FORUM

EDUCATING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATORS FOR AFRICA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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What qualities and competence are needed in a theological educator? To what extent are the needs of Africa different from those of other parts of the world? In what ways can these needs be addressed within the parameters of a master's level academic programme? These are some of the questions which have been considered in devising the Master of Theological Studies Programme in Theological Education at Africa University.

Africa University

Africa University is a United Methodist-related institution. The Faculty of Theology functions as a seminary as well as being integral to the life and work of the university as a whole. The Bachelor of Divinity (BD) taught by the faculty is a degree in theology and ministry. While the curriculum is shaped in accordance with the requirements of the United Methodist Church, ministerial candidates of all Christian denominations can be admitted on the recommendation of their church leadership. Africa University and the Faculty of Theology are committed to developing theological education in an ecumenical context, and to serving all Christian churches in Africa.

Although it is a seminary, the Faculty of Theology also services the education and humanities programmes of the university. Staff are accordingly trained both in theology and the secular academic disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. Teaching theology and religious studies, often simultaneously, poses distinct challenges. It also provides opportunities for developing creative approaches to the study of religion in general and Christianity in particular in the modern African context and appropriate to that context.

Although it is located in Zimbabwe, Africa University, as its name
implies, is committed to a vision of education which embraces the entire African continent. Students are drawn from English-, French- and Portuguese-speaking African countries, and the mixing of cultures, traditions and backgrounds is regarded as an important aspect of the education process. It is in this context that the Faculty of Theology has developed its model of tertiary theological education, and devised its programme to train and equip educators with skills and knowledge relevant to the task in modern Africa.

Theological Education in Africa

Theological education in Africa takes place in a variety of institutions. University faculties of theology, some church-related, others ecumenical or non-denominational, are few in number. This paucity is relative to the interest in the subject among students and the continuing importance of religion and Christianity in African society. Academic theology is being challenged by the continuing claims of indigenous thought and observances on African Christians, and also by the pressures of secularism and pluralism for a non-confessional approach to the study of religion. Theology faculties are accordingly having to define themselves anew to justify their place in the university and to maintain or adapt their Christian character to their African context.

Departments of religious studies, sponsored by the state as participants in the training of primary and secondary teachers, are perhaps more widespread than theology faculties. The issues of pluralism and relevance to Africa are felt no less keenly than in theology faculties, and religious studies departments face additional challenges. The religious studies component in a humanities or education degree is unlikely to exceed half the curriculum, which limits both teaching and reading time. The wider range of material to be covered, and the wider range of courses individual lecturers are expected to teach, clearly has implications for the depth and creativity possible in such contexts. At the same time the secular ethos of humanities and education faculties can stimulate critical thinking on religious issues and interdisciplinary methods of research and analysis to an extent not always found in theology faculties.

Important as faculties of theology and departments of religious studies are, most theological education in Africa takes place outside the