



ALLIANCE FOR VULNERABLE MISSION

3rd April 2020

Open Letter to Africa's Theological Educators,

Towards a 'Code of Good Practice'

Coronavirus is accelerating the rate at which Western theological colleges and seminaries are going on-line. Once on line, people can join our courses from anywhere. Already, much theological education in Africa from the West is of questionable contextual relevance. Now is the time to adjust what we are teaching and how.

Few give sufficient thought to ways in which our offers of theological education from the West, the place known for wealth and prosperity, can distort theological understanding in Africa. Cheap (i.e. subsidized), friendly, but foreign controlled, English-language based culturally-obscure alternatives to indigenous theological education, shine too brightly. This can easily result in anyone in Africa doing theological education without cow-towing to the West, appearing second class. It has become extremely difficult to engage in contextualization of theological education in Africa.

We suggest the following 'code-of-good-practice' for Western people wanting to participate in theological education in Africa:

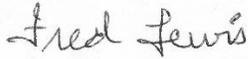
1. Theological education from Westerners in Africa should not be presented in English, French, or Portuguese.¹ This is for many reasons;
 - the categories used in these languages are not familiar to Africa,
 - philosophical and other presuppositions underlying these languages tend to be obscure,
 - these languages function in a secular way that is foundationally 'anti-religious',
 - knowledge of these languages providing openings into lucrative contexts results in their being abused by fortune-seekers and in high levels of temptation to being overcome by 'love of this world',
 - teachers who use these languages, because they do not learn how indigenous discourse functions, cannot develop intimate learning relationships with African Christian communities.

2. We need specific guidelines on use of money. As is usually the case, he who pays the piper calls the tune. This means that the West remains in charge of theological education in Africa (even when African people are given positions of responsibility). This does not encourage indigenous ownership, initiative, or responsibility regarding what the church does or how it does it. Arguably, it results in a very dangerous position for the African church, of never thinking for themselves, because distant foreigners are always the purveyors of correct answers. Theological education by local thinkers using indigenous languages should be given priority. This means not subsidizing what is foreign.
- We hope that readers of this open letter won't rush to the African member of their faculty for a conclusive evaluation of what we are suggesting. Africans in our circles have often been 'bought' into compliance. We believe Westerners need to take intellectual responsibility for their actions.²
 - We do not suggest that the West needs to prohibit African people from using English, French or Portuguese in their theological education if they want to do so. Once not subsidized from the West, Africans will be free to choose languages that work best for them. Westerners should themselves set a good example through using languages indigenous to Africa.³
 - Many Westerners with an ongoing investment into theological education in Africa have had some field experience, but for various reasons have withdrawn to the West. The reasons are typically family and health reasons – children's education, needs of one's spouse, illness in the family, need to give children a good foundation in their own culture etc. *Those who have withdrawn from the front line should not use money to overwhelm or overshadow the efforts of those who remain.* People who have withdrawn from the field should either withdraw from theological education on the continent, or continue to engage using an African language.
 - Others provide theological education for Africa in the form of short-visits to Africa. At the very least such people should not promote their own ministry over and above that of others (including locals) through financial subsidy using money raised in the West.

Current restraints have made it impossible for African theology to develop in any written or formal form. (When European languages are used to develop theologies, owners of the language invariably twist the way they are used by Africans for their own purposes, often not understanding that English used in Africa is largely an implicit translation from mother-tongue terms, categories and concepts.) This is a serious omission for a massively populous church.

We suggest that it is important, before promoting our on-line courses in Africa or for Africans, to learn how and what to teach, and to do so by having course designers from the West be immersed into African contexts and familiar with African languages.⁴

Signatories



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¹ We single out these three languages because 1. Their use is rooted in a long Western philosophical history that is unfamiliar to Sub-saharan Africa. 2. Original owners of these languages tend to control and dictate how they are used.

² In making this point, we draw on Kowal, Franklin and Paradies' insights arising from work they have done on racism in Australia (all quotations below are from page 327 of their article). Important issues that are revealed in their article are often wantonly ignored. Their context is one of reaching out to aboriginal people. They point out major problems in anti-racism training often going on in Australia. In its place, they advocate for 'reflexive anti-racism'. (We hope our readers understand that anti-racism is affecting, if not dictating many of the West's approaches to the majority world or to indigenous people. We encourage our readers to explore the ambiguity of anti-racism in more detail.) Anti-racism results in a reluctance "to nominate indigenous people's choices or actions as even a partial cause of their ill-health ... [through] fear of 'victim blaming', an attribute associated with racism." As a result, Westerners "attribute Indigenous disadvantage to structural factors that are seen to constrain and limit choices, rather than to the actions of Indigenous people themselves" which leads to "the exclusion of indigenous agency from any explanations" regarding extant contexts, problems, and so on. In order to avoid this kind of disappearance of context, one must work against the "desire to agree with any Indigenous person present." For purposes of this code of good practice this means that when offering education to Africa, ironically perhaps, we might, if continued attachments to Western languages and outside resources are advocated for, have to avoid being guided by Africans. (Kowal, Emma & Franklin, Hayley & Paradies, Yin,, 2013, 'Reflexive Antiracism: a novel approach to diversity training.' 316-337 in *Ethnicities* 13(3), 2013.)

³ In our view, this process is so problematic, that African languages should always be first choice, but we are NOT suggesting that Westerners dictate what Africans do amongst themselves.

⁴ It is ironic that, while it is accepted that education that is geographically from the West to Africans be guided by White people, as if that is not 'racist', the perception changes regarding education on the ground in Africa. On the ground in Africa, for a White person to be in charge of education (e.g. the Principal of a theological school in an African country) is frowned upon and avoided if at all possible. It is considered that Africans should be doing this for themselves. This leads to White people running things in the West pushing themselves onto the African scene. This back-door actually results in the worst of both worlds: 1. White people in charge. 2. No contextualization. Hence, if Westerners deem it necessary and helpful to continue playing a major role in theological education in Africa, it is of utmost importance for them to be working through Westerners based in Africa who use local languages (so as to be able to learn from local contexts) and to not draw heavily on foreign funds (in order to avoid the promotion of the prosperity gospel and the silencing of local voices for fear of losing funding). Bypassing such people by offering education direct from the West using European languages is a violation of good sense. It remains to be seen whether Whites who took the trouble to learn African languages and cultures, would remain keen to mediate education from the West that was designed without regard to such insights. This would imply that their local learning was irrelevant to the education being offered. Representing an outside university would constantly identify them with foreign money; everyone would come to them for money, and everything they did would be prosperity Gospel. (The same of course applies to Africans who might agree to be the means for Westerners to apply their curriculum in Africa.)