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EXPLORING THE SYNCHRONY AND SYNERGY BETWEEN THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE CHURCH: IS IT A CASE OF MELODIOUS SYMPHONY OR CACOPHONOUS DISSONANCE? EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES, DANGERS, OPPORTUNITIES AND A MODEST WAY FORWARD IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH AND THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

BY

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The church and theological institutions are at a cacophonous dissonance yet the two are inextricably intertwined they are not merely complementary but in a mutually symbiotic, reciprocal relationship that is of shared benefit like a melodious symphony. The two are tied from their hips in their conception, initiation and functionalities.

Hence, the sustainability and thriving of the two institutions is grounded on their coordination and mutual growth based on curriculum development, financial stability, research and innovation. The two institutions of the church and theological institution ought to concomitantly and concurrently in their ontology and function. In a desktop research and a descriptive survey field study it was established that the two institutions must of necessity co-operate and co-work together for them to be relevant and vibrant. This is actualized in the quest of making theology be relevant to the church and the church supportive to theological institution for the two supplements not supplants each other. The study through desk top study and field study done through descriptive study where a questioner was administered to 40 respondents and it was established theological institutions ought to have a symbiotic and cordial relationship with the church, in the ideal which was established by 92% of the forty respondents which 37 of the respondents. Though in reality the relationship that was ascertained in the study was distant, far and remote as it was proved by 75% of respondents or 30 out of the 40 respondents.

The church need for the theological education was demonstrated in the study by 92% or 37 the respondent which showed that it is critical, while 32% or 13 persuaded that theological education had a very strong impact in the church. The study confirmed the need of a paradigm shift on the curriculum of theological institutions to be on practical ministry skills sand personal devotion with 40% or 16 of the respondents affirming to position.

This goes in tandem with competence based education that has been implemented in Kabarak University department of education and in the school of theological education, this includes having in the facilities lectures who are in ministry so that it can connect the academic to the pastoral which was enclosed by 30% of the respondents in the study as the best suited for practical theological education. Theological institution needs to be adoptive and innovative to circumvent the current economic and the balance between career, family and education priority realities that is why part time blended learning was more preferred by 72% of the respondents. Therefore there is need for a paradigm shift on how theological education that is done to be relevant and practical and to embrace ecumenical theological that is more sustainable that in view of shrinking theological education in parochial colleges owned by churches. There is need for churches to participate in the formulation of theological education curriculums and researches in citadels of ecumenical theological institutions like Kabarak University among others. Consequently, theological education and the church are inextricably intertwined and they ought to be in a state of melodious symphony not a cacophonous dissonance.

Keywords: Symbiotic relationship, Coordination, Research and innovation, Sustainability.

1.0 Introduction

The church is uniquely instituted, eternally in the mind of God, covertly in the Old Testament, preparatorily in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and covertly in the Day of Pentecost, which is so clearly described in the book of Acts of the Apostles. This phenomenon of the ekklesia is well articulated by the erudite

S. M. Houghton in his sketches of church history, his *Magnus Opus*; the sketches of church history, where he asseverates that.

In the inspiration pen which worked in the New Testament tells the reader about the events that led to the formation of the church of the Christian era. The execution and resurrection of Lord Jesus Christ, the descent of the Holy Spirit, the proclamation of the gospel to the Jews of Palestine and to Jews and Gentiles all over the world” (Houghton, 1980, 9), conversely.

Conversely of uttermost, it is important to point out that theological education either the formal or the informal form played a pivotal role in the formation, nurturing and empowerment of the church between the primitive and the modern times. This was envisaged by our Lord Jesus Christ who did to train twelve ordinary men through diverse teaching strategies and methodologies comprising of lectures, selection, observation and practical experience. Christ model of training included didactic instruction, role modeling or demonstration, delegation, supervision and training practicum (Coleman, 1993).

As a result it is fair to hypothesize that Jesus Christ, in his cultural environment and context was both influenced and also underwent the process of theological education based on synagogue activities and temple in Jerusalem. He was a torah and the Prophets expert. Anderson (2007) notes that Jesus went through theological education that existed in the Jewish tradition and this education consisted of informal education at home, communal life and formal learning in the synagogue studies in the school of Nazareth, temple travel, and apprenticeship in piety. The assumption that Jesus received no training, as made with reference to the adulteration of John 7:15, is wrong and an interpretation of scripture out of context Jesus gave holistic training which involved modeling, mentoring and empowerment in His three years of

ministry. Theological education is not a creation of the church but is indeed one essence of the church as it is aptly note by Justo Gonzalez. Without a doubt the years of the public ministry of Jesus were not wasted years in which His immediate followers were prepared waiting to enter into ministry (Gonzalez, 1976, p. ix).

The apostles who played the key roles in founding and feeding the early church were trained theologically well, (Gonzalez, 1976, IX) In the case of Paul, who is among the founder Apostles of Christianity and a student of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel, who is conjectured as a grandson of the great pharisaic teacher and founder of the

pharisaic school of thought Hillel (Newton, 2005). On top of that the Bible exhibit how Paul gained religious and spiritual training through three years of study even in the desert of Arabia (Zuck, 1998; Pazmino, 2006). Therefore we can conclude that since the Day of Pentecost, theological teaching and church have gone hand in hand, not only to establish orthodoxy, but also by setting the canon of the New Testament. This resulted in the early church flourishing faith and membership. Although the center of the primitive church moved to Jerusalem then Antioch and finally Rome. It is abundantly clear that the one unchangeable and undisputed reality was that theologians of the church were the pastors and pastors were theologians in the church (Niestetah, 2005).

The essence of this paper is to explore the linkage and interdependence between theological and the church in order in leveraging and synergizing in each offers functions and *raison d'être* to fulfill their respective mandates and the thrive. For a theological institution without a church is an ivory tower a kin to cemetery and a church without association with a theological institution is an avalanche of zeal without direction and may be counter production. Therefore for relevancy, vitality and mutual benefit the church and theological institution ought to have a symbiotic mutual reciprocal relationship for the benefit of both.

1.0 Statement of the problem

In Africa, the growth of congregations (the pew) has not been matched by the growth of leadership (the pulpit). Prof. John Mbiti aptly noted that the African church has grown evangelically but not theologically. The result is churches led by undertrained leaders,

risking collapse at the center even as they expand at the edges (Oliver, 1952, p. 192).

When theological institutions and churches fail to connect, there may be numerical growth, but the quality of leadership suffers. Theological institutions lose the practical context for applying ministry, while churches are led by passionate but untrained pastors. Meanwhile, many theologians remain in academic "ivory towers," producing work detached from congregational life. Conversely, some pastors, lacking theological depth, may inadvertently mislead growing congregations.

Ironically, while the African church expands, theological infrastructure lags. In contrast, the shrinking churches of the global North retain vast academic resources. Dietrich Werner (2012) noted that while 60% of Christians lived in Europe in 1910, that figure fell to 25% by 2010. Africa, with under 2% of Christians in 1910, rose to almost 22% by 2010. Yet, theological resources remain concentrated in the North and America. There is need to address this quandary.

To remedy this imbalance, there must be collaboration and innovation between theological academia and the church in the world but especially in Africa. Both entities need each other. Churches must support seminaries in producing contextually relevant research and curricula. Seminaries must equip leaders to serve and lead effectively in today's pluralistic societies. As Prof. Jesse Mugambi argues, the availability of trained leaders is crucial to the church's success.

Albert Mohler reminds us that "every pastor is a theologian." The pastoral role requires faithful theological reflection that is both doctrinally sound and practically relevant. He laments that theology has shifted from church-based reflection to a purely academic discipline whereas Historically, the greatest theologians were also church leaders: Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin, and others. Unless pastors are trained as theologians, theology becomes the domain of those disconnected from church life (Mohler, 2008). The separation between theology and pastoral ministry only widened with the rise of modern universities. The church shifted toward personal experience, while academia focused on intellectual abstraction. This divide persists today in Kenya, where seminaries and churches often operate in isolation.

The major challenge, then, is how to bridge this divide and foster a mutually beneficial relationship that revitalizes both church and theological education.

2.0 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Establishing the relationship between the theological institutions and the church
2. To explore the symbiotic relationship between and theological institution from the primitive church to the contemporary church
3. To identify linkages and collaboration between churches and theological institution for mutual benefit.

3.0 Literature Review

Theological institutions and churches are intended to be inseparably linked, functioning as two entities united by a common mission and purpose. This relationship can be likened to two sheets of paper glued together—distinct in identity yet impossible to separate without causing damage to both. Ideally, they should share a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship: the church serves as the operational arena for ministry and service, while theological institutions function as the intellectual and spiritual incubators, equipping leaders for that service. This dynamic may also be compared to the relationship between a grocery store and a gardener; neither can function effectively without the other. (Mugambi, kasibt, Nkonye, 2012)

Historically, the integration of Christian ministry and theological reflection has been central to the church's development, stretching back to the earliest centuries of the faith. Theological discourse was not confined to abstract academic exercises but was deeply embedded in ministerial practice. From the apostolic era through the Reformation, the most influential theologians were often pastors and church leaders themselves—figures such as Polycarp of Smyrna, Jerome, Chrysostom, Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Huss, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. While in the first century of the primitive church there were no formal academic programs as understood today, the New Testament period still offers glimpses of ministerial preparation through mentorship, scriptural engagement, and community service. The early Christian text *The Shepherd of Hermas* affirms the vital role of instruction and moral formation for church leadership. As on the church.

During this formative period, there was little to no distinction between theological academia and church ministry. As Pillay and Womack note, both theologians and church leaders historically valued the intersection of scholarly learning and congregational life, with theology enriching church practice and the church shaping theological priorities. However, the post-Reformation era saw this synergy begin to weaken.

The Enlightenment brought the rise of rationalism which encouraged an academic theology that often disparaged divine revelation and supernatural experience. In reaction, many churches shifted toward experiential and emotional expressions of faith, sometimes at the expense of theological vigour. This crisis crossing created what a “head-over-heart” theology in academic circles and a “heart-over-head” theology in congregational life, resulting in a growing chasm between seminaries and churches.

In Africa, this disconnect has been particularly pronounced, a legacy of missionary-introduced Christianity from an enlightenment context Adeyemo (1997) observes that African Christianity has become “a mile long and an inch deep.” While Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced remarkable growth in Christian adherence—reaching approximately 60% Christian by 2001 (Pocock, Rheenen, & Connell, 2025, p. 135)—this expansion has not been matched by equivalent development in theological education. The result is a lack of ethical depth and theological maturity, with issues such as tribalism, nepotism, and syncretism persisting in church leadership. As Dickson Nkonge Kagema puts it crisply, “The future of the church in Africa will depend on its to retain its well trained personnel and also its willingness to support its students in theological colleges. (Nkonge, 2018)

Traditional African religion, in contrast, was holistic, integrating the sacred and the secular in all areas of life. Christianity, as introduced by Western missionaries, often imposed a dualistic worldview that marginalized African cultural realities. As Zablon Nthamburi emphasizes, African religion is not a compartmentalized aspect of life but an all-encompassing cultural framework. The imposed secular-sacred divide has sometimes rendered both the gospel message and formal theology foreign, if not alienating, to African believers.

Furthermore, academic theology in African seminaries has often been dominated by Western models—such as those of Berkhof, Erickson, and Grudem—which, though orthodox, are not always contextually grounded in

African social, cultural, and ecclesial realities. In contrast, African churches often focus on practical and urgent issues such as poverty alleviation, spiritual warfare, and community healing. While these emphases are relevant, they frequently lack the theological depth and exegetical rigor necessary to ensure doctrinal soundness.

This tension has led to sentiments like that of a Kenyan church leader who asserted, “The church in Kenya does not need theologians but pastors” (Wambunya, 2019, p. 442). Yet, as Mbiti (1921, p. 177) famously observed, the African church has grown evangelically but not theologically. Without trained theological leadership, the church risks doctrinal drift, ethical compromise, and weakened spiritual vitality.

While African churches have invested heavily in building schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure, theological education has often been sidelined. Many theological colleges have been absorbed into public universities, where theology is no longer central to their mission. In contrast to the early church—where leaders were often the most theologically literate—many contemporary African pastors lack formal theological preparation. As Prof. Mugambi warns that the vitality and future of the African church depend significantly on the availability of well-trained leaders. Research by Daystar University in 1989 revealed a disconnection between church attendance and Christian identity: only 10% of Nairobi residents attended church services regularly, despite 80% self-identifying as Christian. Ernest Emboye attributed this gap to a perception of irrelevance in church ministry. Migliore reinforces this concern in *Faith Seeking Understanding*, arguing that theology must remain firmly embedded within the lived experience of the faith community or risk becoming an empty intellectual exercise.

In conclusion, theological institutions and churches are not merely related entities but co-dependent partners in the mission of God. Without intentional collaboration,

the church risks stagnation in leadership development, and seminaries risk becoming disconnected from the pastoral realities they are meant to serve. Effective integration between these two institutions is therefore essential for sustainable growth, theological depth, and holistic Christian witness.

4.0 THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study after administering questioners to 40 respondents who were church leaders, theological education students are lectures in theological institution were that 68% or 27 of the respondents were male while 32% or 13 of the respondents were female. This implies of necessity that a slightly higher number of male are in church leadership and the theological education center. This is disproportional to the population of women that is higher than that of male in church membership attendance. This fact implies that there is still residual of patriarchy in the church and the theological spectrum and church leadership that is not commensurate with the women numerical strength in the church. The reality of women numerical strength is not operationalizing in church leadership this reality. The church leadership and theological institution will be

irrelevant to the contemporary reality of the female majority in the church hence there will be more male oriented policies, programmes and procedures that will be irrelevant to the contemporary church and contemporary theological institutions.

The majority of the 40 respondents had been in church for quite a long time. 78% or 31 of respondents had been in church for over 10 years while 18% or 7 of the respondents had been in church for over 6 years. Partly 4% or 2 of the respondents had been in church between 1 and 5 years while it is natural in the church context and in many other institutions the leadership, and those to be trained, postulants and those engaged in theological education and training must have been in church for quite sometime so as to maintain fidelity to the biblical teachings defence to the Christian doctrine and to avoid knowledge doctrine gap and heretical tendency. The flip side of this is that the old guards will always maintain status quo and fight innovation. This could explain the conservatism that is present in churches and theological institutions but makes innovation and change in orientation and

curriculum to be a toll order. There is need for fresh blood that will inject a fresh blood in the church and theological institution so that they can think outside the box on managing relationships between the church and theological institution for mutual benefit of both. The old guards also needs to be encouraged to have a paradigm shift on how they should address the relationship between the church and theological institution.

On the findings of the study concerning the relationship between the church and theological institutions 75% or 30 of the respondents were persuaded that the relationship between the church and the theological institutions were distant 15% or 6 of the respondents were persuaded that the relationship between the church and the theological institution. 10% or 4 of the respondents were convinced that the relationship between the church and the theological academy was close. The findings project an image where the respondents are persuaded in their actual sense the relationship between the churches and theological institution were either distant or non-existent. Only 10% or 4 of the respondents were convinced that there is close relationship. This should be a wakeup call for both the church and theological institution to improve there working relationship in a practical and mutually beneficial manner of support, research and empowerment.

In the ideal on how the relationship between the church and the theological institution should relate to one another 92% or 37 of the respondents were persuaded that there should be strong cooperation between them. A small percentage of 2% or 1 of the respondents were convinced that there should be no relationship whatsoever between the church and the theological institution. 6% or 2 of the respondents were convinced that the relationship should be moderate and cautious. This findings report that in the ideal there should be a strong cooperation between the two but in actual sense practically that relationship is non-existent.

The findings of the study were that if the churches and theological institutions interacted more there will be positive returns. 94% or 38 of the respondents were persuaded that if there was more interaction between the church and theological institutions the results

would be a stronger church with growth in both faith and number.

3% or 1 of the respondents was convinced that if there will be more interaction between the church and theological institution there will be a compromise in faith leading to heresies dead orthodoxy and a 'cold' church. 3% or 1 of the respondents was persuaded that more close interaction between the church and theological institution will have more impact whatsoever.

On the questions if pastors and church workers should be trained in theology for effective ministry 78% or 31 of the respondents were persuaded that should be standard procedure that each and every pastor and theological worker should undergo theological training.

15% or 6 of the respondents were persuaded that not always that pastors and theological workers should be trained because some are naturally endowed. 5% or 2 of the respondents were convinced that church ministers and workers should not be trained in theological institutions for theological institutions are irrelevant. 2% or 1 of the respondents was persuaded that there is no need for theological training for their theological pastors and workers are very successful and yet with no theological training.

On the question does the church need theological training to thrive 92% or 37 of the respondents were persuaded that the churches need theological training for her to thrive. 6% or 2 of the respondents were convinced that maybe the church needs theological institutions for her to thrive. 2% or 1 of the respondents was convinced that the church does not need theological institutions for her to thrive.

With regard to the question whether theological training has had an impact on the church 32% were persuaded that theological education had a very strong theological impact on church life and ministry. 62% of the respondents were convinced that theological institution had a positive impact on the church ministry. 6% of the respondents were persuaded that there was minimal impact of the ministry in the church.

On determining if the curriculum of theological institution is relevant to the church needs in Kenya, 32% were persuaded that theological institution curriculum were very relevant to church needs in

Kenya. 48% were convinced that curriculum in the theological institution were relevant to church needs. 10% were convinced that curriculum of the theological institution were irrelevant to church needs in Kenya. 10% were convinced that curriculum in the theological institution are consequential to the needs of the church in Kenya.

On the question of the effective proactive and relevant method of training church ministers and workers in the theological institution it was established in the study that part-time or in service training blended all physical or an amalgamation of both is the most preferred method of study which was endorsed by 72% of the respondents. 12% of the respondents were convinced that full time learning is the most effective method of theological

training. 10% of the respondents supported a fully online structures of the study 6% were convinced that self driven study is the most appropriate method.

On the question of the most effective educators/tutors in theological institution 30% were persuaded that intellectuals with pastoral experience should be the ideal tutors in the theological training while 15% were convinced that purely intellectuals from academia were ideal tutors in theological academia. 8% were convinced that effective tele-evangelists who seemed to have thrived in their ministry should be the tutors. 5% were convinced that retired clergy were the ideal clergy in theological institutions. 42% were convinced that intellectuals who are in full-time ministry were the ideal tutors in theological institution.

On the question of what emphasis should be placed in order to make theological education more relevant to the church needs 20% of the respondents were convinced that more emphasis should be placed on systematic theology. 22% were convinced that there needs to be more emphasis on exegesis and biblical interpretation. 40% were convinced that there should be more practical ministry skills and personal devotion. 10% were convinced that more emphasis should be placed on academic ministry. 8% stated that should be more emphasis on philosophy.

5.0 Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm the existence of a symbiotic, mutually reciprocal relationship between theological institutions and the church. Theological

colleges serve as the intellectual and spiritual training grounds for equipping leaders with the theological knowledge, ministerial skills, and moral formation necessary for effective church ministry. In turn, the church provides theological institutions with a living laboratory—a community in which students can gain practical experience, apply theoretical knowledge, and conduct research in real-world contexts. This dynamic exchange necessitates that the relationship between the two remains cordial, affable, and grounded in shared mission and vision.

The cooperation between the church and theological institutions rests upon several salient factors. First, the conception and initiation of both entities are interdependent. Historically, before the church was firmly established, its planters, founders, and early leaders often possessed theological grounding, whether through formal academic training or informal mentorship. Likewise, the creation of theological institutions has always depended on the existence of a church community to sponsor, nourish, and sustain them. The question of which came first—the church or the theological institution—is akin to the proverbial puzzle of the chicken and the egg. While no definitive answer can be provided, it is evident that each has played a foundational role in the birth, consolidation, and flourishing of the other. The church, in its consolidation phase, relies on theological institutions to provide trained leaders; similarly, theological institutions depend on the church to absorb graduates, offer ministry placements, and sustain their relevance. Second, the sustainability of both the church and theological institutions is anchored in their coordination and mutual growth. A church without access to the resources of theological education risks developing leaders without sufficient theological depth, doctrinal clarity, or pastoral skill. In such cases, the absence of trained ministers, teachers, church planters, and competent workers can impede its long-term growth and vitality. Conversely, a theological institution operating in isolation from the church risks producing graduates without viable ministry opportunities, financial support, or real-world pastoral experience—akin to a ship adrift without a rudder. Without the moral and practical guidance that the church offers, such institutions may become irrelevant to the needs of their intended constituency.

Therefore, effective collaboration is essential in key areas such as curriculum development, financial sustainability, research and innovation, and the shaping of moral and theological direction. This coordination ensures that theological training remains relevant, contextually grounded, and responsive to the evolving needs of the church.

Third, the church and theological institutions must operate concomitantly and concurrently to fulfill their shared mission. The most effective pastors should also be competent theologians, able to integrate academic insight with pastoral application. Theology should not remain a purely abstract discipline but should be grounded in empirical research and informed by lived ministerial experience. The findings indicate that the church should actively participate in curriculum formulation, ensuring that ministerial training is flexible and responsive—particularly through online and blended learning formats, which many respondents deemed the most practical and accessible.

The church should also encourage its pastors to engage in scholarship through lecturing, writing, and conducting research in partnership with theological institutions. In parallel, theological institutions must embed themselves more deeply in church life by mentoring, evaluating, and supporting ministers during their training and after graduation. This ongoing engagement ensures continuity between academic formation and ministerial practice.

Furthermore, theological institutions should introduce innovative in-service training programs addressing contemporary challenges and emerging ministry contexts. These might include studies on technology and ministry, social transformation, interfaith engagement, and leadership in pluralistic societies. Institutions must also conduct periodic needs assessments to identify gaps in their curricula and adapt programs to meet the evolving skill and knowledge requirements of church leadership.

One promising example of such innovation is Kabarak University's adoption of a competency-based curriculum. This model integrates cognitive, emotional, and practical competencies, equipping students with skills relevant for full-time and part-time ministry, chaplaincy, and pastoral care. While still a work in progress, this approach

represents a significant step toward aligning academic training with the practical realities of church leadership. Nonetheless, there is room for further integration of online and blended learning models with face-to-face simulations, practicums, and tutorials to ensure that theological education remains relevant, holistic, and faithful to its mission.

In summary, the study underscores that the church and theological institutions are not merely complementary but mutually indispensable. Their shared growth depends on intentional partnership, ongoing dialogue, and a shared commitment to training leaders who are both theologically grounded and pastorally effective. Without this synergy, the church risks losing theological depth, and theological institutions risk losing practical relevance. With it, both can thrive in advancing the mission of God in the contemporary world.

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