

The Continuing Education of a Missionary Theologian

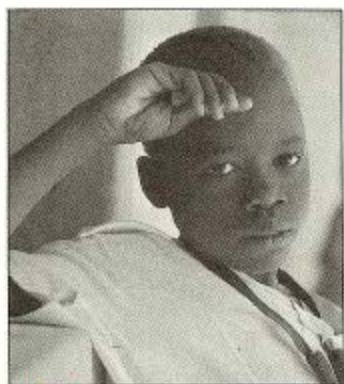
Taking Theological Education Cross-Culturally Holding the Right Answers—Asking the Right Questions

by Mark Blair



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Whether as part of graduate-level seminary classes or a small Bible study group, effective theological education means continually finding ways to make the changeless Word of God find cultural relevance in a changing world. Because of a lack of well-trained church leaders in Africa—and a lack of cross-cultural church workers—many children are not exposed to sound Bible teaching.



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After doing theological education in East Africa for seven years, I have never been more convinced about its importance—nor been more confused about what it exactly entails.

My wife Dayna and I, missionaries serving with Africa Inland Mission International, taught in two Ugandan theological colleges. Our first term was in a regional pastoral training center, Ringili, at Arua. Our second was in the theological college at Mukono.

Students endured three years of intensive studies, barely being able to afford a ball-point pen. Wives kept their families going by collecting water and firewood and weeding the crops. Many of the wives attended lectures when they were able. Guerrilla warfare raged in several parts of the nation. Many Ugandans were suffering. Chaos unleashed by Idi Amin hurled on unchecked.

With two theology degrees in hand, I was ready. My first lecture on systematic theology was delayed 15 minutes as I searched for chalk. The 'chalkboard' was so cracked my scribble was hopelessly illegible. Dull lectures were enlivened by visits from frantically squawking chickens. Enlightenment was impaired by the classroom's wooden shutters being nailed shut. We went limp as the midday sun intensified through the tin roof.

Despite such adversity, my theology was impeccable. Convincingly I proved the truth of inerrancy, guided them safely through

the millennial debates and ended all confusion about signs and wonders.

Then I asked my students if they had any theological issues to discuss.

"Can Christians pay bribes to soldiers at roadblocks?" they asked. "Can a repentant polygamist be baptized?" "What is wrong with traditional healing?" "What is the role of the church in a military coup d'etat?" "Why are so many young people leaving the church?" "How can Africa be rid of tribalism?"

I found nothing similar in my prized seminary lecture notes. Even my volumes by theological giants Hodge and Ryrie, Calvin and Wesley, Smith and Swindoll were strangely silent.

Answering the 'Wrong' Questions

During a ministry outreach 20 students and I confronted the enormity of AIDS. We divided into small groups for four days in a rural area near Tanzania. Visiting from house to house was devastating. Hardly a single home had escaped. New graves were beside most homes, from the prosperous to the peasants. Some houses were closed because all died. Many widows struggled to care for the orphans, fearfully awaiting their own deaths. In some homes the sole adult survivor was an elderly grandmother, battling to raise several small children.

No end of this plague is in sight. Elders lament over little change in people's sexual behavior. Witchcraft is widely believed to be the cause of AIDS. Though we thought ourselves well prepared for this evangelistic mission, we were silenced. Invited into dozens of homes to pray for the sick, we

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 saw dying young people, drained of all vitality. Yet I have never seen greater receptivity to the Gospel. Church leaders tell many bitter-

What is the future of the African church? Theological education holds a big part of the answer. The church in Uganda



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Missionary theologians, like AIM missionary Bill Mull, above, have an important role to play in the maturing church of Africa, both as capable teachers and as willing students. Effective theological education means holding the right answers—and asking the right questions.

sweet stories of deathbed conversions.

God's Eternal Word in a Changing World

Afrikanizing one's theology is more than just substituting drums for organs. Uganda forced me to examine 'fundamentals' I had never dared question before.

My American theology gave me no ideas about the role of the Christian's deceased ancestors, the *living dead*, who can play a vital role in some African religions. My theology of Scripture left me unprepared to counsel African Christians who hear the voice of God in their dreams. If the laborer is worthy of his hire, why do hard-working Ugandan pastors earn less than 10 dollars a month?

How could I speak God's eternal Word in a changing world? All this does not lower my view of Scripture nor does it minimize the importance of rigorous theological studies. We must work hard to hear the Spirit speak through the Word.

is known around the world as being vibrant and alive. About 80 percent of the population profess faith in Christ. Many know the saving miracle of the East African Revival. But can the young theologians being produced fuel the fire of that revival? Being 'saved' and revering the Bible is looked at with disdain by many young theologians. Yet do they reject Jesus or our characterizations of Him? Do they reject the Bible or our misapplications of the text?

Every nation needs the Word of God. Only our Sovereign God can confront the enormous problems challenging Uganda. Only the power of God can grant purpose and joy to a despondent Ugandan. Only the Word of God holds principles by which Uganda may be founded in righteousness. Jesus alone is the desire of this and every nation.

Ugandan pastors are in very short supply. The church is growing faster in Africa than anywhere in the world, and mission forecasters predict uninterrupted gains. A typical pastor in Uganda serves several congregations, some more

than 10! Hundreds of Christians look to him for spiritual care. Many more shepherds are needed to feed Jesus' lambs.

Missionary theologians still have a role to play. Senior Ugandan clergymen speak of the words, and more often of the lives, of their missionary tutors from decades ago. Carefully chosen outsiders can have a vital role in Uganda.

Holding the answers still allows us to ask many questions. Strong convictions can be held in tension with staggering confusion.

The Gospel is the ultimate answer, but the questions are extremely complex. ❖

Rev. Mark and Dayna Blair have served with AIM in Uganda since 1983. They have been involved primarily in theological education at Arua and Mukono, Uganda. The Blairs currently are on furlough at La Canada, Calif., where they live with their three sons, Nathan, Josiah and Aaron.

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