

Global Forum of Theological Educators

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Final Report to Funding Entities that Supported the 2016 Inaugural Conference of the Global Fellowship of Theological Educators

Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada
Church of the Lord (Aladura)
Church of the Pentecost
Evangelisches Kirche in Hessian and Nassau
Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland
Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia
McCormick Theological Seminary
Oxford Center for Mission Studies
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
Yoido Church

Executive Summary

The inaugural conference the Global Forum of Theological Educators was conducted May 16–20, 2016, with a total of 86 participants from 37 countries. Participants represented the major families of contemporary Christianity: historic or ecumenical Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and African Indigenous churches. The conference focused on six topics related to theological education and global Christianity. After daily Bible study from the book of Acts, each topic was introduced by brief presentations after which participants discussed the focus topic in small groups. At the conclusion of the meeting, participants adopted a statement regarding the importance and future of the Forum. The meeting was funded by generous grants from the ten entities identified above and by the organizations and institutions that supported travel to the meeting from various locations throughout the world.

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History

Following two meetings in 2013, a group of persons began thinking how a meaningful discussion on theological education across all Christian families might be constituted. A group of theological educators who had been involved in meetings on theological education either by the World Council of Churches, Roman Catholic entities, the Lausanne Fellowship, and the World Evangelical Fellowship held an exploratory meeting and developed an executive committee to plan, administer, and seek funding for such a meeting. The early discussions grew out of a great sense of the need for this kind of Christian conversation and questions about its feasibility. The executive committee met four times between 2014 and 2016 to undertake the work of constructing what would become the May 2016 Global Forum of Theological Educators (GFTE) conference. These meetings were funded, in part, by small grants and by the organizations that executive committee members and consultants represented.

Participants, Christian Families, Methodology, Agenda, and Outcomes

The inaugural conference of the Global Forum was structured in a way to cultivate mutual learning and dialogue among representatives engaged in Christian leadership formation and theological education from around the world. It differed significantly from other gatherings of theological educators in several ways.

Participants. While all participants at the inaugural conference came from institutions or organizations related to theological education, they gathered as individuals and not as institutional representatives. They shared their personal faith and learned from the stories of others. They engaged in substantive questions about the nature of formation for Christian leadership and how that formation reflects ecclesial and regional differences and similarities. This pattern of participation contrasts with most global conferences on ministerial formation that engage participants as representatives of institutions or spokespersons for particular communities.

Christian Families. Perhaps the most unique characteristic of this event was the participation of persons who identified with Pentecostal, Orthodox, ecumenical or historical Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Roman Catholic, or African Indigenous churches. Almost all international meetings on theological education have limited participation to one or a few of these families. To the knowledge of the executive committee members who have been very involved in international gatherings related to theological education and ministerial formation, this was the first time in the modern era that all the contemporary Christian families were represented on equal grounds in the same meeting.

Methodology. While many conferences focus on plenary presentations, the GFTE conference had none. By contrast, the strategy for this conference sought to engage participants in sharing in

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table conversations. This strategy was employed on the assumption that the wisdom about the issues and topics addressed resided in all the participants—each of whom was a leader or faculty member in his or her context of ministry—and not in experts who would make plenary presentations. Because the strategy of the meeting was focused on table conversations, speakers offered brief presentations to introduce the topic and frame questions as a way to initiate the table discussions. Each group had a notetaker who summarized what was said around the tables, and a summary report of the discussions is still in preparation and will be shared later this year with participants.

Agenda. Each day of the conference began with worship, prayer, and Bible study. The texts for the three Bible studies came from the book of Acts, a book that has often been understood as an outstanding narrative of ancient learning on Christian leadership formation and theological education. The thematic sessions addressed six major themes: (1) the gifts of the different families of Christians, (2) how theological education forms people for ministry, (3) integrity and leadership, (4) the contributions of different geographical and ecclesial family contexts to global Christianity, (5) the role of theological education and the church in God’s mission in the world, and (6) the role of theological education for the future of global Christianity. In addition to these thematic sessions, one session grouped participants by geographical region and another by confessional (Christian family) groups.

Outcomes. The strategy and structure of the meeting, as evidenced by the responses of participants, was effective. People talked across boundaries—both ecclesial and geographical—that many participants had not crossed previously. Perhaps more importantly, people listened to commitments of persons from Christian families that they had not heard before. Some met a Pentecostal for the first time, others an Orthodox believer, and most talked with leaders of African Indigenous churches for the first time. The Global Forum was invented with the conviction that global Christianity needs these boundary-crossing conversations and will benefit by mutual engagement, by friendships formed, and convictions shared.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the meeting was the statement adopted by participants at the closing session. It describes well, the spirit of the conference as it developed over these days, the value of these conversations, and the commitment to pursue further engagement. The text follows, in full:

We, 86 theological educators, give thanks to God for the first meeting of the Global Forum of Theological Educators (GFTE), which met May 16-20, 2016 at Ferienstätte Dorfweil, Schmitten (near Frankfurt). We are grateful to the organizers for their bold vision and careful planning for this exceptional new global forum.

The GFTE’s composition is unique: for the first time, key theological educators from the six major church confessional families—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Independent

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churches—came together in one united forum in order to learn from each other and to share about the current situation of theological education and ministerial formation on a global scale.

Drawing on reflections from the book of Acts, participants gathered in the Spirit of Pentecost, aware that the core conviction of Christians—from whatever strand of Christian tradition they come—is to witness to the reality of God’s transforming love while standing together, not allowing anyone to become isolated. There was a clear sense that each had something to contribute to the common table.

The GFTE meeting was a unique moment, as it is the only time in the recent history of Christianity that such a diverse spectrum of leaders in theological education has joined together to underline the common tasks that face all Christian traditions. Some of these tasks include: building up new leadership for the mission of the church, strengthening the sense of unity between Christians, giving witness to justice with peace in the world, and supporting all aspects of theological education. The meeting was characterized by a deep sense of humility and of mutual openness in prayer and dialogue.

Participants realized with new urgency:

We are living in a critical stage of World Christianity. The landscapes of Christian traditions are changing dramatically—in some countries the existence of Christianity is under threat and Christian minorities are challenged to remain steadfast in hostile environments; there are institutional frameworks of theological education that are crumbling; there is growing religious illiteracy and ignorance that help foster prejudice and extremism; theological institutions are often under pressure to conform to government or other external forms of accreditation requirements. In our many contexts we realize again that unity and cooperation in theological education beyond the traditional divides are not a luxury or mere specialized vocation for some, but are essential to the future of theological education. Cooperation and dialogue in theological formation are required for the majority of settings in which the church finds itself in the 21st century.

We are glad therefore that the consultation in Dorfweil has provided an occasion to recognize each other as Orthodox, Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic or Independent theological educators contributing to a common task of theological education for the sake of God’s reign in the world.

We are aware that we can complement each other and need each other with the different gifts we bring to the common table in the area of theological education. The need to overcome stereotypes and caricatures of each other is crucial not just for theological education but also for our witness in a world that is torn apart by wars, violence and so many types of injustice. We have been made aware of the need to continue conversations started in this first gathering, to foster friendships and collaboration birthed from our dialogue, and to seek together, as educators, to work toward transformative theological education that serves the churches and God’s kingdom.

We recommend that the next gathering of the Global Forum of Theological Educators take place within the next two to three years – and that the Executive Committee undertake the necessary planning and develop increased communication among present and prospective participants.

With thanks to God—Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life.

Administration and Finance

Administration. The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) functioned as the fiduciary agent for GFTE because GFTE is an unincorporated entity. ATS is a tax-exempt U.S. corporation that is supported by dues from member schools, foundation grants for specific programs, fees for certain services provided to member schools, and revenue from its long term investments. ATS is audited annually following the conclusion of its fiscal year on

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June 30, and the revenue and expenditures for GFTE were part of the audit that was completed in August 2016 and reviewed by the ATS Audit committee. ATS has managed the GFTE finances as an “agency account” in which funds were received and expended exclusively for GFTE purposes. The revenue was received in euros and US dollars, and so, the expenses were paid in euros and in US dollars. ATS maintained all euro contributions in euros and dollar contributions in dollars so there would be no loss from currency exchange.

Revenue. Ten different funding entities provided a total of (US) \$71,397 for the May 2016 conference. The meeting was also supported by two other sources. First, invitations to all participants indicated that travel to the meeting was their individual responsibility, although some subsidy would be available for persons requesting it. It is difficult to determine how much was paid in support of travel, but of the 86 participants, a total of slightly more than \$14,000 was awarded in travel subsidy grants. A reasonable estimate is that participants and their organizations likely paid as much in total travel expenses as GFTE received in program support gifts. Second, the Association of Theological Schools provided significant services in kind to administer the meeting, including enlisting participants, registration, accounting, program preparation, and other services. In addition to these kinds of revenue, the conference center aggressively sought to minimize expenses it billed to GFTE while providing commodious accommodations for the participants and conference sessions as well as well-prepared meals.

Expenses. The cash resources were used primarily for onsite expenses (including lodging, food, and travel to and from the airport to the conference center), administrative personnel support at the conference, and travel subsidy for participants from the majority world. The final revenue and expense budget is shown below.

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Total of Revenue and Expenses for May GFTE Meeting

	Euros	US\$
Receipts		
Association of Theological Schools/ Henry Luce Foundation		13,717
Church of the Lord, Aladura	300	
Church of the Pentecost		3,000
Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland	25,000	
Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia		10,000
McCormick Theological Seminary/Danmission		2,511
Oxford Center for Mission Studies	1,368	
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary		3,000
Yoido Church		5,000
Evangelischen Kirche in Hessian and Nassau	7,500	
	<u>34,168</u>	<u>37,228</u>
Disbursement		
Onsite lodging, meals, transportation	34,168	1,646
Travel subsidy to participants		14,285
Onsite administration		12,611
Planning meeting		1,524
	<u>34,168</u>	<u>30,066</u>
Balance	<u>-</u>	<u>7,162</u>

The balance of funds will be maintained in an ATS agency account and will be used at the discretion of the executive committee for the planning of the next meeting of the Global Forum.

Gratitude

The executive committee and the participants of the May inaugural conference of the Global Forum of Theological Educators express deep appreciation to the donors that provided the funds for this unique and significant conference. The funders reflected the wide range of participants: donor entities were located in Europe, Africa, Asia, United Kingdom, and the United States; they were historical Protestant, Pentecostal, African Indigenous church, as well as agencies like ATS that include historic Protestants, Evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics and Orthodox theological schools. Because the actual expenses for the May conference were slightly less than income, the balance of the funds will be used for the initial planning of the next conference. The participants in the May meeting have expressed deep interest in a meeting in either two or three years, giving participants from institutions with limited resources the time to put aside travel money.