

TC Executive Director at Interfaith Forum



In April 2016 Dr Rosalee Velloso Ewell participated in the first meeting of the senior advisors for KAICIID – the King Abdullah International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue in Vienna, Austria. KAICIID has a focus on strengthening communication and reconciliation in places of conflict around the world.

The new Advisory Forum was formed at the end of last year and this was its first gathering, with senior representatives and leaders from all major religions around the world. The Forum advisors were able to meet one another, being building friendships and learn about possible projects and the formation of working groups within KAICIID. The current work in Myanmar and Nigeria, which focus on education and serving young people will continue and to these additional projects will be added.

Recruiting for Ecumenical Educational Project

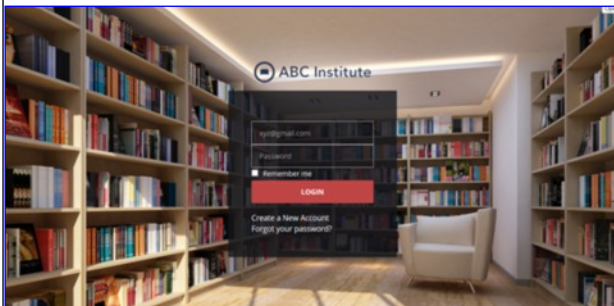
Prof. Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D., WEA Religious Freedom Ambassador to the Vatican, is recruiting Evangelical scholars to participate in a long-term joint Evangelical/Roman Catholic project. The aim of the project is to develop educational materials usable at different levels that will support religious freedom and the related first-generation human rights. The project will also deal with background problems that tend to cause religious persecution and other major human rights abuses.

In announcing the project Johnson said, 'A key philosophical premise of the project is that Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have substantial areas of agreement but also some small but fascinating areas of disagreement that can be used effectively for educational purposes.' He added, 'The goal is to use educational means to help prompt a new wave of Christian inspired democracy in cultures where this is still needed. It is desired that this project may eventually expand to include scholars from the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox traditions.'

Participants for this project should hold a Ph.D. in a relevant field along with significant publications, and have or be willing to quickly develop a broad knowledge of both Evangelical social ethics and Catholic social doctrine. It is hoped that they will be able to participate easily in English and also be fluent in another major language. It is hoped that most participants will be employed in an educational or church institution and use their research and writing time to serve in this project for several years. Communication will be mostly via email or Skype, with few meetings in person. Those Interested personally or able to recommend someone to participate, should contact Dr. Johnson by email: Johnson.thomas.k@gmail.com.

Promoting Biblical Truth by Networking Theologians

Theological Institution Focused E-Learning Making Progress



An e-Learning and student database platform designed for theological institutions is making progress in its first year launch under the sponsorship of the World Evangelical Theological Institute Alliance (WETIA). EdBrite is an integrated learning management system (LMS) and student information system (SIS) that was launched in August 2015 with the goal to provide quality, affordable, easy-to-use education technology for theological schools.

Since its launch, nearly 60 schools have signed up to use the platform which provides web-based tools for blended on-campus learning, full online education, and student database administration for efficiently organizing students/curriculum data. EdBrite has not

only drawn interest from theological higher education, but missionary training programs, elementary, and middle schools have also signed up for the platform.

Current tools include an online classroom that can post announcements, documents, discussion boards, videos, quizzes, and grades in both blended, online, and self-paced formats. Administrative tools include student data, grades, reports, curriculum planning, finance, and announcements. WETIA also plans to upload free course content from partnering ministries, so that schools without an online program can get started easily. As part of WETIA sponsorship, EdBrite is free for schools with less than 25 active users and has affordable pricing for schools with more than 25.

The World Evangelical Theological Institute Association (WETIA) is a non-profit organization linking a global network of evangelical theological colleges and seminaries through the application of information technology.

For more information and to sign up for a free trial of EdBrite, please visit: <http://www.edbrite.com>

For more information on WETIA, please visit: <http://wetia.org>

Landslide changes in Catholic and Global Christianity

In a guest lecture at Westminster Theological Seminary, a prominent Reformed seminary in Philadelphia, Thomas Schirrmacher, the Chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, described and discussed landslide changes in the Catholic Church and in global Christianity.

While dogmatic differences are decreasing, moral differences are increasing, Schirrmacher said. Using the ordination of homosexual clergy as an example for growing division, Schirrmacher also pointed to the full acceptance of wrongly so called 'monophysite' churches, such as the Coptic, Syriac-Orthodox or the Armenian-Orthodox Churches, as example of doctrinal convergence. In the light of modern research and intra-church discussions, the Monophysitist and Chalcedonian positions appear to differ mainly in their usage of the key term 'nature', not in what they actually confess about Jesus or see as a summary of Biblical doctrine. Schirrmacher gave a second guest lecture on the same topic at John Jay Institute in Philadelphia. The institute prepares future civil leaders through half a year of community and intense academic training.

Through his contacts and travels as a lecturer, Schirrmacher has a wide knowledge of different Christian churches and confessions worldwide. He has been involved in several commissions between the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance.



200th Anniversary of the American Bible Society and the World Assembly of the United Bible Societies (UBS)

About 1000 people gathered for the opening gala in celebration of the bicentennial of the American Bible Society in Philadelphia, USA. As part of the UBS Global Council, Dr Rosalee Velloso Ewell attended the gala and participated in board meetings for UBS during the month of May.

Together with Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, Cardinal Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria, Dr Ewell presided over the opening worship service for the World Assembly and spoke on the text of Genesis 1-2.

UBS's world assemblies happen about every 6 years and bring together directors and presidents of the more than 100 Bible Societies around the world. During the 2016 World Assembly, special focus was put on member societies suffering from persecution and the violence of wars and a renewed commitment towards prayer and working for peace was made by all.

Global Forum of Theological Educators (GFTE) First Meeting



Dr Thomas Schirrmacher and Dr Rosalee Velloso Ewell both participated in the first meeting of GFTE, held near Frankfurt, Germany in May 2016. Dr Ewell is part of the executive committee of GFTE, which brought together about 80 Christian theologians and educators from around the world, from all Christian traditions, to meet one another, learn about theological education in their various contexts, to build friendships and break down stereotypes and misconceptions. It was a very positive and Spirit-filled event. Participants agreed that GFTE needs to continue meeting, to strengthen the friendships made and to work together for better theological education around the globe.

The 'Concluding Message' of the meeting said, '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.'

It added, '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.'

The message concluded, '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.'

South Asia Bible Commentary: Faithful...Clear...Relevant

After eight years' work by scholars and editors - partnered with the support of Langham donors - the *South Asia Bible Commentary* was launched in New Delhi, India on Sunday 4 October 2015 with over 750 invited guests in attendance.

The celebrations started with a liturgical Thanksgiving Service. Dr Chris Wright preached the sermon and an offertory procession by the Commentary editors symbolically expressed thanks to God and entrusted the project to him for continued blessing. The Service concluded with Holy Communion. There was tight security in anticipation of the arrival of the Vice-President of India, Hamid Ansari, who had agreed to officially release the Commentary. Then the Vice-President was welcomed with gifts of flowers, a shawl of friendship and a Bible. He released the ribbon-bound copy of the Commentary, followed by a warmly applauded speech. 'I am sure', he said, 'the Commentary will make the text more accessible to large number of people, particularly in South Asia, and enable them to imbibe the message of love and compassion that Bible has for all humankind.'

A Christian politician who read the titles of the special articles was excited: 'These will be useful for my speeches!' A church worker who sneaked an early preview of the Commentary exclaimed: 'I can read this ... it's ordinary language!'

The Commentary was written in English by 91 evangelical scholars from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It consists of 1824 pages, with 90 specialist articles on South Asian realities. The new volume was published by Open Door Publications (ODP) in Udaipur, with Zondervan as Western partner. A Hindi translation is already underway and work has started on an Urdu version, while a Tamil translation is also being considered.

(Adapted from *Transform: Langham Partnership News*, Spring 2016, page 7.)

A subtle Revolution!

A comment on the Papal Letter, *Amoris Laetitia* by Dr Thomas Schirmacher

In terms of language and in its very nature, worlds separate the the Pope's letter, [Amoris Laetitia](#) on marriage and family from writings by earlier popes on sexual ethics, even if the official teaching by the church has hardly changed. The writing is more ordinary, generally understandable, and oriented towards real life situations. The Pope expresses thanks for many contributions made which have helped him understand family (4) and rejects having one solution which is valid for everyone, i.e., doctrinal intervention (3). The document contains a lot of 'self-criticism' (36). This is quite unique for a papal document, at least when one considers those prior to 2013.

A positive appreciation for sexuality and eroticism is found throughout, without there immediately being restrictions, as was common earlier. That has consequences, for instance when the Pope writes self-critically that a calling to love and mutual support has been 'overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation' (36). The Pope refuses to make a universally valid decision upon the actual issues from the last two bishops' synods in Rome, although both bishops' synods asked him for that in the final document: ' . . . I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium' (3). He essentially mentions four reasons for this stance:

1. Regional and cultural differences: 'Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs' (3). The decentralization called for by the Pope, especially in *Evangelii gaudium* is continuing. Decentralization has already been radically put into practice concerning the annulment of marriages by no longer making the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome responsible. What is already the case anyway has now officially been made possible, which is that the practice of Catholic pastoral care in Germany will now differ from that in Poland or in Africa.

2. Applying ideal requirements to concrete situations: The Pope writes: 'For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in 'irregular' situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives' (305). A pastoral care provider has to look at each case individually and, at the same time, allow for compassion 'from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances – psychological, historical and even biological . . .' (308). So the Pope opens up the possibility that in individual cases those who have divorced and remarried might receive access to communion.

3. A plea for a decision based on conscience on the part of believers: An upward reevaluation of conscience on the part of believers is a thread running throughout the document (37, 42, 83, 222, 265, 298, 300-303), for example, in the case of communion for the divorced and remarried or in the case of contraception. Believers make the final decision based on conscience. Indeed, one can read all of this in St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), whom the Pope quotes repeatedly. However, it was particularly under Pope John Paul II that conscience was seen just as the executive body when it comes to church teaching.

4. There is no such thing as 'for life': This has to do with compassion and with integration of the believer who has become guilty. 'No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!' (297). According to the Pope, it can no longer be maintained that a believer living in what is an 'irregular' situation is in the condition of mortal sin and living without grace (301). The judgment 'for life' has in a certain sense been done away with.

For the conservative wing of the Catholic Church, this document is a nightmare, as discussions on the web are demonstrating at the moment. In the place of non-negotiable legal norms binding in every individual situation, there are numerous reasons why priests and believers can deviate from the norm in individual cases. This change has serious consequences because now it is going to be difficult if not impossible for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to admonish bishops' conferences or bishops themselves in the issues addressed. With this document, the church gives up a part of its supervisory authority in questions of sexuality.

The Pope does all of this without at any point changing church teaching itself, as long as one does see the emphasis on culture, individual situations, and conscience as *a shift in the entirety of the Church's moral doctrine*. This becomes clear when looking at the topic of homosexuality. It is not an central topic of sexual ethics but it is almost treated incidentally, not more and not less than, for instance, cohabitation of unmarried heterosexuals, which is also not seen as corresponding to the ideal within the creation.

Ecumenically, the document opens doors in the direction of Orthodox and classical Protestant ethics. More liberally oriented Protestants will be deeply disappointed, but large parts of the Evangelical world will understand the document to be a rapprochement to their position: biblically prescribed basic ethical positions and pastoral care applied to life and conscience are not seen as being in conflict with each other. *Also, one finds that a rapprochement with other Evangelical and classical Protestant positions.* The points of departure are consistently small Bible studies which are dispersed throughout the entire document. It is not only compassion which is emphasized; rather, God's grace always comes first and humanity is not able to bring about God's order and 'covenant' without God's continual grace (36, 37, 35). That which is typically Catholic has taken a strong step backwards. Even a long closing chapter about Mary including prayer to Mary, which had been typical of Pope Francis up to now, has yielded to a short 'prayer to the holy family.'

To see the full papal statement, [click here](#)

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