

No Half-Baked Pastors in East Africa

Shauen Trump

“We don’t want half-baked pastors,” says General Secretary Fred Magezi of the Lutheran Church of Uganda (LCU), as he bristles at the idea of anyone less than a seminary-trained ordained clergyman administering the sacraments. According to Magezi, it is the Christians themselves in Uganda’s Lutheran congregations who want men trained “through the seminary, the Lutheran culture.” The LCU’s President Charles Bameka explains:

It is very clear and important that every congregation at least has a trained and ordained pastor. I know that is a far-fetched desire because in Uganda the congregations are growing faster than we can train men. But the ultimate desire is that every congregation is served and manned by a trained and ordained minister.

While the fervent desire to be served by a pastor is hindered by a shortage of ordained men in most countries in East Africa in the midst of significant growth in the church, the continent also celebrates increased capacity and capabilities of the region’s seminaries.

When I arrived in Uganda as a vicar almost seven years ago, there was one ordained pastor in the church, that same Charles Bameka, who was serving some sixty congregations. Today the LCU has sixteen pastors serving 130 congregations. It’s a better ratio than 1 to 60, but not much better.

Magezi laments, “Sometimes [the parish pastors] spend two months, three months without visiting [a] congregation. It is too far and no means of transport. . . . Most of our congregations are being manned by lay people. And so lay people need to be grounded in the Lutheran doctrine in order to effectively teach.” The LCU trains the lay leaders of a congregation—the helper, elders, chairman, treasurer, and other office bearers through a Mission Training Center program designed for laity. Bameka is insistent, “If somebody asks me what is the most important thing that should happen in your church, it should be training, training, training. Because the more that men and women are trained theologically, the more healthy the church will be.”

Uganda is not alone in their struggle. Bishop Joseph Ochola Omolo of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya’s (ELCK) Lake Diocese oversees forty-eight parishes of three to eight congregations each, collectively served by about forty pastors. In order to serve new congregations, Omolo describes the typical process:

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“We get a man there; he can read and write. Then we ask him to be a helper there, but [he] doesn’t have any theological education.” Rev. Andrew Atunga Ong’ondo, Chairman of ELCK’s Nyamira Proposed Diocese, is in a similar situation with close to one hundred congregations and few pastors. He identifies far-reaching consequences of using untrained helpers in congregations,

Even this counseling problem in homes, when people go to counsel, those who are trained know how to handle [it] but those who are not trained handle it in a different way and sometimes they end up causing more harm. . . . Even these wrangles that we have [in the church], it is because some leaders have not gone through training. So when problems come, they are not able to solve the problems in the right way. . . . [Those who are trained] know what they are supposed to do. They even know the hierarchy, that after this I have someone to give my report.

With a shortage of pastors and a heavy reliance on untrained lay helpers with their weaknesses, theological education continues to be the number one request the LCMS receives from churches in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Consequently, theological education at all levels dominates our conversations and priorities as we relate to church bodies across the region. The LCMS supports Mission Training Centers for lay helpers, continuing education conferences for evangelists and church workers, and local seminaries that serve a single church body. While each relationship is unique, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) is an apt example. The LCMS supports a Master’s program in the EECMY’s Mekane Yesus Seminary through scholarships for students, short-term inter-seminary loan of faculty, and visiting professors. As a result of prioritized recruiting for Ethiopia, a new team of career missionaries is preparing to deploy into the EECMY built around missionary professors teaching at Mekane Yesus Seminary.

The pursuit of higher accreditation and degrees is not unique to Mekane Yesus Seminary. The need for recognized credentials is felt in every country. Omolo, who is also the Principal of Kenya’s Matongo Lutheran Theological College, explains:

The educational standard in this continent, not only in this country, is coming up higher and higher and many of our congregations need well-trained pastors with better education with better certificates. That also brings integrity and respect among the people. But the most important thing is that they are grounded in the proper theology of the church.

Those credentials won’t have an impact only in the student’s home country. Missionaries are increasingly being asked for and sent from Africa back to the West, where higher degrees grant credibility and open avenues for legal immigration and ongoing service.

For the sake of our partners and the West as a mission field, the LCMS prioritizes support for the widest-reaching impact: regional confessional Lutheran

seminaries that award internationally recognized and accredited degrees. Matongo Lutheran Theological College is the prime example in this field, with the LCMS providing career missionary professors, infrastructure development funds, and scholarships for students from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Omolo recognizes that

One of the wonderful things that the Lord is giving us in Africa today is . . . sound confessional Lutheran theological education. I want really to thank [the] LCMS for working with us, especially [at] Matongo Lutheran Theological College, for networking and bringing various students from other parts of Africa, and [receiving] this theology together. . . . I am seeing a future of confessional Lutheranism in Africa as a result of this work.

A pastor who is theologically formed alongside students from across the continent, graduating with a bachelor's or master's degree in theology from a confessional seminary to serve in Lutheran churches in Africa and around the world. . . There's nothing half-baked about that.