

Communiqué of the participants of the first consultation of the “Twin process”, São Leopoldo (Brazil) from November 19-23, 2015

I Abstract

Overall theme of the First Consultation was “Reformation – Education – Transformation”. Approximately 100 persons from 40 different countries, confessionally and theologically diverse, participated in the meeting. Deliberating in both plenaries and workshops and drawing on the insights of four keynote presentations, a consensus emerged that the Reformation process continues to happen. In this, it became evident that education for transformation plays a key role. The Consultation employed the “twin principle”, meaning that the presenters “twinned”, each topic being treated by two (or more) different persons from two different backgrounds, so that content was treated from two different perspectives.

The Consultation saw that the churches of the Reformation have, over and again, boldly witnessed, advocating for justice and peace, healing and reconciliation. However, it also dealt with instances in which the church has failed to live up to its calling, contributing rather to the marginalization or even oppression of endangered persons or peoples.

The Consultation made – among others – the following recommendations:

- *Widening the study of Reformation theologies to include the insights of persons from other Christian traditions, learning thereby what the Reformation means “to the other” and finding new means of cooperation and integration*
- *Expanding theological and biblical studies on violence, religion and fundamentalism vis-à-vis the Reformation traditions with the goal of linking up with other religious communities and fostering models of non-violent conflict transformation. Particularly relevant here are the insights of the historical peace churches.*
- *Advocating for inclusive and participatory education accessible for all as delineated in the United Nations’ Strategic Development Goals (SDG)*
- *Strengthening the role of women and their insights and contributions in education*
- *Strengthening the role of education by giving priority to scholarship programs geared towards capacity building for Christian prophetic leadership development at both regional and international levels.*

Moving towards the second Twin Consultation in Halle, the participants observed that the concept of transformation per se needs further study, in particular the question of what is meant by transformative education. They also called for critical analysis of current neoliberal economic theory and practice, observing that these can be seen as

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a type of “prosperity gospel.” They further called for greater youth participation and requested that interdenominational sharing be strengthened. They commended the first Consultation’s climate of communication and prayer coupled with sensitivity for that which is weak in this world, urging that such a climate be duplicated in church and educational institutions in general.

The Consultation process is organized by Bread for the World and the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany (EMW), together with Faculdades EST, Francke Foundations and the University of Halle/Wittenberg and in cooperation with national and international ecumenical partners.

More information on the R-E-T process www.r-e-t.net

II Communiqué

*I am the First and the Last, says the Lord God who is and was and is to come,
the Ruler of all
(Rev. 1, 8; Bible reading, closing worship)*

Prayer, taken from the liturgy
*Dear God, our Father and Mother,
You have gathered people of all times and places to reflect on Your Word and
to find ways of justice and love, ways that assure a worthy life for all creation.*

*We implore that your Holy Spirit, through your Word of Life, take care of us and
grant us consistency, indignation and courage, setting us free to care about
others, to denounce all forms of oppression and misery and to proclaim hope
for new beginnings.”*

*“We thank you for inviting us in Christ to be your people and for being able to
know you personally through the vulnerable people. We thank you, Lord.”
(Prayers from the Worship services in São Leopoldo during the consultation)*

1 Who we are

We, the 100 some participants of the first R-E-T Consultation, came together in São Leopoldo (Brazil) from November 19-23, 2015. We met on the campus of Faculdades EST. This University and the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brasil (IECLB) have been most generous hosts, giving us opportunity to visit social, diaconal and advocacy projects and to worship with their congregations. We are thankful that we thus experienced how the local church interacts with the realities the country of Brazil and its people face.

We came from 40 different countries all over the world and from a wide diversity of confessional and theological traditions both within the Protestant fold - Baptist, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Reformed - and beyond – Roman-Catholic, Orthodox, Independent churches. We came at the invitation of

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Bread for the World and the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany (EMW), together with Faculdades EST, Francke Foundations and the University of Halle/Wittenberg and in cooperation with national and international ecumenical partners. We, as educators, social or diaconal workers, theologians and lay people, pastors and church leaders, as women and men, younger and older participants assembled here to pray, to discuss and to study the role churches of the Reformation traditions and their organizations played and continue to play in the intersection of education and transformation in periods of rapid change in their societies.

Through our sharing in São Leopoldo we were confirmed in our conviction that reformation theologies and movements, having started in Europe and having spread to other regions over the centuries, played an important role by guiding these churches to emphasize education, formation and social transformation.

2 What we did and what we learned

Coming to Brazil from today's worldwide ecclesiastical community, including Pentecostals movements and newer churches, we realized that Reformation processes continue to happen. In these dynamic processes, churches of the Reformation emphasize education for transformation, i.e. for liberating minds and bodies, impacting societies and enabling the churches to raise a distinctive voice in the public sphere. In the context of World Christianity, however, we recognize that such emphasis is not a privilege of the churches of the Reformation alone.

In São Leopoldo we experienced the richness of the Reformation traditions in our midst. We came to a new awareness of the plurality and diversity the Reformation heritage has achieved by contextualizing and transforming the witness to the gospel in societies and peoples around the globe. We discovered the transcultural expression of this heritage which we hold in common. We experienced the extent to which the churches, organizations and teachings institutions from which we come are connected, joined by their cooperation in faith and action. We are thankful for this community, particularly that sisters and brothers of the Roman Catholic Church, of the Orthodoxy and of Independent Churches participated and engaged with us. Such forums of dialogue and cooperation need to be strengthened further. In São Leopoldo, we used the "twin-principle", meaning that at least two presenters from different contexts and/or reformation traditions introduced their perspectives on the selected themes. This principle was employed both in the 15 small group workshops and in the keynote addresses. The presenters brought to the fore instances in which the churches represented in our midst foster education, thus enabling people to experience dignity and be transformed. They acquire skills and knowledge which empowers and leads them to not only reform their theologies but also to join movements for the transformation of lives and societies. The transformational role of women was particularly emphasized, as well as the urgent need to revisit traditional models of education. It was observed that in some cases, "engendering" theological

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education has led the way forward to rethinking the methodology, structures and content of theological education. It has enabled persons to address the concrete challenges in theological institutions, church and society and to make them more relevant.

Through our sharing with each other, we were reminded how fragile our attempts and how ambivalent some of our historical experience in periods of dictatorship and civil war and in times of conflicts sometimes were. Churches have on occasion boldly witnessed, advocated for justice and offered space for processes of healing and reconciliation. But in other cases, churches have failed to respond to their calling. Deeper studies are needed to understand which role Reformation theologies played in these instances.

Fragmentation and conflict are realities that tear our societies apart, and we are disturbed by the spiraling increase of violence and of wide use of military means. This reality of conflict is also present within and between churches. We urgently need to find ways of constructively dealing with conflicts among ourselves and in society in order to overcome misunderstanding and hatred. We reconfirm our commitment to strive for peace, reconciliation and life in dignity for all and we feel called to look carefully into our understanding of theology and education in order to envisage models that foster dialogue, encounter and peacebuilding and defy the instrumentalisation of religion.

In the reports given as well as in the visits to diaconical projects of the IECLB, we were reminded of the vulnerability of life and of dangers to which people are exposed. In sharing the challenges we the participants from Asia, Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Europe and North America currently face, including recent events such as the terrorist attacks in Paris, we were again sensitized as to how selective our perception of such threats often is and that we easily overlook what happens in other places. We need to keep ourselves informed and continue to pray for each other in order not to overlook the risks to life and livelihood in various places around the globe, the Middle East or Northern Nigeria being cases in point, but not these alone.

We became aware that the Reformation traditions offer a helpful distinction in the relation of the political, economical and spiritual realms. Discerning the different dimensions has become even more decisive today when the interconnection of these realms may be perceived very differently in different cultures and theologies. The plurality of each and every spot on the globe implies that whatever we do or say is an intervention in a larger space in which many different agents act and where the church's voice is one among many. We recognized how decisive it is to discern between situations where churches witness and act in a powerful or majority position and where they are in a minority position. It is necessary to further develop the churches' role in public spheres and concepts of responsible citizenship.

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To remain true to our calling, dialogue and joint action with other agents of change are needed, be they social movements or people of other faiths. This has to be further explored.

Taking stock of all to which we feel called in “bold humility”: we are thankful for any contribution churches can make towards the transformation of individuals and societies. We see an obligation to repent for those moments when churches failed to live up to the gospel, contributing rather to the domesticization, marginalization or even oppression of people through their proclamation, teaching and education. By sharing our narratives, experiences and insights we were reminded again that an emphasis on education has to be practiced and lived in different ways in order to be adequate to the contexts and to the challenges the churches are facing.

In all our discussions and specially in prayer and worship we humbly accepted that ultimately we all are invited to let ourselves be transformed by God’s Spirit.

3 What we recommend

We are resolved to continue what we have started in São Leopoldo and forward to those who will meet in Halle 2016 for the second Twin Consultation the following recommendations and open questions:

We need to deepen the study of Reformation theologies in the frame of a wider ecumenism and to invite more theologians/researchers from other Christian families who will add further dimensions as to what the Reformation means “to the other” and to find new means of cooperation and integration.

There is a need to continue to address the new splits and controversies, in particular with regard to ethical themes, among churches of the Reformation traditions and beyond. How can we focus on what drives a community towards Christ today and kindle a passionate concern for Christian Unity?

We heard critical questions as to whether churches of the Reformation traditions do not sometimes talk and behave like a counter-reformation movement with regard to newer churches and Pentecostal churches. We need to scrutinize our proclamation, theologies and attitudes in the light of this observation.

Some presentations have awakened in us the interest in more and deeper explorations of missional and diaconical histories in the light of the contributions of women and the younger generation. The same holds true for the need to “engender” theologies and education, meaning to re-read both areas in the light of the insights of gender studies. The present and cooperating churches, organizations and schools are encouraged to foster such studies and to share them.

Participants stated that in several contexts today there is a growing level of violence, intolerance, hate talk and emerging attitudes of religious extremism (examples were shared from Brazil, Middle East, Southern Africa and others). This is an expression of

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growing social conflict within societies which permeates and threatens religious communities of all traditions. A need has been identified to further deepen the theological and biblical studies on violence, religion and fundamentalism with regard to the Reformation traditions. There is a need to link up with other religious communities and to foster models of non-violent conflict transformation.

These challenges heighten the relevance of the essential insights of Reformation traditions which take on a new urgency in the global crisis we are facing:

- Reformation tradition, particularly that of the historical peace churches, has delegitimized the religious sanctioning of brutality and violence and made clear the distinctions between the role of state authorities and the church or religion which are still of relevance today;
- Reformation tradition has emphasized a strategic coalition between biblically rooted faith and critical reasoning or humanistic values in education. The emphasis put on education challenges all forms of religious identities which tend to enter into moods of religious extremism and intolerance;
- Reformation tradition has developed a culture of public and social responsibility which renounces any trend for privatization and inner withdrawal of the Christian faith from the world as well as any form of religious dictatorship and extremism;
- Reformation tradition has given emphasis to the competence of local communities to read the Bible in their own languages and to be interpreters of their own realities, thereby strengthening their independence from agents of either religious or secular media to manipulate and exploit their religious longings;

We are therefore convinced that churches of the Reformation tradition provide an essential and critical contribution to the current state of development in World Christianity. The emphasis on education, on public theology, on non-violence and on critical engagement with any form of religious extremism and corruption cannot be taken for granted. In many areas of the world today, this emphasis is greatly needed.

It was highlighted that the churches and organizations of the R-E-T process should prioritize and strategize financial planning for scholarship programs towards capacity building for Christian prophetic leadership development, both at the regional and international level.

Through our sharing and in the presentations given, we were reminded over and again that education is not available to all. All participating churches, organizations and schools are called to campaign and work so that inclusive and participatory education is accessible for all (see SDGs). Our own institutions are called to enhance their efforts to offer education at all levels and invest in a theological education that is open for dialogue and which is teaching tolerance.

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We are resolved to take a new look at our educational institutions in the light of our discussions and improve upon them where needed to make them more relevant and practical.

We have heard of the struggles marginalized groups are facing and need to have more of them present and speaking for themselves. The aspect of disabilities also needs more attention in our discussions and reflections.

We were reminded of the potential of public theology and a theology of citizenship which need further reflection, especially in relation to the reformation traditions in their various contextualized realities.

4 Questions and recommendations for Halle

Transformation seems to be a fashionable word. We have not clearly defined what we mean by transformation and more specifically by transformative education on an individual, communal and ecumenical global level. This needs further study and discussion.

Although ecological and creation issues have been present they need further and deeper attention in the R-E-T process, especially linking to climate issues and SDGs. Aspects of the SDGs were addressed in workshops but the SDGs could be used as a framework for a more systematic addressing of the questions involved.

We were challenged by the insight of our Latin American partners that the present neoliberal system has religious traits (money and wealth as idols). It thus presents itself as a form of the prosperity Gospel. Is that a perspective which needs more study and is would helpful in other regions?

There was a strong wish to partake in Bible study over and beyond the worship and prayer offerings of the first consultation.

The dimension of interdenominational sharing should be strengthened.

The percentage of youth representatives should be higher to have a multi-generational approach to what Reformation means today.

We are thankful for the first consultation's climate of communication and prayer which was sensitive to the suffering and threats to life in various parts of the world. That should be continued in Halle. The need for such a climate must also be communicated to the participating churches and organizations and to educational institutions in general.

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