

The New Evangelical Universities

A dynamic new element in mission lands

Joel Carpenter

Universities, one might argue, form a system of interdependent links involving both sovereign states and economic institutions in the exchange of students, professors, ideas, technology and money. Emanating historically from a still-influential North Atlantic core, this great “knowledge industry” reaches around the globe in complex networks of institutional interaction.

Comparative studies of global higher education abound, but there are some new participants in this vast and complicated enterprise who may surprise even some of its more careful observers. From Seoul, San Salvador, and even the shores of the Baltic, some new universities are arising, and they are coming from an unexpected source, the varied expressions of revivalist Christianity. “Evangelical University” may look like an oxymoron to the average academic, who knows that the world in which she lives and moves is resolutely secular, and that evangelicals, however defined, operate from a quite different angle of vision. Yet there are new universities arising out of Protestant movements for evangelization and spiritual renewal in many parts of the world. Using the scattered and fugitive materials most readily available for charting these new agencies, I discovered 41 evangelical Protestant, degree-granting institutions of the

arts, sciences and professions that have been founded outside of North America and Western Europe since 1980. No doubt there are more, because this movement is quite dynamic, and new institutions often escape detection from afar. Yet virtually anywhere in the world that a significant Pentecostal, charismatic or other evangelical movement has taken root, it is now engaged in higher education beyond the training of church workers.

Any attempt to investigate the relationship between the spread of evangelical forms of Christianity in the nonwestern world and the forces of globalization would do well to consider these educational movements. They are responding to global economic and political conditions, and they are addressing local dynamics as well. Evangelical universities raise questions, furthermore, about globalization of the more religious sort. Are these new universities the latest occasion for nonwestern churches to experience dependency and domination from churches in the West, or do they mark the imminent end of neo-colonial Christianity? Given the pervasively secular character of higher education worldwide and the tensions between Christian values and global economic imperatives, what are the prospects for these new institutions to sustain their religious view of reality and promote a Christian mission in the world?

were formed from the prior educational efforts of missionaries and local Christian leaders. The Universidad Evangelica de las Americas (UNELA), in San Jose, Costa Rica, came about in 1999 as a merger of a thirty-year-old study center that was a partnership of local and expatriate mission theologians, and a collegiate venture that the Church of the Nazarene started in 1992 from a pre-existing theological school, but then abandoned. The Universidad Evangelica Boliviana (UEB), chartered in 1982, likewise is the creation of seven national evangelical organizations and five North American missions to “prepare young people for service as responsible citizens, intellectuals, and Christians.” The Universidad Cristiana Latinoamerica, however, founded by Methodists in Quito, Ecuador, in 1992, is wholly home-grown and independent of expatriate missionary organizations.

The university incubation process in Latin America seems to have had its share of failures. There were several attempts in the Dominican Republic between 1960 and 1980 to form an evangelical university. Each succumbed to various pressures, including a government suppression of evangelicals and a mail fraud case. Yet it looks as though a core of viable institutions is being formed across the region, among them the Universidad Nacional Evangelica (UNEV) in the Dominican Republic, founded in 1986 by the survivors of the earlier attempts. UNEV has 1,300 students on three campuses and seems firmly established. The Universidad Evangelica de El Salvador (UEES), in San Salvador, established in 1981, is also well founded, with degree programs now in medicine, dentistry, agriculture, education and a variety of arts and sciences.

In recent years there have been efforts to develop a network of mutual support and accountability among the region’s evangelical universities. In July of 1997, Latin American educa-

Joel Carpenter, Ph.D., is the Provost of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is the author of Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism (Oxford, 1997), and co-editor, with Wilbert R. Shenk, of Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions (Eerdmans, 1990).



Latin America

... Each region of the globe presents a different context for the development of Christian higher education, but Latin America and the Caribbean are definitely hot spots. The rapid growth of Pentecostal and other evangelical movements over the past three decades seems to have provided Latin America with the critical mass of prospective students, faculty and leaders to make universities possible. Several of the new institutions

tors from 17 nations came to Bolivia at the invitation of UEB to initiate such conversations. They agreed to do some networking and investigation to find like institutions. Two years later they reconvened at Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia to form the Consortium of Evangelical Universities in Latin America (CONDUCE). This organization included the universities in Bolivia, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador as charter members, plus three other evangelical universities, including ones from Paraguay and Nicaragua, and a second institution in Bolivia. CONDUCE is a fragile entity, and it remains to be seen whether it can function effectively across so many nations and miles. The ongoing existence of Latin American evangelical universities, however, is not in doubt. Some of the older ones are major regional fixtures by now. La Universidad de Mariano Galvez (f. 1966) in Guatemala City now has about 15,000 students, while the Methodist University of Piracicaba, Brazil (f. 1975), now enrolls some 12,000 students on four campuses.

Africa

The environment for creating evangelical universities is ripe to the bursting point in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. I found 10 colleges and universities formed over the past two decades by evangelicals from a variety of traditions and movements. Daystar University, a nondenominational evangelical institution, is the pioneer and the prototype of this movement. Daystar began in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the late 1960s as an institute offering studies in communications. It added master's degree courses in the late 1970s (via Wheaton College in Illinois), and an undergraduate degree program in 1984 (via Messiah College in Pennsylvania). Daystar received its university charter from the Kenyan government in 1994, and now enrolls 1,900 students from 28 countries in eight undergraduate majors and four master's programs. Business administration and communications are leading programs. Daystar continues to receive millions from abroad in support of its ambitious growth, but support from the region is considerable as well.

It is no accident that Daystar eventually relocated near Nairobi. The Kenyan capital is also Africa's ecumenical, missionary and parachurch ministries capital, and home to hundreds of highly educated African Christian leaders, both from the region and from across the continent. Bible schools and seminaries abound in the Nairobi area, and additional universities are springing up, such as Africa Nazarene University (f. 1993), which now enrolls 490 students from 14 nations; and Hope Africa University (f. 2000), a fledgling Free Methodist school that started in an abandoned dance hall with 27 students.

... The emergence of new evangelical universities outside of the North Atlantic world suggests that these movements and traditions are following a historic pattern of development. ... Some scholars would interpret this morphology as the process by which evangelical movements begin to make their compromises with the world and move toward decline. A movement like European pietism or American Pentecostalism starts as a protest against the comfortable and the compromising, but then begins to join them, undergoing what the Wesleyan theologian Donald Dayton calls "embourgeoisment." And what could be more middle-class than developing a university? Other observers, however, see the move from the revival tent to the university as a classic evangelical maneuver rather than a betrayal of a spirit-filled movement's essential character.

... When stating the purposes for their institutions, leaders of the new evangelical universities frequently mention two. They want to help students fulfil their aspirations, and they aim to serve the common good of their home societies. "A new generation is seeking reality in their faith in the context of a revived and developing society," states Stephen Noll, the vice-chancellor of Uganda Christian University. "Discipleship for them includes a tremendous hunger for education," he continues, and in equipping them for service, the new university is poised to "become the seedbed for the development of a stable, godly nation." National development has not been a natural first

impulse for evangelical movements. The great biblical drama of creation, sin, salvation and restoration plays out in intensely personal terms early on in revival settings. Fleshing out the idea that a spiritual revival might also bring "healing to the nations" is not high on such movements' initial agendas. Yet for a second generation of contemporary Pentecostals, charismatics and other evangelicals outside of the North Atlantic, such ideas of a broader discipleship and mission are emerging.

The Pentecostal leaders of the Central University College in Accra, Ghana, refer to this broader vision as "the great commission of our Lord Jesus Christ in its multifaceted dimensions." They see their task as

... sharing in God's concern for reconciliation and justice throughout human society and for the liberation of man; evangelism and social action, without fear or favour, denouncing evil and injustice wherever they exist; being part of Christian duty and necessary expressions of Christian doctrines of God and man's love for one's neighbour and obedience to Jesus Christ; to exhibit His Kingdom ethics and to spread its justice and righteousness in the world.

More specifically, according to Vice-Chancellor E. Kingsley Larbi, Central University College aims to help solve "the crisis of leadership [that] is the greatest threat to an African renaissance." Likewise in Latin America, a Christian university spokesman from the Dominican Republic declares, "Pentecostalism is coming of age as a second and third generation begins to ask, 'Now what?' Saving souls has become routine in many cases and there is a desire to make a more significant contribution to the surrounding context." Small groups of Latin American evangelical visionaries who see Christian universities as vehicles for addressing the Great Commission's cultural dimensions are developing educational models and partnerships with which to mount such efforts. The rise of evangelical universities thus marks the emergence of an important second chapter in the story of revivalist Christianity's growth in the non-western world. 🌐