Christian Leadership Training Around the World

Part 1 of 2: Developing Christian Leaders in Non-Western Countries
with Darrell L. Bock and Scott S. Cunningham
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Darrell Bock: Welcome to the Table, where we discuss issues of the connection between God and culture. And our topic today is cultural engagement on a global scale. And my guest and expert is Dr. Scott Cunningham, who literally trots around the globe working with seminaries and helping them to do what they do in the various contexts in which they function. Scott, I'll let you begin by just telling us a little bit about your background in terms of missionary work and then what you're doing currently.

Scott Cunningham: Good, Darrell. Well, thanks for having me. I don't claim to be an expert in this area. Maybe some experience, and I'd be happy to share that with you and those who might be listening. But my missionary career began about 30 years ago in Africa. And we were attached to a seminary there in Nigeria where we had the privilege of shaping the skills and lives of those who were going to serve the Nigerian Church.

We were there for 12 years, had a wonderful experience there, 12 wonderful years of working with Nigerian Church leaders. For another dozen or so years after that, we worked with an association called ACTEA. And ACTEA is the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa. That's why they call it ACTEA. But that opportunity gave me the privilege of building on the work I'd done in one seminary to work with seminaries across Africa.

Darrell Bock: Now, how many seminaries were connected, more or less, in Africa?

Scott Cunningham: We had 30 seminaries that were accredited, but probably another 70 or so that we had association with, so in various degrees of affiliation with them. And that allowed me the privilege of sort of building into theological education and leadership development across Africa.

Darrell Bock: Now, for people who have no idea what accreditation is about, why don't you, in as brief and as exciting a way as you can, explain what accreditation is.
**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah. Some schools or most people here in the States, would be familiar with accreditation at the university level. For instance, they'd want to be sure if they're spending time and money investing in their training, they want a school that's accredited. And accreditation in the U.S. means that the Department of Education or some association, a professional association, would accredit a seminary.

**Darrell Bock:** Basically saying that it's offering education in an appropriate level for the degree that it's offering. And that gives value to the degree that is conferred.

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah. And it's actually accomplishing what it's setting out to accomplish. So a school saying they're setting out to train those who are going to be pastoring in churches in the U.S., are they actually accomplishing that? So you measure and evaluate, assess the school relative to its mission and purpose.

**Darrell Bock:** So not only are we talking about a degree, but we're talking about whether or not they're attaining the objectives of education that they set for themselves in terms of the preparation.

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah, exactly. So it's those two ideas. The idea of the mission of the school or the purpose of the school, and the idea of the academic level that's being offered.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay now, if I've done the math here correctly and if I remember correctly, you've taken care of 24 of 30 years, so that leaves a remainder.

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah, that's right. So, and again, that time of accreditation, that work with schools in Africa was a wonderful experience. Our kids – we have three boys – they all grew up in Nigeria during those years and then returned to the States. And there appeared to be a time in our lives, my wife, Beth, and I, we were thinking, "Where's God going to lead us to next?" And so sort of laid the cards on the table and asked God to direct us.

And just about that time, an organization called Overseas Council approached us and asked us to work with them. And we thought, "Okay, this might be a door that God's opening. Let's pray about this and explore it." And it was actually a wonderful opportunity, and that's the organization that I work with now, Overseas Council, and have been for the past five years.
The reason that this was such a, to me, intriguing and positive way that God was leading was because I had invested my life in theological education and the training of those who would be serving the church around the world, in Africa specifically. Overseas Council does that around the world. That's their focus, is leadership development. And so they partner with around 80 different seminaries around the world and, as you said, helping them to become more effective, helping them to make sure that their mission, their purpose, is appropriate for their context and then helping them to reach that purpose, to accomplish what they've set out to do in terms of leadership development for the churches that they serve in.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah, my involvement with them goes back to my involvement with 5:09 Lausanne. And many people who I came in contact with through Lausanne Cape Town 2010 had been touched by that particular organization and all the work that it's doing in seminaries around the world. Well, that gives us some sense of context. So, today, you travel literally around the globe, helping seminaries assess what it is they're attempting to do. Is that basically what you're doing, taking your accreditation skills, if you will, and applying them to various schools around the world?

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah, my skills from being involved directly in one seminary in Nigeria, then teaching, administration, and then with accreditation, having a broader look of institutional development capacity in Africa, and then now, working with schools around the world. So what I have the privilege of doing is gathering together the leadership teams of these different seminaries: the presidents and deans and board members, and talking about issues of their mission and how to do that more effectively.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay. Now, I imagine there aren't too many people – I can think of one, Manfred Kohl, who has done the kind of global swath that you've done with that kind of an emphasis. So you may have denied having expertise, but you certainly have a lot of experience that is, in many ways, unique, in thinking about what we're going to be talking about, which is cultural engagement on a global level. So as you look at seminaries globally, let's start off with this question. How are seminaries globally – and it's one of these great generic universe questions, but I'll let you go wherever you want with it. How are seminaries in most of the rest of the world like and unlike seminaries here in the West, particularly in the States?
Scott Cunningham: Um-hmm. That's a great question. I think I'll start with the like part. Seminaries are sort of a unique kind of animal in the sense that what they're doing is they've got one foot in the life of the church, and they have one foot in the life of, you might say, academia, in the life of schools or the universities, higher education. And so they're sort of a hybrid kind of institution. So that's the like part. Both of them have those same roots and convictions and purposes. There's that side which is serving the church, which has the whole reason of existence as being serving the church through leadership and all that. But on the other side, there's that component of what we're doing in a seminary that realizes that there's that cognitive development, that learning the word and studying the word and the traditions of Christianity and how we engage with culture as Christians to think Christianly, and to do that from an academic framework.

And that's where the accreditation part comes in a lot. So but the merger, the hybrid of those two fundamental purposes in the seminary is what's common. So whether we're in a seminary like Dallas Seminary here in the U.S., or whether we go to a seminary like South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, SAIACS, in Bangalore, India, you see that similarity, that commonality. So they're institutions that have both a foot in the church and in academia.

Darrell Bock: But the differences can be – I know that some schools, particularly overseas, because education is so fundamental to some of the cultures, really have a broader goal or scope in terms of what they do. Some of them have become not just seminaries, but almost universities in the way they go about doing what they're doing. Now, does your work spill into those kinds of institutions? And that would certainly be different than most seminaries here.

Scott Cunningham: Yeah, it would be, but let's not – let's remember that here in the U.S., for instance, we've got a whole genre of schools that we call liberal arts or Christian liberal arts.

And the schools like Wheaton, for instance, and seminaries that are often connected with those, like Biola and Talbot, like at Gordon or Trinity. So they've got that liberal arts component connected to it. Or a Fuller that has branched out into psychology and counseling, as well as world missions and theology. So there's already that impetus that you see in the States.
It looks a bit different in the States because of the Christian college movement and liberal arts, and whereas in overseas contexts, we don't have the infrastructure to have a separate university or separate college of liberal arts, a Christian college of liberal arts, and so those are often combined.

And so what we see overseas – and this is happening in several places – primarily in Africa and also in some parts of Asia – but primarily in Africa where there's the impetus to – with the realization that there's no opportunities for Christians who want to develop in areas of social engagement, areas of government, or even in just their chosen field of their career to get to learn those things from a Christian point of view.

And so seminaries now are beginning to offer more and more courses and programs that we might, here in the States, think of as a Christian liberal arts kind of track.

**Darrell Bock:** So let's talk about that a little bit. What kinds of courses would be offered in those kinds of schools in those kinds of contexts that either you might see the liberal arts situation, or you even, perhaps, might not see the liberal arts situation because of the nature of the context in which people are operating?

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah, I think your last raises – is so important because of the nature of the context in which they're operating. So these schools, as they reflect on their mission and as they're thinking about what's the best way to form Christian leaders for the churches that we serve, they often realize that it's not simply the pastors and evangelists and church planters that are needed by the church.

But the church also needs people who are going to be engaged in the society in whatever career, whether they're going to be teachers, whether they're going to be doctors or lawyers, whether their going to be businessmen. And how then can that school prepare those Christians also to live and think Christianly? And so they are branching into those areas.

Now, you asked for specific areas, and that would depend a lot on the context. There's some exciting programs, for instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which, as you know, has experience a tremendous conflict in that eastern part, the Great Lakes region, and led to a lot poverty for instance. Well, it could be the other way around. Some of the poverty led to that conflict.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah.
Scott Cunningham: But for whatever purpose, the school – one school in particular, I'm thinking about the school in Bunia, Northeast Congo. A wonderful seminary began, I don't know how many years ago, but it began just offering specific theological biblical degrees, and then, over the past five years, has developed a range of programs. One of those is in agriculture and community development. I think, "Yeah, okay."

Darrell Bock: We haven't offered that at Dallas yet.

Scott Cunningham: That's right. But what's happening is they're simply responding to that contextual need and with the recognition that these churches that they serve have a desperate need for simply learning how to do – how to take care of the basic economic needs as in agriculture. So they developed a fishery program, an agriculture program there at the seminary. And it's integrated in the sense that they're learning that from a Christian point of view. But, obviously, it requires other skills on the part of teachers, other programs.

Darrell Bock: So they're fishers of fish and fishers of men.

Scott Cunningham: Yeah, exactly. That's the connection. Yeah, so other schools are doing things in business, in teacher training, in computer science, things of that nature.

Darrell Bock: So as you look at education overseas and you see this scope of what's being covered, let me ask you this kind of a question. Obviously, you've spent a lot of time outside the West, but you were educated here. So you understand both systems. What do you see happening overseas that you don't see happening here, that you find interesting or intriguing? Something that we might learn from in terms of how seminary education is taking place overseas and the way they're engaging taking place.

Scott Cunningham: Yeah, that's a great question also. I don't think there's so much that's not happening here in the States where you see overseas. But perhaps, overseas, we're seeing it more in accelerated or accentuated way that we don't see it quite so much here. Some of that has to do with simply the economics of what's happening overseas. We don't have overseas, in Africa or Asia, Latin America, we don't have the resources that are done here.
So here in the States, there can be an institution like Dallas Seminary that has a very strong emphasis on what we would think of as a residential program. Although we are now branching out into nonresidential programs, your distance education. And it's sustainable in that sense; the school's sustainable as an economic force, as a – in terms of its mission and purpose, that's an effective viable purpose that we accomplish here.

And there's a lot of seminaries like that here in the States. Overseas, what's happening is that there are increasing economic pressures to – where that traditional, what we think of as a residential seminary where students are leaving their place of work or ministry and coming to study for two or three or four years. That may not be viable for many places overseas, and, in fact, I would say most places overseas.

And so what we have is a situation in Latin America and in Europe and in Eurasia, the Russian-speaking world in many parts of Asia, where there are more nontraditional students, more part-time students or distance education students, students that come into the seminary for two weeks at a time three times a year for instance, students that are studying in extension sites, students that are studying through distance education.

In fact, I can only think of one or two seminaries, evangelical seminaries in Latin America where there are more traditional students than nontraditional students.

*Darrell Bock*: That's amazing. You know I taught in India several – well, about this time of the year several years ago – I guess three years ago now. And that was what was done. Students would come in for a week or two for one or two classes.

One of them walked all the way from – oh, I don't remember if they were coming from Miramar or whatever – somewhere next to India and came a long way in an arduous 36-hour journey to get to the classes there for one week, and then he goes back and ministers in his context. And so it's a way of doing education so that people can continue to minister and have the impact locally where they are. Isn't that part of the rational?

*Scott Cunningham*: It is, yes. So I mentioned the economic side of it, and the other side of it is its effectiveness. So it's both of these forces that are being combined so that they're not leaving their ministry; they're not being simply prepared for ministry, they're being prepared in ministry. And so they can come for two weeks at a time, for instance, or they can do distance education.
They can study where they are in extension sites and so forth, while they retain their ministries. And so they're immediately putting into practice those things that they're learning. And, of course, they're not being separated from their families, which is often the schools – when they have traditional school settings overseas, they often leave their families. So there are a lot of advantages to that situation.

Another obstacle or barrier or disadvantage of the traditional educational setup when it's in the overseas context is that students would often leave their context, oftentimes a rural context. They come into the city where the seminary is, they grow used to that city life. Their children are plugged into schools, their wife gets a job in the city. It's hard for them then to go back into that rural context where they don't have those same amenities.

**Darrell Bock:** Right.

**Scott Cunningham:** And so the traditional school setting actually extracts them from that context and it's difficult to go back.

**Darrell Bock:** You know we have the same problem, oftentimes, with international students who come here. They get so used to life in the West and what they're used to and what their kids have grown up with that going back is hard. It's the same kind of problem.

**Scott Cunningham:** And the solution, oftentimes, is the same too. And that is how can we do a better job of educating them, of forming them within their own context without extracting them. So that's another advantage of that sort of distance education. So you began with a larger question.

**Darrell Bock:** Right.

**Scott Cunningham:** That's what we in the West can learn from what's happening overseas. I think this is one of the main areas where leadership development has been shaped by the context, by response to the context, in a way that's effective, in a way that’s sustainable, in a way that provides greater access to people who need that kind of education and can now benefit from it without a traditional residential setting.
And so all of those things – in Latin America – I mentioned in the Russian-speaking world, that would be another place where I can think of maybe just less than a handful of schools that still have more traditional students than nontraditional students. Asia is moving that way as well. Although you still have strong traditional schools in India, for instance, some strong schools in Africa, but gradually I think we see in seminaries that that's the move, that decentralization move is happening.

It is happening in the States and it's accelerating. And that's exciting to see because it is providing that kind of effectiveness and access that traditional schools sometimes don't offer the church at large.

**Darrell Bock:** So when you say nontraditional, we're talking, primarily, about programs where someone comes into a campus for a short period of time, or are there complete distance learning setups. Because those are two very different kinds of teaching environments.

**Scott Cunningham:** They are, and we see a multitude. It'd be hard to even enumerate all the different variations on the theme. So that's why I just say nontraditional. It's not the typical residential seminary. So it's distance education where it's being done through Internet or through correspondence courses.

One of the largest programs in the Middle East is a program that does it completely by correspondence. And there, of course, you've got other pressures because you don't really want, or can't have, an institution in a strongly Muslim area.

**Darrell Bock:** I'm getting ready to go there, so just keep going.

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah. So that's another reason why those nontraditional programs of theological education are effective and sustainable in those kind of regions.

**Darrell Bock:** Because one of the issues that comes up in countries where if you're either from a country that's heavily oriented with religious restriction – I'll say it that way – or you're teaching in that context is the moment you go to the Internet, you also make yourself susceptible to being watched, to put it simply. So what are the challenges involved there. That's not certainly something we generally don't think about here. Or if we do, we minimize the risk that's involved because of the freedoms that we possess. So how does that work?
Scott Cunningham: That's right. So, again, what we're thinking of as nontraditional systems of leadership development and, in particular, what do you do in areas where, as you said, there are either government restrictions or cultural restrictions on what we think of as a traditional setting.

You can't have a seminary, as we think of it, in Uzbekistan, for instance, or in Algeria, another place where the gospel actually is growing, where the church is growing, and yet we have to do something different in terms of leadership development. I mentioned the correspondence courses that are happening.

Sometimes those don't happen through the Internet, but they would happen through the old, what we call, theological education by extension, where students are given materials to work through, program material, program text, and then they meet together periodically to discuss what they're learning. There's a facilitator there who helps lead them in discussion and in understanding what they're learning and applying what they're learning in their own context.

There are other programs where – I can think of one country in Central Asia – where students would come three times a week, or three times a year rather, for one week to one place in the country. And it's all very much underground. It's not like they're ringing the bell announcing. There's no sign on the door that says –

Darrell Bock: No Facebook page.

Scott Cunningham: Yeah, no Facebook page. And all that is taking place in an unseen way. But there are leaders there, there are facilitators and teachers, who, themselves, have perhaps studied in different areas. In fact, this is a fascinating story, Darrell. Think of this country that is a former Soviet Union country, which means that they had Russian as a common language.

And so they're able to go from Central Asia to Moscow to study in an evangelical seminary in Moscow or an evangelical seminary in Moldova. You're saying, "What's the common thing here?" Well, it's Russian, that those courses are being taught in Russian. They can go there. The visa issue is not a problem for them. They can go there, study, and then come back and train other leaders within their churches in not a seminary context, not a traditional setting, but in house training.
So all there is is a house. And they're coming three times a year to that house for one week at a time, using material that is all being translated from usually Russian into their own language, printed – which, by the way, would be illegal – or using a flash drive or something to put that material on, so those students can study the word of god and study to be come more effective in leading those house churches that they're responsible for. That's happening right now.

**Darrell Bock:** Wow.

**Scott Cunningham:** When we think of seminary or leadership development in the U.S., we have one particular box that we usually think of. This is the way leadership development happens. But, as you and I know, that's not always the way it happens and not always the way it can happen best in overseas context. So we sort of have to go out of the box, think of those nontraditional things that are being developed in countries like in Central Asia and North Africa, where we don't have that luxury, as it were, of a traditional setting.

**Darrell Bock:** So this role of these facilitators is important, because one of the complaints that you get when you move from a traditional to a nontraditional model is you lose the modeling.

**Scott Cunningham:** That's right.

**Darrell Bock:** At least that's what's claimed. What's claimed is you don't have the student-faculty relationships; you don't have the one-on-one time that you get with students. Although I think it's fair to observe for many of us who teach here that what's happened with residency today is, generally speaking, you don't have students who live on campus. Or if they do, they're in and out; they're working, et cetera. So you're not getting as much time with the students as you used to in the past.

Nonetheless, the complaint is that you don't – the nontraditional model can't replace the kind of personal discipleship elements that go with it. But it sounds like what's happening in the overseas models is that there are people being placed in locations to play that role alongside the school oftentimes, or as a part of the school to make sure that that dimension is there. Am I getting that right?
**Scott Cunningham:** I think that’s right. And in a lot of these settings, we think of them as traditional cultures rather than modern or postmodern, more traditional cultures, in which that face-to-face time, those relationships, are so vital. And we could talk about the difference between a more traditional culture and a culture more what we think of here in the U.S. or in the West.

But church leaders recognize that they’re not going to be able to grow as believers without that constant interaction, that relationship. As you said, the modeling and the mentoring and the discipleship. So that even though you might have Skype, for instance, and see each other over the Internet, talk with each other over the Internet, there’s nothing that compares to those vital relationships that only happen on that one-on-one, face-to-face level.

And so I think that they’re developing programs where that is a component. Even if it’s only for several times a year, there’s still that essential component of that face-to-face time that provides that modeling and mentoring. It’s certainly hard; it’s difficult. Even gathering together as a church to worship every week is difficult in some settings. But that’s the desire; that’s their ideal, and that’s what they’re moving – that’s the kind of thing they’re doing.

**Darrell Bock:** Well, let’s transition here a little bit, because we talked a little bit about leadership development and what’s going on in seminaries around the world. I want to do that, but I also want to talk about issues that relate directly to cultural engagement. And, of course, you live here now, so you understand – and grew up here – so you understand life in the West. And, again, part of what I’m trying to help people see and why I wanted to have you in, is to help people see the different ways in which things can happen.

**Scott Cunningham:** Right.

**Darrell Bock:** And, obviously, cultural context drives a lot of what does happen. But how is cultural engagement – so the question like I asked about the seminaries – like and unlike what happens here? Are there similarities? Are there differences? What does that look like?

**Scott Cunningham:** Yeah. I think a lot of it is going to depend on whether you’re thinking of a situation where Christians are the majority or Christians are a minority.
Darrell Bock: Yeah, and I think that is an extremely important point. So just go ahead and go for it.

Scott Cunningham: So in situations where Christians are a majority or there is a Christian – a culture that is heavily influenced by Christian thinking or a Christian heritage, Christian values, and we think of the West, primarily, as being that. So even though you may not say – in Europe, for instance – that you've got a strong Christian majority, there is that Christian heritage and certainly, of course, in North America. And, again, you might dispute whether evangelical Christians, for instance, what their numbers are, the proportion are. But certainly there's that Christian influence within the society. That situation is contrasted with situations, for instance, in India, where the Christian population is small in number. There's a Hindu culture; it's not a strong Christian culture. And the way that the church perceives itself and the way that the church perceives how it engages with the culture around it, would be very different I think. Now, there are going to be some commonalities. And so we can talk about the similarities and the differences. But I think that we have to distinguish areas in which Christianity already has a strong element in the culture versus those where it's not.

Darrell Bock: And maybe a culture that's kind of in between – I don't know – but still in the same boat like much of the West, would be a place like Latin America where you have a strong Catholic and Christian undercurrent, or that moves through the culture that makes it different than say, many cultures in Asia or in Africa.

Scott Cunningham: Yeah, that's right.

Darrell Bock: And what's the African situation like when it comes to this question in terms of Christian versus non-Christian influence? What goes on there?

Scott Cunningham: Yeah, it's going to be different within each country.

Darrell Bock: Right.
Scott Cunningham: Again, thinking along the same criteria. But North Africa, which, of course, is more Muslim, is going to be different than a South African country, for instance, or West Africa where there's a stronger Christian influence and has been for the past 50 years probably.