

WOCATI Press Release

“THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: A RADICAL REAPPRAISAL”. **A Conference of Strategic Importance for the Ecumenical Theological Education for** **Christianity in the 21st century**

The strategic importance of ecumenical theological education for Christianity in the 21st century was underlined during the IV Congress of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) which was held in Neapolis, Thessaloniki, and Volos (Greece) from 31 May to 7 June 2008. WOCATI is the global umbrella organization which brings together some 25 regional associations of theological schools which serve as accrediting, evaluating and coordinating bodies for theological education in many regions and continents of the world. The congress which brought together some 60 leading experts in academic theological education from 35 countries both from the northern and southern hemisphere was organized together with program on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) of the World Council of Churches. It was sponsored by EMW, the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Neapolis and Stavroupolis, the Department of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Volos Academy of the Diocese of Demetrias, where the second phase of the international conference took place.

The theme of the Conference of the Congress was “Theological Education: A Radical Reappraisal”, and in addition to the Introductory Speech of the President of WOCATI Prof. Dr. Petros Vassiliadis on “The Need for Change in Theological Education”, included 4 key-note addresses: from Prof. Dr. Ulrich Duchrow, Germany, on “The Challenge of Globalization to Theological Education”, Prof. Dr. Isabel Phiri, South Africa, on “Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education”, Prof. Dr. Huan Po Ho, Taiwan, on “Contextualization of Theological Education in South East Asia” and Prof. Dr. Ioan Saucă, Switzerland, on “Theological Education in Modern and Post-Modern Societies: An Orthodox Approach”.

During the 6 days of the Conference some 25 regional case studies and reports about key developments in theological education were also shared – almost all of them are documented on the websites of WCC/ETE and WOCATI (www.oikumene.org and www.wocati.org).

According to Dr. Dietrich Werner, Program Coordinator of ETE/WCC, there is an immense need for increased efforts to promote ecumenical theological education and new forms of international solidarity and sharing for faculty development, library and curriculum improvement and quality standards in theological education. This because worldwide there are enormous challenges of fast growing churches, grave inequalities in accessibility and availability of higher theological education, increased trends for religious fundamentalism and fragmentation within the global Christian family of churches and needs for well-trained theologians, pastors and church leaders.

Prof. Petros Vassiliadis, Dean of the Department of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and President of WOCATI, emphasized the unique role which WOCATI has played during its 20 years of existence as a global forum serving the twin goal of contextualization and catholicity for theological education, of unity and contextual diversity, providing an open forum for dialogue on key issues of the future shape of theological education, such as interaction with contemporary society, interdisciplinary research on new issues like bioethics or interfaith issues, participation of women in theological education and the dialogue between different types of theology within the ecumenical fellowship of churches within the WCC.

The Congress affirmed that more attention should be given to the promotion and funding of ecumenical theological education, exchange programs of teachers and students between different regions and churches by churches, donor agencies and universities. It underlined the importance of theological education for strengthening the identity of Christian churches, as well as their openness to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. The Congress in its final message also issued a number of specific recommendations to the churches, the associations of theological schools and the WCC (message LINK), which included a greater emphasize on regional dialogue in the different continents, more concern for theological education in developing regions (Africa, Latin America, Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Pacific etc.) and a closer cooperation between ETE and the entire Program on Education and Ecumenical Formation of the WCC on the one hand, and WOCATI on the other.

During the Business session of the Congress a new Executive Committee of WOCATI was elected for the next four years, consisting of Namsoon Kang (ATS), *President*, Nestor Oscar Miguez (CETELA), *Vice-President*, Kathleen M. Williams (ANZATS), *Secretary/Treasurer*, James Nathaniel Amanze (ATISCA) *Africa*, James Massey (BTESSC), *Asia*, Ivan Zhelev Dimitrov (COTS), *Europe*, Dora de Lourdes Canales Nunez (ASIT), *Latin America*, Isabel Apawo Phiri (CIRCLE).

A next Conference is envisaged as part of the so-called Edinburgh 2010 process which is celebrating the centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh World Mission Conference, which gave rise to many theological education institutions in the South and might take place 2010 in South Africa.

WOCATI Congress Message

„May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.“(Acts 17,19f)

The IV Congress of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) was a remarkable and unique occasion for highlighting and underlining the strategic importance of ecumenical theological education for the life of the churches and institutions of theological education in the 21st century. The Congress, from 31 May to 7 June 2008, was organized by WOCATI and the Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) programme of the World Council of Churches (WCC), in strategic partnership with and the funding assistance of the “Evangelisches Missionswerk” in Germany (EMW). The Congress brought together in Neapolis, Thessaloniki, the Department of Theology of the Aristotle University, and the Volos Academy of the Metropolis of Demetrias some 60 participants from 35 countries from all over the world.

Context

In Thessaloniki, while walking in the footsteps of ancient Christianity and the apostolic journeys of St. Paul:

- we were reminded of the outstanding and courageous role of the Apostle Paul who dared to address the philosophical audience of his time in his famous preaching on the Areopagos in Athens (Acts 17, 16ff), challenging them with the love of God for the least in the Roman imperial society and the wisdom of the Cross of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1), thereby creating a

thorough and long-lasting interest in knowing more about the liberating God of the marginalized, and in getting involved with Christian theology;

- we reconfirmed that our primary concern is mission, i.e., the mission of theological education in terms of the churches' mission, and above all, God's mission in today's world. More specifically we want to explore the reality and the potential of emerging, diverse approaches to theological education in response to the two great threats to life in the twenty-first century: economic injustice, which lies behind the death by hunger and other poverty related causes of at least 30,000 people a day, and ecological destruction, which may well cause far greater death and destruction among future generations;
- we became aware again of the enormous longing to know more about God in many secular as well as multi-religious contexts today, the increased zeal for Christian education and the longing for improved conditions to study theology in many parts of the world today;
- we shared in the joys, the difficulties and immense sorrows of the struggle for the survival and renewal of institutions of theological education in countries which are facing dramatic growth of Christian churches and/or are affected by the aftermath of natural disasters and major destruction of existing institutions of theological education (such as in Myanmar and China);
- we celebrated the diversity of approaches to theological education and the commitment of many theological educators and regional associations of theological education around the globe to contribute to strengthening theological education and to improve faculty development, thus contributing to the integral quality of life in its material and spiritual, physical and intellectual, moral and aesthetic, personal and communal, natural and cultural dimensions;
- we shared promising examples of new developments and models in theological education like the planning for a new centre of excellence of theological education and research in Asia, a variety of new ways of doing theological education in close contact with attempts to empower marginalized groups in India, new forms of teaching Ecumenics in distant learning courses, and many others.

Challenges

In deepening our insights and perspectives with regard to the key theme of this Congress, "Theological Education: A Radical Reappraisal," we became aware of a number of crucial and fundamental challenges which theological education systems are facing today:

- There is an immense need in many churches of the South and in Eastern Europe for more scholarships for post-graduate study programs at Masters and doctoral level;
- There are regions and countries in which the institutional capacities of theological education need to be urgently strengthened and built up in order to answer the needs of rapidly growing churches;
- There are regions in which the creation or reshaping of regional centres of excellence in theological education is imperative;

- There are urgent needs for new curriculum developments taking up challenges of marginalized groups and/or new issues like HIV/AIDS, eco-theology, bioethics and interreligious dialogue without which the churches cannot gain sufficient competence to develop and communicate their own positions;
- There are still immense needs for strengthening the role of women in theological education in a number of countries and traditions;
- There are needs for better resources for teaching ecumenism, ecumenical missiology, and interfaith dialogue in many places which have not had access to any means of teaching ecumenism;
- Some interdenominational colleges and centres of excellence in theological education have difficulties becoming more financially self-reliant and viable than ever before;
- Many churches as well as funding organizations in developmental work still do not give proper attention to theological education in their budget plans;
- There is a great increase of new colleges and bible schools in many regions most of which have no experience of, or connection to theological education proper as well as to the organized ecumenical movement;
- The international lobby for promoting and funding programs of ecumenical theological education has remained small in WCC member churches and many funding agencies;
- The globalization of economy and the continuous brain drain of highly trained theologians from countries of the South to countries of the North deepen the problem of glaring discrepancies in the availability of proper expertise and library resources for theological education;
- The rapidly changing political scenarios in many national situations, as well as the global relations between Christianity and other world religions, demand stronger commitment to and expertise in new frontiers of theological discourse, such as inter-faith dialogue, bio-ethics, ecological ethics, and communication ethics than the present capacities of the infrastructure of institutions of theological education can provide;
- The resurgence of religious fundamentalisms and exclusive denominationalism as counter-movements to the pressures of globalization, demand an ever deeper commitment to ecumenical theological education by all participants, despite the dwindling of funds and financial resources;
- There is an urgent need to educate future Church leaders with a higher ecumenical consciousness. The changing ecclesial landscape in global Christianity also demands the creative development of new and more inclusive ecumenical networks for theological education.

Recommendations

In the light of all this the IV WOCATI Congress recommends the following:

1) To the churches:

- To strengthen their sense of responsibility to and ownership of their institutions of theological education in terms of regular support, accompaniment and encouragement while respecting a certain degree of autonomy which theological education and research needs for its own proper functioning;
- To continue to support interdenominational colleges instead of each denomination creating its own separate theological colleges thus risking fragmentation in the landscape of theological education;
- (the churches in Europe) to listen to the critical evaluation of the Bologna process for European Universities and its effects on other parts of the world, as expressed by representatives of churches in the global South.

2) To the Associations of Theological Institutions:

- To continue innovative programmes of contextualization of theological education while also being aware of the catholicity of the church, thus contributing to the quest of the visible unity of the Church;
- To realize the potential for interdisciplinary research on the root causes and effects of neoliberal globalization in theological education;
- To find suitable curricula and methodologies in theological education which focus on the ways of exclusion, prejudice and marginalization, specially those produced or reinforced by the global North;
- To strengthen interdenominational theological colleges with ecumenical commitment and to find ways to allow participation of minority churches in programmes of theological education;
- To explore innovative theological programmes to promote interfaith dialogue in theological education;
- To engage in intercontextual exchange and networking with institutions of theological education from other parts of the world;
- To send updated lists of member theological schools to both ETE/WCC and WOCATI website

3) To the Executive Committee of WOCATI:

- To consolidate a new working structure of WOCATI in close cooperation with ETE/WCC in order to organize a regular global congress, symposia, or issue-oriented working groups as appropriate;
- To approach possible new members in areas and associations which have not yet been included in the networking of WOCATI.

- To build up contacts with other evangelical and Pentecostal networks of theological education in cooperation with ETE to explore common grounds for possible cooperation;
- To create opportunities for global South to South encounters on ecumenical theological education;
- To set up an electronic system for distance conferencing of the executive committee of WOCATI;
- To invite the global coordinator of ETE/WCC to join the WOCATI Executive Committee to facilitate collaboration.

4) To the WCC:

- To support a joint WOCATI/ETE journal for ecumenical theological education to be available in both print and electronic forms, to serve as a platform for member institutions of WOCATI from 2009 onwards;
- To continue and to develop new forms of regional presence of ETE/WCC through regional consultancies, for the work of ecumenical theological education in different continents to strengthen collaboration between WOCATI and ETE/WCC;
- To elaborate and prepare a joint website on theological education between WCC and WOCATI hosted by WCC website according to initial plans and drafts shared with the conference;
- To give special assistance to theological education in Africa which up to now has been suffering from the lack of a regional consultancy and urgently needs help to activate the regional Associations of theological education;
- To strengthen collaboration with institutions and networks of theological education in Eastern and Central Europe for the promotion of ecumenical cooperation.

5) To funding partners, mission boards and agencies:

- To increase financial support for ecumenical theological education, grants for faculty and library development via ETE and other funds;
- To join in an effort to establish a roundtable on funding ecumenical theological education to be held 2009 with the view of establishing a global fund for ecumenical theological education by the year 2010, one hundred years after the Edinburgh 1910 conference.

Conclusion

We are encouraged by the sense of belonging together in this global fellowship of associations of theological institutions within the WOCATI network. We are sharply aware of the significant tasks ahead of us in many regions facing grave challenges in terms of safeguarding theological education for ministers, church leaders, and society. We are also inspired and encouraged by the history and heritage of committed theological educators and forbearers of faith, which we were reminded of

while travelling in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul and the early theological teachers in the country of Greece. We shall therefore continue to do and to reflect on theology, persevering in our ministries of theological education with excellence, diligence, persistency and compassion as those who have been before us:

“They never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ“ (Acts 5, 42)