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Das, Rupen. "Relevance and Faithfulness: Challenges in Contextualizing Theological Education." *InSights: Journal for Global Theological Education* 1, no. 2 (2016): 17-29.

# Relevance and Faithfulness: Challenges in Contextualizing Theological Education

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The relevance of theological curricula to specific contexts has always been a challenge. In our pluralistic world where graduates minister in greatly varying contexts and cultures, theological education has to be both relevant and faithful. It is no longer enough to ensure that students have mastered core theological concepts and truths, learned biblical knowledge, and developed basic ministry skills. The impact of a theological institution is now measured by the effectiveness of its graduates in specific ministry contexts. Therefore, theological curricula have to be connected with graduates' ministry contexts. This article explores historical models that have responded to needs within the Church and in society, and then asks how theological institutions today can be intentionally attuned to context. At the same time, concern for context must be balanced with the need to remain faithful to the Lord regardless of context.

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## Introduction

The issue of contextual relevance is not new to the Church or to theological education. As the Early Church moved from a predominantly Jewish setting in Palestine into the Roman world steeped in Greek philosophy and Caesar worship, staying faithful to Apostolic teachings amidst competing philosophies and allegiances was a significant challenge. The question was: how can one communicate the Gospel in contexts that are so different from the Jewish world in which the Apostles had known Christ?

This challenge was probably most clearly seen in the life of Polycarp, whose family had moved from Jerusalem after its fall in 70 AD and settled in the Roman province of Asia. It was here in the city of Ephesus that he was discipled as a young man by the Apostle John. Polycarp was later appointed by John himself as the Bishop of Smyrna, which is now Izmir.

What is so special about Polycarp is that he was one of the few Church Fathers who served as direct links between the Apostles who had known Jesus and heard His teachings firsthand, and the Early Church of the late 1st and early 2nd centuries. At a time when the young Church's doctrines had not yet been crystallized through the various Councils and Creeds, the challenge for Polycarp was to ensure that the Apostolic teachings, which he had heard directly from John, remained unadulterated as they were passed on to the next generation.

This was no easy task. As Hellenism was on the rise and a Greek worldview dominated intellectual discourse, the Apostle John had contextualized the understanding of who Christ is by adopting the term *Logos* from Greek philosophy to explain how God is involved in the world and in human life. By observing John's efforts at contextualization, Polycarp not only learned the doctrines defining this new faith, but also learned *how to connect* the reality of Christ whom he had come to know with the cultural and intellectual context in which he lived.

This proved critical when he was confronted with the heretic Marcion, who in his own contextualization efforts, had tried to separate the Church from its Jewish roots and in the process, redefined who Jesus and God were. In order to deal with the heresy, Polycarp sifted through the arguments from the Greek culture and philosophy that had undergirded Marcion's heresy, identifying those that did not align with the Truth he had learned in order to ensure that the Early Church remained rooted in the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles.

This is the challenge that all theologians and missiologists face: how can one take Truth learned in one context and make it relevant in another? Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore writes, "Confession of Jesus Christ takes place in particular historical and cultural contexts...Our response to the questions of who we say Jesus Christ is and how he helps us is shaped in important ways by the particular context in which these questions arise" (2004, 205). For theological educators, the challenge is even more complex: how does one teach students the skills to take the Christ they know in their context and enable people in a different historical and cultural context to encounter Jesus Christ? This is exactly what the Apostle John had to do – to take the Christ he had come to know in a Jewish Palestinian context and teach Polycarp how to proclaim Christ in an intellectually Greek and politically Roman context. In a sense, the Apostle John's effectiveness in discipling and training Polycarp can be assessed by how successfully Polycarp had handled the Marcionite heresy.

Assessing the impact of theological education has always been a challenge. This article will address how a seminary might connect theological education with the ministry contexts of its graduates in order to equip effective Christian leaders. In a pluralistic world with greatly varying contexts and cultures, theological education

has to be both relevant and faithful. It is no longer enough to ensure that students have mastered core theological concepts and truths, learned biblical knowledge, and developed basic ministry skills. The impact of a theological institution must now be measured by the effectiveness of its graduates in specific ministry contexts. Therefore, theological curricula have to be connected with the contexts of graduates. This article will lay some foundations by: 1) looking at how different models of theological education have evolved over time to respond to needs within the Church and society, and 2) exploring how a theological institution might intentionally connect its teaching with the ministry contexts of its graduates.

Pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson states that all ministries are rooted in particular geographic locations. He writes, “Now is the time to rediscover the meaning of the local, and in terms of church, the parish. All churches are local. All pastoral work takes place geographically” (Peterson 1994, 129). If this is true, then do our graduates have the ability and tools necessary for understanding their local contexts?

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## Models of Theological Education

There is no one model of theological education. Jesus mentored the Twelve by focusing on the development of their character, faith, and ministry skills. He also provided extended teaching, as in the Sermon on the Mount and the Upper Room Discourse. The Apostle Paul mentored key people as they traveled with him. He taught them faith through his life experiences, and theology and pastoral practice through his letters and teaching. His students learned about contextualization as they observed his ministry to the Gentiles. The Apostle Peter taught the believers in exile how to defend their faith against false teachers.

Since the time of the Early Church to the present, theological education has always considered: 1) the needs of the Church in a particular context, as well as 2) the influence of the local culture. There are three commonly accepted models of theological education. David Kelsey of Yale Divinity School was the first to compare the classical and vocational approaches (1993, 27). Robert Banks (1999) then added a missional approach and Brian Edgar (2005) a confessional model. Later, Darren Cronshaw (2012) added the contextual and spiritual models.

**The classical model**, sometimes referred to as the “Athenian model,” understands theological education as Christian character formation or *paideia*. *Paideia* is derived from classical Greek pedagogy, literally means childrearing or education, and signifies a process of molding character. The objective is to produce well-rounded and fully educated citizens (Tarnas, 1993, 29-30). Drawing from the philosophical foundations of Platonism, *paideia* does not start with individual persons and their potential, but rather the concept of the ideal person. The

goal of education is to educate and mold human beings into the likeness of the “ideal man,” who represents human nature in its truest form. Greek and Roman philosophers, artists, sculptors, educators, and poets all drew their inspiration from the concept of the ideal man. The goal of classical education is therefore the transformation of the individual.

The Early Church adopted and then adapted this model. Some of the Church Fathers saw the Christian faith as a form of *paideia*, believing that one’s character had to be formed as one grows in faith. By the medieval and monastic period, this model had become the dominant educational philosophy. *Paideia* also influenced Basil of Caesarea’s monastic rules (Jaeger 1961, 90). The objective was to help individuals develop a holistic vision of the totality of life. Rather than just knowing about God, the focus was on knowing God intimately.

Brian Edgar at Asbury Theological Seminary writes of theological education “It is not about theology, that is, the formal study of the knowledge of God, but it is more about what Kelsey calls *theologia*, that is gaining the wisdom of God” (2005, 210). The emphasis is on holiness and the transformation of the individual. Edgar states that in this model of theological education, holiness, and moral and spiritual transformation are central.

**The vocational model**, referred to as the “Berlin model” and rooted in the Enlightenment, views theological education as preparation for a professional Christian vocation. Therefore, theological education had to be situated within the context of a university as an academic discipline. The German term *wissenschaft* means an area of study or science that requires systematic research. The idea of *wissenschaft* as a model for seminaries comes from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s pioneering work at Humboldt University in Berlin. The moral and personal formation of individuals through the study of authoritative texts assumed lesser importance (and became a secondary objective) than the training of students in rigorous inquiry that facilitated movement from theory to praxis.

Schleiermacher’s goal was to design a curriculum that would train professional ministers for the State Church in Germany, as a way of defending theology’s status as a valid academic discipline. He built on the fourfold structure of the traditional theological curriculum used to train pastors and teachers during the Reformation period. This curriculum consisted of Biblical Studies, Church History, Dogmatic or Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology. Schleiermacher adapted it to a modern university context, insisting that the university had a mandate to train clergymen because their training was no different from that of practitioners of medicine or law. In all three disciplines, training follows a progression from theory to professional practice (Schleiermacher and Tice 2011, 137)..This vocational model of study was adopted at the risk of losing the emphasis of *paideia* on

personal, moral, and spiritual formation.

Schleiermacher’s model is still very much the framework used in most theological training today, though the specific content of the four areas of study may have changed. Theological schools continue to recognize that both knowledge and skills are needed for pastoral ministry. Many Evangelical seminaries incorporate elements from both the classical and vocational models in their curricula. They focus on character and worldview formation, as well as on the “professional skills” required to serve in Christian ministry, though the emphasis is more on theory and knowledge.

The final commonly accepted model, **the missional model**, was developed by Robert Banks of Macquarie University in Sydney and is referred to as the “Jerusalem model.” The missional model sees mission as encompassing all aspects of life: family, friendships, work, and community life. For Banks, missional education is “undertaken with a view to what God is doing in the world, considered from a global perspective” (1999, 142). Therefore, theological education is not an independent discipline, but is seen as a part of effective mission. The objective is to be involved in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. According to Banks, the best theological education and spiritual formation involves field-based training, stretches students to practice what they are studying, encompasses all of life, and addresses evangelistic opportunities.

Additional understandings of theological education had been added to these three models. Brian Edgar of Asbury Theological Seminary proposes a fourth approach, called **the confessional model**. Referred to as the “Geneva model,” Edgar’s approach emphasizes knowing God through the means of grace and the traditions of a particular faith community, and especially through the creed and confession of that community.

This involves “formation... through in-formation about the tradition and en-culturation with it” (Edgar 2005, 213).. This is done through teaching about the founders, heroes, struggles, strengths, and traditions that are both distinctive of and formative for that community. Examples of schools following this approach include denominational seminaries and the training institutions of specific mission agencies.

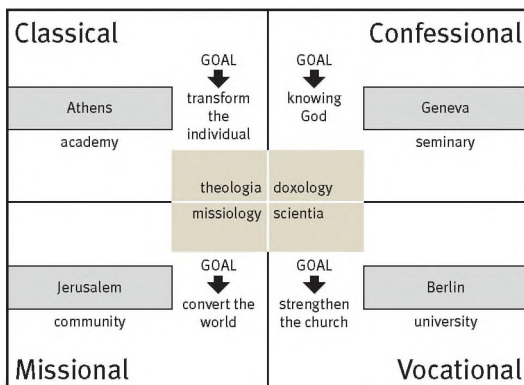


Figure 1. Four Models of Theological Education  
Adapted from Brian Edgar, “Theology of Theological Education,”  
Evangelical Review of Theology 29, no. 3 (2005): 213.

Cronshaw (2012), Mission Researcher at the Baptist Union of Victoria in Australia, adds two further models. The first is **the contextual model**, referred to as the “Auburn model.” According to Cronshaw, theology and mission need to be expressed in specific contexts, such as his local neighborhood of Auburn (Franke, 2005, 90). Thus, theological training involves understanding local contexts and learning how to build community (*koinonia*). It is the community that lives out the Gospel, a process through which boundaries dissolve. Together, Christians experience community and demonstrate the love of God so that others may belong and one day believe (Murray, 2005).

The final model that Cronshaw adds is the **spiritual model**, also known as the “New Delhi model.” This approach takes into consideration a multicultural and pluralistic world. Cronshaw writes:

*A New Delhi context for missional spirituality is the ashram. As the balance of global power and Christian influence is shifting to the global South, Kraig Klauadt artfully suggests that certain Indian ashrams feature helpful characteristics that theological education can adopt. These ashrams are located “in the world” without fences; are open to all; offer community living that is engaged in service; emphasize simple living and spiritual maturity more than publishing; provide a holistic curriculum of intellectual, spiritual, political, aesthetic and relational development; and create time and space for spirituality and self-awareness. Locating theological education and missional spirituality in New Delhi reminds me to engage with the worldviews of my neighbours and to welcome the alternative model of the ashram (2012, 12).*



Figure 2. Six Models of Theological Education and Missional Spirituality

Adapted from Darren Cronshaw, “Reenvisioning Theological and Missional Spirituality,” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 9, no. 1 (2012): 13.



Each of these models understands its role in theological formation differently and, as a result, defines effectiveness differently. While certain elements of each model can be transferred across cultures and contexts, each represents a response to specific needs in the Church and in society.

These six models also highlight the variety of theological education that is available today for laity, ministers, other Christian leaders, and scholars. Each type of training has different goals and requires a different curriculum. Theological institutions need to be clear about what they hope to accomplish, as this would determine the model of theological training they should use.

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## Connecting Curriculum to Context

Different models of theological education arose in response to the specific needs of the Church at certain moments in history and in particular locations. How might a theological institution today intentionally connect with its own context? How might theological educators connect their curricula with the ministry contexts of their students?

There are two models of organizational theory that institutions use to assess their effectiveness. One is a systems theory of organizations. According to this theory, an organization has a structure, clearly defined roles, processes and procedures, a product (in this case, a curriculum), and so on. The more clearly defined these elements are, the more effective the organization will be. Therefore, the quality of the institution is measured by its systems, procedures, and resources in the form of curriculum, faculty, facilities, library, and so on. One hears terms like ISO 9000. Accreditation reviews are often based on this theory of organizations. While context is sometimes acknowledged, a systems theory of organizations is mostly internally focused.

Others see organizations as living systems, or organisms. They move away from a mechanistic model of institutions to a biological one. Organizations are open systems. They have a structure, but they survive and are able to thrive only if they are able to adapt to changes in their environment. The open systems approach requires organizational structures, systems, and procedures to be flexible, responsive, and adaptive. Such organizations are sensitive to context and are externally focused. Both internally and externally focused understandings of organizations are needed to ensure the quality and effectiveness of a theological institution.

Within the larger framework of the ministries of the Church and the *missio Dei*, theological institutions exist not only to produce graduates, but also to meet needs in churches, on the mission field, and in Christian organizations to



further the purposes of God. They do this through their graduates. Therefore, the effectiveness of a theological institution is assessed not by the number of graduates it produces or the personal quality of these graduates, but rather by the ability of graduates to meet the needs of churches, mission agencies, and the communities they serve. Are our theological curricula relevant to the ministry contexts of our graduates?

Consider the “Program Logic” figure below, which illustrates the various interconnected steps in the process effecting positive change. Teaching is an activity that should result in learning. Whether learning has taken place is assessed through exams, research and reflection papers, case studies, simulations, field practice, and a variety of other evaluative measures. However, there is a difference between assessing an activity and assessing the result of that activity. Our objective is not to report on how many have attended a particular training activity, but rather to identify what has changed as a result of the activity. Most seminaries understand this well and are able to assess whether learning has taken place. However, our work does not stop at determining whether learning has taken place. We must also ask what graduates have done with what they have learned.

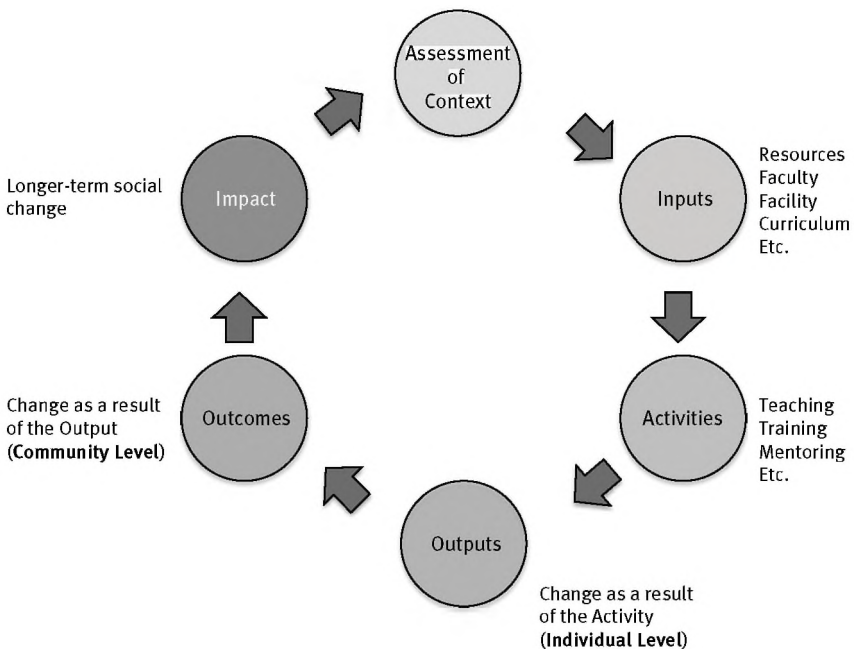


Figure 3. Program Logic

Theological institutions must begin with an assessment and understanding of their own context and of the contexts in which their graduates will minister. Activities such as teaching, training, and mentoring must then be designed according to this understanding with the inputs (or resources) available to the seminary. The activities will result in certain changes (outputs) for individual students that will help them to minister effectively in a church, on a mission field, or through a Christian organization.

The effectiveness of the graduate and the resulting changes that occur in the church, mission field, or organization are the outcomes. (Note that this is different from what we often refer to as educational outcomes). The seminary needs to define what is meant by the “effectiveness of graduates” (at the outcome level) and identify the indicators to be used.

Finally, the local church or the community of believers will influence the surrounding community and the resulting transformation is referred to as the impact. Of course, the local church is only one of the contributors to social change, since social impact can never be attributed completely to any single institution.

As we can see, there are several cause-and effect-relationships from activities all the way to impact. We need to be aware of the factors that can affect and disrupt this cause-and-effect change process at various points. These external and internal factors are known as risks, and should be identified and addressed.

We can discern several implications from the change process that has been outlined:

1. The focus of the theological institution needs to be on the outcome level and not just on the output. The graduates and their training are only a means to the greater end of serving the Church and participating in the mission of God.
2. A theological institution’s effectiveness is measured by the effectiveness of its graduates in their particular ministry contexts.
3. In order for graduates to be effective, seminaries need to understand their students’ contexts and design curricula accordingly.

How can we connect the ministry contexts of our graduates with our curricula?

After assessing the contexts carefully, we need to engage in two administrative processes in order to ensure the effectiveness of our institution. The first ensures feedback collection at various points in the change process. The second ensures that decisions are made based on the feedback and information that have been gathered.

1. *Feedback Collection:* An educational institution needs to have feedback mechanisms to assess the progress and quality of its programs. Exams, for example, assess the progress of students. Student course evaluations provide some information about the effectiveness of faculty. Monthly financial reports provide snapshots of the institution’s financial status. Similarly, we also need ways to collect feedback at the activity, output, and outcome levels to identify and assess the progress and changes taking place. While most institutions have internal feedback mechanisms, very few have mechanisms for obtaining feedback from external contexts on a regular basis.
  
2. *Decision Making:* Good decisions are made on the basis of accurate information and feedback from various sources. Unfortunately, available information is not always used. For example, during a curriculum revision process, do we look at the student and faculty course evaluations? Do we gather feedback from graduates, and from the churches or organizations they are serving? Feedback from assessments, student and faculty evaluations, and student performance need to be directed toward the specific educational administrators who make the decisions regarding curriculum redesign or course revision. Too often, evaluations are done, but the information is never used to make educational programs more relevant.

A seminary’s feedback mechanism could look like the following:

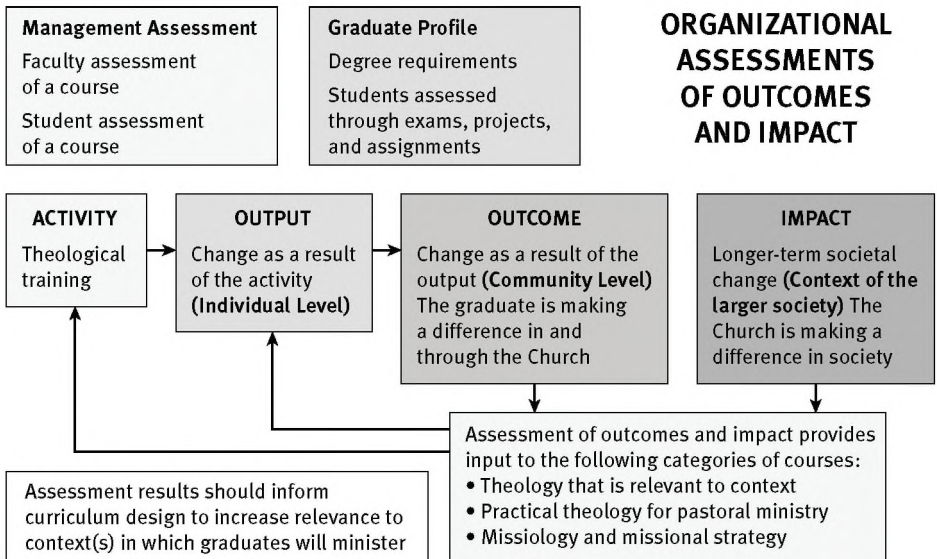


Figure 4. Organizational Assessments and Feedback Loops

Consider these key points about feedback mechanisms:

- As each activity or course is conducted and then completed, its effectiveness needs to be assessed. This can be done through faculty course assessments, student assessments of the curriculum, and student evaluations of the faculty.
- The seminary's main purpose is to train and equip leaders. Most seminaries have already established graduate profiles or graduation requirements for every program. Throughout their tenure at a seminary, students are continually assessed to determine whether they are fulfilling graduation requirements. This is done through tests, exams, assignments, projects, case studies, and so on. The changes in the student's knowledge, attitudes, and skills are what we are assessing.
- At the same time, a seminary's mission should never stop at equipping leaders. Leaders are equipped in order to serve. A seminary's ultimate mission is to serve the Church and the organizations obeying the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Therefore, we must also measure the outcome of our work by assessing whether churches and mission organizations are being served by our graduates. This kind of assessment can only be done by working closely with the churches and communities where graduates are serving. The seminary needs to define what it means by "effectiveness."

At the outcome level, collecting periodic feedback from the ministry contexts of graduates would provide a wealth of information for curriculum redesign or course revision. Feedback from graduates, churches, key Christian leaders, and communities could provide information for improving three vital components of theological education:

- A) *Theology*: These would include the Creeds, Systematic or Biblical Theology, Historical Theology, and Christian Ethics. While all theological concepts are important for any theological education, are certain theological concepts problematic in particular contexts? Students need to not only know what these may be, but also understand how to address them. How is God perceived and understood in a particular context or culture? What are the biblical perspectives on the issues of poverty and social justice, gender, race, human trafficking, immigrants, female genital mutilation, and so on? What are the specific social and ethical issues in a particular context that need to be addressed from within a Christian ethical framework? How is respect shown and thus, how is God worshiped in a specific culture and context?

- B) *Practical or Pastoral Theology*: Do graduates know how to address the specific issues faced by individuals and families? There are cultural variations on issues such as childrearing and child discipline, marital relationships and divorce, interactions with in-laws in extended families, gender roles, selection of marriage partners, etc. Recent converts may face issues such as persecution, baptism, being cut off from their families and communities, polygamy, and so on.
- C) *Missiology*: What are effective missional strategies and practices for a particular context? What contextual bridges can be made to the gospel? What are potential barriers or risks?

Connecting curricula to ministry contexts increases the probability of effectiveness in the ministries of graduates. Attending to each step in the “program logic” – overseeing the activity of theological training, confirming that the output fits graduate profiles, and assessing the outcome of graduates’ effectiveness in ministry – ensures that theological education can have a positive impact in diverse contexts.

## Conclusion

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If all ministries, as Eugene Peterson says, are geographical – located within space and time in a specific cultural, political, and historical reality – then do theological institutions understand the realities and contexts of their graduates, and prepare them accordingly? Do we intentionally connect our curricula to their contexts?

In the life of Polycarp, there is evident another quality that the Apostle John had nurtured in his disciple – that of faithfulness amidst challenging and threatening contexts.

Polycarp understood the importance of contextualization as he observed the ministry of the Apostle John and was able to effectively safeguard the faith by countering the heresies of Marcion. However, when confronted with the Caesar worship of the Roman Empire, there was no option other than to remain faithful without compromise. Polycarp was martyred because he would not proclaim that Caesar was lord. As he faced execution by burning, he declared, “86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” Polycarp is a model of both relevance and faithfulness.

Knowing how and when to be relevant, and when to remain steadfast and unchanging requires wisdom and discernment as we work to contextualize theological education to better serve the Church and transform communities for the glory of God.

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