



Negotiating tradition and change in pastoral training in the Church of the Nazarene in Africa



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This article highlights the tension of sustaining tradition versus the need for change within theological education. Within denominations, there is the challenge of maintaining tradition while at the same time wanting to embrace change. If this is not managed properly, the tradition can become out of date when there is a focus on controlling through enforcing tradition and through indoctrination in education. This article presents the Church of the Nazarene, as a case study, where their theological education is tested against an organic and indigenous framework highlighting the need for a contextual driven curriculum. There are various aspects within the tradition that are slow to adapt, where aspects of Western church polity and practices linger on thereby negatively impact the curriculum. However, if a contextual learning programme does not materialise students' knowledge from the classroom will not match what they need to know once they reach the ministerial setting. This article examines pastoral training in the Church of Nazarene's southern African region to emphasise the dichotomy between preserving tradition and the need to innovate in order to ensure its long-term viability.

Contribution: This article reflects on the important balance of sustainability in a global church tradition, and it serves as a case study of issues commonly found in many denominations. It is about holding on to the core teachings that has stood the test of time but having the ability to be adaptative to the contextual needs of a region. Reasons are provided for the slow pace in change and ways to overcome this. This article contributes to the literature on the Church of Nazarene.

Keywords: African theological education; Church of the Nazarene; church tradition; contextual learning; African church growth.

Introduction

In its establishment, several American congregations came together to form the worldwide Christian denomination known as the Church of the Nazarene. Each group brought with it educational facilities that were operational and missionaries who established national churches across the globe. The Church of the Nazarene was initially called Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. It was at the 1919 General Assembly when it dropped the word Pentecostal in its name. The church is part of the Holiness movement that gave birth to the Pentecostal movement. According to Quanstrom's (2004) *A Century of Holiness Theology*, the Church of the Nazarene does not subscribe to the idea of speaking in tongues; however, to attain a holiness (Lv 11:44, Pt 1 1:6), the Church leans heavily on sanctification, the free will of grace and baptism. Holiness is the distinctive doctrine of the Church of the Nazarene with the emphasis on education and it has established universities and colleges around the world.

The Church of the Nazarene takes the preparation of its pastors very seriously, and the educational preparation is theological as well as biblical. The church accomplishes the academic preparation of Nazarene clergy provided by the academic institutions and programmes (Blevins 2023:208). Some of its institutions of higher learning are as old as the denomination. The *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene* states that:

[T]he college/university educates the church's youth and many of the church's adults, guides them toward spiritual maturity, enriches the church, and sends out into the world thinking, loving servants of Christ. (Blevins 2023:208)

There is a potential for a uniform standard of education globally, which would allow students and faculty from various world regions within the Church to conduct their studies and transition to other locations. The Church recommends that 'each student is to take advantage of the most

appropriate validated course of study provided by the Church in his or her area of the world' (Blevins 2023:208).

Living out a tradition involves passing on tradition and the critical scrutiny thereof. Quality theological education does need a grounding in a particular tradition inside a framework of texts and communities. Here it is important to notice how the church and its training counterpart interact. Theological education is a space for critical discourse and widening the horizons in terms of what is intellectually possible, whereas the church culture ensures that there is an authoritative settling of the issues under discussion (Karkkeinen 2012:245). When the church and theological college are the same, the theological institution avoids clashes and succumbs to the church culture, and openness dissipates. This could be because critical academic reflection and argumentation do not necessarily sit comfortably as it challenges the stability and longevity of the church. Price (2004) categorically states that in the Church of the Nazarene:

... tradition is not only the practice of looking backward, but also of looking forward. Teaching the holiness tradition in Africa needs to ask at least two important questions: What theological traditions, Christian and non-Christian, are already present on this continent? And how does one go about tradition building anyway? In the recent past, building the holiness tradition meant simply to transplant ideas from the United States or Europe into African soil and hope that it would take root. (p. 201)

The Church of the Nazarene in Africa started with the West sending missionaries (Dayhoff 1999:11); this meant that many of the African theological educators received their training from the missionaries and continue to see themselves as ambassadors of these theological frameworks. There is a concern that oftentimes Africans are limited in making a contribution and this sustains the status quo of its traditional presence in Africa. This is often experienced through various pedagogical approaches and sometimes present itself through the Western curriculum (Kraft 2005). This was long noticed by George Wayland Carpenter, reporting on the findings of a task force that was set up after World War I, who mentioned that:

[E]ducation in Africa followed western patterns too slavishly. Courses were too European (or American) in content, they had not been adequately recast from the standpoint of African life and experience, they neglected the vital needs of the African community and the resources of the environment. (Carpenter 1960:191)

Mugambi has observed that 'the missionaries knew little or nothing about the inner dynamics of the African cultural and religious heritage' (Mugambi 2013:120). The problem went beyond a failure to understand the African worldview, it was also a pedagogical issue. For Carpenter, missionaries were concerned with imparting information and gave little thought to 'education for life' as the African would be living it (Carpenter 1960:192). Sadly, this scenario has not changed much. Most theology books are still published in the West; even though missionaries are no longer the majority in theological education in Africa, Westerners still influence through their books.

There is no doubt that the colonisation process in this tradition has shaped theological interpretations and practices and left a psychological scarring on people. However, the baton has been passed on to local and national African leadership and in recent years there have been various theological consultations that speak to global and regional educational developments. In spite of this, in Africa there is still a slow uptake of the African voices in shaping learning material and practices of the church. A key challenge that remains is the traditional-driven nature of the institution as a theological education provider and that educators have been trained in Western theological education. This creates a reluctance towards driving change and opens the door to the irrelevance of education and the needs of the African church. Yet, the commitment to generating a stronger and more creative graduate should take precedence over the survival of the church. This article will expand on these tensions of sustaining the Western tradition while making space for the African voice in theological education.

The impact of the doctrine of Holiness

The Church of the Nazarene was established through an alliance of various churches as part of the Holiness movement. In South Africa, one of the very early and distinctive factors of the church is its strong missionary presence. Rev. Harmon Scmelzenbach arrived in South Africa in 1907 and began work at Endzigeni in Swaziland (Eswatini), in 1910 (Dayhoff 1999:11). According to Dayhoff (1999):

Dr. Charles and Mrs. Fanny Stricklan began the work of the Church of the Nazarene among the white population in Southern Africa, and a few years earlier in 1945 Rev. George and Mrs. Jeanette Hayse began to establish work in the African urban areas of Gauteng. (p. 161)

During the establishment of the Church of the Nazarene, missionaries were used strategically to start the work of the movement.

The Church of the Nazarene, through its compassionate ministry, brought hope to many communities. According to Hirst (2018):

[F]rom its formation around the turn of the twentieth century, the Church of the Nazarene, which proclaims a theology of Christian Holiness within the Wesleyan tradition, has worked alongside the poorest in society. (p. 66)

This is evident through the building schools and clinics in various parts of South Africa. Currently, the structure and operations of the church continue to seek to be inclusive and to allow various representations, especially on the African continent. However, there is often a challenge in how it is implemented within training and education.

It was during the missionary era that the influence of this historical American holiness movement presented the idea that holiness had a particular look, and that one could reach perfection. It led many to adopt not so much a biblical

understanding of holiness but a more Western way of understanding holiness through Western cultural lenses. Mtukwa (2015:65) argues that there is a problem with the American influence on the African understanding of holiness. According to Mtukwa (2015:9) 'what the African Church has learned about holiness, she has learned from the American Holiness movement'. Mtukwa states that (2015):

[T]here are some pastors who understand the biblical message of holiness, while there are many who do not understand the message of holiness or sanctification even though they have gone through the education system. (p. 10)

While there might be the challenge of clearly articulating the doctrine of holiness or a lack of understanding on the part of its pastors, one clear thing is how it relates to others and the broader community, especially those who suffer and are seen as outcasts within society. It seems to be aligned with an individualistic Western interpretation and does not recognise the vibrancy of the spirit in African societies, which led Africans to abandon their cultural and indigenous values.

The doctrine of entire sanctification and the idea of perfection dominates the church in such a way that there is more of a focus on how one dresses and performs certain rituals that have become legalistic. This became especially problematic when ministers do not fully understand the doctrine and are not able to articulate it to their congregations. This seems to have come through the missionaries who came from the United States of America (US) at a time when holiness was understood primarily in terms of what one did or did not do. Dany Gomis (2014:1), Africa's Regional Director for the Church of the Nazarene, reflects on this misunderstanding of the African and states, 'churches heavily influenced by Western missionaries rarely mention the victory of Christ over Satan'. The culture, therefore, that permeates the church is that of defeat and an acceptance of fear within the Christian life. Yet, a recovery of the scriptural doctrine of holiness can help to address African challenges. To maintain the idea of holiness, the Church has subscribed to legalistic practices, which sustains its Western domination in its practices and theology, leaving the Africans highly dependent on the West, through the missionary, for its continual spiritual and pastoral survival.

The Western influence on theology and church practice

Various practices are linked to Western influence and control through examples of governance and administration, doctrine and liturgy, including worship, baptism as well as funerals and weddings. These sacraments and rituals are laid out in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene (2023) to ensure and maintain its practices by making sure that all churches follow a set way of looking at spiritual development. This is important to recognise as it directly impacts ministerial training and dictates how church ministers are trained. It speaks to the needful challenge of the theological relevance of training in different geographical contexts of the church.

However, another perspective, that of Dirk Ray Ellis (2012:45) in his attempt to argue for 'the relationship between the liturgical practice in the church of the Nazarene with special reference to John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection', argues that there is a need for the church to reinforce their liturgical practices as it otherwise results in the spiritual death of the church. According to Ellis (2012), if non-traditional practices are allowed, long-standing liturgical practices will be fragmented and become a concern for the church.

As a denominational church, its structure is framed around the global ministry centre that is situated in Lenexa, Kansas, US. In addition, all *Manual* instruction, as well as the amendments, are done through a framework outside of the African context even though there is involvement from the African representation in formulating these instructions. The idea that the Church of the Nazarene has resources in the US makes it seem that the US is the only significant contributor in terms of theological education (Thomas 2004). Africans may feel they cannot meaningfully contribute to the process because of their lack of ability to create contextual theological training. African culture is also its own impediment because it is not culturally appropriate to question issues. Most often, Africans attend the General Assembly with resources that come from the Western church, and that support makes it difficult for the Africans to engage in the process critically and thus, meaningfully.

The challenge that this presents to the church in Africa is that there must be space within scholarship to interpret and interrogate the traditional teachings in ways that are meaningful for the Africans (Nkonge 2012). While a democratic process seems fair in allowing for fair representation as well as elected candidates, there is still a need for such governance to reflect the changes for organic growth and indigenisation.

Theological training in the Church of the Nazarene

The Church of the Nazarene has 12 theological training institutions in the Africa region, south of the Sahara (countries in the north in Africa belong to another region). The structure, governance and administration are executed through the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene. This *Manual* serves as its constitution, which regulates the educational structure of the church and provides a framework for theological training (Church of the Nazarene 2023).

A critical aspect of the church's educational preparation is the curriculum delivered to the students. The International Course of Study Advisory Committee (ICOSAC), a key player in the educational process, is mandated to approve the course of study. This underscores the oversight and quality control in the educational process. The ICOSAC stipulates that the curriculum delivered to those preparing to be Nazarene clergy should focus on content, competency, character and context. (Blevins 2023:208). This is known as

the four Cs. The first is *Content*, which includes the content of the Bible (Old and New Testament), Christian Theology, and church history and mission. The list of courses should include how to interpret Scripture faithfully and the distinctive doctrine of the Church of the Nazarene, which is holiness, as well as the history and polity of the Church of the Nazarene. The second area of focus is *Competency*, which focusses on competencies in areas of communication (both oral and written), management, leadership, administration and finance, as well as essential analytical skills necessary for ministry. Included here are aspects of pastoral theology – preaching skills, ability to conduct pastoral care and counselling, worship, evangelism, and Christian Education (Blevins 2023:208). The church *Manual* states that ‘Graduation from a validated course of study requires the partnering of the educational provider and a local church to direct students in ministerial practices and competency development’ (Blevins 2023:208). The third area is *Character*, which focusses on character development, Christian ethics, and personal and family relationship, all of which are deemed critical for ministry (Blevins 2023:208). The challenge in this area is the measurement of character development and various tools have been adopted in this area to assess the ministers’ character. The last aspect is *Context* – the minister is required to understand history and current affairs, worldview and the social context where the Church finds herself. Some of the courses that address context include those from anthropology, sociology, social studies and missions (Blevins 2023:208).

Each region of the Church has an accrediting body that approves courses of study known as the Africa Region Course of Study Advisory Committee (ARCOSAC). It is responsible for reviewing the programmes submitted and ascertaining that they are balanced in terms of these four Cs. The ARCOSAC sets the minimum percentage for each area of the four Cs. Currently, the minimums are 30% for Content, 30% for Competency, 10% for Character and 10% for Context, with 20% undesignated to allow each education provider sufficient room to design a curriculum relevant to the context’s needs (Africa Region Course of Study Advisory Council 2024:24). These are what are referred to as ability statements, and they are coded CN for content, CP for Competency, CH for Character, and CX for Context (Africa Region Course of Study Advisory Council 2024:24). Each course syllabus is supposed to indicate what ability statements are addressed in that course. In addition, it is also expected that the assessments of each course indicate which ability statement will be assessed in that course.

The consideration of how the curriculum is constructed is of critical importance. The ARCOSAC’s responsibility is to ‘maintain quality in how we train clergy for ministry’ (Mtukwa & Gabriel 2022). In this case, to maintain its distinctiveness, Western learning materials are used, while it must be noticed that African scholars are beginning to contribute to the literature. African writers have recognised the need for contextualising the church’s distinctive doctrines within the African worldview. Some of these doctrines might be more biblical when presented using African thought

forms. For instance, the individualism of the West negatively impinges on the doctrine of holiness rather than the communal worldview of the African people (Mtukwa 2015). ‘Denominational identities are reinforced through separate and isolated systems of theological education, sometimes even in polemical or exclusive attitudes over against each other’ (Werner 2011:96). Through the continued control of theological training students can become alienated from their communities.

A gap in contextual education and training is mostly found within the curriculum, for example, pastors can struggle to handle spiritual challenges and demon possession, and how the spirit has shaped the worldview of Africans. As Naidoo (2010:347) states ‘a key shortcoming ... is a lack of attention to pedagogies of formation and contextualization, that is, teaching that attends to social identity and social location of the student’. Many times, indigenous communities give up their cultural practices and norms to accept the denomination’s message. These cultural norms have been communicated as an ‘abomination in the sight of God’ (Lk 16:15). Africans would be told that what their forefathers believed was inconsistent with God and the scriptures. According to O’ Donovan ‘many deeply embedded cultural values of Westerners and Africans are incompatible and are incongruent worldviews’ (2000:46). Yet, these tensions remain abstract for the student, and it seems their worldviews are not fully considered. As Katola states (2014:34), ‘when one’s mind is pillaged, he develops a negative attitude towards himself. This means for Africa to develop, their identity as Africans must be emphasized in their education system’.

While there have been modifications in how curriculum design has developed in recent years, the challenge remains on how these changes are integrated. From the above-stated explanation on the flexibility in curriculum design around the four Cs, it is also interesting to notice that only 10% of priority is allocated to ‘context’; however, there seems some concession to design a curriculum that considers the context and worldview of the student. Mugambi (2013) states that:

[C]urriculum development is a professional undertaking, which must begin from the context of the learners – from what they already know – then proceed towards helping them discern those texts and experiences that can provide relevant knowledge, skills, and expertise appropriate for each particular context. (p. 120)

Here theological education must be tested against an organic and indigenous framework. ‘Theological education for missionary pastors needs an emphasis in critical contextualization to help them understand and evaluate the context in which they live and minister’ (Price 2004:200). The challenge is that many educators are trained in theology and not in educational pedagogy, hence the issue of curriculum design results in the easier option of using material from ‘elsewhere.’

The epistemology of local cultures has suffered from their knowledge being unrecognised. According to Gregory

Crofford and Mashangu Maluleka in the article *Let Them Call for the Elders of the Church: Divine Healing and the Church of the Nazarene in South Africa* (Crofford 2014:9), a serious oversight of the Church of the Nazarene 'was the omission of a module on African spiritualism, divine healing, and spiritual warfare in the ministerial curriculum. This resulted in our pastors graduating unequipped in this area'. For many pastors, this not only becomes a challenge to be able to care for the congregants but they are also overwhelmed and become hopeless and victims themselves. They are not trained to become sustainable in their life and ministry and to 'challenge and to shape the surrounding culture' (Palmer 2001:206). Instead, pastors are trained to remain loyal to the values and theological views of the denomination. It is also well-known that pastors as well as congregation members still hold on to their African traditional practices (Oduyoye 2009:18), which often is in contradiction with their place as pastors or members of the church.

Education must be flexible and church history shows how Pentecostalism, through its ability to adapt is 'a religion made to travel' (Cox 1996:102). Given that the centre of Christianity is now in the Global South, this shift should also be seen in theological engagement. Walls has stated that we are now seeing the 'redrawing of the theological maps' (Walls 2011:235). For Walls 'The redrawing has huge consequences, not only for theological education, but for the theological scholarship which both informs theological education and is developed through it' (Walls 2011:236). African scholars should not continue to rely on exported theologies and should not remain behind as the redrawing of theological maps take place.

Implications for training and praxis

Questions have been raised on whether the training of pastors sufficiently considers students' contexts in learning. Training of pastors must be considered in a way that reflects on various aspects such as their worldview, socio-political as well as their philosophy about ministry. 'Since every aspect of life is interconnected the process of learning in theological colleges should continuously be related to the students' lives' (Naidoo 2021:1). According to Van der Westhuizen, Greuel and Beukes (2017:201–273), 'Africanisation of curricula implies that education and training, as well as praxis, be informed by the reality of the African context'. In addition, Naidoo states that people teach as they have been taught (Naidoo 2021:19). She writes that in considering educational models, Africa does not need only innovations or better models, but a radical change in the concept of education from a teacher or content focus to student-centred model. Thus, the life world of the student is important in developing contextual theological education.

Nevertheless, various challenges exist with a hesitancy to renew educational practices. As mentioned, African scholars need academic mentoring in contextualising the gospel to the culture of their students. The other challenge has to do with the trainers' training level, as not all institutions, especially in the Global South have high qualifications. Sometimes,

institutions do not have accreditation beyond what the church provides. Consequently, there are disparities between institutions of higher learning, such as Christian universities and Bible colleges, regarding the quality of the instruction provided to students.

Moving forward, the formulation of educational programmes and training of pastors must be informed by its context, and this must be done with local leaders who can construct such training programmes. Omolewa states (2007:593) 'African historical elements must be considered for education for improving its quality'. It can no longer be that African cultural and historical factors are ignored and demonised when it comes to the church or theological training. This implies that everyone creates their reality in a different way and that Africanness is not inherently unrelated to global challenges. Because of this, it's critical that the African church report and observe the world from their own perspective rather than feeling compelled to emulate America or Europe (Thomas 2004). There needs to be an open, critical dialogue within the tradition on how best to serve the local pastors and their challenges within the communities they serve. There must be dialogue among theologians in the tradition from various regions of the world. Africa must specify the topics for debate on the agenda and start conducting research in those areas. African scholars can benefit from this because they do not have to wait to be invited to share their experiences as Africans and feel sorry for themselves. Africans must organise their own conferences and clearly express their spiritual vision and expertise (Thomas 2004). In addition, denominational health concerns should be prioritised so that the idea of partnership must be in such a way that it allows African theologians to have equality on all platforms of the denomination. The educational providers of the Church of the Nazarene need to show a willingness to adapt to current trends and adopt innovative approaches to address emerging issues.

Conclusion

The passing on of tradition and the critical examination of it are integral components of living out a tradition. In sustaining the vision of the church, tradition cannot be compromised for innovation. Yet in the case of the African church, dealing with the lived realities of Africans in their context means attending to the spiritual and social needs of students. It should be observed that theological education is not just about transmitting knowledge but develops the whole person, thus more intentional curriculum design is needed to adequately prepare clergy, ensuring they are well-equipped to serve their communities with cultural sensitivity, expertise and integrity.

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L.S. wrote the original draft. G.M. conceptualised and reviewed the drafts and wrote additional sections. M.N. reviewed the drafts and wrote additional sections. L.S., G.M. and M.N. all contributed equally to the article.

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