

## **Words of greetings for WOCATI congress**

### **Dr. Dietrich Werner, ETE, WCC**

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ arrived in the city of Thessaloniki in the first century by the teachings of St. Paul in one of the synagogues in this city in ancient times a riot was caused in the whole of Thessaloniki according to Acts 17,5 marking the disturbing and challenging character of the liberating hope in Christ. When representatives of theological faculties, colleges and associations of theological colleges come to Thessaloniki some two thousand years later this hopefully will not create a riot in the city, but it certainly is a remarkable event causing some publicity when some 60 representatives from theological education all over the world return to Greece which historically can be regarded as a country and culture which played a unique role for the very formation of theology – the reflective understanding and systematic formulation of christian faith. As it was the encounter between the judeo-palestinian tradition and the values and philosophical traditions of greek culture on the other which gave rise to the emergence of theo-logy, reflected understanding of God, and its first forms emerging in the works of the so-called apologetics in the second and third century like Justin, Aristides, Athenagoras and the letter of Diognet.

*Theological education is vital for the transmission of christian tradition from one generation to the other. Theological education is essential for the renewal and continuity of the church and its leadership. Theological education is a matter of survival for an authentic and contextual mission of the church in contemporary contexts. Theological education is crucial for the interaction between church and society where many issues demand for a sharpened stand and position of christianity.* This is common conviction in western and eastern churches, in Christianity of the South and Christianity of the North.

*Ecumenical theological education* and broadbased ecumenical formation is a vital priority for christianity in the 21st century and the continuation of the ecumenical movement, this was affirmed by the last assembly of the WCC in Porto Alegre. Without an increased commitment towards the ecumenical agenda (in its broad understanding), the unity of the church and its holistic mission and service in today's world in theological education we might see an increased fragmentation of world christianity, we might see growing trends of religious fundamentalism and a severe lack of properly trained christian leadership for many fast growing churches in the southern hemisphere.

This was a key reason why in an inspiring meeting in Thessaloniki in November 2007 it was decided between Petros Vassiliades and myself that ETE, the programme on Ecumenical Theological Education of WCC and WOCATI should cooperate much more closely and strategically with each other than in years before. I would like to thank the president of WOCATI for this opportunity and would hope that a good cooperation between ETE and WOCATI also can continue beyond this congress on a number of important issues.

In the report from first WOCATI meeting in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 1989 it was mentioned that WOCATI should serve „the *twin goals of both contextualization and globalization in theological education*“. While both emphasis remain valid I wonder whether in changed circumstances today we should also move beyond and try to sharpen our agenda for ecumenical theological education in more precise terms. I would like to suggest the following six key challenges which also would explain our expectations for this conference

#### **1) Adjusting institutional capacities of theological colleges and faculties to growing demands for theological education**

According to the UNESCO Report on Higher Education in the world 2007 the twenty-first century has begun with an explosion in the number of higher education students.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Comp. (<http://www.palgrave.com/pdfs/0230000479.pdf>)

According to UNESCO, enrolment has increased approximately from 72 million in 1999 to 133 million in 2004. Excluding North America and Western Europe, enrolment in the rest of the world more than doubled in these five years, with an increase from 41.1 million to 99.1 million. China alone increased its share from 6.4 million in 1999 to 19.4 million in 2004, giving it the largest higher education enrolment in the world at more than 23 million in 2005. This massive expansion is taking place for at least two reasons: an increase in social demand for higher education and an increase in the economic need for more highly educated human resources. (Introduction UNESCO Report on Higher Education in the world 2007, page 4). What is shown in these global figures concerning dramatic *increase in demands for general higher education* due to younger and dynamic populations in Asia and Africa also is reflected in *growing demands for theological education* and theological study programmes in many countries of the South. There are *grave regional discrepancies in terms of availability and accessibility of institutions of higher theological education* between different countries (for instance India and Buthan or Nepal) and also between different regions within one country. The impression is that in some areas the institutional capacities for theological education are not keeping pace with the growing needs and demands for theological education. How can we help and assist those countries and churches where the establishment and consolidation of facilities for higher theological education has barely begun? What kind of role regional associations and the community of WOCATI can play with regard to the need for elaborating national or regional *master plans for the development of theological education* in weaker areas? How to answer the growing needs for well-trained pastors and church leaders particularly in those churches with fast growing rates but short history in terms of higher theological education?

## **2) Questioning and reshaping the patterns of (theological) education expenditure in churches, agencies and governments**

Theological education systems in global perspective are part of the global scenario of education facilities and education expenditure which are marked by grave inequalities and sharp contrasts between the North and the South and within countries of the South. A wealth of expertise in this can be found in the UNESCO Global Education Digest 2007, published by the UNESCO Statistics Department.<sup>2</sup> It might be wellknown but is worth mentioned here that the education budget of a single country like France, Germany, Italy or the United Kingdom outweighs education spending across the entire sub-Saharan African region. Governments in sub-Saharan Africa spend only 2.4% of the world's public education resources. Yet about 15% of the school-age population live in these countries, according to the Digest. In contrast, the United States, which is home to just 4% of the world's children and young people, spends 28% of the global education budget. This is mainly due to the large numbers of university students and the relatively high costs associated with this level of education.

East Asia and the Pacific has the second-highest share of global public spending on education at 18% (after the North American and Western European region). Yet governments in the region are investing considerably less than their share of global wealth at 28% of GDP and the school-age population (29%).

The opposite scenario is found in South and West Asia, where 7% of the world's public education resources are spent on 28% of children and young people.

How to challenge the structural injustices in the allocation of financial means available to higher education institutions ? How to challenge governments to recognize (and to support) the contribution which churches and institutions of theological education have made historically to the advancement of education in general and research on religion and vital

---

<sup>2</sup> Comp. ([http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=2867\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=2867_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC))

social ethics issues in particular in many countries? How to challenge churches and church leaders to give higher theological education a sufficiently prominent priority in their budget plans and regular support to be made available for their institutions of theological education in order to overcome on-sided dependency from external agencies?

### **3) Quality improvement in theological education**

Many regional associations of theological schools are committed to improving the quality standards in theological education by regular accreditation and evaluation visits to their member schools. We have received an important contribution from Latin American networks concerning a new manifesto for „A quality theological education“ (Servicio Pedagogicos Y teologicos, SPT). *What are common standards for quality assurance and evaluation in theological education in the 21st century?* How can we learn from another within the WOCATI fellowship? And how is our discourse on quality of theological education enriched and related to the secular debate on quality assessment and quality assurance in the UNESCO related network of „Global University Network for Innovation“ (GUNI) which has developed some special expertise in this in many regions?)<sup>3</sup> What can we learn from the ongoing international debate on quality assurance in higher education and where do we differ as theological institutions from standards and values offered to us from the world of business and modern technologies?

### **4) Inter-contextualization of and ecumenical orientation in theological education**

Contextualization in theological education was the key-slogan used and applied in the Theological Education Fund already in late sixties and 70ies. The emergence of different contextual theologies and new forms of theological education (social exposure periods, field research etc) was the outcome and invaluable contribution of this paradigm shift in theological education for which TEF/PTE helped considerably. While this continues to be a priority in many regions the shifting landscape of ecclesial realities give rise to an additional dimension. How to understand for instance the Asian identity of theology and theological education - which played a prominent role in formulating the critical asian principle within ATESEA - when large sectors of Asian populations now live not any more geographically in Asia, but in the States, in Australia or in Kanada? What about African identity of theology and theological education if seizable and growing immigrant groups of Africans and African churches are living in Western Europe? *What can the Asian or African Christian diaspora community outside Asia or Africa contribute for the advancement of theological education both in their diaspora situation as well as for their home-churches in Asia and Africa?* Where do we see the vital mutual assisting and complementary role of regional communities of theological education for each other? Is it worth reassessing and *exploring new models of inter-contextuality in theological education for the future* (like is going on with regard to the future of SEAGST in Asia)? And how do we strengthen the ecumenical orientation in theological education in order to develop a sense of unity, of global catholicity and of ecumenical cooperation between churches from different denominational background as well as a commitment to interfaith dialogue within theological education over against a growing trend of mushrooming colleges and bible schools with each denomination preferring to have its own theological education kingdom without much reference to other church traditions in the same region?

### **5) Diversification of theological education with regard to changing patterns in the global ICT context**

Nothing has a more profound impact on the patterns of education globally than the rapid transformation processes going on with regard to new information and communication technologies (ICT) which are both opening up new potentials in theological learning (e-learning, research exchange groups via internet, distant master courses using digital formats;

---

<sup>3</sup> (<http://www.guni-rmies.net/>)

digital libraries) as well as creating new problems and discrepancies. While the „global digital divide“ in terms of accessibility to the web and electronic libraries still is a major problem and challenge particularly in many African and some Asian countries there is no halt to the global spread of modern ICTs in principle. How are we planning to make use of modern communication and information technologies for our mutual cooperation, exchange and information between member institutions of WOCATI? How many associations of theological schools have a proper website and digital list of their member institutions? How can we develop the visibility of networks in ecumenical theological education both in the WCC (we will see a new version of their website later in this regard) and for the member schools of associations of theological schools? What kind of curricula and courses on theological education can be more easily shared with each other by being made available online or on a CD-ROM? What diversified forms of theological education in a non-residential pattern (TEE-programmes) can benefit from proper and contextualized use of the new ICTs?

#### **6) Promoting a new system of global solidarity partnership for theological education**

The ETE programme of the WCC or its predecessor, the Theological Education Fund (TEF), owes its existence to a marvelous act of global solidarity for funding and strengthening theological education in churches of the South in the late fifties in which mainly churches and mission boards of the States and from Western Europe were involved. As many mainline churches in America and Western Europe face decline in membership and financial resources due to demographic reasons and also because the changing ecclesial landscape sees some new and financially very gifted churches in countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and also in other parts of the world we should look for a new system of global solidarity for promoting ecumenical theological education worldwide. Time has come to *reconsider the (onesided) international division of labor with regard to making available grants and scholarships for theological education and library development*. The number of applications by far outweighs the resources available for TE in the WCC at present. It might be explored whether we would like to mobilize for a new global solidarity fund for theological education or whether it is more appropriate to establish regional solidarity funds for ecumenical theological education which exist already in some regions. This whole interest goes together with another issue of fundamental importance which is *bridging the institutional divide between global ecumenical networks in theological education and global and regional evangelical and pentecostal networks of theological education*. There are well-developed evangelical networks of theological education (like International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE)<sup>4</sup> under WEA) which play an important role in some regions and levels of theological education and which are not yet part of WOCATI and/or ecumenical networks in WCC for a number of reasons. Bearing in mind what was called for during the Global Christian Forum in Nairobi last November in terms of widening the networks of cooperation we could explore whether from this WOCATI conference a signal should be developed to invite some of these networks for a process exploring more cooperation.

For the WCC and its ETE programme this conference is a great opportunity and associated with some high expectations. We wish this conference good deliberations and processes, God's blessings and rich fruits to come, bearing in mind that – like in theological formation – excellency in academic or organizational preparation will not do it alone, but it is the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit which grade and qualify a conference, a proper theologian or an institution of theological education. Because remarkably enough when Jesus was entering the temple during the Jewish feast of the Tabernacle according to the Gospel of St. John the experts of the scriptures and the pious crowds listening to him were amazed and surprised and asked: „How did this man get such learning without having studied?“ (John 7, 15).

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.icete-edu.org/>

