

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School 2009 Alumnus of the Year Dieumème Noëlliste (MDiv '82)

“My heart is to see the gospel of Jesus Christ impact society and transform and conform it to the ideals of the kingdom which has broken in and which has yet to be consummated. This is my passion.”

Dr. Dieumème Noëlliste has fulfilled his passion through the growth and development of theological education for over twenty years, first as the dean of the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology (CGST), and then as the president of both CGST and her sister undergraduate institution, the Jamaica Theological Seminary (JTS). At the same time, he has served to strengthen the training of pastors throughout the Caribbean through various positions within the Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association (CETA) and the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE). This ministry of theological education would have surprised Dr. Noëlliste if he had been told about it while a student at TEDS, or later when he was completing a PhD at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (Northwestern University). “That is what God has done—I did not perceive [theological education] as a major role when I was pursuing a doctorate, but that is what it turns out to be.”

During the mid-1980s, the Caribbean was suffering from a lack of well-trained pastors. Evangelical churches had grown tremendously in the previous decades; in Haiti, where Dr. Noëlliste was born, it was thought that a quarter of the population was evangelical. Though there were Christian undergraduate institutions—such as JTS, founded in 1960—there were no schools offering graduate-level training in theology. And those who left for training outside the Caribbean would often not return.

CETA—originally called the Association of Bible Colleges—was formed in 1971 to promote standards of excellence among Caribbean undergraduate institutions, beginning with twenty colleges from eight different territories reflecting three primary languages. The need for graduate training was discussed early on. The first steps were taken in 1981, and CGST was opened in 1986. Dieumème was approached about becoming dean of CGST in 1985, but he was skeptical. He was pastoring a Haitian church that he had planted in Evanston, Illinois, and he had planned to stay there. However, God had often shifted the direction of Noëlliste's life.

Learning

Dieumème Noëlliste was born in extreme poverty in Haiti, though he is careful to clarify that it was *material* poverty. He had other great riches, including family and community. His mother became a widow at an early age, having lost two husbands while Dieumème was still young. She raised four children on very little and was a strong woman of faith. According to Noëlliste, “her desire to grow in the faith was one of the main reasons she sent me to school. I could read the Bible to her when we'd meet in the morning for prayer and in the evening before I'd go to bed. So she sent me to school, and God blessed her effort.” However, it required more than simply desire; the school in their village charged one dollar for the course. So his sister made a sacrifice: she sold her only rooster to pay for him to go.

Dieumème has loved to learn his entire life, and one way or another, he progressed through the educational system in Haiti, even studying on his own to make up for a year that was not offered at his school. He came to Christ when he was thirteen through a vacation Bible school led by his brother, who is fourteen years older and later became the pastor of the church in the nearby town of Petite Rivière.

After completing what would be equivalent to high school in Haiti's French-based system, Dieumème attended the school of law at Haiti State University. Rather than ministry, which so far had left his older brother poor, he would pursue a profession that would provide for his family. At the same time he could play an important role in society. During this time, he fell in love with the study of law. So when an unexpected opportunity came, he was at first hesitant. While in school, he worked as an announcer for Radio Lumière. Dr. Harold Merchant, on a visit to the station, offered to sponsor Dieumème's study at Detroit Bible College (now called William Tyndale College). With encouragement from his brother, Dieumème accepted the offer and moved to the United States. In hindsight, Noëlliste could see God's hand at work.

Theology & Church Ministry

Dieumème quickly fell in love with theology, especially the reasoned, philosophical elements of it that were similar to what he loved in the study of law. Not long after, he fell in love again, this time with Gloria Charleston, a fellow student at Detroit Bible College. He graduated and they were married in 1979.

Dieumème knew the next step was a graduate degree, and with his interest in the philosophical aspects of theology, he wanted to study under Norman Geisler at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. However, his plan was not God's plan, and coming to Trinity had a very different purpose. When he arrived, he discovered two things: Geisler had recently left TEDS, and twenty-five to thirty thousand Haitian immigrants lived in the Chicago area. He and Gloria began to minister to this population while attending Trinity, and when he graduated in 1982, they moved to Rogers Park and planted the Haitian Evangelical Baptist Church.

The preparation he received at TEDS proved important for both his later ministry and for the doctoral studies he began shortly thereafter: “I must say that I always am grateful for the tremendous foundation that I received at TEDS. It served me well in my doctoral studies both in terms of the firm grasp that I received on the various disciplines, but also the solid anchor that I received in terms of my evangelical belief. I was able to stand my ground in areas where liberalism challenged our belief as evangelicals, and I owe that to the training I received at TEDS. The biblical grounding and the knowledge of the Scriptures is simply wonderful.”

When Noëlliste was approached in 1985 about becoming dean of CGST—even before finishing his doctoral work—he was skeptical. He had expected to remain a pastor at his church. But then again, he had not wanted to become a pastor when he was in Haiti. He had loved law first, before God nudged him into the study of theology. He thought he was attending TEDS to study with Geisler, but he was really attending to learn from the likes of Brown, Feinberg, and Hackett among others, and to minister to Haitians in Chicago. God had been consistently leading him into new and unexpected areas throughout his life.

Dieumème and Gloria visited Jamaica that year. CGST was to be located on the same campus as JTS; the school purchased an additional acre and had plans to build once a funding campaign was finished. When the school opened in September 1986, Noëlliste was not ready to make the move. But then in December, the call was clear—with some strong encouragement from Gloria—and he accepted the position at CGST for the following year. Soon thereafter he taught a modular course on campus, and he knew that he found his place.

Theological Education

Why did Dr. Noëlliste focus on theological education, first as dean and then president of both CGST and JTS from 1992 to 2007? His answer is twofold.

“When I first arrived in Jamaica, I was teaching a course in New Testament Theology and was somewhat discouraged because I had only three students in the class. Then about a year later, I took a trip around the Caribbean region, and arrived in Trinidad, only to see that one of the students who was in that class was teaching the same course to eighty students. So that kind of multiplied effect of passing on to a few critical people who will pass it on to others—I think that speaks of the importance of the ministry that God has graciously asked me to do. The other thing is that Christianity has exploded in the global south in the past twenty-five years or so, and the need for persons to nurture this growing church is tremendous. To play a role in the strengthening of the various institutions throughout the majority world which came into being in the last fifty years or so is a tremendous privilege God has given me in the past twenty years of my involvement in that global ministry.”

Dr. Noëlliste strengthened CGST and JTS significantly by developing and expanding their joint campus, securing accreditation for their programs, increasing their student bodies significantly, developing relationships with undergraduate schools throughout the Caribbean, and strengthening their financial bases. In addition he became involved in CETA and ICETE in order to strengthen theological education in the Caribbean and worldwide. He became president of CETA in 1991, and has held various positions in ICETE through the years, including chairman, deputy chairman, and international director. Along with these, he has been a member of the Lausanne's Issue Group 28: Effective Theological Education for World Evangelization.

Schools in the global south still face many challenges today, including scarcity of resources both physical and human. Dr. Noëlliste continues to advocate for partnerships between the Western nations and majority world schools in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean.

In 2007, Dr. Noëlliste entered a new phase in God's call on his life by becoming the Professor of Theological Ethics at Denver Seminary and Director of the Grounds Institute for Public Ethics, which seeks to educate students, leaders, and the community in the area of social ethics. He still serves as the president of CETA and continues to travel extensively. Dieumème and Gloria Noëlliste have four grown children: Joseph Daniel, 26, Leila Ann, 23, Emmanuel Pierre, 21, and Nicole Elizabeth, 18.

*It is with great honor and pleasure that the Trinity Alumni Association awards the 2009 Alumnus of the Year Award to
Dr. Dieumème E. Noëlliste (MDiv '82).*

Certain biographical information from Harry Genet, “Caribbean Church Leader Dieumème Noëlliste,” in *Ambassadors for Christ*, ed. John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

