

STEP



Strategic Theological Education Partnerships

A Community of International Theological Educators

Early on a Saturday morning several weeks ago, we were surprised to see a small herd of buck deer strolling through our neighborhood. While we frequently see doe and the occasional buck, this was a first. Seven bucks were together, their antlers still covered in velvet, grazing on the grass, and walking together in unison.

While we work apart, serving the Lord in more than a dozen countries scattered all over the world, STEP is a family of BMM theological educators. We are a community of men and women who dedicate our lives to the training of national leaders for local church ministry.

However, just like the buck deer in my neighborhood, we need time together. There is great benefit in hearing what God is doing in other ministries. We can learn from one another. We can share resources. We can be encouraged to tackle challenges that seem beyond our abilities, to pursue excellence in our training institutions, and to take our ministries to the next level of pastoral training.

We have recently opened a private BMM STEP discussion group on Facebook.¹ Our goal is to encourage dialogue and promote conversations on issues surrounding theological education. So, we invite you to visit the discussion group. Jump right in. Ask a question. Make a suggestion. Share a resource. Share a blessing. Share a prayer request. Join the community. I hope to see you there!

¹ Since some of us work in sensitive areas of the world, we have made the Facebook discussion group both a hidden and private group for security. If you want to be a member of the group, please send Bruce Burkholder a message on Facebook, and he will get you connected.

Excellence in Theological Education

by Bruce Burkholder

Merriam Webster defines excellence as “the quality of being eminently good.” The word “eminently” is what makes the attainment of excellence so difficult. Excellence requires more than merely being “good.” It calls for one to be eminently good at what one does.

The Scripture clearly teaches that God is excellent in all that He is and does. “His way is perfect” the psalmist declares (Ps 18:30), and He calls His people to excellence in life and ministry (Php 4:8; Tit 3:8).

Excellence is important as we consider the ministry of theological education. Here is the point: God desires (and so do we) that BMM theological education ministries would be known for their excellence. I think that we can all agree with that, but what does excellence mean? Let me briefly suggest four characteristics of academic and institutional excellence in theological education.

Faculty

First, of the four characteristics that I mention, those that serve as teachers within the institution are the most important. In his book *Excellence in Theological Education* Steve Hardy writes, “If it is true that the focus of our educational efforts should be centered on the development of character and the preparation for ministry, we will need teachers that know how to do this well.”¹ In other words, academic excellence requires teachers who are highly trained in their areas of instruction, who are spiritually mature and are experienced in ministry, who are godly examples to the students, and who have a passion for continued learning.²

Programs

Second, excellent education requires excellent programs of study. Academic programs and the courses that make up those programs should be fashioned to meet the needs of the students

and ultimately the churches that they represent. I appreciate the “learning outcome” approach advocated by Leroy Ford in his book *A Curriculum Design Manual for Theological Education*.³ This approach starts with intended outcome (i.e. expository preacher) and works backward, ensuring that the program is designed and courses written with the intended outcomes in mind. Also, courses should be designed in sympathy with the learning styles of the local context.

Standards

Third, excellent education follows agreed upon academic standards for degree programs. Parents increasingly want their children studying in Bible schools to graduate with a meaningful degree, that is, a degree that is recognized and provides them with opportunities for the future. Likewise, many graduates would like to continue their theological studies. Sadly, many cannot, because their undergraduate degree is not recognized or does not meet commonly accepted academic standards. Granted, this is a process that may take time, but excellence in education compels us to provide the best education possible.

Peer Review

Finally, the voluntary submission of academic programs, installations, and procedures to the evaluation of one’s peers can provide an objective assessment of how we are doing. As Hardy writes, “This is especially useful for evangelical training institutions with goals that are distinct from local universities.”⁴ Other theological educators can help us to assess the quality of our programs and provide counsel and recommendations for improvement. Solomon’s counsel still rings true today, even for pastoral training institutions. He wrote, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Ecc 9:10). May that be our goal!

¹ Steve Hardy, *Excellence in Theological Education: Effective training for Church leaders* (Cambria: Langham Global Library, 2016), 115.

² *Ibid.*, 116-119.

³ Leroy Ford, *A Curriculum Design Manual for Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003).

⁴ Hardy, 10.

Central African Republic

by Scott Kenson

Faculté Internationale Baptiste de Théologie



The Central African Republic (CAR) was the first ever mission field opened by Baptist Mid-Missions in 1920.¹ Despite much turmoil and trouble over the last 100 years, including struggles for independence, coups, and a civil war, BMM has continued to have a strong presence in CAR, planting churches, and training church leaders.

When Baptist church leaders gathered for a summit meeting in 2008, they were asked to identify three of the most pressing needs for the Baptist churches in the CAR. One of the top three needs identified was a Baptist master's-level seminary to train pastors for the churches in CAR and other French-speaking countries. As a result, the Faculté Internationale Baptiste de Théologie (FIBAT) was started in 2011.

Despite the ongoing civil war in the CAR, the seminary has been growing. Except for one missionary, the faculty are all African and have advanced degrees. Depending on the required teaching load, they have between 7 and 12 teachers per semester for the French

language degree program, and an additional 4-6 women teachers for the Sango-language women's program. Around 50% of the faculty are pastors or involved in other full-time ministry besides teaching. So, the teaching load is spread among several people.

Prospective students are required to hold a baccalaureate degree (comparable to 12th grade in the USA), be a member in good standing in a Baptist church, give a salvation testimony, testimony of involvement in church, and provide a good reason for why they want to go to seminary. The accepted students are sent by their home church, but they may or may not receive financial help from it. The ongoing turmoil has kept the CAR ranked among the 10 poorest countries in the world. So, it is difficult for churches to support a student. When students graduate, their churches encourage them to minister in a different church rather than return to their home church, for they have found the proverb true, that a prophet is not without honor except at home.



The seminary currently offers a one-year baccalaureate degree,² a three-year license degree, and a four-year master's degree. They are in the process of switching over their degree system to follow the European LMD standard (License, Masters, Doctorate) since that is what is typically used in the CAR and other French-speaking countries. They plan to offer a master's Level 1 program in 2024, followed by a Level 2 in 2025.³ The seminary is accredited through the government of CAR, which recognizes its degrees on par with the University of Bangui (the main university in the CAR).

Missionary John Dannenberg, the current president of the seminary, has two main prayer requests for the seminary. The first request is for transition to national leadership. John sees the need to set up a national board that will help oversee the running of the seminary and help select his successor.

The second request is for God to provide the finances needed to run the seminary.

John's original goal was to raise all the financial support for the seminary from student fees. However, given the extreme poverty of the country, and the fact that even in developed countries student tuition does not cover the cost of running an institution, he realized that was too much to ask. At present the student fees cover about 40% of the cost of running the seminary. Some of the local churches also contribute regularly, but it is very hard for them to do so. Most churches give occasional gifts. So, John's request is that the Lord will abundantly provide the finances to continue training men and women for ministry in the CAR.

¹ When William Haas entered the area in 1920, it was known as French Equatorial Africa, and comprised of modern-day CAR, Chad, Republic of Congo, and Gabon.

² The seminary strongly prefers prospective students to already hold a baccalaureate when they apply. However, if a student is able to pass the entrance exam without holding a baccalaureate, they are able to earn one at the seminary.

³ These are both in keeping with the European LMD standard.

Why train national leaders in country?

by Mark Swedberg

When Maycom* [MIGH-comb] arrived at Bible College—known as seminary in Brazil—everyone knew he was going places. Although he was from an interior town of 70,000 inhabitants, he spoke well, did well in school, and was ambitious in a good way. In a word, he was sharp.

In seminary he met a sweet girl by the name of Laura. They were married the December between their third and fourth years. By the time they graduated, several churches had contacted him to see if he was interested in either becoming their pastor or joining their pastoral staff. He eventually decided to accept a position in a church near the seminary. If things went according to plan, he would be called to pastor the church by himself in a year or two.

The church grew quickly, and he grew with it. Soon he was being noticed in the local fellowship and earning the respect of his fellow pastors. He was also feeling pangs of inadequacy, maybe even inferiority, because many of the leaders in his church were professionals with accredited university and master's degrees, while his degree was not accredited. Additionally, the seminary encouraged him to pursue graduate level studies. He was on their radar for a future faculty position.

He looked at different options for getting a master's degree in theological studies. Some of the BMM affiliated seminaries offered specializations in different ministry areas, which was not really what he was after. A couple of them offered Master of Ministry degrees, but they did not seem as rigorous academically as he would like. His desire, if God allowed, was a doctorate in theology, with the goal of returning and strengthening the Baptist seminary faculty.

One of the missionaries had contact with a seminary in the States. So, he took a leave of absence from his church, cobbled together enough funds with the help of American

churches and a generous scholarship at the school where he would study, and he moved his family to the USA. Graduate studies are hard in any language, but they are harder in a language not your own. But after a tough semester or two, he got used to it and began to love the States. What is more, Laura *loved* the States, as did their two children. It was great to see them all learn English so well and so young. It would give them a leg up back in Brazil. They also found a very good church in which they could get involved and minister.

After eight strenuous, but wonderful years of study, it was time to return to Brazil. Neither Laura nor the kids wanted to return. But Maycom insisted, "We came here to get an education so we could help our Brazilian brethren back home. We must return. We promised."

The first thing they discovered is that they did not really fit in anymore. The traffic bothered them, as did the disorganization everywhere, including the seminary. And they could no longer tolerate the easy-going way Brazilians treated a schedule. The Brazilians, for their part, thought that Maycom and Laura had changed—a lot. Their tastes in music had changed. They had strange ideas about how a church should be run, and they began every other sentence with, "In the United States..."

More worrisome to the seminary and the association, they had changed some of their doctrinal positions so that they were on the fringes of what was acceptable in their circles. This led to conflict and eventual division within the association. When he was offered an opportunity to teach at his seminary in the States, he and Laura quickly packed their bags and left Brazil.

This story illustrates the challenges of sending men and women to study abroad. As the national church matures, advance theological education is increasingly important. Here are several reasons why training in-country is best.

First, it keeps the church leaders in their culture. Americans cannot help but take a little of their culture with them to the mission field. That is not all bad, and the people in most countries allow for the foreignness of foreigners, especially if those foreigners won them to Christ. The same is not true for the nationals themselves, and keeping them in-country for their education helps protect them from becoming too Americanized.

Second, it is more sustainable. It simply is not feasible to send all, or even most, of the field's leaders to other countries to be trained. A local Bible college or seminary can train a greater number of leaders. It can even train the next generation of professors and staff.

Third, every country has its own educational system, and the American system is sometimes not accepted. That is the case here in Brazil. I have a BA, MDiv and a ThM, but none of my degrees are recognized by the governmental accrediting agency. National leaders trained in their own countries will be best positioned to decide whether to pursue governmental accreditation and to secure it, if they decide in the affirmative.

Fourth, it is usually more cost-effective to send career missionary professors to the field

than to move a national to the United States for their training.

Fifth, issues arise on the mission field, as they do in the U.S. These issues can be doctrinal, practical, or even government related. Part of the discipleship process is to learn how to deal with these issues, and that cannot be learned if the disciple is out of the country. He will learn best what to do by going through the difficulty with a faithful mentor to guide him.

Finally, it keeps the future pastor and professor in ministry throughout the process. Few seminary professors on the mission field have the luxury of teaching full-time and receiving their support from their teaching. The vast majority must also pastor local churches. Taking them out of the country, even for a brief time, usually leaves at least one church without a pastor for awhile. Thus, the ministry suffers.

Here in Brazil, it is safe to say that our best-trained, most faithful pastors, leaders, and professors received their training in Brazil. This should encourage us to strengthen our training institutions to meet this need.

*This story is based on a true story, although names and some details were changed.

