

Friendships, theological education, and ministry embraced at global consultation

BY LISA KERN

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(with contributions from James R. Moore)



The International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE)—a global community to enable international interaction and collaboration among those concerned with the enhancement of evangelical theological education worldwide—gathered 462 participants from 80 countries and 286 churches and organizations from around the world November 14–18, 2022, in Izmir, Turkey for its 18th global consultation.

The consultation, focused on the theme *Formal and Non-Formal Theological Education: Beyond Dialogue*, was the

first time ICETE had met in person for an event since the 2018 consultation in Panama City. Preceded by a year-long ICETE-wide conversation and designed to “build global mutuality in theological education,” it was planned as a “working consultation” rather than a conference.

Registrants were encouraged in advance of the consultation to connect with others ahead of time, and were able to read through and join active discussion forums on working tracks that continued in Izmir (quality assurance, technology, online competencies, pastoral leader training, designing for the next generation, and assessing spiritual formation—co-led by David Wang, Cliff and Joyce Penner



Chair for the Formation of Emotionally Healthy Leaders and associate professor of psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, director of accreditation and global engagement at ATS). The working tracks with core objectives were held each morning, and each group was offered the opportunity to share with the larger audience what its track accomplished during the week on the last day of the consultation.

In addition to afternoon workshops and times for worship and networking, there were evening plenary sessions led by Michael Ortiz, ICETE international director, Josue Fernandez of the Overseas Council, Grace Al-Zoughbi of Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, and Kevin Smith of South African Theological Seminary.

“For ATS, engagement in these kinds of gatherings—global or otherwise that have been part of the ATS Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative (GAEI)—are crucial to its core strategy to improve the growing conviction expressed by those involved in the GAEI,” said Ruiz. “GAEI believes that accredited graduate theological education is not only now thoroughly and undeniably ‘global’ in character, but that any future for theological education—particularly in the global north—must intentionally comprehend and address the challenges posed by its current global engagements, especially with ongoing commitments to effective partnerships, strategic global engagement within North America, intentional cultivation of mutual scholarly and programmatic exchanges, participation in a pan-Christian conversation on theological education, and accreditation and quality assurance.”

One of the pathbreaking events in Izmir, jointly organized by ATS and the European Council for Theological Education, was a roundtable meeting on accreditation and quality assurance to consider how collaboration among the agencies might enhance and improve theological education in their respective regions. Time was dedicated to the identification of present issues, immediate challenges, and possible next steps for mutual advancement. Participants clearly identified the impact of the global pandemic necessitating the emergency delivery of education and the rapid transition to online delivery as the most disruptive among member schools. They named that schools also face challenges in resourcing online delivery, development of faculty capacity to teach quality

online courses, and long-term implications and possibilities caused by this new reality.

Additional common concerns emerged in the commitment to assist the church and develop both pastors and parishioners who serve in local church

ministries in an increasingly global context. Several of the agencies are in the process of revising their educational standards and desire mutual accrediting conversations around matters such as competency-based theological education, prior learning credit, non-formal educational designs, micro-credentialing, shared digital resourcing, and possibilities of mutual faculty development opportunities. This led to an initial exploration of ways to share agencies’ standards amid often overlapping accreditation geographies.

Fourteen representatives from six regional accrediting agencies of ICETE participated in the roundtable



The consultation included an optional tour of what remains of the historic Library of Celsus, located in Ephesus, Anatolia, which is now part of Selçuk, Turkey.



meeting: Philip Dearborn, president, and Lisa Beatty, executive director of the commission on accrediting, Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE); David Tarus, executive director, Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa; Theresa Lua, general secretary, and Rick Weymouth, accrediting commission, Asia Theological Association; Errol Joseph, accreditation coordinator, and Abson Joseph, accrediting commission, Caribbean Evangelical

Theological Association; Carmen Crouse, accreditation director, European Council for Theological Education;

Elias Ghazal, executive director, Middle East and North Africa Association for Theological Education; Orbelina Eguizabal, associate director, ICETE; and Tite Tiénou, founding board member of ICETE. They were joined by ATS staff members Ruiz, Frank Yamada, executive director, and James R. Moore, director of accreditation. The discussion group affirmed the desire and need for continued multilateral conversations among the agencies centered in accreditation matters.

The Izmir gathering also provided an occasion for ABHE and ATS personnel discussions initiated by Kent Anderson, president of Providence Theological Seminary and a member of the ATS Board of Directors. Six members of the two agencies gathered for a meal and conversation to talk about their common work in the North American context and to further develop emerging relationships.

Yamada noted how theological education across the globe is facing significant changes in his workshop, "Current Realities and Challenges in North American Theological Education."

"This is a critical time, a *kairos* moment for theological education—a moment in which God's creative acts are at work, emerging from the chaos and challenges. This moment will define the future of our common

enterprise as theological education rides the currents of change, taking us to the river, where, downstream, lies our journey in the continuation of God's mission to the world. These currents are flowing in distinct directions in North America and have implications for theological education and the church in regions where Christianity is growing, even thriving, particularly in the Global South...

Ultimately, this critical time of change... is a sign of hope that God is at work in the world in and through

theological schools as they educate and prepare leaders for the future of church and the world."

Moore and several other participants spoke to the spirit and ethos of the consultation.

"After having attended ICETE for several years, it was a joy to renew relationships and introduce or re-introduce my ATS colleagues to many of my global friends. These relationships began in my own global engagements through my students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and other global meetings such as the Global Forum of Theological Educators. It was a blessing to see friends now in key educational and ministry positions around the world."

He explained how the renewal of those relationships continues to provide both the opportunity and the

responsibility for mutual conversation, learning, and partnerships to develop across global contexts. “As these friendships deepen, greater communication ensues, and the possibilities of shared understandings enable us to better serve and support one another. I am enriched in my own work in North American accreditation through the friendships I have with theological education colleagues on each continent.”

Yamada reiterated the Association’s commitment to global theological education when speaking directly to ICETE in plenary.

“Friends, as we seek to move forward in God’s mission through these remarkable and challenging times, continue to pray for ATS theological schools as they undertake substantial changes to better equip men and women to serve in the church and society... Know that we will continue to show up in dialogue with you at ICETE, and that you, your churches, schools, and organizations will be in our prayers as we seek God’s will for these days.”

He referenced past conversations between ICETE and ATS, which eventually resulted in a joint statement—The Playa Bonita Affirmations—that formalized a 2019 partnership enjoining the two organizations “to commit to seek God’s help, pray for and accompany each other, and continue to share their hope to be faithful to the work to which they are called: the improvement and enhancement of quality theological education in the service of ministry, to the glory of God, and for the fulfillment of God’s purposes.”

These collaborative efforts have included a joint webinar on online accreditation visits across the globe, staff-level consultations on programmatic collaboration—especially in the area of theological education and quality assurance—and participation in each organization’s major gatherings (the 2022 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting and the ICETE 2018 Panama and 2022 Izmir consultations).

For more information on the Global Awareness and Engagement Initiative, please email ruiz@ats.edu.



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