

The Challenges and Promises of the Global Forum of Theological Educators (GFTE): A story from Kolympari, Crete, Greece

Χριστός ανέστη! // Christ is risen!

The [Global Forum of Theological Educators](#) (GFTE) met May 20–24, 2019, at the [Orthodox Academy of Crete](#), in Kolympari, Crete, Greece, for its second meeting focused on the theme *Vision and Viability in Contexts: Theological Learning and Formation*.

GFTE was designed to provide both a context and an opportunity for theological educators from diverse Christian traditions worldwide to meet and learn together through *koinonia* from those engaged in similar work but whose faith traditions might be different from their own. The inaugural meeting of GFTE was held at *Familienferienstätte Dorfweil* in Schmitten, Germany, May 16-20, 2016, with 86 participants from 37 countries representing six different ecclesial families: Evangelical, historic Protestant, Independent Churches (Africa and China), Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic. This year's forum gathered 64 participants from 29 countries still from the same six different Christian ecclesial families. Sharing worship, Bible study, table discussions, plenaries, and community meals, attendees participated as "individuals" rather than as "official representatives" from their institutions or organizations.

Bible studies included themes like—

"Genesis 12-20—What does Abraham learn on the road?"
"Luke 24—What do the disciples learn on the road to Emmaus?"
and
"Mark 7:24-30—What did Jesus learn on the road?"

Plenary presentations and table discussions included topics such as—

"How do our theological and educational methods shape outcomes?
– Part 1: Looking for the right images,"
"How do our theological and educational methods shape outcomes?
– Part 2: Narratives and contexts"
"Sustainability in theological education,"
"How do we recognize and foster vocation?"
– Part 1: How does ACTS College (Singapore) recognize and foster vocation?"
"How do we recognize and foster vocation?"
– Part 2: Context as a key determinant in fostering vocation:
Lessons from African Independent Churches,"
"Human migration and the churches' response,"
"Theological education in China and the Chinese diaspora,"
and
"How do we further missional fidelity in changing, challenging contexts?--
Spontaneous, formal and highly structured."

Materials prepared for these conversations are currently being revised and consolidated and will soon be made available on the [GFTE website](#).

Each day for the three full days of the conference, Roman Catholic and Independent Churches (from China and Africa), Orthodox and Evangelical, and Pentecostal and historic Protestant, partnered in leading morning prayers. Daily table conversations ensured that each participant had an opportunity to sit with participants whose religio-cultural traditions and geographical locations were other than their own. A central part of the GFTE process included intentionally structured time for informal conversations throughout the conference, including those that happened over leisurely meals; while participants “toured” the facilities of the Orthodox Academy which has a large library with both digital and online collections, an iconography program, a museum of Cretan herbs and botanical garden, artwork throughout its campus, and three historic chapels including the Abba Makarios Chapel, as well as the nearby 9th century Gonia Monastery with its remarkable museum, and the historically-vibrant and picturesque seaside town of Kolympari—all of which were framed by the shoreline of the Gulf of Chania; and, over singing, dancing and refreshments led by a Greek cultural performance group on the final evening of the conference.

New to the GFTE process was the formation, this year, of a Listening Group. Eight participants from the conference were asked to be “silent observers” throughout the four-day meeting to help name what GFTE had been learning on its “shared journey.” The full report, titled “What have we learned on the road?” and which identifies at least seven observations that reflected most of the experiences of the participants, will be available soon on the [GFTE website](#). However, its importance may be illustrated even now by one dinner conversation between two forum participants—included in the report but decorated here by the many similar stories told and re-told throughout the conference—that seems to encapsulate both the challenges and promises of the GFTE experiment.

Over a delicate moussaka, exquisitely prepared roast lamb, and a rich Greek salad, the first participant observed, “Theological education sometimes feels [like an endless struggle—*my own interpretation*] ... especially in these days of elusive sustainability and reductive vision [and] crushing market forces and contexts that move like tectonic plates under our feet...”

“These conversations,” the second participant almost wearily responded, “are so difficult. There are three poles and if you could lock down any one of the three, the conversation becomes easier.”

“And what are these three poles?” the first participant asked.

To which the second participant responded, “Well, the first is region of the world, that is, where one comes from. The second is a cluster of hot topics around identity, involving race, gender, and human sexuality... The third, is *confessional identity*, which in our home contexts is fixed, but here at GFTE is decidedly unfixed.”

“This, in my view,” the first participant said somewhat tentatively, “is the genius of the GFTE concept to date: that we have chosen not to lock the third pole down but to engage the other two as the motley collection theological educators from six Christian families of theological educators that we are... Whatever the GFTE experiment accomplished, it most certainly does not make the conversation *easier*.”

It definitely does not make the conversation any easier. But with a commitment to listening, dreaming, and expecting the best in each one in the context of mutual critical and respectful engagement—performative values which GFTE seeks to articulate and embody in its process—the following seven observations of the Listening Group seem to provide an agenda, if not a direction—and therefore a *promise*—for the futures of theological education worldwide:

- our Bible reading is inevitably *located*,
- we must be dreamers,
- we are changed by the people we meet on this road,
- hospitality is arguably the defining quality of GFTE,
- our capacity for empathy...indeed, for shared journeying...is best enhanced by narrative...by the sharing of our stories,
- theological education is best understood as an enterprise on the move, and
- we didn’t learn new truths. We re-learned old truths in community.

Χριστός ανέστη! // Christ is risen!

June 15, 2019
Lester Edwin J. Ruiz
The Association of Theological Schools in the US and Canada
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
ruiz@ats.edu