees by keeping as close as possible to their wordings. Two surveys were also conducted to triangulate what the millennials interviewed said about the "existing church paradigm" by comparing it with the responses from pastors and leaders (hereon shortened as leaders) in Malaysia (that yielded 77 responses) and those of the millennial Christians at large (196 responses).[3]

Ecclesial Paradigms of the Millennials

From the interviews, two collective narratives emerge on the distinctiveness of the millennials' ecclesial paradigms that reflect their struggles. The two ecclesial paradigms are: (1) church extends beyond the institutional boundary, and (2) church is primarily about loving relationships.

Church Extends Beyond the Institutional Boundary

The first divergence from the existing church paradigm is that, for the millennials, church extends beyond the institutional boundary.

The Church Beyond

Being church, for these millennials, has to do with the everyday reality of their life and work, and the definition of "spiritual community" spills into areas that are not conventionally recognized as church, as well as includes the wider body of Christ from other institutions and denominations.[4]

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[3] Pastors and leaders who are themselves millennials or younger are diverted to the survey for millennials. Of the 77 responses for pastors and leaders, 54.5% are from Gen-X (born in 1965–1980) and 45.5% are Baby Boomers (before 1964).

[4] "Spiritual community" is the term used in place of "church" in the focus group discussions. This term was included after observing that respondents separate their responses

"My own definition of spiritual community has also changed a lot," says Alice (online interview by author, June 8, 2021).[5] She continues with an example of what spiritual community looks like outside of the church.

> In the past I would have advised everyone to be part of a weekly cell group or Bible group, which is not a bad thing at all. But in so many ways I think it's definitely much more than that…The idea of running the gym is rooted in making it a safe place for what we call "mission." I met with so many people in the gym just having conversations about life. A few girls [who have never attended church] and I are doing online Bible study together through interacting on a Bible app…I consider them my spiritual community too because we not only talk about physical fitness, but we also talk about life's events…The idea of the gym is really that—to see how it really looks like for followers of Christ operating in places that you would not think is church and I've been challenged in so many ways. (Alice, interview)

Alice shares that "I am finding God a lot in the places we call "secular," where we feel has no God element in it…I don't have to put God in every single thing, but God *is* in every single thing" (Alice, interview). Her faith is alive in the everyday, in her workplace guiding her convictions and decisions, even though it might not be explicit. She describes her shift from pastoral work to her current job as being very freeing and how worshipping this God that is bigger than what is done in an institution has been redefined for her.

> Seeing God so active in the world makes me feel like the world becomes a lot more alive, and I feel a lot more alive too. I see how things are bigger than us and I'm learning to trust Him a lot more… It's a place of worship but worship has looked a lot different. (Alice, interview)

Cosette (online interview by author, June 3, 2021) echoes this understanding that the church is not of the world but sent into the world (John 17:14–18) to partner with what God is doing outside the confines of the church institution.

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for institutional church and their communities outside church in their personal interviews. As five of the eight interviewees do not regularly attend an institutional church, this term is utilized to include their Christian communities outside the institutional church in the focus group discussion.

    5 All the interviewees' names have been changed to protect their identity.

The church gets a little self-contained where everything happens in the church. "If you want an opportunity to do something, then do it in the church, like serve in the ministry"—I think that's good, but I think there's more than that. I think we are called to impact the world out there—the music world, the food-making world, business, education, children, arts, media. (Cosette, interview)

While the institutional church would call all these "missions," it is rare for church leaders to recognize what these millennials are doing as church or consider their community as church. And this is the point of this paper, to clarify the issues in these conflicting understandings or paradigms of church and reflect on and respond to them theologically.

The Institutionalized Church

In contradistinction to church extending beyond the institution, the millennials voiced their struggles with the primarily institutional way of thinking about church. Robin (online interview by author, May 31, 2021) mourns what church has become in what he observes: "For many Christians, Christianity has become what one does in an institution and about fulfilling a religious duty that has no effect and makes no demand on one's life beyond the institution."

Alice also shares her frustration with the church, focusing on growing institutionally that the welfare of the regular members is sidelined. Here, the question of whether the church is the institution, or the people, becomes prominent. She wished that the caring and courageous love she so appreciates in the church community could be shared with those outside, "In trying to be an establishment that is polished and have it all together, certain things got too complicated, and this love and care is overshadowed…and even turn judgmental when people don't fit in" (Alice, interview). An institutional understanding of church draws a clear boundary between those in and out, between "us" and "them."

Serving Outside the Institution

Having a personal relationship with God comes with a sense of vocation (calling), but this sense of vocation is often not trusted nor respected

by church leaders who see church as solely the institution. Samwise describes the internal process of this conviction:

> There's something unsettling about not doing something about what's being shown to you. So for me it's just that clarity to say no, but I know what I'm saying yes to. It's not "no" because I don't want to do anything. It's a "no" so that I can say yes to something else…I do think that people will be more effective at wherever they are called. Based on my observation, it seems like it's going to be more and more and more outside the church (Samwise, online interview by author, June 5, 2021).

The survey indicated that serving outside the institution is common for Malaysian millennials. A third of millennials surveyed serve in other capacities outside the institutional church. Almost half of the millennials surveyed (45%) also indicated that "I see my occupation as serving God." Seven of the eight interviewees hold a job in a non-religious institution and all of them see their work as more than a job with a sense of calling to that field. It is jarring that despite the fact that many see their occupation as the place they serve God, this area is rarely one of the church's priorities—ranked the lowest out of fifteen concerns in both surveys from the leaders and millennials.

<div align="center">Church is Primarily About Loving Relationships</div>

The second point of divergence is the place of relationships in church. While the existing church paradigm's emphasis is on practices, the millennials draw attention to relationships. Is church the Sunday gathering or the community that gathers? Are the gatherings centered around an activity or is the community gathered for connection, where real relationships are fostered?[6]

Event over Community?

The surveys showed that "members attend weekly worship services in church" is the second highest concern of the church. About half of the people surveyed agreed that "Worship service attendance determines whether someone is part of my church community." It is this understanding of church

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[6] "Relationships" here include relationship with people in the local church and the wider body, relationship with God, and with the people in the world.

as primarily an event or gathering (including showing up for Sunday service) that the millennials interviewed struggle with.

For Samwise, "to be in a community means to connect at a deeper level than what you are doing together" (Samwise, interview). He makes a distinction between "shallow fellowship" that he experienced with all different types of believers coming together for corporate worship, and "deep community" whom he treats as his "family," where people are willing to make an effort for real relationships and commit to explore how to build a rich and supportive community (e.g., provide practical help, share needs for prayer, follow up on previous sharing). For Samwise, then, "my cell group is my real church" (Samwise, interview). Beyond merely having relationships with one another, Samwise emphasizes *loving interactions* as the distinctive of what it means to be a Christian community. This area is the one that showed the greatest gap between the respondents' desire and the desire being met in church (43% and 32% gap for millennials and leaders respectively)—showing that the kind of community they find in church is deficient from that desired.

Before Eloise (online interview by author, June 6, 2021) became a Christian, she admired one of her Christian schoolmates, who had a very close community of church friends. This has always been very attractive to her because that friend seemed to have a community she could rely on, who shared both good and bad times together and often helped each other out. She testifies to the reality of John 13:35 as she experienced first-hand how beautiful a community who loves one another is to onlookers. After her conversion, she sees this community as more than that because besides doing life together, what is most important for this community is their pursuit of God, and the way they are accountable to and vulnerable with each other.

Serving over Relationships?

"Serving in church" is a big part of belonging to the church in Malaysia. "Members serve in church" ranks fourth in the top concerns of the church in both surveys. The survey also reveals that 74% of the millennials serve actively in the institutional church, out of which 11% indicated that the service is "sort of imposed on me," showing that there is some pressure to serve in church.

One of the reasons Moana (online interview by author, June 7, 2021) struggled with fitting into a church after moving to another state is her resistance to being "hounded to serve." "I wonder if the way church functions today is structured in a way where it makes people come in, and 'let's welcome them and get them involved a.s.a.p.'" (Moana, interview). She is uncomfortable with the way some churches welcome newcomers and said she appreciates having churches where she is "being welcomed with no agenda…The thought that I can be here, I am being regarded as a family and not a worker" (Moana, interview). She recognizes that her resistance is due to some bad experiences of serving in her home-church. That includes a time when she was not allowed to give up one of the two major leadership roles she had, even though she was struggling with life and her relationship with God. When she asked her pastor, he basically told her that "you just need to lean on God's grace and you need to continue doing this" (Moana, interview) and she felt trapped in ministry at the expense of her well-being. Her story is not unique in that church leaders are expected to perform their roles until they find someone to take over their duties, even when they or their relationships (with God, others, or self) are suffering.

Moana also shares that this emphasis on ministry or serving is perhaps rooted in the leaders' identity as servants rather than as children of God. The others in her focus group agree that churches often fail to appreciate that there is more than being useful and there is a time for rest and to just *be*. Just as mental health is still a bit of a stigma in Malaysian churches, there is little room for leaders to "take a break" without being perceived negatively.

As figure 1 shows, one third of millennials and leaders who in the previous question agreed that "My church is concerned about my personal well-being" became unsure when they were asked if the church is more concerned about their involvement in church activities. It is remarkable that of all the questions asked in that category, the leaders most clearly deny that (or are most unsure of whether) the church actually cares for their well-being more than their involvement in church activities.

What is revealed in these stories is not that serving is bad or unimportant. The millennials seemed to be saying that the emphasis on "serving" might have taken over the place for relationships to develop. They want to be received and discipled as persons and not just workers because it is
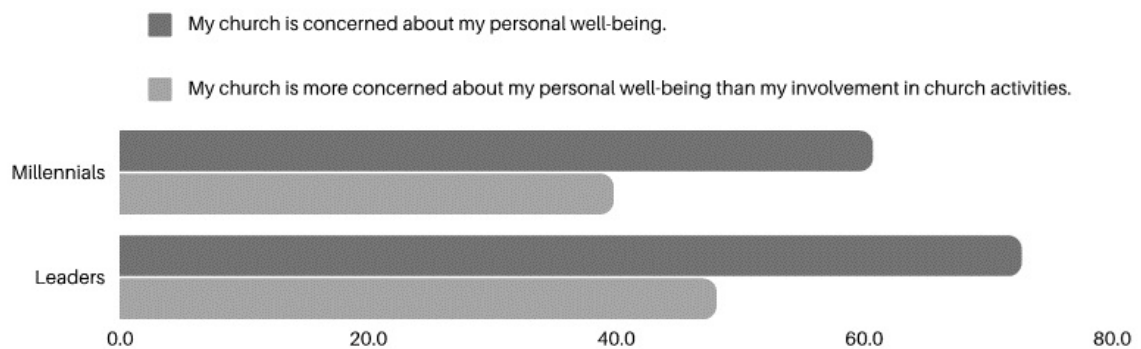
Figure 1: Survey results for respondents' perception of church's concern for their personal well-being over their involvement in church activities

about relationship at the end of the day. Even Jesus called His disciples (and us) friends instead of servants.

Relationship with God

In the same breath of expressing the importance of community, Robin and Emma (online interview by author, June 1, 2021) both locate the most important aspect of their faith in their personal relationship with God.

The three desires that receive the highest number of "agree" for both the millennials and the leaders' survey are "I desire to know God," "I desire an authentic connection with God," and "I desire to be in a real community." However, as figure 2 shows, "my desire for authentic connection with God is met in church" and "my desire for real community is met in church" also made up the two greatest gaps between a positive indication of that desire and an affirmation that the desire is met in church, revealing the main disappointments in both the millennials and the leaders' church experience.

It is interesting that although the respondents' answers to their desire to "know God" and desire for "authentic connection with God" are almost identical, their answers to those desires met in church indicate a rather great difference. Of course, what it means to "know God" and have "an authentic connection with God" is not specified, but it seems obvious that an authentic connection with God has an added element to knowing God. Perhaps this is connected to the maxim "It is not enough to know about God, we want to know God personally"—an emphasis on a personal or even intimate relationship with God.
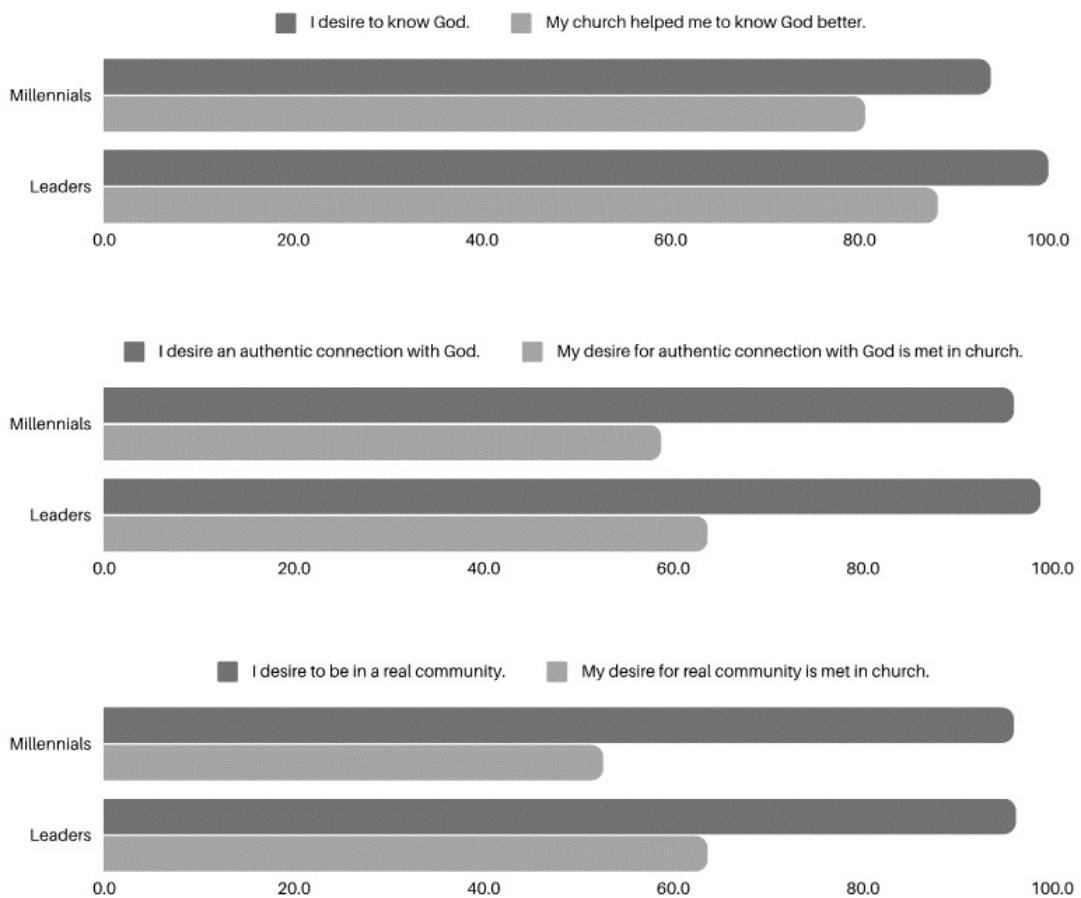
Figure 2: Survey results for respondents' perception that their respective desires are met in church

Both Robin and Samwise made this distinction in their sharing, saying that though their knowledge of God has grown much through the church, that does not necessarily mean that they have a closer relationship with God. Samwise shares that though he was leading in the church and knowledgeable in the Bible, none of these got him closer to God. He was feeling dry, unfulfilled, empty, and lost even though he was doing well in life then. Kenobi, likewise, makes this distinction in emphasizing that church is where people come together to "not just talk about Him but have a conversation with Him in His presence" (Kenobi, online interview by author, June 8, 2021).

Although none of the millennials interviewed go as far as Carey Nieuwhof did, citing a Barna survey, that "God is missing in the church… people in all kinds of experiences from liturgical to charismatic have left the church in search of God" (Nieuwhof n.d.), none of them mentioned the

institutional church when they were asked to share an episode of their life when they felt closest to God or a favorite moment with God. Six of their answers are personal encounters with God, while the other two shared about a time with other (non-institutional church) communities.

All these reveal that the millennials desire an authentic connection with God. While this connection or relationship with God can be mediated through practices, it is not always the case. Practices and connection (either with God or people) are not mutually exclusive, nor are they equivalent. The recognition that practices do not automatically translate to connection and even could take the place of connection is crucial, for the millennials desire a real and authentic connection with God and people. Locating church primarily in relationships, then, furnishes a definition of church that is constructive in understanding the millennials' church paradigm.

Longing for More

It is easy to regard the dissonance faced by these millennials negatively, but they describe this struggle as a longing for more, springing from a place of love. This exchange in a focus group brings into focus the tension and love that undergirds the tone of the discussion.

> There's this nagging feeling of "Is this all it's about?"…It doesn't feel right but you are up against a tidal wave of things, you don't even know where or when you are going to start changing it. It came from a place where you really cared a lot. And caring can be really tiring…I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one, we are talking about the church, also there's a part of us like, "are we biting the hands that feed us?" kind of stuff. This whole conversation has that interesting tension and awkwardness to it…I can see that there's so much affection for the church, but that you just can't see yourself fitting into the conventional leadership role in the church anymore. (Alice, interview)

Moana echoed this in her response to Alice in the focus group.

> There's also this understanding that we are not rebelling, we do love the church, but we just realize that there could be more, more of what the church could be. Understanding this sometimes makes it difficult for how we relate with our own church members and church leaders. We are still here, and we still have a lot of love in our hearts…But

there's this desire to bring more freedom within believers to be bold to ask the difficult questions. (Moana, interview)

As these quotes emphasized, the readers are invited to read these accounts not as rebellion or even complaints, but as a way to make sense of the struggles that emerge due to conflicting church paradigms.

A Theological Reflection on the Millennials' Ecclesial Paradigms

One key question in the readers' mind would be whether the ecclesial paradigms that emerged are theologically faithful. Although the millennials' ecclesial paradigms are not conventional and challenge the current ways of "doing church" in Malaysia, their voices may be prophetic in the way they call the church to abandon ourselves in following our Lord Jesus. Deep down is a cry to experience the reality of this God whom we love so deeply and to see the call of the Bible lived faithfully. The two collective narratives mirror the incarnation and participation in the Trinitarian love relationship.

Word Made Flesh

These millennials are not content with a religion that is confined to an institution. Their dissatisfaction and struggle can be seen as wanting to follow Jesus, and not have the Word of God remain as something they simply believe in or something that excites the mind and is practiced in an institution. Just as the Word of God was made flesh in their Lord, they desire to allow the Word of God to reorient their whole lives and shape the way they live, so that the Word of God is "made flesh" in their lives through the Spirit. It is a faith or word that is lived out, not merely believed in. They seek to embody church as the body of Christ in their participation in God's narrative by being *in Christ*, that the Word of God becomes something people can encounter in their flesh.

Just as the Word of God did not stay uncontaminated with the Father, away from the sin-filled world for self-preservation, these millennials are not content with the Word of God affecting only their life in the institutional church. They seek to inhabit the story of the Word of God by following Him into the world, by both *encountering* and *embodying* the Word-made-flesh in the mess of everyday life. Their faith is not characterized by faithfulness and

contribution to the survival of the institutional church. Because God's presence and activity is not subjected to institutional boundaries, they give themselves to the kind of faith-full living that goes beyond institutional boundary as the people of God.

Two ecclesiological researchers have addressed this conceptual problem. Nicholas Healy highlights,

> But the boundaries between church and world are never clear. The church is sinful and "worldly," and the Spirit acts throughout creation; so "church" and "world" may often be more prescriptive than descriptive categories within a theodramatic horizon. (Healy 2000, 170)

Clare Watkins similarly finds it troubling that much contemporary ecclesiology seems to read church with a "management paradigm," a danger that theological education has to avoid in order to go beyond preparing leaders with the primary aim of running the operations and organized gatherings of the institution. She explains,

> I mean that tendency to assume that: first, we can speak about "church" as if we know what that is and, secondly, that when we speak of it, we are referring largely to something of a bounded, organised, observable reality, all be it one with a transcendent or mysterious aspect, and a missionary activity. "Church" quickly becomes identified—more or less—with ecclesial structural institutions, all be it in various ways. Even when it is the subject of the church's identity that is being discussed, there is all too often an assumption that we know the "thing" whose identity we are concerned with. (Watkins 2020, Chapter 8, Section 1, para. 1-2)

Watkins uses "edgy" to describe the shape of the institutional church and calls the paradigm shift required as "the edgelessness of church, centred on ecclesial structural edges" (Watkins 2020, Chapter 8, Section 4, para. 2). She asserts the importance of the "edgy" or institutional church as "a centre which exists to serve the edges" (Watkins, para. 2). She thus concludes that this paradigm shift calls us to rethink how we do church.

> The church thus lies ahead of us as vocation, every bit as much as it is present to us as identity, community, structure and ritual. As such, it is not something to be possessed, managed, envisioned or strategically planned. That this has significant implication for how structures, and

especially authority and ministry work is clear. It also has enables a renewal of understanding of the churches' sacramental lives in ways which break open our liturgical and ritual practices to the realities of world and boundary-less Spirit. (Watkins, para. 3)

Hence discerning where the Spirit of God is at work and calling the church forth is of utmost importance. It is crucial for leaders to be formed with this theological vision to call people where the "boundary-less Spirit" is leading, to see beyond the institutional boundaries, and also to grow in the art of discernment in cultivating a culture of noticing where we may be led beyond what we are familiar or comfortable with.

These millennials' lives show that intimacy with God can cause one to be impregnated with the desires of God's heart that may lead them to live in unconventional ways, that are sometimes even offensive to others. But for them, it is simply something that one cannot unsee, and following Jesus this way is the only way to make sense of their faith. After all, the God we worship is one who left the perfect company of the Father, being compelled by love, to enter the messiness of this world to reveal the heart and ways of God. It is not the most sensible thing in human eyes; it is the incarnation; it is Word made flesh.

A Call to Love

What the interviews revealed, simply put, is this: The church gathers to *do things*. While the purpose of *doing things* is to serve the relationships, the *things* we *do* seem to have eclipsed the relationships. Practice has taken precedence over relationships. While relationships need to be expressed and sustained through practices, practices are susceptible to being prioritized at the expense of people and relationships.

The challenge posed by the millennials interviewed is not merely a return to the primacy of relationships over practices. During the individual interviews, a few of them emphasized the word "love" as what they are called to, what they are learning, and how they are challenged to live. It is hence not a surprise that both focus groups concluded their discussion on the note of love. While one's discussion revolves around love *within* the Christian community, the other's discussion is geared towards loving those *outside*; and the tension between loving those within and outside the Christian community

is deliberated in both groups. A key verse that both groups referred to is John 13:35: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

When what happens in the institutional church does not foster relationships and growth in love, the millennials do not settle, but instead they venture out to find it. "To just simply love Jesus without all the unnecessary things that tie me down, and to not succumb to pleasing people" is how Alice (interview) puts it.

Comparing the leaders' description of church with the millennials' in the survey reveals that although "love" occurred 23 times in the millennials' responses, this word was not used even once by the leaders. However, the word "love" did occur as one of the top responses to the question "I hope my church can…" for both the leaders and the millennials (ranked sixth and seventh respectively).

The love that the millennials interviewed depict is not the feel-good, fluffy love. Nor is it a staged unity in diplomatic collaboration through events or organizational structures. They talk about the kind of love that entails a willingness to vulnerably give of themselves to others in down-to-earth practical ways, an openness that allows themselves to be challenged while working through differences and conflicts, and even measuring the degree of their love by their readiness to actually lay down their life for the other. And for them, church is the *context*, or better, *community*, where they learn to live out this love. Because this love is not natural. It is only made possible through abiding in the love of the Father, in Jesus, through the Spirit. It is an imitation of the kind of love they witness in the incarnation and crucifixion, as well as a participation in the dance of the Trinity.

The primacy of relationships and love is not only the millennials' affair. It reflects the qualities of the Trinitarian God we worship—a relational God whose nature is love (1 John 4:8-12). Paul Fiddes argues that relational beings are only known through participation, "We cannot observe, even in our mind's eye, being which is relationship; it can only be known through the mode of participation" (Fiddes 2000, 38). Jesus thus prayed that those who believe in him might share in the love of the Trinity (John 17:21-26) by abiding in him and his love (John 15:4-9). In this sense, Pete Ward expounds that the church "does not just reflect the life of God," it "joins in with that life and it is

indwelt by that life" (Ward 2002, 55). Hence, when the focus for church is on relationships, priority would be given to participation.

With this relational paradigm, what the church needs is a theological education that sees equipping leaders as forming persons in relationship. More attention needs to be given to the formation of the *self* of the leader, as it is the *person* of the leader that the church relates with, more than what they are able to do. The church needs leaders who are experienced in abiding in the life and love of the Trinity so that they are able to cultivate nurturing relationships among church communities.

When love is the agenda, personal relationships (with God, with one another, with people in the world) take center stage. Growing in love is never general, it is deeply personal. It involves giving full attention to a person or a thing, or what Walter Burghardt (1989) calls contemplation, a "long, loving look at the real." This is where spiritual formation happens, when people work on growing in love in the real, lived relationships, and by paying attention to their real, lived experiences in their ordinary lives. God is always encountering and forming people in their lived relationships, but how often do these relationships become the focus of spiritual formation?

It is also important to note that an emphasis on personal relationship should not be read as individualistic. As this relationship that we are called to join in is a "progressive dance" (Fiddes, 75) characterized by an outward movement that invites others to join in, or an "ecstatic communion," "always inviting all of creation to share in the triune life of communion-in-mission" (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 294). This is evidenced in the sharing of the millennials interviewed, that though their faith and focus is on personal relationships, their lives portray a concern for others and those in the world and are making efforts to establish connection with them even without the support of the institutional churches.

The millennials are not perfect in this love, for sure, and many are still working through knots in their hearts when it comes to church.[7] It is possible

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[7] This means that the millennials also have their own faults and blind spots, and their viewpoints are not to be uncritically accepted. From the findings, it is possible to point out the millennials' deficiency in their perspectives as well, but that is outside the scope of this paper. At best, the struggles of the millennials reflect shortcomings in the church, and in all people, including the millennials.

that they are not even representative of the majority millennials who struggle with the church in Malaysia. But these millennials' attempts are like building a bridge, plank by plank, with every step courageously facing the turmoil raging in their hearts (to understand their own and their generation's struggle), with their feet firmly on the ground (experimenting with different ways of living out their faith in the world) while responding to the tune that they hear the Trinity is dancing to, trusting that each plank will bring them closer to fulfilling God's heart for this generation.

This project began with a desire to understand faithful millennial Christians who are struggling with church and to discern their creative and constructive potential for ecclesial renewal. The central argument is that these faithful millennials struggle with church because they have diverging ecclesial paradigms and yet, their ecclesial paradigms, as discussed in this article, are theologically faithful. I attempted to demonstrate the theological nature of these ecclesial paradigms by reflecting on how they mirror the incarnation of our Lord Jesus and call for participation in the Trinitarian love relationship. Further research is needed to address questions on how communities outside an institutional church can be church and how can we pave the way for these new ecclesial paradigms to find their communal embodiment.

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Perceived Dynamics that Help Children Thrive: Implications for Theological Education Institutions in Understanding Children Toward Holistic Mission

Nativity Petallar, Nehemiah Bathula, Mamre Buelis-Bating, Floyd Cunningham, Wobeni Lotha, Ernesto Lozano, Mark Gil Petallar, Ronnie Pingol, Marie Joy Pring-Faraz, Catherine Stonehouse, Achita Thurr, and Menchit Wong[1]

Abstract

The main thrust of this article is to identify ways for theological education institutions to better understand the place of children in God's kingdom and how to encourage them in their societal context. This is one of the research outputs of the study titled, "Listening and Learning from Various Entities on the Perceived Dynamics that Help Children Thrive."[2] The study explored through amplifying the voices of various people, the essential factors that help children thrive toward greater understanding and more effective ministry to, for, and with children.

There were three major questions posed in the research. First, what does the child need to thrive: to grow up well and be happy? Second, who are the people that can help a child thrive and how? Third, what are the factors in a child's environment that can help a child thrive? Answers to these questions were obtained through the following methodologies: an open-ended questionnaire, focus group discussions, and drawings and self-interpretations of drawings by the children.

The study showed the following results: First, the respondents identified that for a child to thrive, the following are the elements they need (in order, according to frequency count based on the open-ended questionnaires): (1) basic needs met, (2) family, (3) relationships, (4) spirituality, (5) education, and (6) community. Second, the study indicated that the following are the people that can help a child thrive (in order, according to frequency count based on the open-ended questionnaires): (1) parents, (2) church, (3) family, (4) community, (5) school, and (6) friends. Finally, the study showed that

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[1] Floyd Cunningham, Catherine Stonehouse, and Menchit Wong served as research mentors for this project.

[2] The study was conducted in 2018 by the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary Research Team. The paper was presented at the very first Lausanne Movement Philippines National Forum on Children-at-Risk.

the following are the factors in a child's environment that can help a child thrive (in order, according to frequency count based on the open-ended questionnaires): (1) healthy environment, (2) normal family life, (3) holistic needs met, (4) spirituality, (5) education, (6) friends, (7) productive space, play, and sports, and finally (8) governmental and non-governmental institutions. For the purpose of this article, specific ways were identified for the seminaries to better understand the place of children in God's kingdom and how these theological institutions may participate in this holistic mission and discipleship for children.

Keywords: Children, Church, Community, Seminaries, Parents, Pastors, Thrive, Nurture

Background of the Study

Menchit Wong's prospectus titled, "Moving from Risk to Thriving: On Mission To, For, and With Children-at-Risk" explains that the 2010 Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization produced the Cape Town Commitment (CTC). This document contains Lausanne's commitment to uphold the welfare of children. Wong mentions that this was truly a defining moment in Evangelical Church history. Never before has a global movement in world evangelization produced a foundational document that holds the worldwide church accountable for its actions toward holistic nurture, protection, and advocacy for children at risk (Wong 2018, 1).

One important commitment made during that 2017 forum[3] was to expand this learning community and to bring the conversations and multi-disciplinary/multi-cultural collaboration to the national and local level, where action is most felt and impactful to the children we serve. Thus, the decision was made to convene in 2019 for the very first Lausanne Movement Philippines National Forum on Children-at-Risk. One of the major goals of this forum was to become a "community of learners," to "listen and to learn" from various entities across cultures, age groups, disciplines, and social contexts (Minutes of Meeting held at APNTS on June 20, 2017). In August 2018, the results of this study were presented at the Lausanne Forum held in Manila.

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[3] This refers to the 2017 forum held in Lancaster, PA, which formally established the Lausanne Issue Network on Children-at-Risk.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

The Biblical Basis of Nurturing Children for Growth

The Bible describes children using the following unique descriptions: (1) created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–31, 2:18–25; Ps 139:13–14), (2) heritage from the Lord (Ps 127:3), (3) included in God's covenant (Deut 29:10–15, 31:12–13), and (4) "a crown to the aged" (Prov 17:6). Thus, children need care and attention so they thrive in all aspects of life. These Scripture references show how special a child is in the eyes of God and the biblical writers. Furthermore, children have the following capacities as noted in Scriptures: (1) glorify God (Matt 21:15–16)*;* (2) come to Christ (Mark 10:13–16); (3) understand Scripture (2 Tim 3:15); (4) receive the promises (Acts 2:39); (5) believe (Matt 18:6); (6) receive training (Eph 6:4); and (7) worship in God's house (1 Sam 1:24, 28) (noted in *The Open Bible*, 1983). As such, the people around them have the joy, responsibility, and opportunity to nurture them in the knowledge of God until they "reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

The Place of Children in God's Kingdom

To enrich this discussion, there was an official document in the form of the *Lausanne Occasional Paper* (LOP) created by the Lausanne Issue Network for Children-at-Risk which presents a high view of children and a high view of Scripture using the biblical story of young Samuel (Segura-April et al. 2014, 4). Using this approach, the following are some biblical principles that emerged: (1) all children should be holistically nurtured throughout childhood; (2) God uses whom God will, including those on the margins of life, where numerous children find themselves; (3) children can be called by God and hear God's voice; (4) children can be active participants in worship and service to God; (5) the people of God are to respect, listen to, envision, and empower children as vulnerable agents of God's mission.

These principles provide a framework that allows the church to nurture and protect children as well as empower and release them as agents of God's mission. This framework also provides boundaries so children are not placed in situations of spiritual abuse by the adults who try to release them to be part

of the *Missio Dei*. This gives us the unifying theme that children are important because they are created in the image of God and need our care and attention. Catherine Stonehouse (2018) explains that the image of God reflects that from the very beginning of life, children are spiritual beings because God is Spirit. Stonehouse further states that this gives children the potential for a relationship with God and to sense God's presence from a very early age.

<div align="center">

Thriving and Its Implications for Meeting the
Needs of Children
</div>

Thriving is also known as flourishing. It includes the following aspects: a love of learning, a sense of purpose, good relationships, emotional well-being, life skills, serving others, moral courage, taking care of selves, suffering wisely, a sense of joy, physical health, and spiritual growth.[4]

Raising children is a rewarding, yet challenging task for parents, caregivers, teachers, coaches, pastors, counselors, and people who associate with them. Children thrive when their basic needs are met and they have opportunities to learn, grow, and explore. Ned Olney, Country Director of Save the Children said, "Children learn and thrive when they are safe from violence within their families, and the practice of positive discipline helps parents and communities provide all children with a safe environment (cited in Department of Social Welfare and Development 2015). For children to thrive, the family plays a foremost factor. A large body of research shows that family functioning has far-reaching effects on children's developmental trajectories (Maholmes 2014, 9). Pam Leo quotes the statements of John Holt, who compared human beings to Bonsai trees. If we take a tree seedling, trim its roots and branches in a certain way and limit its supply of water, air, and sun, we can produce a tiny, twisted tree. A Bonsai tree is a malformed miniature of the tall, straight tree, the seedling had the potential to be had it been given the sun, air, water, soil, and food it needed. And so, it is with children. They cannot realize their potential if they are given only a limited source of the things they need to thrive (Leo 2007). Therefore, the researchers understands thriving through the analogy of John Holt. Thriving is not all about achieving

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[4] For more information on the Thrive Foundation and their work on helping youth thrive, please see http://www.thrive.org.uk/.

a fixed state or being fully developed, but it is a state of progressing from one degree to another degree as continuous growth occurs.

Theological Implications of Child Thriving

God is a Triune God who lives in community and one of his attributes is being relational. As a relational being, God created humanity to be relational as well. He has made humanity, including children, live and thrive in the community. Children are a gift to the entire community. They are called "olive shoots" (Ps 128:3), a "heritage from the Lord" (Ps 127:3), and "arrows" in a quiver (Ps 127:4–5). The Scripture speaks highly about children. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus taught his disciples and multitudes by placing a child in the middle of the conversation (Matt 18:2–5, 19:13–14; Mark 9:36–37, 10:13–16; Luke 9:47–48, 18:15–17). These passages strongly emphasize God's gift—children to the families, and community, welcoming and nurturing children which pave the way for child thriving, which is the ultimate intention of God toward children.

God intends for children to thrive in stable and loving relationships (Ennew 2007, 109). It is a privilege and responsibility for family, friends, church, and local community to create an environment that promotes children's well-being. Bunge narrates that when caregivers attend quickly and gently to children's learning needs, they generate a space that balances assistance and freedom, talking and listening, guidance and curiosity (Bunge 2017, 32). Such an approach to learning, in whatever context, produces real connection and human flourishing. Children thrive when caretakers provide a pleasant environment that reflects love, joy, compassion, positivity, and self-esteem.

Implications of the Ecological Theory in the Ministry of To, For, and With Children

Three implications can be gathered from Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner 1999, 3). First, everyone in the community has the opportunity to be part of the well-being of children. The role of every level of society is integral for children to thrive. Second, if and when the home which is considered as the immediate setting of a child's defense is broken,

the church and the people in the community should be there to make up for the deficiencies. This would imply that the presence of caring and nurturing programs and activities provided by the church or the community is crucial. Finally, the whole network of influences, both external and internal supports like the home, the school, the theological institutions, and societal attitudes should value children thriving at all levels.

Methodology

This research employed *purposive sampling.* Purposive sampling enables the researcher to select respondents to suit the purpose of the study. The respondents of the study consist of parents, church leaders/workers, theologians/seminary professors, NGOs/persons in the community, and children. Research ethics were observed by seeking parent's consent to allow their children to participate in the research. In addition, participants 19 years old and above signed informed consent statements. There was also no risk identified in the research.

This research is descriptive in design. It employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches for data gathering. It is qualitative in the sense that the
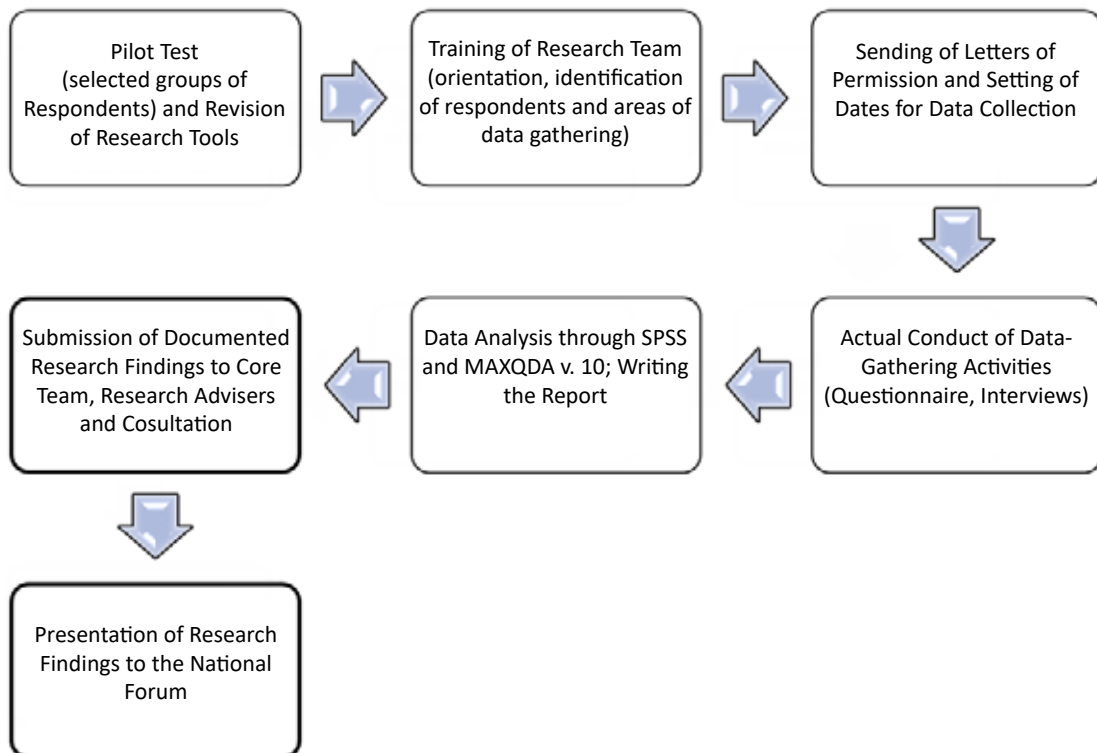
Figure 1: Research gathering procedures

data contained responses from focus group discussions (FGDs) of respondents to explore areas related to the research questions. Questionnaires were used to gather data. The anticipated total number of respondents was 1,000 from all over the Philippines, but only 776 respondents were able to participate in the actual research.

The breakdown is as follows: The total number of respondents in this study is 586 plus 40 FGDs and 140 drawings of children.[5] Church workers comprise the largest population of the research. Next are the children, then the parents, the persons in the community, and the smallest group is the seminary professors. The research determined various perceptions of the factors that help children thrive from the different respondents.

Results and Discussion

This section is presented in a thematic format discussing the perceived dynamics that help children thrive with the intent to provide implications for theological education institutions to identify ways to participate in this holistic mission and discipleship for children.

Perceived Dynamics that Help Children Thrive

The research study identified the following themes that are paramount to child thriving: (1) family that provides a child's needs; and (2) community as a network of internal and external supports for child nurture.

A Family that Provides the Child's Needs

In the study, the respondents, namely, the children, the church workers, the NGO and GO workers, the parents, and the seminary professors indicated that the family is crucial to child thriving. More than half of the children indicated that "family" is their number one need to thrive. The Nonformal Education (NFE) Module for Elementary Curriculum of the Alternative Learning System of the Philippines (2016, 1) writes, "The family is the basic unit of society. It is the source of emotional, physical, spiritual, and financial support of an individual." For Filipinos, the family is the major source of

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[5] Visit https://tinyurl.com/mw8t56fd for the extensive study report.

support for children and it is not just composed of the immediate family members, but extended families as well. In particular, in the FGD, they unanimously identified their fathers and their mothers as the key people who will help them thrive. Parents are the child's immediate "safety net" against the elements that might hurt them. One child commented, "My mom and dad [*are* important] because they help me and discipline me." Discipline is part of teaching children boundaries and the values that matter in life. In whatever context, parents play a huge role in the transmission of values to children (Petallar 2015, 98). Another group of people the children mentioned are "relatives," "friends," and "neighbors." This coincides with what the children in the questionnaires indicated as well. Even the children in the FGD as well as their self-interpretations of their drawings, match this particular research finding as well.

In the FGD, the church workers affirmed that a perfect world for children to thrive is one where they are "nurtured by the people who relate to them." The church workers believed that "attention to all the needs of the children must be a priority mainly by the parents, but it must also be a concern shared by the children's family and relatives, and the rest of the adults in the children's community." In addition, the NGOs/persons in the community mentioned that the children need "family" at the top of the list for them to thrive. The frequency distribution done on the transcription of the NGO's FGD shows that two themes were mentioned the most in their answers were: relationship (five times) and basic needs (five times). This reveals that, while the NGOs acknowledge the significance of a child having healthy and nurturing relationships, they also believe that the physical needs of the child must be met.

Furthermore, the children who participated in the FGD expressed that a perfect world for them to grow happy and strong is one wherein they are "surrounded with people who care for them," and they have means like money to access their basic needs like "food," "clothes," etc. The parents indicated that meeting the "basic needs" of the children is the highest priority for thriving (88 frequency count). In the FGD conducted with parents, they shared about their personal experiences in raising their children. The motifs of "relationship," "family," and "providing for the children's basic needs" were mentioned frequently in their responses. The seminary professors indicated

that the basic needs are the priority in the list of the criteria that need to be fulfilled for the child to thrive. They also perceived that children thrive when they have "healthy relationships" in the "community." Furthermore, the seminary professors place "access to holistic needs" as the most important factor in the thriving of a child. In addition, they mentioned that meeting these needs goes beyond just providing, these needs must be of genuine help to the child: food must be healthy food and shelter must be safe shelter.

Part of a child's basic needs is education, as identified by the children themselves. One of the children remarked on the difficulty but fruitfulness of going to school and doing requirements, "School is important because [even though I] won't be happy, at least I am going to be successful, right?" The respondent acknowledged that even though he or she will not be happy while in school (probably because of requirements, etc.), he or she will be successful. In the Philippines, many people believe that education is one way to have some kind of a good life in the future, however, David P. Barrows, in his article, "Education and the Social Progress in the Philippines," published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* writes, "In the Philippines, the fundamental aim of the school system is to effect a social transformation of the people…" (Barrows 1907, 69). This child who said this is not far from the truth. If society is transformed because of education, then that could mean "success" on the part of the citizens.

Community as a Network of Internal and External Supports for Child Nurture

In addition to the family, the respondents of the study identified that the church and a "healthy environment" surrounding the children are essential for thriving. In terms of the church, one of the children described his church as a picture of a "perfect world" for him. "I love everyone in my church," he beams out proudly. The church workers/leaders mentioned that the children need "church" (81 times, highest f count) to thrive. In terms of people and places comprising a "healthy environment," (which the respondents described as an "environment that is safe from any physical or non-physical threat)" themes like "productive space, play and work" (with "friends") and "community influencers."

Productive space with friends to play with

For the NGOs, four motifs emerged at the top of the frequency distribution analysis: "holistic needs," "normal family life," "education," and "productive space and play." One of the statements that kept emerging was, "Children in the Philippines do not have enough playgrounds to play in." Other factors mentioned by the participants were children having spiritual guidance and having friends who will support and influence them to make the right decisions and actions. The church workers also indicated the need for children to have "good friends," and have the "opportunity to play and learn sports."

Community influencers

The NGO or community workers as well as the parents acknowledged that children can truly thrive if other people around them like the "community influencers," "church workers," (particularly pastors and Sunday School workers) and "school workers" work hand in hand for their best interest. For the theologians, the motif of "community" was the most frequently mentioned. While they mention the importance of a child having good parents, they believe that the school, the church, and the children's friends are also important people to ensure that children thrive.

Implications for Theological Education Institutions to Participate in Holistic Mission and Discipleship for Children

Theological education institutions cannot escape from the reality that they are needed in child thriving. The seminaries are the "thinking arm" of the local church and are strategic in providing avenues to training local church leaders to value and care for children. In light of the findings of the research, first, theological education institutions can conduct more research on amplifying children's voices to learn from them how best can they be nurtured as active agents of the *missio Dei*. In the FGDs with children that were captured in the video (with permission from their parents), one may notice that when children are asked about what they picture a world that is fit for them, their eyes show a different "twinkle," like they are transported to another

world, a world they want to be in. Letting children tell adults what they dream about, and what they wish would happen to them is a powerful means of giving children a voice, a chance to influence the actions, plans, and programs that affect their well-being, and a rare opportunity for adults to enter into the innermost world of the child. Second, theological education institutions need to equip the students and faculty to encourage the local church to engage in deep relationships with the family and to provide trainings to parents and extended family members concerning child thriving in a holistic sense: basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), spirituality, and space and opportunity for play.

The following are some recommendations for practical actions that are needed for our circle of influence (e.g., seminaries, missional thinkers, theologians, ministry organizations, networks, church/denominational leadership) to more effectively support the local church in holistic mission and discipleship of children: (1) The seminary can engage the community by helping the parents in strategic activities to provide for their families. They can do extension or outreach ministries to the families in the community; (2) The seminary can also collaborate with the church to help people be educated on the factors that help children thrive; (3) The seminary students can also work with the children in the community not just by providing means for spiritual nurture but by helping children in the community in the form of tutoring the children who need help in their studies; (4) Seminary professors and theologians can help the parents, the churches, and the NGOs/persons in the community in the area of equipping them to meet holistic needs, and how to sustain a healthy environment with spirituality at the center; and (5) The seminary can provide a curriculum to help students as they, in turn, equip the local churches in strengthening the family (so they can better meet the holistic needs of their children), the churches (so they can better connect with the home and community to work together to nurture children), the community (so its officials know the needs of the family, the churches), and the children (so they know their rights, obligations, freedoms, and opportunities to thrive in a world that is fit for them).

Conclusion

One of the aims of the study was to identify ways for theological education institutions to better understand the place of children in God's kingdom and how to encourage them in their societal context.

This study has found out among others that children have multi-faceted needs. Their responses to the questionnaires and the FGD convey deeper needs that only intentional attention can identify. First and foremost, children need their parents to survive. Almost all of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) tabulation on what and who children need to thrive points to the "parents." Next to the parents is the "family." For the respondents, family does not just mean immediate family, but includes grandparents, siblings, relatives, and other extended family members. If this family system breaks down, the child is left to all kinds of unsafe systems, predators, and destructive elements. In the same vein, this study concludes that child thriving is an endeavor that cannot be done by one person or one organization alone. It is something that needs the collaboration of all the persons surrounding the child. Holistic mission and discipleship of children is a monumental task and requires all supports, systems, and structures to collaborate.

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Developing a Curriculum for Christlikeness using Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)[1]

Brian Woolery

Abstract

The researcher developed a "Curriculum for Christlikeness" for Keystone Nazarene Church, an English-speaking international congregation in Okinawa, Japan, using Dallas Willard's approach to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5–7 as a biblical foundation for congregant character development. This curriculum was developed as a way of fulfilling the church's mission statement of "Making Christlike Disciples" and in response to the reality that Christians struggle to habitually obey the teachings of Jesus or reflect his character. The twenty-four-week "Curriculum for Christlikeness" consisted of three curriculum venues: the corporate worship service, a weekly guided reflection journal, and discipleship groups for discussion and accountability. A mixed-methods approach was used to evaluate if congregant growth occurred. Research data showed that implementation of the "Curriculum of Christlikeness" at Keystone Nazarene Church played a part in congregant character development in Christlikeness.

Keywords: Sermon on the Mount, Discipleship, Curriculum, Dallas Willard, Okinawa, Japan, International Church.

Introduction

The genesis of this project occurred when the researcher noticed in his own life, and in the lives of Asian believers among whom he has ministered for the past twenty years, behaviors and character traits that were persistently inconsistent with the teachings and character of Jesus. This pattern was not confined to a cultural or geographical group. Gallup research published studies that found that within the United States, knowing Christian doctrine—meaning

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[1] The study, on which this article is based, was the focus of my Doctor of Ministry in Transformational Ministry research at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, in partnership with Asia Graduate School of Theology, Philippines.

church-goers—did not necessarily bring about life transformation seen in actions such as self-control (Gallup Jr. 2023). Something important was missing in discipleship.

Dallas Willard (2009b, 1-3), in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, argues that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount (hereafter referred to as the Sermon) gives a comprehensive view of life available in God's kingdom which both addresses these issues and provides a better way forward. The good news Jesus proclaimed was from his personal experience in the wilderness, that God's kingdom is near and available to guide and help us (Matt 4:17). For Willard, simple engagement with and obedience to Jesus's teachings will address much of the lack of discipleship, revealed in un-Christlike behavior, seen in the church today. He argues that the pervasiveness of this problem comes from a misunderstanding of salvation which excludes practice and obedience (Matt 7:21-27, 28:20).[2] While Willard laid out a clear explanation of the problem and its answer through Jesus's teaching in the Sermon, he left it to others to take the final necessary step to build this into a systematic curriculum guiding people into habit and character-forming practices.

The researcher took the Sermon on the Mount, using Willard's approach in *The Divine Conspiracy* as a guiding framework, and developed it into a curriculum emphasizing practice, developing a twenty-four-week backward designed "Curriculum for Christlikeness" based in the corporate worship service. This was done for Keystone Nazarene Church, an English-speaking international congregation in Okinawa, Japan, to aid congregant character development.

This article will first explain the use of backward design in the writing of the curriculum and describe the mixed method approach used to evaluate congregant character development through participating in the curriculum. Next, the article will share the curriculum design beginning with Willard's approach to spiritual formation generally and the Sermon specifically. It will then describe the construction of a twenty-four-week curriculum and

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[2] Willard speaks in his book to an American context, but the issues he addresses impact Asian Christians both in the fact that American missions has impacted Asian understandings of theology, spiritual formation, and ecclesiology, but also, in the opinion of this author, are universal temptations to a form of Christian religion in which one does not need to know or apply the teachings of Jesus. See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009b), 63–69.

the development of practice-based tools designed to aid congregants in systematically understanding, reflecting on, and practicing the teachings of Jesus. Third, the article will discuss the assessment of congregant character growth and obedience to Jesus's teachings in his Sermon.

Methodology

The researcher used Wiggins and McTighe's backward design approach, a learner-centered approach focusing on skill development through concrete practice (Wiggins and McTighe 2005). He used mixed-methods research to evaluate congregational growth based on changes in knowledge of, reflection on, and application of Jesus's teachings in the Sermon.

Backward design consists of three stages: 1) identifying desired student results, 2) determining acceptable evidence that the results were achieved, and finally 3) designing learning experiences and instruction to achieve the desired results. This is important as often sermon preparation and education in churches begins with content and hopes that results occur. In the first stage, the researcher identified three criteria that would show growth in putting Jesus' teaching into practice: 1) knowledge: seen in familiarity with and understanding of the teachings in the Sermon, 2) recognition of where the topic of teaching addressed in the Sermon occurs in one's life, and 3) application of the teaching seen in concrete actions. The researcher believes these criteria build upon one another.

The curriculum's effectiveness was measured through a voluntary survey, generally after two units. The survey asked questions covering the recurring unit cycle of knowledge (divided into "familiarity" and "understanding"), recognition, and application (titled "behavior"). Likert answers to each question were specific, concrete, and based upon a skill. On the surveys participants were prompted to make further written comments and reflections, providing qualitative data to help give context to the quantitative response data. Participants evaluated themselves at the end of a unit or units compared to before the unit(s). In total, there were 8 surveys. The first survey served as a baseline. Surveys 2-7 covered 1-2 units each of the curriculum. Survey 8 was a summative survey and included more specific short-answer

questions to gather additional qualitative feedback. Participants could fill out a survey at church or online.[3]

Willard's View of Spiritual Formation and the Sermon on the Mount

To understand the curriculum content and approach, it will be helpful to give a summary of Willard's view of spiritual formation and how this guides his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount.

Willard's view of spiritual formation into Christlikeness is encapsulated in what he called the "Golden Triangle" (Figure 1) (Willard 2009b, 347). The three points of the triangle consist of these three principles: 1) spiritual formation happens amid ordinary events of life, 2) spiritual formation occurs through planned discipline or activities to put on a new heart, and 3) spiritual formation is enabled by the action of the Holy Spirit. The fourth element—the mind of Christ unites and centers these activities
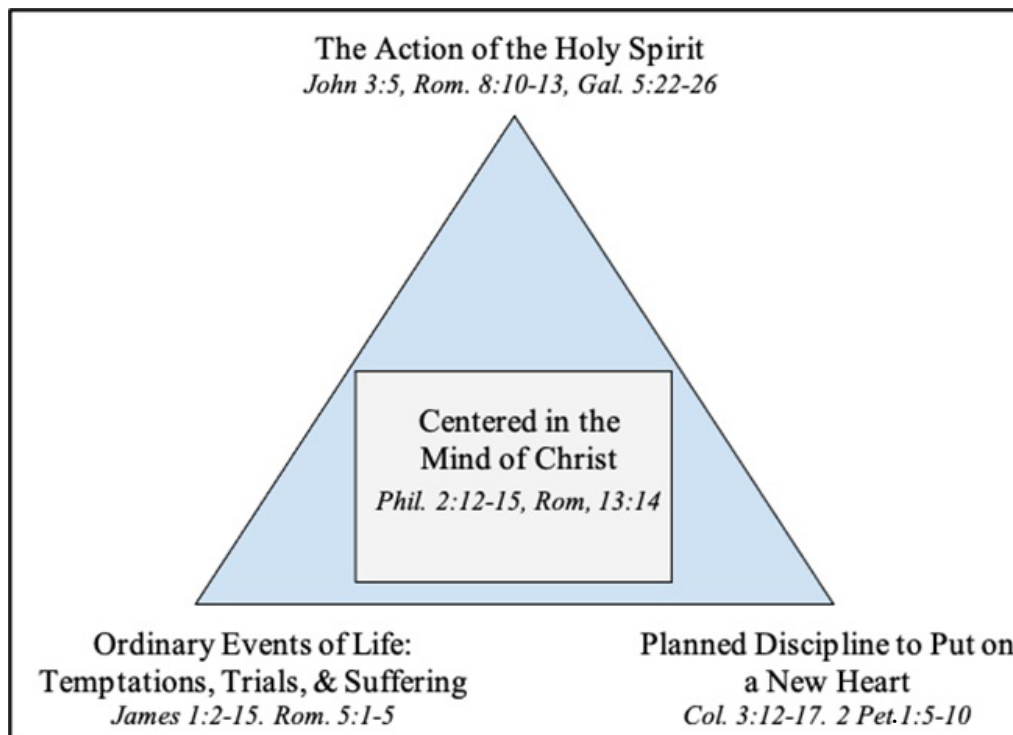
Figure 1: Willard's Golden Triangle of Spiritual Formation.

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[3] To view survey templates, see dissertation Woolery (2022, 147–62).

in the person and example of Jesus. As these four components are applied, spiritual formation into Christlikeness occurs, while the lack of application of any of the elements will result in spiritual mis-formation revealed in a visibly different character than that of Jesus.

In his book *Knowing Christ Today* Willard explains how Jesus, in his Sermon, gives a holistic and progressive lesson about life with God which answers key human questions that all religions and philosophies seek to address. First, "What is real?" This is the base-level view of how the world works and what people can count on. Second, "What is the good life?" This guides one's desires, choices, and behaviors within the world. Third, "How do I become a good person?" The answer to this third question guides a person in synthesizing answers to the first two questions (Willard 2009a, chap. 2). In *The Divine Conspiracy,* Willard shows how Jesus in his Sermon brilliantly answers these questions and helps reveal how a misunderstanding of the reality of God's presence and of what makes up the good life leads to the damaging character, attitudes, and actions seen in the world and in one's own life. Willard sees Jesus explaining how wrong action is the natural result of one's belief in the necessity of doing what they know to be wrong to get what they believe will make life good, even if only for a moment.[4]

Willard sees that spiritual transformation is a new way of looking at and interacting with what is real: God and his creation. As one systematically puts his or her trust in the reality of God's kingdom announced by Jesus in the Sermon, employing specific practices in normal life events, and trusting in God's grace given through the power, wisdom, and guidance of the Holy Spirit, one's character will be formed and one's behavior will begin to align with the description of kingdom life described in the Sermon.

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Section 1: The Goodness of the Kingdom
(Matt 4:17–5:12)[5]

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As in all good biblical hermeneutics, Willard shows how the context before the Sermon critically shapes one's understanding of it. At the end of

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[4] Much of this happens at a habitual, unconscious level, which is why it is so easy to justify or simply ignore.

[5] Adapted from, Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, chap. 5.

Matthew chapter 4 Jesus proclaimed the availability of God's kingdom to the crowds. God's kingdom, which met his needs in the wilderness, was also available to meet their specific needs (Matt 4:17-25). Jesus freely offered the benefits of the kingdom if people would simply turn—repent—and come to him. Willard argues that in the Beatitudes, Jesus does not give a list of things to do in order to be blessed, but rather Jesus is giving a show-and-tell to the very people he had just been healing and calling. It is they who discovered the kingdom meeting their very needs despite their circumstances (Matt 4:18–5:12).[6] Jesus is not saying, "Do this to be blessed" but "As you come to me you will discover God's kingdom blessing regardless of your situation" (Willard 2009b, 113–14). It is the goodness of God and not their religious achievement that gives their lives flavor and radiance (Matt 5:13-16). The remainder of the Sermon is an explanation of what these people had just begun to discover, what is most real in life and what they can count on above even crushing circumstances—the goodness of God's kingdom available through Jesus.

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Section 2: The Character of Kingdom Love
(Matt 5:17–48)[7]

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Willard (2009b, 152) notes that Jesus' transition here to what constitutes righteousness is precisely because what Jesus was saying was the opposite of what they had been taught. The Scribes and Pharisees taught that righteousness is measured by externals: "You have heard that it was said…" Jesus redefines righteousness as a heart that reflects the character of kingdom love: "… but I say to you." Here, Jesus answers the human question of, "How do I become a genuinely good person?" A good person learns to live out of kingdom love.

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[6] For Willard the poor in spirit are the spiritually destitute. Those who mourn are the heartbroken. The meek are those unassertive who are walked on and ignored. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who have been wronged and long for justice. The pure in heart are the perfectionists longing for a standard they don't see in others or themselves. The peacemakers are those who feel the pain of being distrusted by parties in conflict because they do not take sides. The persecuted are those who feel the rejection for doing what is right and for following Jesus. See Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 107–38.

[7] Adapted from, Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, chap. 6.

What is the character of kingdom love? Jesus next identified ways that people try to make life good and abundant which are non-helpful and unnecessary because they are failures of love. In many instances, Jesus gave clarifying illustrations. Willard is adamant that these are not laws, which can ignore the source of action in the human heart. Therefore, these statements are illustrations of the kingdom heart which will guide actions appropriately (Willard 2009b, 198).

For the rest of Matthew 5, Jesus describes how true righteousness moves beyond simple externals but goes to the heart. He does this by showing how common techniques people used to make life "good" are not necessary and not helpful in light of the availability of God's kingdom. In their place, he shows examples of the character of kingdom love. These cover each aspect of the human self.[8] One can let go of anger and contempt and seek to reconcile (Matt 5:21–26). Also, one can learn to let go of cultivated lust and obsessive desires by removing gateways—cutting and gouging—but more deeply learning to value people and practice contentment (Matt 5:27–30). This will lead to faithfulness in relationships, particularly marriage (Matt 5:31–32). One can let go of oaths and the manipulative ways he or she uses words. Instead, he or she can learn to speak simply and honestly, releasing the other person and the outcome of the situation to God's care (Matt 5:33–37). It is possible to learn to let go of retaliation instead of reacting to get what one feels is right or fair. Instead, a person can practice appropriate ways of being helpful and loving to the person (Matt 5:38–42). One can choose to release enemies and practice being loving and generous as God is loving and generous (Matt 5:43–47). This is practice into the wholeness (*telios*) of the character of God and kingdom love (Matt 5:48).

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Section 3: Living for an Audience of One
(Matt 6:1–34)[9]

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In Matthew 6, Jesus shifts from discussing human passions centering in the heart to finding security in a physical world of relationships and objects.

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[8] For a full treatment of Willard's view of the aspects of the human self, see, Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 32–39.

[9] Adapted from, Willard, *Divine Conspiracy,* chap. 6.

Humans find security in a physical world as they learn to live for God alone, what Willard (2009b, 209) describes as an "Audience of One." In Matthew 6:1–18, Jesus affirms spiritual disciplines but notes how they can be made ineffective when done for others' approval instead of God alone. The approval of others does not give real security. It is both unreliable and inadequate.

Jesus next moves to the human tendency to find security through treasuring physical things (Matt 6:19–24). These also do not provide real security, for they inevitably wear out and break. God created humans to value things, but as they treasure God first, they learn to value and treasure all his gifts of people and things in the right ways. It is in this way that they join God's kingdom coming and his will being done here on earth just as it is in heaven (Matt 6:9–13). Jesus understood that what humans treasure is revealed by what they worry about (Matt 6:25–34). Because God knows and cares, and his kingdom provides what people need, they can practice laying aside worry and discover a freedom greater than the birds and a beauty deeper than flowers. Jesus ends this section by summarizing why living for an Audience of One is the best thing, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness [*the character of kingdom love*] and all these things [*security, physical, and social needs*] will be given to you as well" (Matt 6:33, italics mine).

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Section 4: Living with Others
(Matt 7:1–12)[10]

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Jesus now moves us to the third dimension of human life: living with others. Willard (2009b, 239–40) argues that Jesus is not speaking of judgment as discernment, but of condemnation. Condemnation is like a log in one's eye that blinds them from seeing the other's true need (Matt 7:3–5). Similarly, one does not need to try to force "good" upon another, which may easily lead to defensive retaliation (Matt 7:6). Instead, he or she can learn how to ask questions of others and God (Matt 7:7–11). Questions allow the Holy Spirit to work on one another. Jesus himself asked more questions than he answered. How does one live with others? This is how one would want to be treated and how God treats them (Matt 7:12).

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[10] Adapted from, Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, chap. 7.

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Section 5: Doing what Jesus Said
(Matt 7:13–27)[11]

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Jesus ends the Sermon by emphasizing practice. Practice begins with a choice: choose to do what Jesus taught. Such a choice is the narrow way of obedience that leads to life (Matt 7:13–14). Practice requires help, so select guides whose lives reflect the character traits Jesus has taught (Matt 7:15–20). Such obedience is a sign of trust in Jesus. Many came to get something from Jesus: healing, forgiveness, food. But his disciples are the ones who did what he said and so became like him (Matt 7:21–23).[12] Practice, not religiosity or causes, anchors and secures an individual, providing a foundation that can stand the storms life brings (Matt 7:24–27).

Willard (2009b, 329) argues that the moral failures within the church come down to a lack of discipleship, helping people to practically and experimentally put what Jesus taught into practice in daily life situations.

Design

Willard (2009b, 344) leaves the assignment to his readers to create a curriculum to guide people through the understanding and practice of the Sermon. This final step is essential. One congregant told the researcher, "The church told me what to do but not how." Often lack of obedience stems not from a lack of desire but the lack of a clear method.

While Willard recognized the curriculum structure and nature of the Sermon, he did not develop a curriculum to be implemented, but he did give objectives to guide a curriculum design. First, the element of worship, is to bring the goodness of God and his kingdom before people. He called it "enthralling the mind with God" (Willard 2009b, 354). Willard's second curriculum objective is to remove automatic, habitual responses against God's kingdom (Willard 2009b, 351–52). The researcher sought to accomplish this second objective in three ways. The first method was through content, an increased understanding of Jesus's explanation in the Sermon that reveals

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[11]   Adapted from, Willard, *Divine Conspiracy,* 297-308.

[12]   Willard says, "A disciple, or apprentice, is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is." See Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 309.

what God's kingdom is and how life works within it. Next was recognition, an imaginative recognition of how each topic of the Sermon manifests itself in life and reflection on and identification of old habits that do not depend on the kingdom. And last, application through practice, giving practical exercises that people systematically apply in daily life which help people confront and remove old habits that do not depend on the kingdom. This is done by practicing what Jesus taught and the attitude he had.

While congregants' lives would be the primary location of practice, the curriculum began in the Sunday morning worship service. Sunday corporate worship is typically the central act in a church and as well as the most consistently attended activity of a church body. Using the backward design approach, each part of the service was assessed as to how it functioned to support the objectives of the curriculum. The curriculum continued into congregants' daily lives through a daily reflection journal and provided opportunities for discussion, sharing, and accountability through discipleship groups.

Next, the researcher divided the Sermon on the Mount into 11 units centered on a specific topic with each unit covering two weeks (Figure 2) (Woolery n.d.). The researcher created and implemented each unit individually. Each week of the unit consisted of three curriculum venues: the Sunday worship service, a reflection journal, and discipleship groups. Each unit took participants through a cycle of knowledge of what Jesus said, recognition of where this occurred in one's life, and application of putting specific practices during corporate worship, a voluntary daily reflection journal which took between twenty minutes and one hour, and a voluntary weekly discipleship group discussion and accountability group which lasted between an hour to an hour and a half.
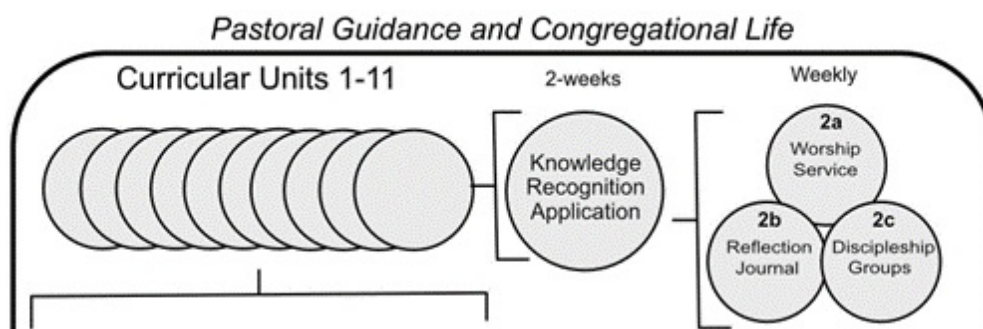

Figure 2: Curriculum design

The researcher designed worship services to be a place where congregants could actively practice the curriculum objectives. The first part of worship was designed to enthrall the mind with God. Scriptures, songs, prayers, and guided activities were carefully selected to help the congregation speak to and hear from God.[13] Sermon times would begin by reviewing the Sermon on the Mount that had been covered to aid in congregant retention and contextual awareness of the whole Sermon. The researcher would then introduce the week's topic. The sermon was designed to help congregants understand the topic conceptually and through Jesus's illustrations and to begin to recognize how and where the topic occurred in one's life. This was to help break up shallow familiarity. Often within and after a sermon, the researcher would give activities where the congregation would reflect on their lives and identify specific situations where the topic took place. A message outline was provided to help congregants reflect and review major points and to provide a place for guided reflection questions in the service. As congregants moved into the week, they would put Jesus's teachings into practice.

The researcher developed two tools to help congregants practically put the topics of the Sermon into practice in daily life: 7-Steps and the Habit Journal (Figure 3).[14] The purpose of the 7-Steps tool was to help people in

Figure 3: 7-Steps

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[13] I recommend the two albums of George Williamson, *All Things* (2011) and *Made for You* (2014), as exceptional examples of how this is accomplished. Welton Gaddy's book *The Gift of Worship* (1992), also gives creative ideas that are highly participatory.

[14] In the original implementation, there were only 6-steps. The step of "obey" was implicit but not explicitly shown, and so was added to the graphic.

moments of temptation or conflict to establish habits consistent with Jesus's teachings in the Sermon. In the first step, a person must *decide* they want to trust Jesus and put into practice what he says. This prepares a person for the next moment the issue comes up, equipping them to *stop*, to disrupt the old habits and patterns. Next, he or she must *ask* for God's help in changing their perspectives, habits, and behaviors. Then one would *admit* what was wrong and not aligned with the way of the kingdom and the teaching of Jesus, then *confess* what is true. The next step is to obey by doing what is right to the best of one's understanding. This cycle is repeated at the next moment of temptation, resulting in the progressive transformation of heart and action. Lastly, one will share this journey with others who will be empathetic but also provide accountability.

The Habit Journal helped people to think more deeply about their actions and to recognize incremental progress in obedience to Jesus's teachings (Figure 4). A page was given where people could write where they experienced a situation addressing a topic from the Sermon such as anger or worry. They were invited to reflect on what triggered that emotion or response. Learning to recognize triggers helps individuals come to a better understanding with God of why they react or respond in the ways they do. Third, they would write how they responded or acted. Lastly, they would list the timing of when they began the 7-steps: 4) after acting, 3) during action, 2) after allowing thoughts but before acting, and 1) at the moment of temptation.[15] The issues Jesus addressed are often deeply entrenched. This provided a way of recognizing incremental yet important change that may not seem immediately visible.

Timing: Recognized and began steps 4) after action; 3) during action; 2) after allowing thoughts but before action; 1) at the moment of temptation

Experience What was the situation?	Trigger What caused the issue?	Response How did I respond?	Timing (1-4)
Example: Argument with a friend	*Felt hurt and attacked by their comment*	*Sarcastic comment, and stopped talking to them*	*3*

Figure 4: Habit Journal

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[15] These four habit timing statements were also used in the "recognition" section of the congregant surveys.

To help congregants continue to practice Jesus's teaching throughout the week, they were offered a daily reflection guide created by the researcher.[16] Each week's guide began with an opening practice to help people notice God's presence and invitation to interact with them. Next was an opening prayer. Every week had a memory verse to help congregants memorize passages throughout the Sermon. This was followed by a Scripture reading that tied with the week's theme. Then the participant would engage in a question of recognition or practice of the week's topic. The guide closed with a final prayer. Additionally, the guide included quotes about the topic from various authors and a "Go Deeper" section with songs, articles, and other book or video recommendations to help an individual further explore the topic.

Congregants also met in smaller discipleship groups throughout the curriculum to provide a place to share practice, ask questions, and anchor understanding.[17] Groups would begin with open conversation, then an opening prayer and/or practice to bring the group together before God. Reflection and honest sharing were encouraged by asking two questions: How has God been working in your life this week? Are there any ways you have been out of bounds? This provided a chance for group members to share about that week's practice as well as other issues or situations in life. Next, the groups would shift into a discussion about the week's Scripture passage. Group leaders could draw from a set of knowledge, reflection, and application questions, but were also encouraged to use these questions as a starting place to let the group shape how conversion would proceed. Finally, the groups ended in a closing prayer and divided into pairs to pray for one another.[18]

Assessment of Congregant Character Growth and Obedience

The qualitative and quantitative data suggest that the implementation of the "Curriculum of Christlikeness" at Keystone Nazarene Church played a significant part in congregant character development in Christlikeness (Table 1).

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[16] See the curriculum. Accessible at https://tinyurl.com/2rz8t8v2.

[17] Ibid.

[18] To see reflection guides and discipleship group guides refer to the curriculum.

TABLE 1. Likert answers legend by category

	Likert 1	**Likert 3**	**Likert 5**	**Likert 7**
Familiarity	I was/am unfamiliar with the passage(s)	I could/can recognize the passage(s)	I could/can summarize the passage(s)	I could/can recite the passage(s)
Understanding	I did not/do not understand the teaching	I could/can explain its meaning	I grasped/grasp its significance for life and living	1 was/am able to translate the teachings to my life
Recognition	I did not/do not recognize	I recognized after I acted/act	I recognized while 1 was/am acting	I recognized before 1 acted/act
Behavior	Rarely	Infrequently	Frequently	Consistently

Responses for surveys 2-8 were averaged per category (familiarity, understanding, recognition, behavior). The table above shows the Likert number and answers for each category to serve as a reference.[19] Congregational feedback implied that participants were largely familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, but in many ways, it was a shallow familiarity. As one respondent wrote, "I knew [about] the Sermon on the Mount, but I didn't really 'use' it in my daily life." However, based on survey responses, congregants did grow in familiarity from a Likert 3.9 to 5.1 (3: recognize the passage, 5: able to summarize the passage). This is where familiarity began to lead to understanding.[20]

Congregants showed large improvements in perceived growth in the understanding category, from a Likert 3.9 to 5.5 (3: explain passage meaning, 5: explain passage significance for life and living, 7: translate passage teachings into one's life). One survey respondent noted, "I had never thought of the Sermon on the Mount as instructions for living!" Another respondent reflected, "I love the beauty of the thread of how one concept leads into the other and it's really our instructions for life. God loves us so much that he

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[19] Only Likert numbers 1, 3, 5, and 7 had responses, while numbers 2, 4, 6, and 8 were left blank to give respondents room to express growth between categories. To see surveys refer to the dissertation available at https://tinyurl.com/bdd4atjc.

[20] To see deeper evaluation see the dissertation.

taught us how to live. He knew what we needed and that not only for our spiritual health but our physical health as well." A third respondent noted, "Instead of simply seeing the Sermon on the Mount as a passage of the Bible, I see it as a recipe for a good life, and a recipe for the kind of life Jesus wants us to live. With this journey through the Sermon on the Mount, I have been able to not just see what the Sermon on the Mount really is, but to learn and understand how I need to act in order to live this life."

Growth was also reported in the recognition category, from a Likert 4.1 to 5.2 (3: recognized [Sermon topic] after I acted, 5: recognized while I was acting, 7: recognized before I acted). This new understanding of the meaning of the Sermon seems to have brought about an increased recognition of the issues discussed in the Sermon in respondents' lives and around them. A congregant shared, "I need to be more self-aware of my anger and judgment toward others. [I am] especially coming to realize I gossip and deceive myself into believing it is 'office talk.'" Another congregant admitted, "When things don't go the way I want [or] expect, or when people don't treat me with respect, I get angry. I learned that it is one of my weaknesses and it does not produce anything good or reflect God's love and teaching."

Congregants' behavioral growth, one's thoughts and actions being aligned with Jesus's teaching, progressed from a Likert 4.0 to 5.0 (3: Infrequently, 5: frequently). Respondents commented on the practice of addressing old habits to form new ones and the progress they were making. Regarding practice, one congregant noted: "[I am] trying to show mercy to people even when I am angry at them. [I am now] praying for patience to stop cycles of behavior that are unhealthy." Another shared, "[I am] trying to step aside [from] a situation where I lose my sense of peace. I try to stop, breathe, and calm down before being quick to judgment and quick to anger." Participants saw progress in their habits of behavior. One participant wrote, "I'm forgiving others and releasing the hurt/pain/anger/resentment/etc. to Jesus. The freedom that has come from it (and even the desire to love the people who once hurt me) is truly an act of the divine and outside of my own self." Another said, "[I am] setting down anger, choosing trust and peace. [I am] setting down judgment, choosing grace and understanding (asking questions)."

The findings indicate the possibility that behavior, the habitual putting into practice of Jesus's teachings, necessitates a critical mass of the lower three categories of familiarity, understanding, and recognition. This takes time, thought, effort, and engagement. One of the participants summed this up when he said, "I think that's been the most challenging thing, recognizing that it's easy to know the information and a lot harder to actually apply it, stick with it, and to get back up when we do fail and keep going."

Conclusion

Behaviors and character traits that are habitually inconsistent with the teachings and character of Jesus cause great damage and reveal a lack of discipleship despite professions of belief and religious activities. Willard shows how Jesus's Sermon on the Mount specifically addresses these issues and provides a hopeful alternative in God's present kingdom made available in Jesus. This project developed a holistic backward designed curriculum based on Willard's approach to the Sermon, which resulted in spiritual growth in those who chose to participate in it. The key was moving from passive familiarity to understanding the Sermon as truly good news, which is achievable and helpful. The curriculum helped provide ways congregants could recognize the various topics Jesus addressed in the unique ways it manifested itself in their lives. It provided tools to help them, with the help of the Holy Spirit, make behavioral choices that confronted and re-formed habits based on the goodness of God.

While the researcher is not Asian, he has over two decades of ministry experience in Asia. He has observed how the topics Jesus addresses manifest themselves in all human contexts. This curriculum was conceptualized, written, and applied within an international context in Asia. While the problems are universal, they often manifest themselves uniquely in each cultural context. Think of areas of moral failure or un-Christlikeness in the church in your specific context. Do any of these not find their root in the topics Jesus addresses in his sermon? Similarly, think of the dynamics of your local community from families to government. Do any of the problems or issues not find their roots in the topics Jesus addresses in the Sermon?

The Christian church in Asia is among the fastest growing in the world, while America and Europe have greatly declined (Ng 2022). The author can

see the reason for this decline and a warning for the health of the church in Asia. Religious forms cannot create or sustain growth, though they are necessary and inevitable. Experiential life in the kingdom through obedience to the teachings of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit is the source of the life of the church. A hopeful, practical, and experimental approach to applying the teachings of Jesus proposed by Willard can both build professing Christians into deeper Christlikeness and provide a verifiable example of the practical goodness of God through Jesus. The kingdom, in Jesus, can meet the needs of a broken community God loves and wants to bring to himself, that his kingdom may come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Notes on the Author(s): Brian Woolery has served as pastor of Keystone Church of the Nazarene, an international congregation in Okinawa, Japan, since 2010. He has served as a missionary with the Church of the Nazarene with his wife Julie since 2003 in Guam, the Philippines, and Japan. He holds a Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry from Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. The author can be reached at briandwoolery@gmail.com

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COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Intentional Integration—
Modeled and Applied

Allan Harkness

Background to the Process in Practice

A challenge in theological education (TE)—at all levels—is how to ensure that the students are able to take what they are learning across the different courses of their study program and to synthesize their learning into an integrated framework fit for purpose for their ongoing ministry and mission roles and tasks in church and society.

Typically, courses in majority world TE institutions (as elsewhere) are offered from within one or other of the traditional TE curriculum areas: biblical-theological, historical, socio-cultural, and ministerial formation. The listing of courses within an area is administratively convenient and helps students appreciate broadly where the focus of their courses lie. But a significant downside of the way the courses are taught is that students then fail to appreciate how the different areas of focus interrelate, and even perhaps why they need to interrelate. Students' ability to integrate is often not intuitive, due in major part to their prior learning experiences and lack of modeling. And while this may be particularly notable in Majority World contexts, it is certainly not exclusively so. Hence, many Christian leaders leave their seminary experience with "silos" of learning, self-contained reservoirs of often extensive knowledge, but without the necessary integrated perspective and tools honed up for the realities of their ministries, which most often benefit from that integration. This is especially the case for pastoral and teaching ministries. This sort of comment from an Asian seminary leader is quite likely more widespread than we would wish for:

> [Our] students said they did not mind working hard on biblical languages, theology texts, and completing demanding practicums. But they felt they had only acquired a bunch of difficult and yet fragmented

theories which could not be practiced in real life…they did not know how to understand the fast changing society. (Lua 2023)

Recognition of this reality led to the introduction of a seminary integrative coursework module. While it was offered at Master of Theology (MTh) level, it is offered to JATES readers as a process which could well be adapted for any level of TE study, including non-formal TE.

In 2018 I was invited to work closely with a Bible seminary in an Asian country as the seminary ran the first MTh program in that country, which spanned 2018–2022. For the purposes of this article, the seminary has the pseudonym EBS (Emmaus Bible Seminary).

The EBS MTh program comprised (as is typically the case) coursework followed by a thesis or major papers. The coursework module topics included Biblical Theology; The People of God; The Mission of God; Living as the People of God; God and Culture; and Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation. All these modules were valuable in themselves, as reflected in the positive assessments from the students. But the MTh program organizers were concerned about whether the students would move on from their program competent to integrate the learnings and applications of the individual modules. Even though this was a postgraduate program, the program committee recognized that this integrative ability was likely to be a challenge for the reasons above.

Hence, *Word, World and Witness: Doing Integrative Theology*[1] was conceived as the final coursework module, described as

> an opportunity for participants to draw on, synthesise and apply their learning across the MTh curriculum in order to further resource understanding and faithful action. The module will provide a framework – which we hope will become a lifelong attitude – to be used again and again in your ministry for interacting with issues in ways which embrace the whole of your being as a careful theologian, committed disciple, good citizen and able communicator. It will enhance your and your peers' ability to respond as engaged, balanced, real, and whole Christian leaders…The framework integrates *Word* (Bible and theology), *World* (understanding context) and *Witness*

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[1] Adapted from Carey Baptist College (n.d.), for which the key text is Philip Halstead and Myk Habets, eds., *Doing Integrative Theology: Word, World and Work in Conversation* (Auckland, NZ: Archer Press, 2015).

(faith and life response, for both individual Christians and their faith communities as expressions of the church). (Harkness et al. 2020)

So, the module's focus was rather more than simply a content-based learning experience; it was about shaping attitudes and developing competence.

While I coordinated *Word, World and Witness,* three other faculty members (who had earlier facilitated modules) were also closely involved in it. Fifteen students participated, all Christian leaders in churches and organizations, and/or seminary faculty members.

Towards the end of the MTh coursework in mid-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was rampant, with its social dislocation, immense economic repercussions, significant physical and mental health challenges, and test of political will to cope. In terms of Christian understanding and witness, significant questions were being raised:

- Why has God allowed COVID-19 to happen?
- What does human solidarity mean in this reality?
- How does God want his people to live in this moment?
- What does witness to the majority society look like?
- What shape could personal Christian life, character, and spirituality take?
- Where do virtues like honesty and courage, love and care for others, peace in adversity, attitude to sickness and death, duty in service, etc. fit?

So, it was a no-brainer to apply the *Word, World and Witness* integrative framework to "faithful Christian responses to the COVID-19 pandemic" (Harkness et al. 2020). The realities of COVID-19 were identified as the students had experienced it in various ways and in various contexts. Through a structured process, they were helped to deepen their understanding of the contextual realities, to explore the resources of their Christian faith, to evaluate practice that addresses aspects of the reality, and to develop faithful Christian responses for both individuals and faith communities as they moved into the uncertain future.

The module facilitators built a number of process elements into the module:
- We brought a range of sources of knowledge and approaches to understanding the issue.

- We ensured Christian faith, contexts and examples of practice were in conversation with each other.
- We helped the students to articulate a faithful Christian response to the issue for both individuals and churches, as the issue was informed by their attentiveness to faith, context, practice, and character.
- …and we undertook all this as a collaborative process, as an expression of a key Christian and ministry and mission value.

Chronologically, the module comprised three phases:

- "Pre-campus": spanning 6 weeks, commencing with a 2-hour on-line introduction to the module, and another on-line update 4 weeks later.
- "On-campus": six and a half hours of on-line interactions on each of three consecutive days.
- "Post-campus": spanning about 5 weeks.

Within this timeline, there were five parts to the learning process.

Part A: Analysis of Context—Identifying a Reality
(World and Initial Thinking about Witness)

Early in the pre-campus phase, the students identified an aspect of COVID-19 and its impact on their country and faith communities. They reflected on the reality and initial responses and formulated a specific question for biblical/theological exploration. Their questions were posted on an online forum, along with short responses to their peers' questions.

Part B: Biblical/Theological Exploration
(Word and Tentative Informed Thinking about Witness)

Continuing in the pre-campus phase, students were paired, the pairs broadly based on the similarity of their identified realities in Part A. In their pairs, the students searched for resources of Scripture and theology that might help point to an appropriate response to their adapted question from Part A. They were encouraged to revisit their earlier MTh coursework notes and resources for insights.

Key points for an initial biblical/theological response to each pair's question were written up, allowed to be rather rough and unfinished, to form the basis for discussion during the on-campus sessions and for reshaping post-

campus. The students also started to think tentatively of possible examples of enhanced action that would address the realities of the issue.

Part C: Evaluation of Practice and Perspectives
(*Word, World and Witness* in Conversation)

This comprised much of the on-campus component of the module. Substantial time was taken together to listen carefully—to each other and to key informants—in order to develop the conversation between *Word, World and Witness* in theory and in practice. The student pairs presented their discoveries to date and received feedback from their peers and faculty as critical friends.

Also, during the on-campus sessions, faculty members provided input to model the integrative process: approaching the COVID-19 issue through biblical/theological, contextual (natural and social sciences, and social institutions) and missional lenses, and the place of Christian character and spirituality. These sessions had topical content, but also raised process matters, so that the students could better understand the thinking process for coming up with insights in these areas.

Part D: Integrative Response Output and Resource
(Witness)

Post-campus, the students (still in pairs) finalized their integrative responses, and prepared a resource based on their response for the Church in their country. The resource could be targeted at local church leaders or church members (adult, youth, or children) or seminary students; in the setting of a small group (e.g. Theological Education by Extension, Bible study group), church service (e.g. sermon outline), seminar/workshop, or seminary classroom. The resource needed to demonstrate the students' ability to engage and integrate *Word, World and Witness* as they relate to the issue for the target group; and could include a creative arts component (e.g. artwork, music, drama, poetry, story, documentary).

Part E: The Framework—Method and Attitude

The final part was a meta-learning, "learning how to learn" element. This took place at the end of the post-campus phase, and the students responded individually. This part was designed to enable the students to "step outside" the specifics of the issue they had been exploring and to encourage in them the critical thinking and deeper learning attitudes and skills significant for ongoing, lifelong ministry/mission. The students were asked to articulate their understanding of the integrated *Word, World and Witness* framework; and then to reflect on what the module had meant for them as a model framework able to be used by them as Christian leaders "to embrace the whole of their being as careful theologians, committed disciples, good citizens and able communicators" (Harkness et al. 2020).

Reflection and Theoretical Foundations

The Church in EBS's country (as elsewhere in both the Majority and Minority Worlds) urgently needs leaders with the kind of contextual awareness, faith exploration, and appropriate practice that this module sought to develop in the students. So, it was our hope that the process of this module would provide another useful tool for students' lifelong ministry toolbox: That they would be able to increasingly and intuitively recognize and address key contemporary issues for Christian understanding and effective missional and ministry response in a way that is thoughtful, well informed, and nuanced. In this way, it is anticipated that incrementally the Church in that country (and beyond) will be strengthened in its partnership with God, to see his Kingdom come, and his will done.

The need for this is well recognized. The 2022 ICETE Manifesto epitomizes the widespread concern for integrated theological education, reflected in these summary statements:

> Theological education is called and committed to delivering educational programmes that are 'fit for purpose' by serving God's mission (*missio Dei*)…Theological education is committed to doing theology in specific contexts by addressing the questions, challenges and needs that arise from the various contexts…Theological education is called and committed to facilitating integrative learning processes that include action and reflection, individuality and community,

rationality and spirituality, knowledge and character, wisdom and innovation, educating the entire person. (International Council for Evangelical Theological Education [ICETE] 2022, 3-4)

The methodology adopted in the module was a demonstration of *praxis*, the dynamic action/reflection process at work, a work reinforced in the ICETE Manifesto: "We understand theology and theological education as a praxis which integrates practice and theory, action and reflection" (ICETE, 13). Schematically, the integrative module *praxis* process looked like this:

Figure 1: The integrative praxis process

The students clearly appreciated the module, with a number of them making comments along these lines:

> One of the vital takeaways of this module for me is the understanding that the integration of *Word, World and Witness* is the key to effective ministry in our given contexts. Without the integration of *Word, World and Witness* our ministries remain shallow and ineffective.

> This module has refreshed and reminded me to do the process of theology with great honesty and integrity keeping and integrating these three aspects; *Word, World and Witness* in mind. Any personal, marital, family, church, communal, societal and global issue can be dealt with in the light of the biblical framework. (Student module reflections)

These comments are affirming. But the module was not easy for the students, and their assignments often demonstrated that, even at postgraduate level, integration is a challenge. It is not possible to determine whether students responded differently to the module's approach and the challenge of

integration based on demographic differences (e.g. gender, age, ministry, and denominational context, etc.). Regardless, we are confident that the integrative module was clearly a significant move in the right direction.

The EBS end-of-coursework module is an example of encouraging an integrative mindset, attitude, and skills. However, my advice is not to leave it until the end of students' study programs! Faculty can intentionally talk about and model integration from the start of students' seminary experience, and that would enhance the productiveness of an end-of-coursework integrative exercise. Efforts early in the seminary year could include an integrative orientation to seminary study; and continually and consistently through their teaching, faculty could intentionally demonstrate integration, model aspects of it, refer to the contribution of courses from the other curriculum areas, and take time to explain to their students their integrative thinking and application processes (a meta-learning opportunity). Creating collaborative teaching and learning experiences with faculty colleagues will be a significant component, too, for the formation of an integrative seminary culture, with transformative impact.[2] With hindsight, these are dynamics which I would have encouraged more actively in the EBS MTh program, and certainly would strongly advocate for in future iterations of the program.

It is a privilege and responsibility to partner with God in shaping Christian leaders who are careful and reflective theologians, committed disciples, good citizens, and able communicators. Intentionally enhancing an integrative mindset and attitude in our students goes a long way to achieve this outcome, for lifelong ministry and mission effectiveness.

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[2] For further information on transformative impact in seminaries, see Allan Harkness, "The Role of Academic Leadership in Designing Transformative Teaching and Learning," in *Leadership in Theological Education, Volume 2: Foundations for Curriculum Design*, edited by Fritz Deininger and Orbelina Eguizabal (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2017), 135–75.

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My Experience Designing a Course on Middle Eastern Christianity

Grace Al-Zoughbi

Introduction

The Middle East is home to the formation and most ancient expressions of Christianity. By the year 600, Christians comprised more than sixty percent of the population of the wider Middle East, with four of the five different centers of Christianity in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem located in the region (Rome, in Europe, being the fifth).

Recently, I designed a course on Middle Eastern Christianity. One of its purposes was to help students assess the influence of Middle Eastern Christianity on global Christianity by exploring the story of Middle Eastern Christianity, a plurality of Eastern Christian traditions and sociopolitical influences on Christianity in the Middle East. The hope was that students would gain clearer insights into the reality of the daily life for Christians in an increasingly complex region of the world, and also pray for the church in the Middle East in light of the crises challenging the Middle East: war and conflict, lack of religious freedom, and significant migration of Christians from the region. By appreciating the testimony of the people of each region about their Christian faith and identity and how they became part of the global story of Christianity, one of the objectives was for students to develop a passion for the plurality of Middle Eastern Christianity through prayer and identifying with narratives of the earlier expressions of Christianity. In what follows, I offer a glimpse of some of the highlights of the course.[1]

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[1] With regards to Eastern Christianity and the earliest expressions of Christianity, the course outline has as its goals to encourage students to trace the history of Eastern Christianity to its earliest origins, to give a brief overview of the earliest spread of Christianity in the region in the aftermath of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection, elaborate on the origins of the Eastern Christian traditions with special focus on the traditions, theology, spirituality, and ecclesiology, demonstrate how Eastern churches are of Apostolic origin and have their roots in the Middle East and India, explain how Eastern Christian identity allows for a greater

The Protestant Narrative

The *Protestant* (or Evangelical) churches of multiple denominations have roots in modern Western missionary movements and are a minority within Middle Eastern Christianity. One of the traditional concerns about "Evangelicalism" in the Middle East is that it implies the contemporary Western way of practicing Christianity and following a particular kind of political agenda. A further concern is that Protestantism is viewed as a "foreign identity" in the Middle East since its roots lie in Western missionary activity. While the Evangelical[2] Protestant Church initially began through Western missionaries, the church in the Middle East has mainly kept its cultural and theological identity. Not only are Protestants a minority in an Eastern Christian context, but they also find themselves as a double minority as Christians among Muslims. The dominance of Islam is perceived as one of the challenges for theological education in the Middle East and has prevented some theological institutions from obtaining national accreditation in Islamic contexts. However, it is also an opportunity as many Arab students in theological education come from a Muslim background and are eager to know more about Christ, but also "know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings" (Phil 3:10, KJV).

In acknowledging that one of the temptations of Western missionary culture is to assimilate people of other cultures into their own, I encouraged

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integration into the wider Christian world and how this development is taking place in the context of geopolitical tension between Christianity and Islam in a global context, evaluate if Western Christendom has become separated from its origins in overlooking the earliest expressions of Christians who are living in the region, share a cultural heritage with and in some parts speak the language of Christ himself. With regards to Christianity in Egypt, the course intends for students to explain how Christianity reached Egypt and the remarkable role Egypt played in the development of early Christianity, elaborate on Egypt's contribution in the field of monasticism and mission, describe the context of Copts under Islamic rule and in modern times. In respect of Protestants, the course aims for the students to explain the rationale behind the Protestant Missions in the Middle East, explain the presence of newer Protestant churches, evaluate the contribution of Arab Protestant women in theological education.

[2] Though this framework has been subject to critique, the main identifiers of Evangelicalism are Biblicism, Crucicentrism, Conversionism and Activism. See Mark A. Noll et al., *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019). Evangelicals in the Middle East hold to these theological commitments. See also Azar Ajaj et al., *Arab Evangelicals in Israel* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

the students to think how this plays into the reality that the Early Church was multi-cultural, composed of followers of Christ from the Jewish, Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Armenian traditions. I challenged them to write some of their thoughts on reviving monastic tradition for Protestants to retrieve a forgotten part of their heritage. How can Protestants, being immersed in Eastern Christian tradition, can make it relevant in their theology?

As the birthplace of Christianity, the Middle Eastern Christian world is profoundly Eastern. Western Protestant understanding considers Christians in the Middle East mostly as part of the missionary effort of nineteenth century Protestantism and thus does not necessarily make space for Eastern Christianity within the landscape of the Middle East. I wanted the students to reflect on the consequences of such an understanding of Christian history.

Coptic Christianity: The Persecuted Church

Christianity reached Egypt through the missionary efforts of St Mark. Egypt played a remarkable role in the development of early Christianity. Egypt's contribution in the field of monasticism and mission is significant. Since the dawn of Christianity, the Egyptian Christians, also known as the Copts,[3] have carried on the light of faith. Early Egyptian Christianity is credited with giving the Christian world its first structured theological education, for example, the School of Alexandria. The origins of the Coptic Church date back to the first century. As the indigenous church of Egypt, it has a reputation of being traditional (Innemée 2021, 357). Until the ninth century, the Copts formed the majority of the Egyptian community. After a series of persecutions, they gradually came to terms with their attenuated and increasingly vulnerable status as a statistical minority in society as a whole, even if they refused to accept the implications of marginality.

Today, the Coptic Orthodox Church is the majority Christian denomination in Egypt, ninety percent of the eleven to fifteen percent of Egyptian Christians are thought to be Coptic Orthodox (Raheb 2020, 498–

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[3] The original meaning of the word "Copt" is "Egyptian." It is taken from Qibt, the Arabic translation of the Greek word for Egypt, *Aigyptos*. Historically, all Egyptians were referred to as Copts, but subsequently, the word became synonymous with indigenous Egyptian Christians. See Nelly Van Doorn-Harder, ed., "Introduction: Creating and Maintaining Tradition in Modernity," in *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 1–18.

510). The contemporary Orthodox Christians, numbered at approximately ten million, are also the largest Christian community in the Middle East, forming two-thirds of the Christian population in the region. By learning about the experience of the persecution of the Coptic Church, I hoped this might encourage the students to pray more for the persecuted church.

Women in Theological Education

As a female teaching the course, I sought to reflect on the role and contribution of women in Eastern Christianity and how they can inform our faith as Protestant women. As members of the first Christian communities, Eastern Christian women—deaconesses, historians, theologians, and martyrs—articulated their faith and theology centuries ago. However, their stories are not well known even in our region. It is remarkable that two of the largest remaining Christian communities in the Arab world, Coptic and Maronite, have known historical female leadership. Within the rich and complex ecclesial context of the Middle East, their legacy continues to shape our theological thought as evangelical women today.

Marked by deep spirituality, these women are leading a new generation of female Arab theologians—within a diverse theological landscape where their presence has often been unrepresented, their voices ignored, and their contributions unacknowledged. In light of Arab Protestant women's contribution to theological education, I asked the students to reflect on why they might view including the voices of women in articulating theology as important, and encouraged them to read an article by an Arab woman in theological education.

The different voices of Arab women theologians have made it possible to articulate a unique way of doing missions through the creative exercise of their own study, research, and writing. In this way, they bring their own creativity to their theological exercise by drawing on their unique assets. For example, their fluency in the Arabic language, in addition to the Eastern Christian languages such as Assyrian, Armenian, Coptic, and their diverse experiences as a result of persecution, set them apart from Western Christian women. In the context of the Middle East, there is indeed persecution and a lack of freedom for Christians, but these women have a profound and rich voice which needs to be heard.

In the context of cultural and ecclesial barriers to Arab Protestant women in theological education, a growing number of Christian leaders, both women and men, are becoming aware of the need and opportunity for women to contribute to theology. Making space for Arab Protestant women as lay theologians is one way to have women contribute meaningfully towards theological education. By lay women theologians, I mean women who are not ordained and undertake the task of theology, whether in the local church, in theological institutions, or both. In order for Arab Protestant women to articulate their identity as part of the church, while also acknowledging their calling to a broader mission, they must take a more visible role in the church and academy.

In light of Arab Protestant women's contribution to theological education, I asked the students whether they viewed including the voices of women in articulating theology as important, and why?[4]

Palestinian Christians

The resilience and creativity of Arab Palestinian Christians as they live their lives as a minority is inspiring. It is through their heritage embedded in the early Christian traditions and commitment to the church and academy that they have the potential to transform their marginalities into sources of strength.

A further point of reflection concerned some of the ways that the Church in the West can help the Church in the Middle East. I challenged them to think about the ways Christians in the West (e.g. majority white Christians, diaspora Christians or Christians from minority ethnic groups) can learn from the Church in the Middle East.

Following reading two narratives, the first from Elias Chacour (2003) and the second from Yohanna Katanacho (2013), I asked the students to write a lament based on the injustices that take place in the land of Christ, and to spend a few minutes every day in prayer for those who bear many injustices on a daily basis. I also asked them to think about what it meant to

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[4] You may wish to read an article by one of the Arab women in theological education profiled here: "Arab Female Leaders," The GlobalChurch Project, https://theglobalchurchproject.com/arab-female-leaders/. Share it with a friend.

them personally to follow the biblical command to "pray for the peace" of Jerusalem.

Global Christianity

The twentieth century saw the emergence of global Middle Eastern Christian communities, as Christians in Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, and elsewhere led diasporic movements to secure their survival. Immigration is an ordeal: an emotional, physical, and financially fraught process. As a gift to ecumenism, the modern monastic movement has taken great strides and created real potential to bridge the gap between the Eastern and Western churches. A significant milestone in the history of the ecumenical movement in the Middle East is the work of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). The MECC is an outgrowth of the institutional renewal of Christianity that is emerging in the Middle East. For centuries, relations between churches have been fragmented. While the movement has its roots in the 19th century, the symbolic beginning of modern ecumenism is the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. From that event, concepts developed that underpinned the movement's continuing priorities: common service, common fellowship, common witness (World Council of Churches). The modern ecumenical movement is still in its early stages, having started only in the 1960s. By adopting "epistemological humility" and taking into consideration "historical facts," "theological rationale," and "personal experience," Arab Christians in the Middle East can educate and be educated ecumenically (Koryakin and Strelove 2021, 117-25).

Mariz Tadros states:

In the twenty first century the hardship and suffering experienced by most of the populations, especially in the Middle East, against the backdrop of wars and civil conflict, security, instability and economic inequalities is acute. However, in addition to all of the above, Christianity faces an existential threat because of the diminishing numbers of adherents in the countries, in particular the Middle East. (Tadros 2020, 442)

I asked the students to think of some of the ways that Global Christianity can help encourage Middle Eastern Christians. Further, I encouraged them to spend time in prayer and examine if God is calling them personally to

encourage others in the Middle East or to go there and serve for a short period of time.

Conclusion

As a theological educator in the Middle East, part of my endeavor is to think theologically about the historically deep, rich, and complex ecclesial setting in the Middle East today. One of the questions on which I have been reflecting is how we might reimagine and reengage in theological education. Hence, I seek to offer insights to students based on my research work and findings, recognizing that this position of asking questions is part of my vocation and my calling. My career strengthens my desire to see Arab students, male and female, acknowledged in the theological academy and their potential to contribute theologically, reached.

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Regional Training Hub South Asia: Strengthening the Church by Empowering Seminaries and Collaborating Training Sectors

Jessy Jaison

Introduction: Re-envisioning Theological Education in a Collaborative Paradigm

The Regional Training Hub (RTH) I am leading in South Asia and am introducing here epitomizes a collaborative ecosystem across the training sectors (formal/non-formal/informal) to accompany and strengthen the mission of the church. This Community of Practice envisions a ground-up momentum by creating a conducive space for training initiatives and resource-providers to collaborate to accelerate church planting and growth by equipping significantly more trained workers in the region. The South Asia Hub initiative of Mesa Global[1] takes significantly on my research published in 2023[2] and its first phase in Nepal and India in 2023 was fine-tuned to identify the key training needs and the roadblocks in collaborating churches with seminaries and other training sectors. At the backdrop of this vision is a commitment to empower seminaries to be responsive and innovative in sensing the training needs on the ground. RTH vision casting in 2024-25 will be in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.

Taxonomic siloes in theological education, polarizations of formative dimensions, church-seminary distancing (dissonance often), and the critical debate on the fit-for-purpose of the formal and the quality of the non-

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[1] Mesa Global (https://www.mesaglobal.co) is a ministry formerly known as United World Mission and Overseas Council.

[2] Qualitative research among theological educators and ministry trainers in four countries in South Asia. See Jessy Jaison, *Building the Whole Church: Collaborating Theological Education Practices in the Ecclesial Context of South Asia,* ICETE Series (Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2023).

formal have taken central place in our discourses for long. While high level consultations mark the global agenda of theological education, a louder plea for more trained workers is reverberating all around, where the church is experiencing overwhelming growth. Tangible collaboration between the training entities—beyond minimal adjustments—remains a distant dream. RTH as a church-centered strategy is assuming a responsive momentum towards this goal. It aims to assess the needs in training and leader-development in the fast-changing socio-cultural climate and to make available the expertise and resources across the theological education spectrum to help churches nurture sturdier roots on their own local grounds.

Hence, the core principles are:

- Exploring and assessing with the seminaries, the training needs in church's multi-faceted mission.
- Collaborating expertise and resources across the existing training sectors.
- Facilitating creative listening space for seminaries and other training entities to meet with the church leadership in a local setting.
- Leading the momentum of "building trust" among the leaderships of training ministries and churches.
- Facilitating networking platforms to inspire leaders to share expertise and relevant resources to serve the pertinent needs to help strengthen the mission of the church.
- Inspiring local collaborative networks to build contextually sustainable methods to thrive in local settings, supporting the mission and leadership of the church.

What are key areas RTH is responding to?

- Massive need for trained workers for the multi-faceted mission of the church
- Diminishing church-focus in theological education
- Quality and Fit-for-Purpose tensions between the non-formal and formal modes

Let us dig a little deeper into each of these.

Massive Need for Trained Workers for the Multi-faceted Mission of the Church

The growing normalization that theological education is an end in itself has shackled the enterprise from multiple fronts. The lament to get seminaries to break out of their scholarly isolation to retrieve their relationship with the churches has been enduring. As the number of congregations grow in the majority world that was once considered impervious to the gospel, theological training is struggling to keep up with the learning needs of the believers and emergent leaders. Gordon-Conwell's Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) estimated that only five percent of the total of five million pastors or priests are likely to have had formal theological training. "Roughly 70 percent of these pastors are in Independent congregations. Independent pastors, in particular, have little theological training, even in the West" (Gordon-Conwell Seminary). Zurlo's *Global Christianity* affirmed these statistics with supportive evidence (Zurlo 2022). This points to a pertinent need to revisit the aims and approaches of theological education globally.

RTH engages catalytically across the sectors in theological and ministerial training, creating opportunities for collaborative initiatives that will address the declining pastoral and missional capacity and the overwhelming shortage of trained leadership. This vision is facilitated by firmly upholding the role and significance of all forms of education in equipping the whole people of God. While the RTH strategy is new, the vision of cross-fertilizing among training sectors is not. The consultation at the Billy Graham Institute of Evangelism, Wheaton, Illinois in 1997, attended by 99 organizations addressed "the sin of doing one's own thing" (Global Proclamation Commission for Trainers of Pastors n.d.). RTH facilitates such cross-sectional collaboration to serve the church better.

Diminishing 'Church-Focus' in Theological Education

The striking slogan as noted by Joseph W. Handley (2023, 101), citing Stephen Loots, "Church planting is moving at a speed of the bullet train, with leadership development following on a bicycle" has captured much attention lately. While the center of gravity of Christianity is perceptibly shifting to the global south, we are also struck by the growing divergence of training in the

church, mission-field, and the seminary. No single organization or movement can meet this massive need for training. We need impactful and sustainable collaborations to have enough people trained to serve a population of over 1.9 billion in South Asia (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2022). Seminaries, Bible colleges and other training institutes are to grow into life-giving and transforming communities so that every member in the church will be trained in the work of God. The isolated, scholastic seminary campuses are invited to build bridges to the world around them; the faculty must experience the pain and strain of the world in which they prepare their students to serve. As Donald McGavran reminds us, "Theological education around the world must fit the economic and educational standards of the population being evangelized" (McGavran 1969, xiii-xiv). This posits the responsibility on seminaries to have wide-open eyes to see and big hearts to make sense of the locations where the church is flourishing or is yearning to flourish in her mission.

RTH serves to this end. It catalyzes collaboration across the training spectrum by making training accessible, comprehensible, and affordable to the whole people of God in their own circles of interaction and influence. We therefore need thriving irrigation hoses and not just solid pipelines as Justo Gonzalez (as quoted by Benjamin Wayman) differentiates. "In a pipeline, success is measured by how much water gets to the end: how many students go to graduate school or seminary, complete their degree, and go into ministry." But with a drip hose, "the dripping of water is purposeful" (Wayman 2021). The water at the first hole is just as important as the water at the last hole. This is because "the purpose of theological education is mission. The purpose of theological education is to irrigate the land around it—it's not to push people forward" (Gonzalez 2022). By bringing seminaries and other training streams together, developing contextually pertinent resources and facilitating a collaborative momentum, RTH endeavors to reach this goal.

Authenticity-Quality Tensions Around the Formal and Non-formal Modes

As we have seen already, the collaborative initiative of RTH is to strategically bridge the gaps between training sectors and their leaders. Linda Cannell raised the issue asking:

> How do we provide theological education for the whole people of God? How do we serve the continuing professional development needs of our alumni and other ministry professionals? What are the implications of conceiving of education not as preparation for some future ministry, but continuing development in ministry? How do we address issues of authority, power and elitism in higher education? (Cannell 1999, 59-60)

The debates related to the church-seminary gaps shifted to the formal (FTE) and non-formal (NFTE) confluency discourse. This was the theme at ICETE's Global Consultation C-21/22 (Shoemaker 2022).[3] This consultation's analysis summary confirmed the existence of class discrepancy between the sectors, apparently making a reconciliation or bridging complex. However, we as educators and trainers need to be proactively seeking ways to strengthen the life and mission of the church. What if the church's mandate of "Equipping Everyone" is re-envisioned in the way we do theological education? What would it take us to see the church at the center of theological education?
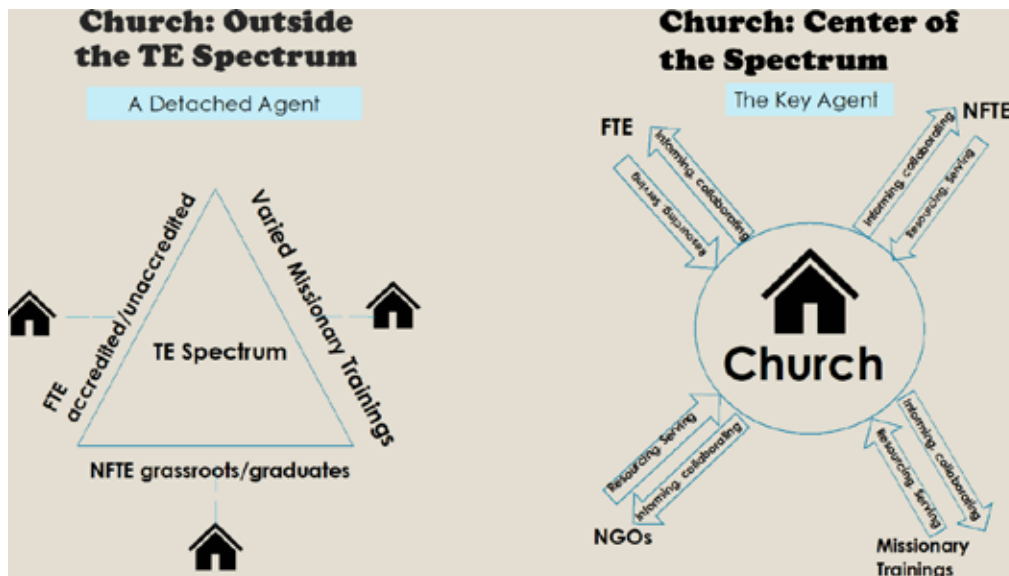

Figure 1

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[3] See also Stefanii Ferenczi, "Formal and Non-formal Theological Education in Dialogue - C22" *ICETE Academy* forum threads, November 2021–July 2022, https://tinyurl.com/pvsfsp8x.

Catalytic Collaboration of Training Sectors

The simple premise of RTH is this—when a need is conjointly discerned and missionally compelling, it has incredible potential in catalyzing genuine collaborations in training. RTH is neither a training provider, nor an infrastructure maker or fundraiser. It endeavors to advance local ownership and sustainability by fostering collaboration with mainstream theological institutions, churches, NGOs, mission organizations, without a goal to blend any. RTH South Asia represents a dynamic concept that upholds the collaboration of training institutions and personnel who by ongoing contextual exploration and dependency on God will facilitate vital networks towards equipping every believer in the church. This bottom-up movement synergizes research and relationships organically, and, in all this, not pushing the church to the margins or a receiving end, but authentically collaborating "with," "by" and "for" the church. Connecting seminary faculty with the grassroots churches and pastors in the past few years has been an incredibly transformative experience for me personally.
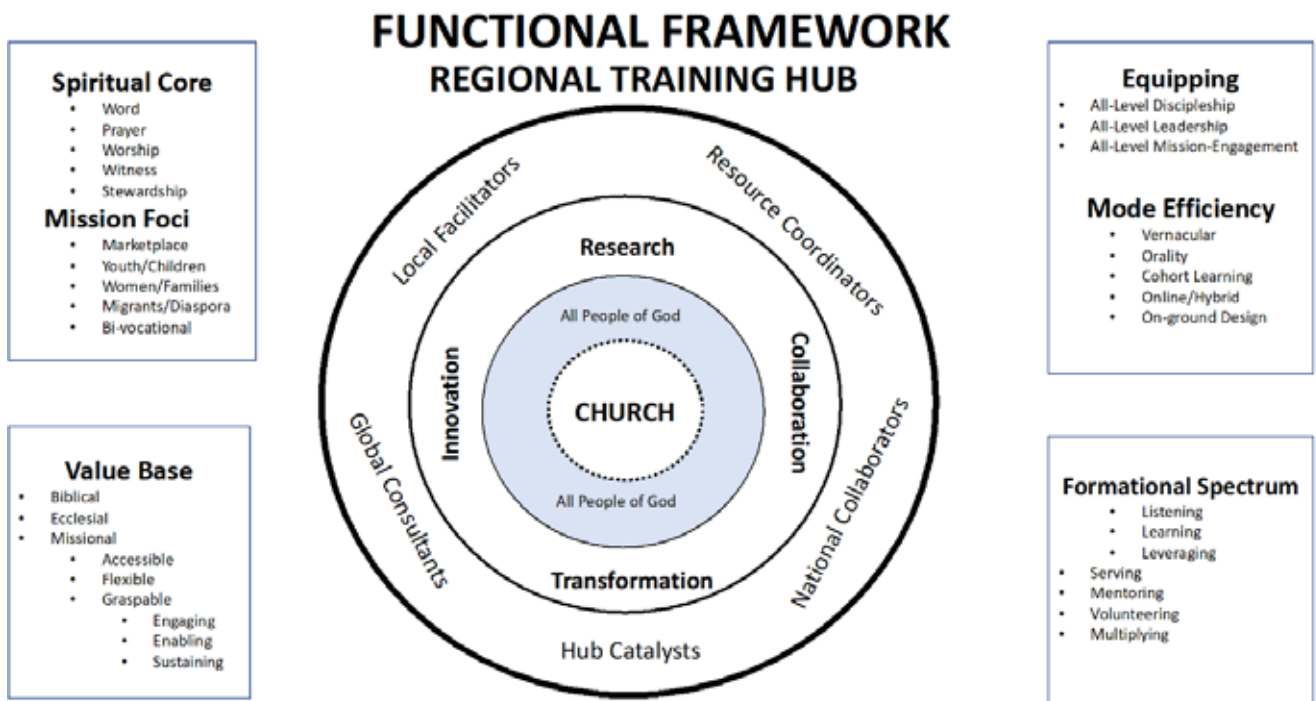

Figure 2: Functional Framework

One might ask how this approach relates to and benefits mainstream theological education. Seminaries, in fact, play a critical role as both listeners and contributors in the RTH process, beginning with the initial "listening calls." In these calls, ministry trainers from diverse backgrounds gather to assess local training needs. Seminaries, entrusted with significant resources, are invited to participate in these calls, often adopting a posture of learning and a readiness to respond to the church's evolving training requirements. In South Asia, the RTH initiative is partnering with the Asia Theological Association-India to facilitate leadership development, accelerating and solidifying the growth of churches in the region.

RTH initiatives thrive where functional reciprocity and genuine collaboration between theological seminaries and other training sectors are established. Together, these entities strive to equip believers for ministry within their local contexts. This dynamic fosters innovation within mainstream theological education, enhancing its responsiveness to the pressing training needs of the church. It is within this collaborative framework that seminaries extend their educational services strategically to support the multi-faceted mission of the church. The aim is not to replace seminaries, but to empower them to be creatively missional by embracing cross-sectional reciprocity. No single model of training can sufficiently address the needs in a context marked by the complexities of urbanization, intergenerational divides, migration, gender biases, religious pluralism, denominationalism, and other challenges. The central focus of this Community of Practice is to explore the necessary paradigm shift for a more holistic approach to leadership formation for the future church.

These strategic advancements, however, are not without challenges. Some of the key issues include: (1) fostering reciprocity and trust between training entities and churches, which traditionally operate within "institutional silos"; (2) overcoming organizational resistance to collaborative efforts; (3) effectively assessing and tracking the impact of training collaborations on churches; and (4) managing the time investment required for these processes. Within the Community of Practice for RTH in South Asia, an initial needs-assessment identified five critical areas that seminaries must address, both academically and ministerially:

- Holistic, contextual formation of faculty/training facilitators for healthy leader-development.
- Development of a contextualized curriculum that embraces diversity.
- Formation of women as theological faculty and ministry trainers.
- Continuing education and formation for pastors, particularly in the area of church planting.
- Vision for youth and the next generation ministry in theological education.

While simultaneously addressing needs and offering services is a commendable strategy, fostering reciprocity and collaboration is rarely straightforward. Two persistent gaps that need to be bridged at every stage of this process are the seminary-church divide and the formal-non-formal education divide. These entities symbolize distinct needs and resources, often striving in isolation to achieve their own goals.

Conclusion

RTH's collaborative paradigm is realizing profound impacts in strengthening the mission of the church in context. Genuine collaboration commands trust, sharing and releasing, and, therefore, is not easy and straightforward. Institutions and individuals naturally tend to shield than share their intellectual properties and resources. A drastic shift in our disposition needs to happen out of the conviction about what God is doing in the world and in the church today and a will to partner with God in it. The changing landscape of education and Christian engagement warrants a re-envisioning of the way we think and do theological education. We also need to be constantly reminded that church is not a competitor to any; her central place and missional vitality are uniquely and spiritually bestowed. The urgent task, therefore, is enabling the church to move from the margins to assume its axis space in theological and missional formation. This, however, requires all forms of theological education and ministry training to collaborate, each one complementing and feeding on the other, as what RTH serves unto. Conserving the DNA of church as the body of Christ in the world is God's work in which teachers and trainers across the spectrum should willingly partner.

In closing, I re-affirm the driving conviction of RTH—unless the church on the ground benefits from the formal, non-formal, and informal training, we end up building great structures on shaky foundations. Wherever the goal of serving the church is unattended or moved to the periphery, theological education regardless of its pattern, turns out into an aimless pursuit. We need relational collaborations that blend theological conviction, persuasive generosity, solid reciprocity, and authentic humility in building the ecclesia in all-level discipleship, all-level leadership, and all-level mission/social/business/marketplace engagement. With RTH, training endeavors are coming to a collectively prompting moment in South Asia—to venture into the uncharted territory of church-centered, church-oriented relational collaborations. There is nothing predictable, yet for the body and the bride of Christ, we hope this momentum will unfold at its own pace, shape, and contextual will.

Notes on the Author(s): Jessy Jaison is a Theological Education Consultant and Regional Training Hub leader of MESA GLOBAL for South Asia. She serves as a member on ICETE Board and the Commission for Accreditation and Educational Development (CAED) of ATA. She has a PhD in Practical Theology from Queen's University of Belfast, UK and an MTh from the University of Oxford, UK.

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DISSERTATION
ABSTRACTS

Title:

Appropriate Parental Participation in Faith Nurture of Primary School Aged Children in Urban Chinese Families of the Sarawak Chinese Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Malaysia

Author:

Winnie Sin Ming Chan

Submission Details:

School: AGST Alliance

Program: EdD (Spiritual Formation & Discipleship)

Year: 2015

Dissertation Abstract

This study investigates how the parents of primary school aged children of the Sarawak Chinese Annual Conference (SCAC) of the Methodist Church in Malaysia can be better equipped and be more effective as partners in faith nurture of their children. Many parents of the SCAC churches are concerned with faith nurture of their children but not sure how to do this effectively. The study used the qualitative research method of grounded theory. Data was collected through interviews with sixteen parents and seventeen children from four different Methodist Chinese churches in Sarawak. The interview data was coded and analyzed to generate an emerging theory.

The key findings of this research suggested that churches may need to be more intentional in offering creative and accessible ways for parents in faith nurture of their children. Parents may need to understand that children's faith is nurtured through talking about faith matters and also doing ordinary everyday things. The significance of this research helps to understand the struggles of the parents and propose some possible ways for them in faith nurture of their children.

Title:

Toward Developing Biblically Sound, Spiritually Formative and Contextually Appropriate Curriculum Guidelines for Theological Schools in Myanmar

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Submission Details:

School: Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, in partnership with Asia Graduate School of Theology

Program: Doctor of Philosophy (Transformational Learning)

Year: 2020

Dissertation Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of spiritual formation practices in two selected theological schools in Yangon, Myanmar. It explores the main problem: What guidelines can be formulated to develop a Biblically sound, spiritually formative, and contextually appropriate curriculum for these two theological schools? The descriptive study used a mixed-methods approach involving survey questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

The quantitative data pointed out the most helpful practices for the spiritual formation of the students in the two theological schools: prayer, repentance, and worship. The interview data demonstrated that the spiritual formation course contributed to the spiritual life and vitality of the students by providing an understanding and meaning of spiritual practices. Moreover, the spiritual emphasis week helped them to become more vital in their spiritual lives through the solid and powerful messages preached by the speakers. Fellowship, Bible reading and study, worship, prayer, meditation, discipleship, fasting, examen of conscience, and service are the most crucial and necessary disciplines by the students, graduates, and faculty in the interview data.

Title:

Christian Futures Studies: Designing a Course Syllabus to Develop Foresight Competency among Mandarin-speaking Christian Leaders in East Asia

Author:

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Dissertation Abstract

This research investigates the development of foresight competency among Mandarin-speaking Christian leaders in East Asia, addressing the growing challenges they face in ministry. Employing Practical Action Research, the study first conducted a biblical-theological critique of futures studies, adapting it for a Christian context. This analysis identified three core foresight competencies: scanning (identifying emerging trends), simulating (imagining potential future scenarios), and strategizing (developing proactive responses). Based on this Christian futures studies framework and adult education methodologies, a course syllabus was designed and pilot-tested at Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary. Key findings revealed a significant increase in learners' sensitivity to change, a deeper understanding of the future, and the successful acquisition of core foresight competencies, leading to enhanced resilience in navigating complex and uncertain environments. This research contributes to a theological understanding of the future, emphasizing watchful preparation, promoting risk management and continuous learning, and providing a foundation for further curriculum development in Christian futures studies.