

Why Lutheran Education in Africa?¹

Glenn Fluegge

As an LCMS missionary and theological educator in Africa for some fourteen years, I was asked a few years back to give a presentation on the work to which God had called us. I diligently set about preparing the presentation but was immediately confronted with a rather heavy question: Why are we even involved in theological education in Africa? The question hit me rather unexpectedly. I am quite accustomed to talking about “what” we did in Africa. But this was different. This was a question of “why?” Is education for the Lutheran churches in Africa really that important?

Similar questions continue to confront our synod. Why are we as a church body involved in theological education in Africa? Is it really worth the sacrifices and resources that our church invests in it? Are our education efforts in Africa really that important?

It is sometimes helpful to look back in history to be able to see the bigger picture that we miss when we focus only on the present. It may prove helpful, then, to take a look at Germany some five hundred years ago during the Reformation. I would not be so presumptuous as to say that sixteenth-century Europe is the same as, or even similar to, twenty-first century Africa. That would be irresponsible historiography. Nonetheless, I think that there are some interesting parallels that shed light from the past on the present situation in Africa.

There are parallels, for instance, between the challenges faced by the German Lutheran churches shortly after the Reformation and those faced by the churches in Africa today. The first of these challenges is that of the traditional religion. Christianity was nearly universal in Europe some five hundred years ago, but it was often intermingled with the traditional folk religion of spirits, magic, and witchcraft—the remnants of a pre-Christian culture that lurked just beneath the surface of popular understandings of Christianity. Similarly, the traditional African religion of ancestral worship and animal sacrifices continues to threaten seriously the churches of Africa today. In many parts of Africa, even the strongest Christians are constantly beset with temptations to revert to former beliefs and practices, especially for significant events and ceremonies or in times of trial, e.g., birth, wedding, death.

Glenn Fluegge and his wife, Susan, were called as LCMS missionaries to Togo from 1998–2009, where Glenn served as lecturer and director of the Centre Luthérien d’Etudes Théologiques, an international seminary that trains pastors for Lutheran churches throughout Francophone Africa. He then served in South Africa as lecturer at the Lutheran Theological Seminary from 2009–2012. Glenn currently serves as director of the Cross-Cultural Ministry Center and professor of theology at Concordia University Irvine, CA.

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Syncretism, the mingling of Christianity with elements from the Traditional African Religion, continues to challenge the African church.

A second challenge to Christianity is that of the multitude of sects and cults. During and after the Reformation, a host of sectarian movements, many Anabaptist in nature, sprang up all over Europe and seriously threatened to undermine the newly formed Lutheran churches. Luther even felt compelled to come out of a forced exile at the castle of Wartburg to reprimand Andreas Karlstadt, a fellow professor at the University of Wittenberg, for having given in to dangerous Anabaptist tendencies. Throughout his life, he and other Reformers spent considerable time and effort combating these movements and convincing Christians of the danger these sects posed to the very Gospel itself. Similarly, a vast number of sects and cults have risen up and grown alarmingly popular in Africa today. Mormonism, Eckankar, and Jehovah's Witness have strongholds from West to East to Southern Africa. These sects from the United States are joined by a host of cults originating in Africa, such as the Celestial Church of Christ and the Kimbanguist Church in Congo. Self-proclaimed African prophets, mingling elements of Christianity with African Traditional Religion, gather significant numbers of followers in almost every country of Africa.

The third challenge is perhaps the most serious of all. At the time of the Reformation, the German lands and, for that matter, all of Europe was at the brink of war with the Muslim Turks. Having conquered Constantinople (Europe's "doorway" to the East) some fifty years earlier, the Turks were at Europe's doorstep and eagerly awaited the opportunity to invade. With the Turks came their religion: Islam. Islam is also at the doorstep of Africa today, or, more accurately, Islam is already entering through an open door. Islam is not just in northern Africa. The vast majority of the populations (around 98%) of many countries in West Africa, e.g., Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, are Muslim. In countries such as Togo and Nigeria, it is split rather evenly between Christians and Muslims. Central and Southern Africa have fewer Muslims, but the numbers are growing. It is most alarming, however, to see Muslim "missionaries" at work in Africa. According to a recent conversation with the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Congo, Muslim merchants, financed and sent from northern Africa, are arriving daily to settle in Congo. (Trade has historically been a primary means of spreading Islam).

I have traveled with countless Muslims during my time in Africa, but for the first time I recently witnessed Muslim missionaries "at work" in the Ethiopian airport. Five Muslim men, most probably Imams, sat on prayer rugs in the center of the waiting room surrounded by people on all sides. After they had strategically placed themselves, they began the ritual prayer, bowing with foreheads to the ground, followed by the rhythmic reading of the Quran. At one point, two of them very strategically left the group and asked a young African man who was watching to join them so that they could split into pairs and continue the reading. All of us in

the waiting room watched with curiosity. Then, while they ate a small meal, one of the men took out a bag and offered a date to every person in the room. This open proselytizing by Muslims took me by surprise. They were on their way to Togo, where Christianity and Islam are fairly evenly balanced. (For more information on the religious landscape of Africa, see <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1564/islam-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa-survey>.)

There are other parallels with sixteenth-century Europe as well. When we talk about the Reformation, we focus mostly on those famous events with which we are so familiar: Luther's vow to become a monk on the road to Erfurt, the nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses on the chapel door, Luther's courageous response at the Diet of Worms, etc. What we often forget is that shortly after these famous events and after the break with the Roman Church had become more or less apparent, the Christian church in the German lands found itself in a state of utter chaos. Christianity was very widespread, almost universal, but the Church had lost its shape. Things were a mess. Most devastatingly, in separating from the Pope and the Roman Church, the new "evangelical" (Lutheran) churches lost the very structure that provided them with spiritual leadership. In addition, monasteries and cloisters, along with the accompanying monastic schools, were shut down. Consequently, there was an alarming shortage of well-prepared pastors and preachers so desperately needed to lead the newly established church.

Christianity in Africa is extremely widespread and is considered by many to be the world's most rapidly growing church. There are roughly twenty million Lutherans in Africa alone. Often because of this widespread growth, many churches in Africa do not have adequate structures in place to provide the desperately needed pastors and preachers. In Lutheran churches all over Africa, ranging from Guinea to Togo to Nigeria to Kenya, there is an alarming shortage of well-prepared pastors. The recently planted Evangelical Lutheran Church of Guinea, for example, can already boast of over 150 congregations and preaching stations and yet has only five ordained pastors. Although this example is perhaps more dire than most, the problem is not at all unique to Guinea. In fact, it is so widespread that it could be called a crisis.

There is yet a final parallel between the religious context of the German lands back then and Africa today—a parallel that is often overlooked. European society at the time of the Reformation was an oral society. Printed books were becoming more popular since Johannes Gutenberg invented the moveable type printing press some seventy-five years earlier, but the vast majority of Europe was still illiterate, and their lives revolved around an oral-aural way of sensing the world around them. With the Lutheran Reformation revolving around a written Word (as opposed to the "inner Word" of the enthusiasts), there was a sudden, desperate need for an educated clergy that could read, interpret, and preach this written Word. Africa, too, is comprised mostly of oral societies, probably even more so than in sixteenth-century Europe,

where systems of study had for centuries been based on hand-written manuscripts. And just as the Reformation church found itself in need of an educated clergy, Lutheran churches in Africa today are also experiencing this same need. It should not come as a surprise that Pentecostalism is growing rapidly in Africa and that even many of the larger mainline Protestant churches have charismatic tendencies. Pentecostal and charismatic approaches to Christianity accentuate the immediate activity of the Holy Spirit and relegate the written word to a position of secondary importance, a tendency that coincides well with oral societies and yet poses a challenge to traditional Lutheranism.

Some five hundred years ago, in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges—sectarian threats to the church, chronic lack of well-prepared pastors, and the inherent challenge of the written Word in an oral society—the Reformers set out to rebuild the church from the bottom up. And where did they start? Education. As early as 1524, Luther wrote a letter “To the Councilmen of all the Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” in which he exhorts the councilmen: “My dear sirs, if we have to spend such large sums every year on guns, roads, bridges, dams, and countless similar items to insure the temporal peace and prosperity of a city, why should not much more be devoted to the poor neglected youth?” (LW 45, 350) A few years later, Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s comrade at the University of Wittenberg, developed a curricular program of study in a booklet of instructions for those conducting parish visitations. This curriculum subsequently provided the basis for the establishment of schools throughout much of Germany. Melanchthon was so adamant about education and such an intriguing teacher himself that he became known as the *Praeceptor Germaniae* (Teacher of Germany).

Luther and the reformers did not emphasize education purely for the sake of being educated. They realized that good and faithful leaders in society are brought about through sound Christian education. This was nowhere more true than in the church. Education was seen as of the utmost importance for the health, well-being, and growth of the church. The transformation of the church (and society) would be through the education and transformation of the pastors. In “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School,” published in 1530, Luther bemoaned the lack of leadership in the church and exhorted parents in no uncertain terms to send their children into the ministry. He and the other professors at Wittenberg had already set about completely revamping the entire university curriculum so that it might produce the well-prepared pastors that the German church so desperately needed.

The strategic emphasis placed on education by the reformers has become a legacy of Lutheran churches around the world. We see a continuation of this legacy in the fact that our Lutheran forefathers arrived in the United States and immediately set about building schools. To this very day, education has been a hallmark of Lutheranism. Why? Because the original Lutheran Reformers believed that education was of crucial importance for the well-being and growth of the church.

Is it really worth it for us to be involved in education in Africa? History shouts a resounding: YES! Lutheran education (both theological and general) is one of the most important ways in which we can come alongside partner Lutheran churches in Africa today.

Perhaps a final warning is called for here. Education is a long-term investment focused on decades rather than tomorrow, on generations rather than years. That it rarely produces immediate gratification or results may discourage us into focusing only on those ministries that bring more immediate results. Let us bear in mind, however, that Luther, Melancthon, and the other Reformers never really saw the immediate results of the educational reforms that they worked so hard to bring about; yet the following generations reaped the harvest. The long-term benefit of investing in the education of Lutheran churches in Africa is immeasurable.

Endnotes

¹ A shorter version of this article was first published as “Why Lutheran Education in Africa?” in *Lutherans Engage the World* 1, no. 1 (2012): 2–4. The article has been expanded as it appears in this issue of *Missio Apostolica*.