

WEA Theological News



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WEA Theological Commission Strengthens Links with Latin America



Dr Parker (l) and Dr Schwambach (r) with Ziel Machado, IFES Latin America

With an extensive tour of Latin America by its Executive Director, Dr David Parker, visiting seminaries and universities, meeting with theologians and theological groups, the WEA TC has taken a significant step in strengthening its connections with this region. Following the appointment four years ago of a Brazilian member, Dr Claus Schwambach, the TC has been actively working to extend its relations with evangelical theologians in the area. Its annual meeting and consultation will be held there in 2009. The TC is also working towards the appointment of a Spanish-speaking theologian to its core membership to represent the fast growing and virile Christian community in the region.

Dr Parker's tour, which took place in April 2008, covered 35,000km in five Latin American countries. During this time, he presented the work of the TC and discussed key issues in the church and theology with theologians and church leaders. He said, "I am very pleased to report that I received a warm welcome everywhere I went, and encountered a great deal of interest in our work—especially our intention to hold our annual meeting and a consultation somewhere in the region next year."

His visit included Brasil (where he travelled with Dr Schwambach to Sao Paulo, Curitiba, Atibaia, and Sao Bento do Sul), Santiago, Chile; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Lima, Peru; and Guatemala City. He concluded his tour by spending time in Pasadena, Los Angeles en route back to Australia. In each centre he spoke to a range of groups and individuals about the current work and future plans of the TC, and held discussions with seminary leaders, theologians and students on key issues facing the churches. He said, "The discussions were intense and informative, giving us an exceptionally good idea of the vast range of interests and concerns on the hearts and minds of pastors and theologians. This will give us good material to work on as we decide on the details of our visit and consultation."

There was good contact with former TC members including Dr C René Padilla (Argentina), Rev Pedro Arana (Peru), David Suazo and Dr Emilio Nunez (Guatemala). Representatives of other groups such as Overseas Council, World Vision, and IFES were also included. Of particular importance were members and officers of the Latin American Theological Fellowship (FTL) including President, Ruth Padilla de Borst, and General Secretary, Omar Cortés; AETAL (the evangelical accrediting body linked with the WEA through ICETE), through Dr Paul Sywulka, Executive Secretary, and Vera Brock, Board Secretary. Other important links were with the local accrediting agencies in Brasil (ASTE) and the southern cone of the continent (ASIT). Dr Norberto Saracco, Lausanne International Deputy Director for Latin America, provided invaluable assistance for the Argentinian part of the tour, as did SETECA, the leading theological seminary in Guatemala and Dr Josué Fonseca of the Baptist Seminary in Santiago, Chile.

In Peru, Dr Parker brought a greeting from the TC to a regional conference of the Micah Network consisting of about 150 people from 19 countries, discussing "Integral Mission—achievements, setbacks and challenges."

Over coming weeks the TC will develop a plan for its 2009 annual meeting and consultation, with details to be announced later in the year. The meeting will include the TC's planning and strategy discussion along with new appointments and further development of its activities. The consultation will address important theological and practical issues facing the church in Latin America with the exact format yet to be determined. Expressions of interest and ideas were sought throughout Dr Parker's trip for this event and are further invited from readers.

Theological Commission 2008 Program—Plans Develop for Contextualisation Project and TC-08 Bangkok



The WEA Theological Commission study unit on Contextualisation will hold a writing session in Oxford UK in August 2008 to develop papers on its current project. The Convenor, Dr Matt Cook, is leading the group which is at present preparing its work and sharing information electronically. More than a dozen scholars from around the world will assemble to discuss their concepts face to face and to advance the editing of their manuscripts. Representatives of the WEA Missions Commission will also be present and later in the year there will be more collaboration as the two groups work on the same topic. The focus of the TC will be on contextualising exegesis and it is hoped that the papers of both groups can be co-published in book form. Further financial support is urgently required for this project and those able to help are requested to contact the TC as soon as possible.

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Promoting Biblical Truth by Networking Theologians

TC Chairman's visit to Belarus highlights critical need for mutual understanding and religious freedom

A report by Dr Rolf Hille, Chair, WEA Theological Commission (adapted)

Twenty-five years ago, when the Theological Commission (TC) of the WEA first established ecumenical contacts, the relationship of Evangelical churches and the Roman Catholic Church was the focus. However, for some time now, the TC has also intended to establish a dialogue with the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe. Since the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the former Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe, new possibilities of diverse encounters for dialogue have arisen. TC member, Rev. Per Pedersen, of the Danish Lutheran Church who teaches at the Armenian Orthodox seminary in Armenia, now has regular meetings with the Armenian Patriarch. But there have also arisen conflicts between Protestant churches and missionary societies in the predominantly Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe which has made the need for better understanding acute.

As Principal of the Albrecht-Bengel Haus seminary in Tuebingen, Germany and as chairman of the TC, I had the unique opportunity of taking a study trip to Belarus with a group of 15 students from May 10–17, 2008. On the first day of our journey, I had the chance to meet and to get to know the Belarussian Orthodox Patriarch Filaret, who was responsible for officially inviting our group. Our students had the pleasure of giving a musical concert including some German classical choral pieces at the Minsk Philharmonic concert hall on the occasion of an official celebration of the Belarussian Orthodox Church. On the following Sunday, we not only visited an Orthodox service, but also the services of the Lutheran Church in Minsk.

Thereafter, our program included paying a series of visits to the Theological Institute and the Academy of Spirituality. There, I was able to give a lecture to candidates for the Orthodox priesthood on the Essentials of Protestant (Reformation) Christianity and on questions of ecumenical relations.

With respect to the relationship to Orthodox churches, I would suggest that a number of fundamental theological insights are of vital importance. Since the schism of the Greek-speaking Eastern Church and the Latin-speaking Western Church of the Roman Empire in the year 1054, both churches have become quite estranged from one another and developed apart from one another in relative isolation. But in some respects, the Orthodox churches stand in the middle between Catholicism and Protestantism. For example, while the Orthodox churches developed independently, there was parallel development in Europe and later in all other continents of both the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches. However the critical intellectual struggle which enveloped the western churches did not take place in the Orthodox churches because they were not seriously affected by the European Enlightenment.

This is evident in dealing with the questions of basic doctrine: the Roman Catholic Church recognizes Scripture, the authority of bishops together with the Pope and tradition, but Protestants strictly espouse the principle of the Scripture alone as the basis of all theological questions of doctrine, faith, and life. However the Orthodox churches recognise as binding revelation of truth the doctrinal decisions of all seven ecumenical councils of the early (Patristic) Church up to the year 787, but none after that.

Orthodox churches have been involved in the World Council of Churches (WCC), together with a large number of Protestant churches. But it is interesting to note that at

the WCC General assemblies in the past years, frequent conversations have taken place between concerned Evangelicals and Orthodox bishops voicing their concerns about developments within liberal Protestantism. In the 20th century, some degree of reconciliation occurred between Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople, at least regarding the lifting of the mutual official condemnations that took place with the schism of 1054.

Protestants, particularly Evangelical Christians, feel a marked distance to the Orthodox with respect to their intense veneration of saints and of Mary. Many Evangelicals are quite skeptical about the spirituality of the Orthodox and see in it an external, ritualized Christianity. But the survival of the Orthodox church and the faith of its people during the long period of persecution endured by them during the 20th century indicates that this opinion must be re-examined. It is amazing how many people returned to the churches after this persecution. Their faith was kept alive and the Gospel was propagated in services and in families, particularly by grandparents.

However, the most critical question is the matter of religious liberty. The views of Protestant Christians who have begun to work in Orthodox areas since the Fall of the Wall in 1989 are absolutely in opposition to the self-understanding of the official Orthodox churches. Protestants are labeled cults, without any consideration of that fact that they are from larger Protestant denominations, such as the Baptists.

So ecumenical dialogues led by the WEA TC must, in my opinion, keep these three aspects in mind: the theological discussion about the early Christian points of common reference, the question of the controversies regarding doctrine and practice, and finally, the question of how to create better mutual understanding so that Protestant churches can live and work in freedom as respected Christian congregations.

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Contact - PrestonTaylor777@yahoo.com

Call for Papers: Vulnerable Mission Conference

Dr Jim Harries, Chairman of the Board of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, has announced that the organisation is looking for people to contribute papers relating to vulnerable mission to be presented at the conferences in UK, Germany and USA and/or posted on the web in advance. He said that papers should be encouraging either ministry without Western resources, and/or the use of local languages in Christian mission. For more information, visit www.vulnerablemission.com contact jim@vulnerablemission.com, and send drafts of papers.

Pioneering Consultation on African Christianity by TC Study Unit

The Center for Early African Christianity (formerly known as the Early African Christianity Project), a study group of the Theological Commission of WEA, held its first International Consultation on Early African Christianity in Addis Abba, Ethiopia April 11–12th, 2008. The consultation was convened for the purpose of dialog and reflection on the basic vision for a reassessment of Early African Christianity set forth in the recently published book, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* by Thomas Oden.

Papers were presented by a wide range of speakers including Metropolitan Bishop of the Monastery of St. Demiana, Prof. Michel Willy Libambu of the Congo, Prof. Lamin Sanneh of Yale University and Principal Thomas Oduro of Good New Theological College and Seminary in Ghana. TC members, Dr. Thomas Oden and Dr. Chris Hall, and affiliate member Dr. Michael Glerup were also in attendance.

The response to the book and academic project were extremely positive. As Bishop Mouneer wrote, "I would like to say thank you to Prof. Thomas Oden and all his colleagues at the Center for Early African Christianity. You have been a great inspiration to us here in Africa. Your book *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* not only threw light on African Christianity but also drew a road map that helps us, as Africans, to rediscover the treasures of Christian thoughts that were left by our early African Christian Fathers."

In other developments, Thomas Oden presented two lectures on "Early Libyan Christianity" at Islamic Dawa University in Tripoli, Libya in February 2008; and the CEAC joined a consortium of digital humanities projects organized by the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

For more information contact Dr Michael Glerup mglerup@mindspring.com

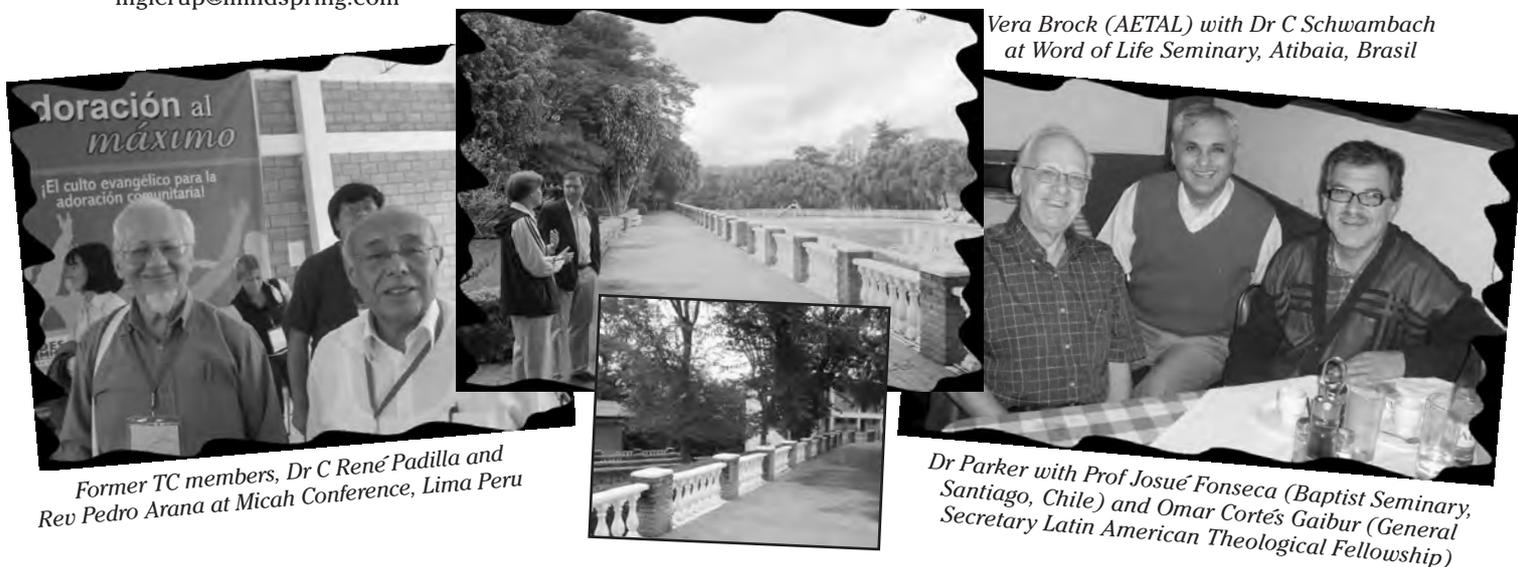
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TC-08 Bangkok

Meanwhile, plans are in hand for consultation to be held in October in Bangkok in association with the TC's annual meeting, Oct 22–25. The topic, finalised in talks between the TC and local theologians, will be "Holistic Gospel in a developing community." The TC will contribute two plenary papers on the biblical/theological foundations and historical developments. They will be presented by Dr Brian Edgar (Australia/Asbury Theological Seminary) and Dr Justin Thacker (Head of Theology, EA UK). These presentations will be followed by in-depth discussion on several areas of application of this theme in relation to the practical work of churches in Thailand covering topics such as ministries relating to children, prostitution, HIV/AIDs and the issues of politics and corruption.

In addition there will be another English language discussion group which will focus on international aspects of the topic. It will include contributions from theologians present at the consultation as well as input from participants in an on-line discussion group recently set up by the TC with the intention of gathering insights, experiences and resources from people around the world who are not able to attend in person. Findings from both the Thai language discussions and the international group (including the e-group) will be compiled into a document to be available from the TC display at the WEA General Assembly which follows TC-08 in Pattaya, Oct 25–30.

The annual TC gathering is open to TC commissioners, Global Members and invited guests and observers and other interested friends by arrangement. The Global membership scheme enables anyone interested in the work of international evangelical theological activity to participate fully in the annual gathering of the TC and the rest of its activities. Membership and annual subscription details are available on request. Those interested in TC-08 and the new e-group are invited to contact the TC office for more information.



Vera Brock (AETAL) with Dr C Schwambach at Word of Life Seminary, Atibaia, Brasil

Former TC members, Dr C René Padilla and Rev Pedro Arana at Micah Conference, Lima Peru

Dr Parker with Prof Josué Fonseca (Baptist Seminary, Santiago, Chile) and Omar Cortés Gaibur (General Secretary Latin American Theological Fellowship)

ICETE's 2009 International Consultation

ICETE is pleased to announce that the next ICETE International Consultation for Theological Educators will take place 5–9 October 2009 in Sopron, Hungary. The distinguished international evangelical scholars Bishop Hwa Yung of Malaysia, and Professor Henri Blocher of France, will be among principal speakers at the event. The Consultation's theme is: "Energising Community: Theological Education's Relational Mandate."

The 2009 ICETE Consultation is intended for the ICETE constituency throughout the world. Available space will be limited, so priority will be given to representatives from schools affiliated with one of the eight continental associations that make up the ICETE family. Any school that is formally linked to any of the ICETE member associations will be eligible for 50% discount on the consultation fee. Guests or observers will be accommodated on an invitation basis only, as space is available. Those interested in attending the Consultation should contact the ICETE Consultation Directorate at: Consultation2009@icete-edu.org.

Verbum

Peru's theology-in-practice

By Rob Haskell, Director of Senderis www.senderis.com

When most people think about Latin American theology they probably think Liberation Theology. With its social and political orientation and Marxist emphasis on praxis, this thinking has deep roots in Peru, especially because Peruvian Catholic Gustavo Gutierrez's influential book *Theology of Liberation* set the theological agenda for the movement in the seventies. The specific Marxist insight that guides Liberation Theology is the idea that philosophy is not for describing the world but for changing it. One can see how, when applied to theology, this would lead to a heightened interest in practice.

This emphasis on practice and transformation is actually prior to Gutierrez's ideas and can be seen, for example, in the work of John Mackay, an influential Scottish missionary to Peru in the middle of the 20th century. In later times there have also been several other prominent evangelical theologians from Peru who have contributed significantly to the life and work of the church. In a recent trip to Peru I had the opportunity to speak with some evangelical leaders there and noted that the emphasis on a theology of practice is also important in Protestant circles. For example, I asked Pedro Arana, president of the Peruvian Bible Society and former TC member, what was the hot theological topic in Peru; he responded immediately that it was creation care and global warming. Arana gave me the latest copy of the journal he helps edit, *Textos para la Acción* (Texts for action)—the latest issue is dedicated to the oppression and liberation of women. In another publication on evangelism he presents the gospel as necessary for the social, political, economic and cultural renewal of Peru. The reality of future, eternal salvation is implied in the work as well but the greater emphasis falls on the gospel's power to transform the present.

Other leaders explicitly stated that in Latin America there is no interest in issues related to systematic theology. The hot topics are the practical ones like leadership, informal theological education, the family and other such questions. A striking example of how this works out in practice can be seen in the fact that at the Seminario Evangelico de Lima there are no courses in systematic theology in the curriculum. The only 'theology' class is the history of doctrine course and this is a single class as opposed to the traditional three. Cesar Morales, the academic dean of SEL, rejects the distinction between systematic and practical theology because it seems to denigrate the importance of practice. But although Morales is passionate about practice and the social impact of the gospel, he is not as interested in the political arena because, he says, the political system in Peru is too corrupt and therefore the only possible way to gain political influence is to sell one's soul in the process. One can understand such sentiments in a nation whose former president (Alberto Fujimori) is on trial for running a secret death squad.

Peruvian Dario Lopez documents some of the perils of evangelical involvement in Peruvian politics in his recent book *La Seducción del Poder: Los evangelicos y la política del Perú en los noventa* (The Seduction of Power: Evangelicals and the Politics of Power of Peru in the Nineties). Evangelicals, says Lopez, have been influential in society and politics since the late 80s. But many evangelicals in power in the 90s could not be distinguished as Christians from others and did not use their power to serve the interests of citizens or defend democracy against Fujimori's attacks; they simply enjoyed the benefits of political power for themselves.

However, Lopez still holds hope for evangelical involvement in Peruvian politics. He encourages Peruvian evangelicals to realize that they should be involved because of the need for the gospel to transform public morality and political process. This disagreement over political involvement is a question of strategy, not of theology. Underlying both options is still a strong notion of practice as the substance of the theological task. This perspective is well worth investigation and could lead to important discussions about the nature of the theological task as it is carried out in other areas of the world.

For further reading:

The Other Spanish Christ by John A. MacKay (Wipf and Stock, 2001)

Internet:

www.integral-mission.org/PDF_files/Evangelical_Theology_in_LA_context.pdf



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Contributions from readers of ideas and articles (700 words) are warmly welcomed.

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