

Challenges and major tasks for ecumenical theological education in the 21st century

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When the Gospel of Jesus Christ arrived in the ancient city of Thessaloniki in the first century by the teachings of St. Paul in one of the synagogues of this city 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 some 60 representatives of theological faculties, colleges and associations of theological colleges came to Thessaloniki some two thousand years later, in June 2008 for the IVth Congress of the World Organization of the Associations of Theological Schools (WOCATI) this did not create a massive riot in the city, but it certainly was a remarkable event causing some publicity when theological educators from all over the world returned for a week of intense dialogue and meetings to Greece, to a country which historically can be regarded as the place 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 which gave rise to the emergence of Theology, the 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 has become a common conviction in western and eastern churches, in Christianity of the South and Christianity of the North.

Ecumenical theological education and broad-based 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.

These are key convictions of the World Council of Churches Program on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) which not only was the driving force behind the formation of the global WOCATI network, which originated some 20 years ago during a conference in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in June 1989, but also was instrumental to revive this only platform for global dialogue on strategic questions of theological education on global level due to some good cooperation between the former President of WOCATI, Prof. Petros Vassiliades from Theological faculty of Thessaloniki, and the new global coordinator of ETE.

John Pobee, who for many years was Executive Staff member of PTE and later Global Coordinator of the Program on Theological Education (ETE) in WCC, would have liked very much also to be present during the WOCATI assembly in Greece, as it was his passion and untiring commitment which substantially contributed to global dialogue on theological education. It was taking up and continuing his heritage which he left behind with the Oslo world conference on theological education in 1996¹ when we planned for the world conference on theological education with the WOCATI network some

¹Comp. Report of Oslo world conference on theological education: J. S. Pobee (ed.), Towards Viable Theological Education Ecumenical Imperative, Catalyst of Renewal. Geneva: WCC 1997

12 years later.² Being hindered by unfavorable health conditions John Pobee nevertheless delivered a substantial paper for the WOCATI congress in which he reviewed the history of PTE/ETE as originating in the Theological Education Fund (TEF) - which was founded 1958 during the International Missionary Council in Ghana - and reminded both WCC and WOCATI of the ongoing and strategic importance of ETE which continues to have a distinctive role at least in the following areas:

- “Programmatic dialogue on key themes of theological education at the world level³
- Project-related networking between regional associations and donor agencies
- Promotion of common standards in ecumenical curriculum and ecumenical teaching.
- Programmatic efforts to facilitate the access of women in the theological education institutes both in the North and South

As WOCATI is a loose network of regional associations meeting every fourth year, it should not be seen constitutionally or functionally as gradually replacing ETE which understands itself not only as a forum for dialogue but also as a strategic instrument of the missionary calling and ecumenical movement ETE should maintain structural links with WOCATI by being present on its executive board but it cannot be absorbed into its structures”.

In the report from the 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*“. The WOCATI Congress in Greece provided a unique occasion to unfold in what ways these goals have been partially achieved, what new challenges for theological education in the 21st century can be identified and what priority issues for an updated working agenda of the ETE program in WCC could be named. It might well be asked whether in the light of contemporary challenges and recent changes we have to revisit our key slogans, to be honest about what really was achieved and to also move beyond and to sharpen again our global agenda for ecumenical theological education in more precise terms.

The following 8 points which have been formulated in the context of encounters of the WOCATI congress and beyond are meant to serve as a first orientation and discussion starter for a process to reformulate our common mandate in considering key challenges and major tasks for theological education in the 21st century. There are no ready-made answers for many of these issues, therefore many of suggestions conclude with open questions:

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.⁴ 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

² Comp. documents of WOCATI Congress 2008 on WCC website under Resources:
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-theological-education/world-conference-of-associations-of-theological-institutions-wocati.html>

³ John Pobee, Travel through memory lane: Theological Education in the World Council of Churches Orbit. Lecture prepared for WOCATI conference June 2008

⁴ Comp. (<http://www.palgrave.com/pdfs/0230000479.pdf>)

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.⁵ 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 programs 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 to compare between South India and Nepal, Buthan, Bangladesh or Vietnam and Cambodia) 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. In Nepal for instance where the number of Christians has grown from zero to 800.000 in the past fifty years only many pastors have only a rudimentary 5-month training program which enables them to read the Bible and to pray. There is an enormous zeal to server God, but an enormous lack of well-trained trained pastors and theological educators and still no M.Th. course can be offered in that country. Another example of its own certainly is China where for a growing number of Christians there are only some 3000 ordained pastors many of which have to shepherd to 4000 Christians or more due to lack of well-trained pastors. There is an enormous challenge in China to equip a new generation of leadership and to bridge the wider generation gap between church leaders and theologians that exists after many years of inadequate theological training. How can we help and assist those countries and churches where the establishment and consolidation of institutions 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?

Strategic national or regional planning for institutional capacity building in theological education seems to be less developed or more difficult to be achieved in protestant contexts than in roman-catholic settings. How many Christian universities or regional hub colleges of theological education do we need for a given regional context in a given period of some 3-5 decades? To have this question thoroughly explored, analyzed and answered is more difficult in a situation of denominational fragmentation where each denomination thinks only in terms of safeguarding its own interests and institutional continuation than it is in a situation where well-developed ecumenical cooperation is taken for granted.

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.⁶ It might be well-known but is still worth to be mentioned 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 lives 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

⁵ Introduction to: UNESCO Report on Higher Education in the World 2007, page 4

⁶ Comp. (http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=2867_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC)

the large numbers of university students and the relatively high costs associated with this level of education.

East Asia and the Pacific have 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.

This is just the tip of the iceberg with regard to general inequalities in support for higher education structures and programs. It would be worth analyzing how this is reflected in the area of theological education both regionally and globally. We might leave it with some very tentative observations which are just meant to indicate some of the problems:

- a) there is a huge demand for grants for theological PhD and MTh studies particularly in African and in Asian Churches which cannot be met presently as neither on regional nor on global level there exist sufficient funds for this demand; thus leadership and capacity building in the area of theological teaching and expertise in quite a variety of different fields falls by the wayside;
- b) in most of the church budgets in Asia, Africa and Latin America funding is provided only for the lower levels of theological education (up to BD-level, those degrees sufficient to become a pastor) but not for higher levels of theological education because this is seen as a matter of the colleges or universities (or external partners). The majority of the grants for post-graduate theological grants in India for instance still comes from ecumenical partners outside India; thus the sense of ownership for higher theological education and prioritization for higher theological degrees in order to do leadership development is not sufficiently developed;
- c) only a minority of mission boards do see theological education as a major part of their agenda and budgets for development and North-South partnership; most of the funding if at all is given on bilateral projects between partner-churches, but less and less funds are available for global programs and global solidarity in theological education;
- d) In fundraising initiatives in WCC it apparently is more easy to get funds for development work than for projects of capacity building in theological education or theological library development;
- e) Only very few experts are aware of the global discrepancies in terms of investments in higher theological education in Christianity in the global South and investments in higher Muslim education which are promoted by some very powerful and financially strong Muslim countries in the Arab, Asian and African world which have established a number of high standard centers of theological education and Muslim universities all over the globe – a situation which needs to be reflected also with regard to the future of Christian-Muslim dialogue and the need for well-educated Christian experts in this field.⁷

This is just outlining a few sketches of a very complex global picture. But some basic questions are becoming obvious:

⁷ Indonesia might be an interesting example as it is said that there are some 50 Muslim state universities and some 150 private muslim universities in this country.

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 and at present to the advancement of education in general and research on religion and vital 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? How to develop new mechanisms of regular support (annual donations, regular budget allocations etc.) to be made available for regional and local institutions of theological education in the churches and congregations in order to overcome one-sided dependency from external agencies?

3) Encountering the ongoing proliferation of theological colleges and the need for common standards in theological curriculum plans

Myanmar country is an example of success as well as of continuous challenges in the landscape of theological education institutions: Following the "Commission for the Cooperation of the Churches for Higher Theological Education" which was founded in 1980 only one year after the political opening which took place in 1979, the Association of Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM) was formed in 1986 and has grown from 8 member schools to almost 32 member schools in this complex and multi-ethnic country today. But despite the fact that some member schools have grown to big and larger institutions the sad fact is that still each institution seem to work under the motto "Each for himself" and common standards and common planning are difficult to immerse in the institutional systems. Besides there is a considerable number of new colleges and Bible schools beyond the ATEM constituency as there are also other organizations funding theological institutions or Bible Schools from outside (like from South Korea) but without much cooperation with ATEM.

This is only one example for a picture which is characteristic also to some other Asian countries: What has shaped and inspired the formation of ecumenical associations of theological schools under the motto "ecumenical unity in theological education" in the early phase to some extent today is bypassed and outdated by recent developments in a dramatically changing ecclesial landscape which leads to a proliferation of institutions of theological education many of which working independently, not considering any binding commitment to an ecumenical network of theological education or process of any common planning.

How to promote unity and common standards and accountability in the area of theological education in a situation in which commercialization of tertiary education systems seemed to creep in the area of theological education? How to enter into dialogue with those who have kept a certain distance to institutionalized ecumenical circles and do their own mission without consulting existing national councils of Christian churches or existing associations of theological schools?

4) enlarging the circles of ecumenical dialogue on theological education - bridging the divide with evangelical and Pentecostal institutions of theological education

This is leading to another similar issue on global scale: There is a striking un-simultaneity between the growing missiological convergence between evangelical and ecumenical circles engaged in Christian mission and theological education – both in many cases affirm basically common convictions in the understanding of mission and education - and the institutional structures and "camps" of theological schools and colleges which remains structurally divided or in some areas are even marked by identities which are shaped in opposition to each other. There will not be any major progress in ecumenical orientation and contextualization of theological education unless there are no deliberate attempts for *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)⁸ under WEA which play an important role in some regions and levels of theological education and which are neither part of WOCATI nor of any ecumenical networks in WCC for a number of reasons. Bearing in mind what was called for during the Global Christian Forum in Nairobi in November 2007 in terms of widening the networks of cooperation one should explore in each region what kind of signals could be developed to invite some of these networks for a process deliberately designed to strengthen mutual cooperation.

In India for instance there is the family of colleges linked and recognized by the Senate of Serampore. Some 50 colleges belong to this family.⁹ On the other hand there is the Asian Theological Association¹⁰ (ATA) with more than 100 member institutions in Asian countries and around 70 member institutions in India which understands itself as a community of “theological educational institutions, committed to evangelical faith and scholarship, which are networking together, to serve the Church in equipping the people of God for the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ... (established in 1970 it aims at) serving its members in the development of evangelical biblical theology by strengthening interaction, enhancing scholarship, promoting academic excellence, fostering spiritual and ministerial formation, and mobilizing resources to fulfill God’s global mission within diverse Asian cultures.” There is dual affiliation for some of the colleges but structurally there are two distinct bodies dealing with issues of and curriculum developments in theological education though ATA cannot do this on the level of university degrees. There even is a third accrediting association which is the Indian Institute of Missiology (IIM). It was founded in 1994 and meanwhile brings together some 70 institutions of theological training and education in the area of mission work within and outside India – but only in 2004 equivalency and mutual recognition was worked out between ATA and IIM concerning their curriculum and degrees in mission and theological studies.¹¹

While the historical reasons for the formation of a distinct evangelical network of theological education (in the context of the emergence of the Lausanne movement) are obvious relating to the polarization in the understanding of mission in the late 60ies and 70ies it should be asked today what is the distinct common task and what are common objectives for all major stakeholders in theological education. It needs to be justified whether it still make sense to have separate networks for theological education and how the given picture really presents the unity of the church and the strategic importance of theological education for future generations. We have to ask: How should the situation be transformed for securing a common and not fragmented future of theological education in Asia and Africa? How can we best contribute to visible unity in the area of theological education in the different parts of our global community?

70% of the students coming and joining in programs of major institutions of theological education in Chile today come from Pentecostal background. In both Latin America and Asia the number of theological colleges providing only “fast food theological education” without any clear and substantial curricula and without sufficient libraries, but all with impressive titles and degrees to be sold is increasing. There are growing anti-ecumenical tendencies in many denominations and many books and materials for theological education which are based only on one denominational identity. Commercialized Christian religion, shallow “prosperity-Gospel” variations and “cheap” theological training and courses have an inroad and outreach now in all sectors and layers of churches in Asia, Africa and Latin-America. On the other hand there are also some Pentecostal schools and theological colleges which are now looking out for new models of theological education and are becoming interested in dialogue with ecumenical partners in search for help in terms of upgrading their degrees, contextualizing their theological teaching and becoming more open to the “mainstream of theological

⁸ <http://www.icete-edu.org/>

⁹ Comp. Ravi Tiwari, Senate of Serampore College (University) at Ninety : Issues and Concerns, Article from July 2008; website: <http://www.senateofseramporecollege.org/overview/mission.htm>

¹⁰ Comp. <http://www.ataasia.com/>

¹¹ Comp. Siga Arles, Advocacy: A Missiological Imperative, Indian Journal of Missiology, Vol. 8, No. 1, August 2007

education” (if this term is appropriate) and oriented towards a holistic understanding of theological education.

What does all of this entail for the self-understanding, for the style and the curriculum of theological education in established institutions of theological education? Where are proper bridges to enlarge and broaden the dialogue between the different “families” in the different denominational associations of theological schools? After fifty years of work in TEF, PTE and ETE much has been achieved in terms of contextualization of theological education for some circles and WCC member churches, but on the other hand the fragmentation of the landscape in theological education has become even larger and proper “unity in diversity” in theological education in some regions seems to be more utopian a vision than ever before. 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? How do we avoid 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?

With the diminishing number of courses, teaching positions and chairs teaching ecumenism, history of the ecumenical movement, ecumenical missiology and interfaith dialogue in many contexts the “transfer of the ecumenical memory” from existing generations to the next generation does not seem to be guaranteed any longer. This is a serious issue for the whole of the ecumenical movement. Thus “the task of promoting ecumenical consciousness, engagement and formation has become more critical than ever. It is of great necessity and urgency to create a generation of ecumenical theological educators and leaders who have a clear grasp of the evangelical, diaconical, missionary and ecumenical nature of Christian faith. In other words, transforming theological education in mission is not enough without transforming of the quality and patterns of leadership in the churches, and theological and ecumenical institutions, together with the accompanying policy and decision-making organs of the institutions.”¹²

Attempts have been made to re-translate the notion of “ecumenical theological education” and its proper meaning for contemporary situations of dialogue among theological educators¹³. Though knowing that “ecumenical” is a bad and rejected term still in many churches in the Asia and Africa and also in some evangelical and Pentecostal circles there is no alternative than just to try again and again to circumscribe what is a biblically founded and sound meaning of this concept which – even if in some instances we might drop the term and rather speak of catholicity of theological education or its holistic nature – points to an understanding of theology and the church which is fundamentally rooted in Scripture and in the tradition of the Universal Church as expressed in the Creeds (the church as being one, holy, catholic and apostolic in essence).

5) 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. There is a new debate on what “quality improvement” is and means for theological education. Latin American networks have introduced an important study document with the new manifesto for „A quality theological education“ (Servicio Pedagogicos Y teologicos, SPT). “Quality” of theological education according to their statement cannot just be defined in the seemingly neutral terms of academic excellence or “effectiveness-standards” as applied and sought for in many training and education

¹² Nyambura Njoroge, An Ecumenical Commitment. Transforming Theological Education in Mission, in: IRM Vol. 94, No 373, April 2005

¹³ Comp. Magna Charta on Ecumenical Formation in Theological Education in the 21st Century, in: Ministerial Formation No. 110, April 2008, p. 82ff

programs of business world and industry. There is a special and distinct approach of theological institutions speaking of “quality theological education” which is defined by seeking “quality in the theological undertaking...by combining in an imaginative way the search for theological relevance in the overwhelmingly pressing reality of Abya Yala regarding the pertinence of a discipline that has its own epistemological identity and demands.”¹⁴ The theological approach to quality of (higher) education undeniably is related to the quality of life which God has promised in the prophetic vision of abundant life for all and an explicitly missiological orientation of the paradigm of theological education in the context of the concept of *Missio Dei*.¹⁵ For patterns and models of theological education geared towards that abundance of life for all which constantly is denied by existing systems of exploitation and globalization some essential requirements are identified in the statement which would lean towards inter-disciplinary and intercultural methods, clear account of pedagogy and teaching methods, inclusivity in terms of multiple forms of rationality and human potentialities (emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual, moral, intuitive, creative) and contextually and historically rooted discourses on theological concepts. There are consequences of this for the “quality management” of the life of institutions of theological education which ought to be measured “by the level of learning, security, welfare, mutual trust, initiative, as well as by other general criteria linked to an inclusive character, diversity, gender equity.”

The document is an indication of how the debate on quality of theological education is both advancing in some regions and essentially needed still in other regions.¹⁶ The international debate on comparable quality standards of theological education has barely begun among existing associations of theological schools, though it was becoming clear during WOCATI conference that this is a field of strategic importance and many potentials for mutual learning between the associations of theological schools.

What are common standards for quality assurance and evaluation in theological education in the 21st century?

There are also external reasons for intensifying this debate, as looking beyond one’s own nose it is soon becoming clear that there are enormous and rapid developments going on with regard to quality assurance and international standardization of higher education systems in the secular field which are of crucial importance also for higher institutions of theological education.

Since the first UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in 1998 (WCHE) there has been an intense debate on quality of higher education at UNESCO level which theological colleges and regional associations should not look at with despire but explore with interest what they can learn and benefit from them. In the “World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty First Century: Vision and Action” from 1998 it was stated that “Developing quality in higher education and mechanisms for its assurance is crucial for the future of education in the 21st century”. The definition given here was: “*Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities: teaching and academic programs, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment, internal self/evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, are vital for enhancing quality*” (Art. 11).

In 2004 there was an important First International Barcelona Conference on higher Education on the theme “The social commitment of Universities”, organized by GUNI (Global Universities Network for Innovation, a network created by UNESCO and the University Politecnica de Catalunya in Barcelona,

¹⁴ For A Quality Theological Education, Manifest from Latin America, June 2008, p. 2

¹⁵ For the debate on Theological Education in a Missional Paradigm see among many other publications: Transforming Theological Education in Mission, IRM Vo. 94, N0 373, April 2005; Peter F. Penner, Theological Education as Mission, Neufeld Verlag, Germany 2005; Lothar Engel/Dietrich Werner: Ökumenische Perspektiven Theologischer Ausbildung, Beiheft ÖR, Frankfurt 2001

¹⁶ For the debate on quality in theological education in the US comp. the excellent book of Daniel O. Aleshire: Earthen Vessels. Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools, William B Eerdmans, /Grand Rapids, 2008

which is very rich in terms of deepening insights and experiences in quality assurance in higher education institutions.¹⁷ In the GUNI network on global level it was emphasized:

- ⊙ There is diversification and increased social demand for higher education
- ⊙ National states have no longer the capacities to finance this high education explosion (alone)
- ⊙ New and different kinds of providers for higher education emerge both from public and private sector – diversification of higher education markets
- ⊙ There is an enormous increase in degree mills, academic fraud and corruption in higher education
- ⊙ There also is increase in demand and supply for cross-border higher education schemes
- ⊙ There are urgent needs for proper governance concerning quality assurance in terms of quality audit, quality assessment and accreditation

It is worth exploring what institutions of theological education can learn from the set of criteria concerning quality higher education which were developed among others by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), which is linked to UNESCO. The realm of theological education is and should not be an isolated island which introvertly circles only around its itself, but rather is part and parcel of the higher education systems and the ongoing dialogue between culture, education and society in a given country even if church-state relations might vary considerably. The more church related theological colleges and seminaries are seeking recognition and compatibility of their curricula and degrees with universities and institutions of higher education on national level or in other countries the more crucial it becomes to be related and to be open to the quality standards and the debates on quality assurance which are emerging in the secular field – though not without critical scrutiny concerning its own Christian identity.

How can we learn from one another within the fellowship of regional associations of theological schools on global level? 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 network of „Global University Network for Innovation“ (GUNI) which has developed some special expertise in this in many regions?¹⁸ 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?

6) Understanding global migration, the changing ecclesial landscape and the consequences for inter-contextuality 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 *contextualization* 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 Canada? What about *African identity*

¹⁷ Higher Education in the World 2007: Accreditation for Quality Assurance: What is at stake? GUNI series on the social commitment of universities

¹⁸ Comp. <http://www.guni-rmies.net/>

of theology and theological education if sizeable and growing immigrant groups of Africans and African churches are living in Western Europe? The realities of global migration have profoundly transformed conditions and frameworks for theological education in both the southern and the northern hemisphere. During the 16th to early 20th century migration from Europe to countries of the South has brought models of theological education from the northern hemisphere to be planted (and later transformed) in contexts of the South. In the process of de-colonialization which started in the late forties in Asia and in the fifties in Africa the cry for self-determination led to the concern for contextualization of theological education in the realities of the South. But in the last two decades of the 20th century and in the beginning 21st century there are new realities emerging with regard to the presence of African and Asian Christian and non-Christian communities emigrating to Europe and the US due to trends in global reverse migration and many are gradually forming their own churches including new patterns of theological education. It has been estimated that approximately 10 million people migrate globally every year and both sending as well as receiving countries bear the consequences which include the religious sphere (reviving, transforming, opening religious identities or seeking refuge in fundamentalist religious identities).¹⁹ According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Migration is considered one of the defining global issues of the early twenty-first century, as more and more people are on the move today than at any other point in human history. There are now about 192 million people living outside their place of birth, which is about 3% of the world's population. This means that roughly one of every thirty-five persons in the world is a migrant. Between 1965 and 1990, the number of international migrants increased by 45 million-an annual growth rate of about 2.1 per cent. The current annual growth rate is about 2.9 per cent” Woman accounted 49.6% in 2005.²⁰

These migration-based new global church realities of large sectors can have a profound impact on theological education systems both within the northern and the southern hemisphere if the proper partners are brought into contact with each other in an appropriate way.

With John Pobee coming from Ghana it might be appropriate to just cite the example of Hamburg, Germany, where some 7000 Africans, the majority of which from Ghana and Nigeria are living permanently. There are some 70 African Churches now in Hamburg. Some people are arguing that there are more Africans attending church services regularly in the secular city of Hamburg than Germans. Africans have formed an African Church Council of Hamburg, assisted by ecumenically committed members of the Northelbian Lutheran Church. Due to initiatives in Missions-Academy of the University of Hamburg a special program African Theological Training in Germany (ATTIG) was formed and has worked for more than four years now providing a series of week-end workshops and lectures in cooperation with the protestant theological faculty of the University of Hamburg. Some representatives of African immigrant churches in Hamburg are now considering how they can also assist mother churches in Africa and theological education systems in their own home context. The key question in facing consequences of long term and irreversible migration trends all around the globe there is the following:

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 anyhow to reassess and to *explore new models of inter-contextuality in theological education for the future* in order to release new energies and commitments which come from migrant populations and their potentials. In the case of the SEAGST – program of ATESEA in Asia this kind of question has already led to the formation of something like a community of Asian theologians at

¹⁹ We owe some of these informations a PP- presentation of Henry Wilson from FTESEA during a consultation on the future of SEAGST in Malaysia in July 2008, H.S. Wilson: Changed ecclesial realities in the world church and theological education

²⁰ Comp. <http://www.iom.int/jahia/page3.html>

large (ATL) (outside Asia) which are committed to contribute with their resources to strengthening higher theological education in Asian countries in a reformed structure of the SEAGST program.

7) 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; 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 ICT's in principle.

Experts in global higher education have assured us that there is a historically unprecedented acceleration of knowledge in science and education which goes hand in hand with improved means of rapid dissemination of knowledge by modern means of ICT's though we also face the widening digital or knowledge divide (but this not only between North and South, but very much also within many nations depending from educational and socio-economic level of development in certain groups of society).²¹

Although some theological colleges have a department on Christian communication little has been done in terms of studies and research on how theological education institutions should plan to make proper use of modern communication and information technologies for theological teaching, for mutual cooperation, for exchange and dissemination of information to larger sectors of their societies as well as between member institutions of WOCATI.

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? In some Evangelical and Pentecostal as well as many mainline colleges there is much use of modern ICTs already but an ethics of modern communication means for theological education still is missing in most settings.

8) Strengthening regional centers of excellence in theological research and post-graduate studies

Since its inception the TEF was concerned about the development of regional centers of excellence in theological research and post-graduate education which would allow churches in the South to invest into long-term theological leadership development programs.²²

A prominent example for a regional center of excellence in theological research and post-graduate education is the SEAGST program of ATESEA which in fifty years has grown from a community of 16 colleges to a community of 104 colleges in South Asia at present. A consortium style of higher theological education institute, the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST) was established in 1966 under the auspices of the Association of the Theological Schools in South East

²¹ Comp. Wadi D. Haddad, Ph.D, President, Knowledge Enterprise, Inc. (USA): Tertiary Education Today: Global Trends, Global Agendas, Global Constraints, presented 19 August 2003 at the ICETE International Consultation for Theological Educators High Wycombe, UK

http://www.theoledafrica.org/ICETE/Files/Haddad_TertiaryEducation.htm

²² comp. the highly interesting TEF staff paper on „Centres for Advanced Theological Study in the Third World: A Survey and Evaluation of Developments“, in: Learning in Context, TEF London Bromley, 1973, p. 155ff

Asia. In cooperation with and on behalf of member schools of the Association, the Graduate School conducts programs of advanced theological studies at the master and doctoral levels and grants the degree of Master of Theology (M. theol.) and Doctor of Theology (D. theol.) The program makes available to graduates of approved theological schools in South East Asia the combined academic resources of the participating accredited schools so that suitable students may have the opportunity of continuing their studies within South East Asia.

Four specific aims were designed for this Graduate School:

1. To assist in the intellectual and spiritual development of Asian theologians so that their Christian ministry will be enriched and be more effective;
2. To contribute to the emergence of contextual and Asia-oriented theology by providing the facilities, and opportunities of research into, and reflection upon, the Christian faith as it relates to the living faiths, cultures and traditions of Asia, and to contemporary Asian society and its problems;
3. To further the training of competent teachers for the theology faculties of the region and of leaders for Christian ministry in the church and society;
4. To promote opportunities for the interchange of the graduate students and faculty members between the different participating institutions with a view to enhancing both a regional consciousness and Christian fellowship across the barriers of race, cultures and nations.

The SEAGST is a Christian institution, which is entirely ecumenical in doctrine and in its relationships to the churches and participating schools. The faculty and students represent a broad spectrum of Christian belief and denominational affiliation. The umbrella of the consortium covered 27 participating schools from 7 areas in 9 countries. There are 2 schools from Hong Kong, 9 schools from 2 areas in Indonesia, 4 schools from the area of Malaysia-Singapore-Thailand-Sri Lanka, 4 schools from Myanmar, 5 schools from Philippines and 3 schools from Taiwan. In last 40 years the SEAGST has successfully developed theological scholars and faculties to meet the needs of Asian churches and their theological institutions. There are more than 60 D. Theol. graduates and hundreds of M. theol. alumni, who are serving churches and theological education over Asian countries and beyond.²³

The SEAGST program is both a success story and an illustration of new challenges and difficulties due to the complex nature of the region and the successful impact made which demand for a serious reconsideration and re-shaping of SEAGST:

- vast distances between the different regions make it difficult to sustain a common level of quality control and similar orientation;
- many ATESEA member schools appear now to be able and ready to start their own advanced degree programs and offer degrees which parallel those granted through SEAGST on their own. The duplication of program has sometimes created confusion and waste of theological education resources that calls into question of the existence and participation of SEAGST programs for those participating schools.
- the identity of SEAGST is less visible as no central campus is linked to its programs.

The case of SEAGST and the ongoing debate within ATESEA for its re-shaping and re-orientation illustrates the challenges and needs for a serious re-consideration of the role of regional centers of excellence in theological research and education (which might be called „hub-colleges“) also for other parts of the global theological community. It is a fundamental task of strategic importance for regional associations of theological schools

²³ These informations are from: Huang Po Ho, Contextualization of Theological Education in South East Asia – Challenges and Responses, Contribution to WOCATI Congress, Greece, June 2008

- a) to review and reassess their own landscape of institutions of theological education with regard to the number, localization and appropriateness of regional centers of excellence in theological research and theological education;
- b) to strengthen the financial and institutional viability and distinct role of regional centers of excellence in theological research and theological education even in a situation where some individual colleges offer their own post-graduate and doctoral degrees in order to strengthen interconnectedness and mutual cooperation over against fragmentation and mutual isolation in theological education;
- c) to identify key areas and theological disciplines or research areas in which investment in high level expertise and theological competence is vital for the future mission, witness and contextualization of churches in a given region and without which contemporary challenges in rapidly transforming societies cannot be addressed professionally by representatives of Christianity (areas like bio-ethics, ecological issues, christian-muslim dialogue, gender issues, international law and human rights issues). Each regional association should develop its own priority list for disciplines and research areas which need to be reinforced and qualified in terms of creating more theological excellence in a theological dialogue which is vital for the contextualization of the Gospel as Christianity in many Asian and African regions still is in captivity due to being shaped in western garments;
- d) for each regional center of excellence in theological research and theological education also strategies should be developed to strengthen inter-contextual partnership and enrichment programs involving theological educators from other parts of the world, in order to strengthen global solidarity and inter-contextuality in theological education.

9) Exploring new models for Interfaith-Learning theological education

Ecumenical formation in theological education fourthly is guided by a vision of sharing and mutual discoveries reaching beyond the realm of Christianity to the human community in the whole inhabited earth (oikumene) and taking into account the challenges of Christians living in close neighbourhoods and experiencing mutual sharing and solidarity with people of other faith traditions in many church contexts. Thus interfaith encounter and learning about what can be affirmed in common action for peace, justice and human dignity with people of other living faith traditions is an integral component of ecumenical formation (*interfaith dimension of ecumenical formation*) which is not endangering one's own Christian identity but rather deepening it in processes of communication and sharing with people of different faiths. With the recent Letter of some 140 Muslim Leaders ("A Common Word between Us and You,") to Leaders of Christian Churches around the world at the feast of "Eid al-Fitr al-Mubarak" 2007, which marks the end of Ramadan, and the answer from WCC this whole dimension again becomes an urgent priority also for institutions of theological education.

Space and time does not allow to develop this priority issue further here but it should be mentioned at least briefly

- that there is a growing demand for new models of Christian-Muslim dialogue in theological education particularly from Christian minority churches in Muslim countries;
- the irruption of communal clashes and violent attacks on Christian churches in India, in some areas of Indonesia and in some African countries is an indication that more emphasis need to be given for interfaith-encounter and interfaith-theological learning in many theological institutions both in the North as well as in countries of the South;
- many of the materials and teaching resources which are available worldwide for interfaith learning are not available in local and regional languages and therefore the question of proper translation and dissemination needs to be addressed;
- there are situations in which due to political and religious factors on the national level no or only limited official participation from Christians in non-Christian programs of religious studies or official dialogue occasions is possible. Ways need to be identified to increase dialogue even in complex situations with limited mobility and freedom to operate in interfaith-encounters.

10) Promoting new systems of global solidarity partnerships for theological education

The ETE program 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 (including the Rockefeller Foundation) 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 it should be explored whether there can be 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 theological library development*. The number of applications by far outweighs the resources available for TE in the WCC at present. It might be explored whether the WCC or other organizations should 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 (comp. South Asia Solidarity Endowment Fund for Theological Education).

But it is also true that working for global solidarity in ecumenical theological education cannot be reduced to increasing efforts in fundraising and presenting ETE mainly again as a funding instrument though this remains an important dimension (as institutions without any funding and grant giving functions are often regarded as superfluous). But there are dimensions for global solidarity in theological education which are not solely measured in terms of budgets transferred and financial powers accumulated. Networking, accompanying expertise and programmatic work in the area of global ecumenical theological education by far exceeds purely monetary dimensions, it involves also in-kind contributions and just low-cost programs with innovative potential. Let us mention three recent examples from ETE's work in the recent past:

a) Global Digital Library on Ecumenics (GDLEC)

Theological colleges in the South and in Eastern Europe have sent important signals with regard to a dramatic shortage of proper teaching resources for ecumenics, history of the ecumenical movement and proper understanding of ecumenism in their context.²⁴ There is a

- Lack of proper library resources for teaching ecumenics and history/present stage of the ecumenical movement in many theological colleges of the South
- Diversification and pluralization of resources on ecumenism, church unity, ecumenical missiology and interfaith dialogue stored in a wide variety of different places and libraries in the world
- Digitalization of academic resources on ecumenism, ecumenical movement and globalization of world Christianity
- Increased accessibility and spread of digitalized library systems in theological colleges of the South
- Acceleration of the production of theological books and materials, deceleration of the trickle down and dissemination effect of recent publications to regional theological libraries in the South

²⁴ The PTE publication „Teaching of Ecumenics“ which was produced in 1983 by the WCC, edited by Samuel Amirtham and Cyrus Moon, is not available any more

To equip all theological libraries in the South with a proper physical collection of books for teaching Ecumenics, Ecumenical Missiology and Interfaith Dialogue would take at least half a century and would cost a lot. An alternative vision was developed (though tangible theological books are still held in high esteem...):

The goal of a project explored by ETE at present is to create a Global Digital Library on Ecumenics in order

- to increase and improve global individual and institutional access to theological journals, books and articles in the theological discipline of Ecumenics (including history of Ecumenism, church unity, ecumenical missiology, interfaith dialogue, contextual theologies)
- To improve theological education and research in these areas particularly for institutions of theological education in countries of the South and for Eastern and Central Europe
- To establish a global digital library on ecumenics (GDLEC) in order to support and enable qualified participation in teaching Ecumenics, ecumenical research and participating in the international discourse on the future of Ecumenics and the ecumenical movement (follow-up project for the International Bibliography on Ecumenics IOB which stopped two decades ago).
- To seek for better integration and cooperation of different partners and stakeholders working and publishing in the field of ecumenism, intercultural theology etc. and providing mutual access to their resources

Ways of cooperation and innovative working alliances are sought (for example with Globethic.net) to develop this idea further.

b) Senior Expert Exchange programs in ecumenical theological education

It is one of the key tasks of ETE to promote exchange programs for theological educators to get involved in ecumenical dialogue and exposure to other contexts. All experts know how expensive it is becoming to provide transport and accommodation for people which are still employed in their home context. In secular fields so-called Senior Expert Exchange programs have been developed in areas of secular developmental cooperation. People in retirement positions offer half a year or one year for offering their expertise and knowledge for contribution in a different social and political context – financially dependent for support only in terms of traveling costs. Similar models are practiced by some mission agencies for retired pastors or senior church experts. Only in few instances examples are there that this model has been applied also to retired professors in theological education. One should carefully explore whether assisting for the development of a program like this could contribute for the advancement of global solidarity in theological education and identify proper and adequate condition for a two-way system of exchanges are provided for this. Being aware of grave discrepancies in terms of retirement regulations and pension levels one needs to develop proper mechanism to ensure that this does not become a one-sided export model for senior experts in ecumenical theological education from the West to be transferred for limited period to the South but equal chances are given to representatives of Southern theological institutions to serve in the North or in other parts of the world.

c) New global journal on ecumenical formation in theological education

Ministerial Formation for some 30 years has played a unique and absolutely indispensable role for providing an international platform for theological educators to share new approaches in terms of contextualization and globalization in theological education. As the WCC see itself not able any more to continue this publication on its own due to shrinking finances and reduced staff positions alternative scenarios are developed to explore some creative alternative while not giving up the important history and common platform for dialogue. As WOCATI did not have its own journal or news letter and remained a rather fragile organization so far it is explored whether a joint journal between the regional associations of theological schools, WOCATI and ETE can be developed to continue the tradition of Ministerial Formation in a new format. If each year two Associations of Theological Schools would feel responsible for producing their own thematic issue of a small Journal the sense of ownership of a

Journal of Ecumenical Theological Education would increase and a new style of shared responsibility between a central ecumenical organization like WCC and networks in the region could evolve. It remains to be seen whether this approach could safeguard the global platform for the ongoing debate on ecumenical theological education which is as urgently needed as ever before.

Ecumenical Theological Education remains crucial for the future of the mission of the church – this was our starting point. The humble service a small program like ETE in WCC can contribute to the global scenery of theological education institutions might seem almost invisible and insignificant. But enthusiastic responses and a constant flow of many daily demands faced in ETE office weekly do still teach a lesson of its continued relevance. But it is not only its professional effectiveness or institutional strength which guarantees the “viability in theological education” in its broadest sense. Viability in theological education (this having been a favorite term for John Pobee) in its deepest sense as its capacity to sustain and to nurture life of faith, of the church, of humankind and of God’s creation is always depend on more. It is dependent on God’s grace and on the working of his Spirit. In this perspective it holds true that in theological formation as in any work of WCC excellence in academic or organizational professionalism will not do it alone, but it is the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit which grade and qualify a proper theologian, an institution of theological education or the work of a WCC program. 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).