

**Listening report of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI)
Consultation Johannesburg (South Africa), 2011**

Isabel Apawo Phiri

- 1) from 4 to 8 July 2011 representatives of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) met at Lakeview Airport Lodge in Johannesburg, South Africa for a consultation on “Challenges and Promises of Quality Assurance in Theological Education: Ecumenical and Multi-Contextual Inquiries”.
- 2) During the session on participant introductions, it became clear that this was a historic occasion in 3 ways:
 - a. For the first time, all the major denominations are represented. These include: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostals and African Instituted churches (AICs) associations have come together to discuss issues of quality in theological education. The presence of the AICs was particularly important because they feel marginalized in theological institutions. Therefore, this consultation gave them a platform to gain international recognition in WOCATI.
 - b. It was particularly historic for Africa, because it was a first WOCATI meeting of its kind on the African continent.
 - c. It also created an opportunity for African Theological Institutions to come together to discuss challenges and promises of quality assurance in Theological Education. This was important because the African Theological Institutions are trying to find their joint voice after a long period of dormancy.
- 3) During the session on reception by the local committee, there was screening of a South African film entitled ‘White Wedding.’ After the screening of the movie, the participants engaged in a lively discussion on issues of race, gender, culture, hybridity, tradition and modernity as part of life after apartheid in South Africa. The discussions showed an appreciation of an exposure to some aspects of change in human relationships in South Africa. Critical reflections on the movie continued to inform the discussion at various points of the Consultation, and participants drew on the insights offered in the movie to highlight issues particularly related to contextuality and theological education.
- 4) At three of the morning reflections, the participants were introduced to Contextual Bible studies which provoked serious conversations among the participants as received readings of bible passages were challenged and transforming interpretations were promoted. In the first biblical reflection, a new reading of the Genesis 1 creation stories promoted the creation of mutuality in the relationships between women and men based on community of equality. In

the second biblical reflection, the reading and discussion of the narrative of the Canaanite/Syrophonician woman as recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Mark brought to the fore challenges of inter religious relationships and the need to transform our deep seated prejudices of other religions. The third morning reflection was facilitated by a Muslim theologian who shared a reading and a reflection from the Quran. In his reflection, he highlighted the struggle of all religious people who live with contradictions in our faith, particularly with regard to our sacred texts. We struggle to make sense of the ambiguous God portrayed in our sacred texts - a loving God and at the same time a God who avenges. He highlighted the inconsistency in the ways in which “power” requires different and contradictory responses from Islam. He provided the following examples: When communists ruled Afghanistan “power” required Islam to respond with “jihad”, which in turn relied on an understanding of a God of vengeance. In the aftermath of 9/11 “power” requires a more “moderate” Islam, one that relies on an understanding of God as loving. In the final morning, at the request of some of the participants, a session on how to design and facilitate a Contextual Bible Study was held. The pedagogical principles which undergird the Contextual Bible Study method were discussed.

- 5) During the sessions of paper presentations by the participants, it became clear that quality assurance and quality enhancement take place in a variety of different ways. In some contexts, the work of quality assurance and enhancement is done by different organizations, including state- related accreditation agencies, independent secular accreditation agencies, and church-related denominational or multi-denominational accreditation agencies. It also became clear that there is no global agency to accredit institutions of theological education with similar standards all around the world. However, there are increased expectations to have some common understanding between all Christian institutions of theological education on what constitutes essential elements of quality assurance and enhancement in theological education.
- 6) Furthermore, from the participants papers it also become clear that quality assurance and improvement in theological education is a multidimensional process that involves several interrelated dimensions, including: the dimensions of content and curriculum in theological education, institutional resources for theological education, competencies and skills achieved by theological students, contextualization, and outcomes of theological education among others. A balanced concept of quality in theological education should include academic proficiency, spiritual formation and pastoral competencies.
- 7) From some papers and discussions that followed, one of the dominant issues was the importance of making a link between offering a quality theological education with multiple oppressions and discriminations affecting all people regardless of gender, race, nationality, religion or race. Giving an example of gender, it was asserted that the inclusion of gender in the curriculum needs to be two-fold. On the one hand mainstreaming is crucial. Mainstreaming requires not just “gender sensitivity” in the curriculum but a critical

awareness of how power relationships between women and men, inform, restrict or contribute to the scholarship in particular disciplines. On the other hand, specialized study in the area of Gender and Religion is also required so that students can obtain specialized qualifications in this discipline in and of itself. Another point raised here was also the issue of evaluation – how can those who support patriarchy themselves be the evaluators of whether the study of gender is needed within theological education.

- 8) Another major issue that came from some papers and discussion was that despite denominational differences on what constitutes quality theological education, there is much more which can be held in common between all Christian churches in the understanding of theological education. During discussions, examples of collaboration in Theological Education across denominations were given to show that it is possible to work ecumenically without compromising on denominational theology. As a way forward, one of the papers presented a proposal to formulate a Common guideline on what constitutes basic elements in the understanding of quality in theological education. During discussions of this proposal call for the need to respect contextual experiences and focus on outcomes were voiced out.
- 9) Participants raised a number of important issues on - Kairos theologies in South Africa and Palestine and their implications for Theological Education. One of these was the notion of a theology of land as espoused in the Palestinian Kairos Document.
- 10) At the meeting of the WOCATI executive which took place before the Consultation, the members were informed about the plans of WCC to prepare a major assembly in 2013 in South Korea where attempts are under discussion to also have an Ecumenical Theological Institute prior and during the assembly. Furthermore the executive were also informed that discussions included the possibility of creating a visible space for theological educators and associations of theological schools.
- 11) Where are we going with WOCATI

Discussions

How can WOCATI be helped as an institution?

What is the next tangible stapes to go forward?

How can WOCATI's relationship be improved with regional church organization

James: on the basis of the papers that we have received, we can empower the executive to concritse the points that we have heard

Or form a small group of experts to be adopted in South Korea

Group discussions have been less reflected on