

IV WOCATI CONGRESS, THESSALONIKI, GREECE
PAPER PRESENTED BY WAATI CHAIRMAN,
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ON THE TOPIC: WAATI: PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

INTRODUCTION:

West African Association of Theological Institutions was founded in 1973 at the instance of the then Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches which came to be known later as the Programme for Theological Education and now as the Ecumenical Theological Education of the World Council of Churches. The Association was formed with the following membership: Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. The Churches represented in WAATI include: Seventh day Adventist, African Independent Churches (AICS), Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Charismatic, Lutherans, Mennonites, Pentecostals and the Presbyterians. The Association was formed with the following purpose:

- To Promote Christian fellowship, understanding and cooperation among the various institutions engaged in theological education in West Africa.
- To foster the study of theology, religion and related subjects.
- To improve the standards and methods of Theological Education in West Africa.
- To provide a forum for discussion and exchange of information and ideas of common interest and means for coordinated action whenever this is deemed to be desirable within the scope of the Association
- To promote co-operation with other Theological Associations in Africa and elsewhere and to form a link with donor agencies so that the priorities of theological education in the region can be determined and presented as commonly agreed plans.

- To promote research into theological education and religious studies and to disseminate the results.
- To act in an advisory capacity to the member institutions and the Churches which they serve¹

The prospects and problems of WAATI can be determined by analysing the aims and objectives of the Association, that is by looking into the purpose for which the Association was founded. So the following questions will have to be asked in this presentation: Has WAATI fulfilled its aspirations since it was established in 1973? If not what aspects of the aims and objectives have been fulfilled? What are the problems confronting WAATI? How can the problems be resolved?

THE PROSPECTS OF WAATI

The prospects of WAATI can be disseminated in its achievements so far. How much of the objectives have been realized? From the above we can see a seven point agenda or purpose for WAATI. Of the seven point agenda, WAATI, has been able to

- (1) Promote research into theological education and religious studies and to disseminate the results through publications.
- (2) It has also been able to provide a forum for discussions and exchange of information and ideas of common interest through bi-annual conferences in rotation among the member institutions and consequently (3) It has been able to promote Christian Fellowship, understanding and cooperation among various institutions engaged in theological education in West Africa. The realization of the part of the objectives has

been made possible through a link with donor agencies which have been wonderful in supporting WAATI to realize its objectives of having conferences and publications of some of its research materials.

Pursuant to these aims and purposes, the Association has over the years deliberated on a number of themes including the following: Training for the Ministry in West Africa; African Theology, Healing, Ethics and Morality; The Christian Presence in West Africa; Contextualizing Theological Education in West Africa; The curriculum; Religion and Nation Building; Ecumenical Theological Education and Ministerial Formation, Women, Culture and Theological Education in West Africa; The Gospel, Poverty and the Displaced in West Africa; Spirituality and Theological Education in West Africa, HIV/AIDS in Africa: A Theological response. You may want to know that most of these themes and deliberations have been published with the assistance of donor agencies like EMW.

Since the mid-1990's WAATI has been raising serious issues at its biennial conferences that are challenging to theological education calling on the discipline to be more socially responsible and action – oriented. These are also contemporary issues which have to do with shaping people's lives and calling for the transformation of attitudes and values. These include culture and gender issues aimed at pointing out the unequal treatment of women with regard to dignity, opportunity and power. At its 1996 conference held at the Adventists Seminary of West Africa in Nigeria, WAATI noted the deterrent factors to theological education for women in West Africa sub-region and called on Churches to sponsor all categories of women in theological education. It also called on institutions of

higher learning especially Seminaries and Religious Studies Department to increase the employment of female professors and lecturers².

The 1998 Biennial Conference was held at the trinity Theological Seminary, Legon in Ghana. The focus was on poverty and the phenomenon of refugees and displaced persons in Africa in the light of the Gospel.

WAATI noted how poverty has been ravaging Africa and the fact that over 41% of Sub-Saharan Africans have below poverty line. WAATI also saw how the phenomenon was so alarming. WAATI therefore denounced oppressive structures and all forms of exploitation of the poor in society and called on African countries and Churches to be involved in capacity building of the poor and displaced in the society. Churches should be encouraged in efforts to reconcile dissenting factions and to prevent causes of the refugees phenomenon that lead to poverty and displacement.

In 2000, WAATI focused on religion and morality. The Association was not happy with the enigma which on one hand puts on display a rather high level of religiosity among West Africans, but on the other hand exhibits a decay in quality of moral life. WAATI therefore called on stakeholders to fund realistic ways of combating the rising phenomenon of immoral acts, human rights abuses, violence and general permissive way of life.

Churches and theologians should engage in the formulation of national policies to ensure that the ethical and moral dimensions of life are duly recognized.

For the year 2002, the theme, “Spirituality and Theological Education in Africa was discussed. As a theological community, WAATI recognizes the need to have a broader perspective on Theological Education that is inclusive of spiritual formation. Theology cannot be separated from spirituality, both belong together. Just as spirituality without theology is ignorance, so also theology without spirituality is impotent. Furthermore, the increasing interests in spiritual matters in the West Africa sub-region call for a response from theological Institutions and seminaries. It cannot be gainsaid that there is a wide misconception as to what spirituality is all about, especially as some use it may not refer to Christianity at all³.

In 2006 at the Christian service University College, Kumasi, Ghana, the theme “HIV / AIDS in Africa: A Theological Response” was considered by WAATI. The theme was an expression of our concern as theologians of various Christian groups in Africa about a major and ravenous problem in the world.

The number of disadvantaged and poor people in Africa are increasing and one of the major causes is the dreadful pandemic of HIV/AIDS. The number of street children in Africa due to HIV/AIDS is growing at an alarming rate⁴. Many People in Africa have HIV but do not know and thousands of Africans have died and many are still dying of AIDS. It is estimated that by 2010, 9 million Nigerians alone would have been infected with HIV.

It is obvious that HIV/AIDS affect primarily the most productive age group, and because AIDS is fatal and widespread, it will have a longer impact on Africa's development than other more common diseases.

WAATI was of the view that it is important for African governments in collaboration with her theologians who are closer to the grassroot to approach the matter of AIDS with pragmatism, bearing in mind the different forces that influence the spread of AIDS. WAATI was of the concern that in many African states, HIV/AIDS are already widespread and their economic and social effects are already rocking the boat of the continent. In many African countries, statistics available show that adult mortality rate from AIDS – related deaths have skyrocketed beyond propensity in the last decade and that HIV/AIDS is now a major cause of adult and juvenile deaths. It is quite frightening that Africans who have died of AIDS represent only a fraction of those who are infected. And the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS implies that death from this diseases will hold back Africa's development in the next millennium. That is why everything must be done to stem the tide and African theologians in collaboration with the churches should assist in stemming the tide⁵.

I have tried to summarize some of the themes in WAATI conferences and to show that WAATI is contributing to the solution of social evils in Africa and in collaboration with the governments are doing something positive and pragmatic to make sure the society is impacted by our resolutions and various communiqué issued during the conferences.

WAATI therefore has a great prospect in being the mouthpiece of the poor and displaced in the society. WAATI is becoming the conscience of the society. In West Africa WAATI in collaboration with the government is going to stem the tide of immorality, diseases and corruption in the continent. This is the prospect of WAATI in the region that is ravaged by corruption, diseases, poverty, war and refugees.

PROBLEMS OF WAATI

The problems of WAATI are multifarious. These include membership, finance and logistics.

The major challenge currently facing WATTI is membership attendance at conferences. In the introduction I stated that the membership of WAATI include: Gambia, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria. In the seventies up to the mid 80s all these countries were represented at WAATI meetings and conferences. That made the meetings and conferences vibrant, attended by eminent scholars across the sub-region who presented great academic papers which were published and these books were being used as text books in theological Colleges in the sub-region.

With the advent of war in Sierra Leone and Liberia and with the border conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria, delegates stopped coming from these countries, basically because of insecurity. These wars ravaged the countries in question killing thousands of people and making others refugees in other countries. Poverty after the war also contributed to the inability of the delegates to come to conferences. The preponderance of this situation

made it impossible for these countries to host conferences. So for sometime now the conferences rotated between Ghana and Nigeria.

With the end of the war WAATI is making attempts to reverse the trend and to woo the confidence of the delegates from these countries to attend conferences. We have started to invite them again to our meetings. We even have invited them to the 2008 conferences to be held in Igbaja, Nigeria. But we have to sponsor them, pay for their tickets, accommodation and boarding. We hope this gesture will bring these separated countries back into the fold.

The other challenge facing WAATI is finance. It is true that we were receiving grants from EMW in the past. But since 2004 because of inability to send complete financial statements and reports to EMW we have not been able to ask and receive grants from them. The member countries literally are only two for now and it is not easy to receive subscriptions from member institutions to run the association. And because of lack of finance, many important things to be put in place for efficient running of the Association is lacking. For instance the headquarter has to be equipped with computer, internet, secretary to assist in running the organization. We also have to install a website, e-mail facilities etc. I have not mentioned Gambia and Cameroon who have not been attending our meetings also. Their refusal to come is basically due to finance and logistics problems in their national associations. It is only Nigeria and Ghana who have efficient national organizations even though they also have their internal problems. WAATI is working out modalities to help re-organize the national associations of those inactive countries.

LOGISTICS

WAATI is facing a lot of logistical challenges. Like I mentioned above, the secretariat is not at all equipped with modern day communication and electronic gadgets. We have no computer sets, no internet facility, no e-mail and website. If even we have these, we need a full time secretary to work on these facilities. It will be easier to link up with member institutions and countries if these facilities are provided. We need to contact defaulting institutions and countries through the internet. With internet the officers of WAATI should be able to reach others fast for efficient organization. Distance between officers at times impede the progress of running the organization but with internet facilities the problem will be solved.

SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS

The solution to membership is finance and organization. We appeal to our donor agencies to please come to our aid to resuscitate the dormant member countries to enable them attend conferences and meetings. We need to reach them. We need to visit them and we need to sponsor them with money.

WAATI presently has not got the money to do this. That is why we need the assistance of donor agencies to come to our aid.

We need to assist some member countries to reorganize their National WAATI. WOCATI can assist WAATI with the technicalities to re-organize these dormant countries.

CONCLUSION

WAATI has come of age in its 35years existence and by now should be a matured adult organization able to stand on its own. But because of various problems WAATI is not able to stand on its own. WAATI has made some giant strides in her publications to sensitize the sub-region about the challenges facing the region and in collaborating with governments to clean the rot in our societies. However WAATI cannot succeed in her arduous task without finances and efficient organizations. May be this is where WOCATI comes in to assist WAATI in her task of restructuring the West African Sub-region using theological education as a tool and helping to realize her objectives of making theological education pragmatic and practical in West Africa.

REFERENCES

1. See Joshua N. Kudadgie, *The Gospel Poverty and the Displaced in Africa* (Accra: Presbyterian Press, 2000).
2. See Emmanuel Martey, *Spirituality and Theological Education in West Africa* (Ibadan: Baptist Press, 2005).
3. Emmanuel Martey, *Ibid.*
4. See A.S. Oyalana, “HIV/AIDS in Africa: A Theological Response”, a paper presented at the WAATI Biennial Conference in Kumasi, Ghana, 2006.
5. A.S. Oyalana, *Ibid.*