

**Reflecting on  
WOCATI IV Congress on  
Theological Education: A Radical Reappraisal  
May 31 - June 7, 2008  
Neapolis, Thessaloniki, Greece**

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Available at

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-theological-education/wcc-partners-in-theological-education.html>

and

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation.html>

I would like to try to capture the spirit of the recent WOCATI IV CONGRESS in three parts, viz.,

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## **I] Introduction**

In the next few pages, I have taken pain to avoid overlapping too much with the WOCATI Communiqué and Press Release, though there is some inevitable overlapping.

The pre-IV INTERNATIONAL WOCATI CONGRESS AND JUBILEE OF THE ETE OF WCC 2008 documents signal the seriousness and depth of preparation

that Professor Petros Vassiliadis and his Executive Committee had put into, to gel the 2008 Congress in Neapolis, Thessaloniki, Greece, May 31, 08 – June 7, 08.

The Letter of Invitation clearly stated that the IV Congress comprised three components, viz.,

- 1] the theme of the IV Congress on *Theological Education: A Radical Reappraisal*;
- 2] the Jubilee Celebration of the Ecumenical Theological Education [ETE], World Council of Churches [WCC]; and
- 3] the WOCATI business sessions.

Per kind hospitality and sponsorship of the

- Holy Diocese of Neapolis and Stavroupolis,
- the Diocese of Demetrius,
- the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki [AUTH],
- Volos Academy for Theological Studies [VOTS], and
- Evangelisches Missionswerk [EMW]

WOCATI was able to provide board and lodging throughout the entire Congress up to sixty-six delegates: 30 from the WOCATI constituency, 10 from ETE, and the rest from the region and from future members of WOCATI.

Member-Institutions were requested to

- a] nominate one female and one male delegate according to WOCATI's Constitution in a prescribed order should it be necessary to 'diminish participation';
- b] submit the title of their presentation latest by end of April, 08; and
- c] respond to the attached questionnaire on the future of theological education regarding 'the needs of the providing theological education institutions, the co-operation of the institutions among themselves, as well as between them and their supporting agencies'.

WOCATI is committed to theological education [being] 'carried out in a world which is increasingly being made aware of its interdependence [*and*

*interrelationships*, editorial addition] and religious pluralism. Its context is both local and global'. Thus, it is sine qua non that a '... closer cooperation must be sought to serve, support and enhance theological education in its constituent parts. To this end has the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions rendered its services, its "diakonia", up to now.'

For sure, another document [the Agenda] sent to delegates prior to the 2008 Congress reflected clearly the intent of WOCATI to reappraise radically [global] theological education.

The Agenda also cleverly did some 'twinning', i.e., how the Jubilee Celebration of ETE/WCC interwove with WOCATI's radical reappraisal of global theological education. After all, it was the Program For Theological Education [PTE], predecessor of ETE, that was the midwife at WOCATI's birth.

## **II] IV Congress Proceedings**

Delegates were truly treated to a feast of documents upon registration. For a start, there was the 299-page *WOCATI: Challenging Traditional Theological Education, 20 Years of WOCATI*. A colourful and detailed **PROGRAMME Theological Education: A Radical Reappraisal** and other numerous documents followed in its wake!

It dawned upon the delegates that, all too soon, they would experience a phenomenon aptly described as:

With my eyes, I have captured your scholarship.  
With your spirituality, you have captured my heart.

WOCATI IV Congress started on a Sunday, June 1, 08, appropriately and inspiringly with Worship in St John's the Baptist Orthodox Cathedral. Almost immediately after the opening worship [Orthodox Divine Liturgy appropriately taking place at St John's the Baptist Orthodox Cathedral, conducted by the host, H.

E. Metropolitan Barnabas of Neapolis and Stavroupolis], the Inaugural Session kicked off by the Choir of the Orthodox Diocese charming delegates with Byzantine Hymns, followed by the

- the warm, traditional welcome by Mgr. Barnabas,
- welcome given by Mr. Nathaniel Ladopoulos [Mayor of Neapolis], and addresses by
- Professor Anastasios Manthos [Rector of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – AUTH] given through, Professor Ioannis Kogoulis [Dean of the Theological School of AUTH], because the former was hospitalized,
- Professor Ioannis Kogoulis, in his address, reminded the audience that the full and proper name of his church is the Orthodox Catholic Church by which it is known in the Synodikon of orthodoxy, and not simply ‘the Orthodox Church’,
- Dr Verena Grueter, Desk for Theological Education of the Evangelisches Missionswerk, and
- Dr Dietrich Werner, [Programme Coordinator of the ETE/WCC].
- The President of WOCATI, Professor Petros Vassiliadis, gave a short introduction to the Theme, **Theological Education: A Radical Reappraisal**, focusing on *The Need Of Change In Theological Education*.

The afternoon session started with Dr Ulrich Duchrow [Europe] giving the first Keynote Address on **The Challenge of Globalization to Theological Education**. Right on its heels, were papers given by - - Professor Hyacinth Boothe [CATS] on **Twenty Years of WOCATI**

- Dr Magdi S Gendi [ATIME] on **The Challenge of Theological Education in the Context of Globalization**
- Dr Thu En Yu [ATESEA] on **Ecumenical Theological Education as Agent of Transformation**

The St Panteleimon Parish, Ambelokipi, graciously served dinner slightly before 9 pm. So, the first day ended with a feast of challenging papers and yummy Greek cuisine.

The second day started with Dr Namsoon Kang [ATS] giving a meditation on John 3:1-4, immediately followed by the second Key Note Address by Professor Isabel Phiri [Circle] on **Major Challenges For African Women Theologians In Theological Education**, and subsequently followed by

- Professor Emmanuel Martey [CATI] on **Challenge of Inter-religious Dialogue and Praxis to Theological Education, The African Experience**,
- Dr Daniel Nuhamara [PERSETIA] on **The Challenge for Developing Contextual Theology in Pluralistic Society of Indonesia**.

Lunch was served in the University Dining Hall, and after lunch, Dr Huang Po Ho gave the third Keynote Address on **Contextualization of Theological Education in South East Asia**, followed by papers given by

Professor Raymond Nobbs [ANZATS] on **Doing Theology Down Under**,

- Professor Namsoon Kang [ATS] on **ATS - Targeted Areas of Work 2004-2010**,
- Professor Dr James Massey [BTESSC] - on **Paradigm Shift in Theological Education in India: Advocacy to Solidarity**,
- Yuan Shiguo gave a slide presentation on the recent disaster in Sichuan, China, instead of his paper and immediately left us over the China-Taiwan issue.

The St Constantine & Helen Parish, Helioupolis, provided a yummy dinner.

The third day was used for WOCATI business dealing with issues on

- Professor Petros Vassiliadis' **Report by the WOCATI President on 'Past Achievements, Contemporary Challenges and Future Perspectives of WOCATI**, -
- Professor Kathleen [ANZATS] on **Financial Report**,
- Dr Tevita Banivanua on **Constitutional Changes**,
- Dr Dietrich Werner on **Global Solidarity in Theological Education and the Future Shape of WOCATI**,
- appointment of a Nomination Committee comprising out-going Executive Members Petros Vassiliadis and Hyacinth Boothe, and Yeow Choo Lak [President of WOCATI, 1992-1996].

The second half of the morning was used as a plenary to discuss the future of WOCATI.

Lunch was served in the University Dining Hall, with the Faculty of AUTH, joining us.

After lunch, Professor Christoph Stueckelberger, Chair of *Globethics*, presented his paper on **The Global Ethic Project** [*Responsible Leadership: Global and Contextual Ethical Perspectives* edited by him and Jesse N K Mugambi was made available to delegates], followed by a short Thessaloniki City Tour ably conducted by Professor Maria Kazamia-Tsernou.

The evening session was spent with panelists Professors Ross, Ofelia Ortega, and Hope Antone on challenges to theological education today, ending with Professor Ross Kinsler's book presentation *DIVERSIFIED Theological Education: Equipping All God's People*.

The Diocese of NEAPOLIS graciously offered the farewell dinner, accompanied by a cultural evening with Greek folkdances and singing, thoroughly enjoyed by all. That appropriately ended our exciting sessions in Thessaloniki. The following morning, we made our way to Volos.

June 4, 08 saw an excited busload of delegates looking forward to seeing a place familiar to all who have read the New Testament, viz., Philippi. The bus ride took about two hours to get to Philippi, affording one and all in the Congress glimpses of the beauty of the Greek country side.

Due to time constraints, the day-outing [on-hands field trip to introduce delegates to local contexts] was shortened. Nonetheless, it was an inspiring time for one and all, just to recall Paul's God-blessed ministry in Philippi, especially in baptizing the first European believer/convert [Lydia] in the year late 49 [ACE], 'out of the city by a river side' [Zygaktis River], earning its claim and reputation as the new Jordan! (Acts 16:6-40) Not a few of us stepped into the fast-flowing stream,

praising God from Whom all blessings flow. During those few precious moments, we ceased being delegates to the WOCATI IV Congress. We lost our role as official delegates, guests, and observers. We were pilgrims led right into ***the God-blessed footsteps of St Paul in Macedonia. Thy Kingdom come*** came in recalling how that missionary saint and scholar was God's instrument in spreading the Gospel as seen in the slave-girl proclaiming that 'These men are servants of the Most High God, and are declaring to you a **way of salvation**'. (Acts 16:17) A saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour comes through **Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household**. (Acts 16:31) Praise God that **we were God-praising pilgrims, feeling absolutely privileged to be on the time-honoured footsteps of St Paul in Macedonia** as the one-day outing was so appropriately called.

Jumping the gun a wee bit here, probably, it was providential that, in his paper in the evening, Dr Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Director of VOTS, crafted these wonder-filled words:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' [Heb. 11:1, cf. Heb., ch. 11; Rom. 8:24], or as *analogous to the eschatological or 'future' memory as this is experienced in the Anaphora Prayer at the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*: [italics mine] 'Remembering therefore this saving commandment and all that has been brought about for our sake: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the ascent into heaven, the sitting at the right hand *and the glorious Second Coming*.' And this is because, according to the scholia on the Areopagitic writings attributed to St Maximus the Confessor [but whom scholarship now identifies as John of Seythopolis], the entire Divine Liturgy represents not some eternal heavenly archetypes or some reality in the realm of ideas, *but the eschatological Kingdom which is to come, a reality of the future where the truth of things and symbols is located*. [italics mine]

I had mentioned ‘providential’ because when we were at the Saint Lydia’s Baptistry, especially at the Zygaktis River and the Philippian jail earlier on in the morning, **Thy Kingdom come**, came to us vividly in St Paul’s utterance: **Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household**. C H Dodd’s **realized eschatology** came to my mind. A few hours later, we heard Pantelis Kalaitzidis telling us that, in the Catholic Orthodox Church, the Divine Liturgy is best understood, appreciated, and experienced as the celebration of the article of faith, ‘... *the eschatological Kingdom which is to come, a reality of the future where the truth of things and symbols is located.*’ [italics mine]

Reformed theology has always maintained the eschatological dimension of the Holy Communion as attested to in the affirmative ‘*For as long as you eat this bread and drink this cup [the truth of things and symbols], you do show forth the Lord’s death till He come*’ [is located] at the end of the celebration of the Holy Communion, echoing ‘He who affirms this says, “Yes, I am coming very soon”. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus’. [Maranatha!] (Revelation 22:10) As pilgrims, we were filled to the brim with eschatological hope.

Since Lydia was the first Greek [European] convert, I deliberately read Acts 16: 6-40 in koine Greek, and felt the power of those verses in a way I had not before. Something mysterious was taking place in my soul, more so when we stopped by all too briefly to view the prison Paul, Silas, and Timothy [and possibly Luke, the writer of both the Gospel According to St Luke and Acts of the Apostles, as seen in the pronoun ‘... *we* came with a straight course to Samothracia ...’] were thrown into and the old Philippi town in ruins now. Somehow, during those few days in Greece, I felt ‘connected’ mystically with Athens, Corinth, Thessaloniki, and Philippi, yearning to connect even more deeply so that I could learn, enjoy, and benefit from the Catholic Orthodox spiritual and theological heritage. I am still feeling that way.

Philippi lives up to its reputation!



Tired and physically fatigued but spiritually ‘high’, we again enjoyed the same beautiful Greek countryside as we got back to Thessaloniki for a much appreciated lunch hosted by the Metropolitan of the apostolic diocese of Beroia, Mgr Panteleimon, before making our way to Volos Academy. Both time and weather made it impossible for us to visit the famed Mount Olympus and the Meteora Monastic Center. Dinner was provided by the Diocese of Demetrias, followed by an informative session with the Volos Academy of Theological Studies [VOTS].

June 4’s **On The Footsteps Of St Paul In Macedonia** and attention given to **Theological Education In Developing Areas** made sure that theological education facing dire challenges in countries around the world is not forgotten. Political developments and changes in numerous countries have forced churches in such countries to come up with new paradigms as they continue to bear witness to our Risen and Living Lord.

Cultural and educational ‘on-hands’ field visits like meeting with young theologians, a short Thessaloniki City tour conducted by Professor Maria Kazamia-Tsernou, cultural evening with Greek folk dances, an all-day excursion **On The Footsteps of St Paul In Macedonia**, complemented the cerebral/academic dialogues.

It was not lost on one and all that the intellectual sessions and cultural exposures in Congress 2008 could be said to reflect what took place nearly two thousand years ago when the Early Church was established in the Graeco-Roman world. As then, so also now, a radical reappraisal of theological education is on the plate. As such, to use a baseball figure of speech, all practitioners of theological education are challenged to step up on to the plate. The Early Church ‘reviewed’ and set in motion new theological paradigms: *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom God appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the worlds.* (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Onesimus was both useful (Philemon, verse 11) and beneficial (verse 20) to St Paul. Philemon's welcoming Onesimus as a partner would both benefit Paul and 'refresh my heart in Christ'. (Verse 20b)

For a radical reappraisal of global theological education to succeed would mean, inter alia, the Pauls, the Philemons, and the Onesimuses of theological education today need to put our act together. I praised our good Lord that the Foundation For Theological Education in South East Asia [FTESEA] financially made it possible for me to witness efforts made by the Pauls, the Philemons, and the Onesimuses committing themselves to do theology ecumenically.

With that in mind, the second half of the IV Congress started on June 5, 2008, appropriately on the Orthodox Ascension Day! Professor Ioan Saucia [Ecumenical Institute of Bossey] gave the fourth keynote address on **Theological Education in Modern and Post-Modern Societies: An Orthodox Perspective**. Anastasia Vassiliadou M.Th. [CWME/VOTS], who had been helping us in so many ways, delivered her **Mission and Theological Education: Toward the 2010 Edinburgh Centenary** which was very much appreciated. Delegates were treated to vintage volka, so to speak, when Dr Vladimir Fedorov [ARTEEE] presented his **Perspective of Ecumenical Cooperation in Theological Education in Eastern and Central Europe**.

Lunch was hosted by the Church at the Volos Academy with H.E. Mgr. Ignatios gracing our company.

The afternoon session started off brilliantly with **The Theological Agenda of the Volos Academy**, with the Director, Pantelis Kalaizidis, introducing us to the multi-faceted programs of VOTS. Professor Francis Ross Kinsler's **Diversified Theological Education: Equipping All God's People** was a timely reminder to the delegates of the dire need to enable church members to exercise the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2: 9). With the recent disaster in Myanmar, the Revd Peter Joseph's **The Challenges Facing Myanmar Theological Education on Becoming Ecumenical Theological Education** helped delegates to get our feet on

the ground, aptly enough to prepare delegates to examine Matthias Preiswerk [SPT]'s **For a Quality Theological Education: A Manifesto** which is The Manifesto 'Por Una Educacion Teologica De Calidad in Spanish.

Professor Fernando Bortolletto Filho [ASTE] is a new face whose **Theological Education in Brazil and the Work of ASTE** updated delegates of theological education in Brazil and South America. Professor James Nathaniel Amanze [ATISCA]'s **Paradigm Shift in Theological Education in Southern and Central Africa and Its Relevance to Ministerial Formation 1980-2010** showcased the significance of theological education interfacing with ministerial formation in Africa. Professor Erik Eynikel [TRES] delighted the audience with his informative **Religious Education in Europe**.

The day ended with the Church at VOTS providing dinner.

The last day of the IV Congress was used for business items, focusing on **The Global Solidarity in Theological Education and the Future Shape of WOCATI**.

The Closing Service appropriately brought the WOCATI IV Congress to an appropriate conclusion.

A most enjoyable and memorable trip to Mount Pelion took place, with dinner on that '**view on a hill to kill**' site. *Feng shui* [literally meaning 'wind' and 'water'] masters would aptly describe Mount Pelion as enjoying perfect *feng shui*, having the Northern Turtle hills to protect the site, the Western Tiger hills and East Dragon hills to ensure safety, and the South Phoenix hill to prevent bad chi from causing damage. A body of water flowing by speaks of good fortune coming into the area.

It may not be coincidental that the Western Tiger hills and East Dragon hills are so situated that they resemble an armchair [relaxation] or a horseshoe [fortune], curving towards each other ever so gracefully.

With the black Northern Turtle hills and the vermilion South Phoenix hills supporting the location, a small *footstool* type of formation [symbolizing rest and recreation] emerges.

When such a formation exists, and the vegetation is lush and healthy, it bodes good for the place with its perfect *feng shui*. Prosperity is on its way.

It is quite obvious that at Mount Pelion, all four directions of the compass and the symbolic animals have come together, creating perfect *feng shui* by trapping the vital cosmic chi [breath]. No wonder Mount Pelion mesmerizes inhabitants and visitors with its **view on a hill to kill**. Incidentally, it may not be a coincidence that worship taking place in the two churches we visited on Mount Pelion is soul-moving, for obvious reasons. The physical and spiritual configuration is just right! No awesome Gothic architecture to dwarf the worshippers. Just Mother Nature's plain gifts to move worshippers' soul and heart and mind.

Can we say the same thing of WOCATI that WOCATI promises and looks forward to delivering this perfect *feng shui* to global theological education? Surely, an intriguing and challenging question.

How can the body of water [The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (John 4:14b)] flow past and bring together the contributions of theological education from the Northern Turtle hills, the Western Tiger hills, the East Dragon hills, and the South Phoenix hills in our global/local [glocal as mentioned by Dr Namsoon Kang] theological education? Definitely not through Gothic ways [nothing wrong with Gothic architecture, I hasten to add], but very possibly by and from plain gifts that we all bring to theological education. This is possible as suggested by the fact that Dr Sientje Merentek from Indonesia representing ATESEA, exclaimed, whilst enjoying the wonderful *feng shui* on Mount Pelion: 'I'm reminded of Tomohon overlooking Sulawesi'. In short, our planet earth abounds with Mount Pelions. Ditto for global theological education. The bottom line is how to bring together all the Mount Pelions that theological education in the four corners of the earth have. As usual,

easier said than done. So, for a start, WOCATI looked at some obviously glaring concerns, issues, difficulties, and challenges that doing global/local theology faces and **elected the following to do a follow-up task.**

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**Available on the website**

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It was also WOCATI's pleasure to have admitted the following as new members :

ASTHEOL, Association des Institutions de Formation Theologique et Pastorale en Africa, [from Africa]

AOTA, Association Oecumenique des Theologiens Africains [from Africa]

CIRCLE Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (from Africa);

KAATS Korean Association of Accredited Theological Schools (from Asia - Korea);

EFOSTS European Forum of Orthodox Schools of Theology (from Europe);

ARTEEE Association For Religion and Theological Education in Eastern and Central Europe (Central Europe);

BTI Boston Theological Institute (from North America); and

CETELA Comunidad de Education Teologica Ecumenica Latinoamericana y Caribe (from the Caribbean).

To conclude this section, since I do not intend to hijack what both the *Communique* and *Press Release* want to say, I would like to include them as part of my report and allow them to speak for themselves [see below], after which I would like to end my reflection by mentioning some Concerns, Issues, Difficulties, and Challenges facing WOCATI.

**WOCATI Press Release**

## **“THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: A RADICAL REAPPRAISAL”.**

### **A Conference of Strategic Importance for the Ecumenical Theological Education for Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The strategic importance of ecumenical theological education for Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 Sauca, 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](http://www.oikumene.org) and [www.wocati.org](http://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 emphasis 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.

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### **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)*

### **III Concerns, Issues, Difficulties, and Challenges**

It is quite obvious that glocal theological education is going to see changes. With us or without us, glocal theological education will change. Woe unto us for not being there when changes take place. Woe unto us for not being at the riverside when we are expecting a boat ride. While waiting for our boat ride at the riverside [at Zygaktis River?], the following prayerful as well as nitty-gritty concerns and issues come to mind.

#### **A] Need for an infrastructure**

God has been truly gracious and merciful to WOCATI the last twenty years. In spite of solely relying on volunteers, WOCATI, despite staggering odds, has managed to survive. The time has come for some infrastructure to get WOCATI to function more effectively. At the very minimum, WOCATI needs an Executive Director, a bare bone support staff, and a modest ‘home’ [office since currently the essential WOCATI documents are located here and there and almost everywhere] to

- do all the essential paper work, carrying out the mandates of each Congress,

- consolidate ongoing programmes and projects,
- network with member-Theological Associations,
- do some basic travelling,
- engage creatively in lots of fund-raising,
- surf the internet as a way both to disseminate as well as to gather information relevant to the work of WOCATI, and
- envision the future.

Volunteerism is fine, but it collapses under the weight of WOCATI's field of work, e.g., who are there to carry out the decisions of the recent IV Congress? All the office-bearers are up to their neck in their ministry of teaching, lacking sufficient time and emotional energy to move the momentum generated to a new crest. Is there a member-Theological Association available to provide space for a [at least part time] Executive Director and small support staff in a central location to do what has to be done? This question is all the more pertinent since WOCATI, sooner than later, would need to think of registering itself, to do fund raising, for example. The waves and surfboards are calling. Where are the surfers – the Executive Director and her/his bare bone support staff?

## **B] Financial concerns**

One cannot mention the need for some infrastructure without at the same time speak of the need for funds. How could WOCATI generate funds for its programmes/projects is a fundamental question and issue and concern. Funds would come in when there are the programmes/projects with a cutting edge. At a time when many Christian institutions are facing an economical crunch, fund-raising is more difficult than usual. Nonetheless, fund-raising need to be carried out. As I have often affirmed:

If you think theological education is expensive

Try heresy!

## **C] One area for improvement**

All the papers that were read were all informative in their own ways. One way to make them more effective is for them to dwell less on ‘introducing’ the Institution the presenters represent and more on ‘key issues’ their Institution faces. What their Institution represents can be easily made available in a flyer or Handbook. The time spent on introducing what their Institution represents can be better used to share what serious concerns, issues, and challenges their Institution faces. To the ‘old hands’, spending time on introducing what their Institution represents is ‘old hat’. To the new comers, they need time to digest what was presented to them when it comes to introducing what this or that Institution represents. Hence, this part of the paper can be better handled by providing a flyer or Handbook. Then, there is more time to share with the Congress what are the issues, concerns, and challenges the presenters’ Institutions face.

It is obvious that the numerous papers presented were going to take up much time. Hence, the ability and necessity to stick to the time limit is absolutely essential. There is no need to go over time, especially when it was so obvious that there was the need to use our limited time to cover numerous papers. Presenters must have the discipline to observe the time limit, and the Chair has to be firm diplomatically to cut them off when presenters go over the time limit. Why is this necessary?

Because of the numerous papers and presenters going over the time limit [some even were guilty of grandstanding!], there was scarcely sufficient time for discussion. Crucial questions were either left partially answered or went off the radar totally. Having far too many papers is already poor paedagogy. Presenters going over the time limit made it worse!

#### **D] Legitimate Local Contexts**

Once again, the local field trips are so engagingly educational which goes to show how theological education is so differently carried out in our own contexts.

In Pittsburgh, we witnessed the magnificent network of ATS, covering both USA and Canada. ATS's charming plant is an envy of many member-Theological Institutions. First world and all that.

In Kenya, delegates got 'safari-ed', so to speak. We saw the challenges of carrying out theological education in Africa as suggested by how a safari-oriented context calls for doing theology aware of society understood as comprising the 'living dead, the living, and the yet to be born.' The wild animals told us that they were there precisely because of their forebears, and they would continue to be there in their posterity.

The elephants in Chiangmai, Thailand's **Elephant Walk**, also reminded us that *'like an elephant, we never forget*. How does theological education function when, after all is said and done, theological education matters as affirmed in

When everything else is long gone and forgotten,  
theological education remains.

The Philippian jail, the old Thessalonian city walls, and Saint Lydia's Baptistry are life-time reminders to us that we continue what our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has done on the Cross. What else can be more important than that? 'The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church' is still true. Fortunately, we do not have to be martyrs, but don't we have to take seriously St Paul's invitation to 'be imitators of me, as I am of Christ'. (1 Corinthians 11:1) This means 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many, but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence. (2 Corinthians 2:14-17)

The four Congresses showcase the diversity of cultures, contexts, concerns, and challenges global theological education faces yet, at the same time, feeling the

need to pull together. The local contexts/givens are the particular yearning for the universal and vice versa. We say to one another: **we all need you to run with us someday**. Why someday? Why not today?

\*Yeow Choo Lak

Hawaii

June 23, 2008