

Learning along the pathways of global engagement . . .

Now that I am on my way back from Jakarta to Pittsburgh—quite literally—in the air between Hong Kong and Dallas, my next stop, I can say that this summer, most of July and part of August, has been a most rewarding, even though almost exhausting "global engagement" of my professional life, at least since I joined The Association of Theological Schools (ATS). And I am grateful for my colleagues who, in their wisdom and understanding, have supported such efforts as part of the Association's institutional commitment to accreditation and global engagement. It has been worth it in terms of new learning, developing new connections, seeing new places, including, of course, the strengthening of already established relationships between "the global north" and the "global south"—or at least, parts of them.

First, it was a meeting (July 5–7) in Hong Kong hosted by IASACT of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, celebrating its 15 years of work on "pluralism in higher education in Asia." Second, it was participating in two of ATESEA's accreditation visits (July 7–13) to the Adventist University of the Philippines (AUP) and the International Graduate School of Leadership (IGSL) in the Philippines as a member of the accreditation teams—part of the partnership between ATESEA and ATS. Third, working with ATESEA's methodology seminar for doctoral students from its member schools (July 22–27) held at STT Jakarta (one of ATESEA's long-running successful programs). ATESEA is the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia. Fourth, serving as resource person on issues related to the themes of globalization and peace-building for PERSETIA's summer school (August 4–7), hosted by Satya Wacana University in Salatiga, Indonesia. PERSETIA is the association of theological schools in Indonesia. And fifth, supporting the masters' and doctoral programs of STT Cipanas (August 7–9) through a series of lectures and conversations under the auspices of PERSETIA.

There also were the presentations and conversations on leadership with doctoral students from Central Philippine University in Iloilo City, my birthplace (July 20), and consultations on theological education and formation with the academic leadership of St. Andrews Theological Seminary in Quezon City, Manila (July 15), as well as with the president of Union Theological Seminary in Dasmariñas, Cavite (July 14); and consultations with the ATESEA leadership concerning CHEA-CIQG membership (July 17). There even was a lunch meeting with the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines under the current government regarding shared concerns on the role of the churches in the public square (July 16).

It has been a great privilege to be involved with both old friends and colleagues—and new ones as well—in these theological institutions. What I learned and experienced is beyond value. From the challenges that theological schools in this part of the world face, to their hopes and dreams, to their fierce pride and uncompromising dignity in the face of tremendous odds, and most of all, their faithfulness to the Gospel and their commitment to quality education—which they themselves believe they must define for themselves—and, their hospitality, friendship, and collegiality offered without condition to those of us who represent, more often than not, barriers to their own flourishing.

I return to the other part of my work—also with friends and colleagues—with a deeper appreciation for the need for a truly just, participatory, and sustainable "global engagement." I am even more convinced that global engagement is a necessary part of theological education in the global north, in part because the challenges that our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world are facing cannot be separated—whether substantively or programmatically, even more, theologically, historically, and missionally—from the challenges that we face where we are in the global north. Even as there is so much, we in the global north can and have shared, there is even more that the global south can share with us and the rest of the

world, indeed, so much more they can teach us not only about their own ways of “doing theology” but also about our own ways of doing theological education in our part of the world.

There is so much to be learned from our sisters and brothers in the global south, including, doing theological education under the sign of scarcity; delivering quality theological education in the context of unevenness (diversity, plurality, and inclusion); engaging in theological education as a struggle for justice and missional faithfulness. Peter Phan has reminded us that Asia challenges us to give even more attention to the contextualities of overwhelming poverty, systemic oppression, political heterogeneity, cultural diversity, religious pluralism, and geography and population challenges—including, in my view, the challenges posed by forced migration. We are also being challenged not only to find new and better “trade routes” of mutuality and exchange, not just to share out of our largesse but to engage out of necessity and faithfulness to the Gospel, but also to find ways of reducing our own ecological and theological footprints—to make sure that the elephant does not crush the grass under its feet.

I believe that the schools that I serve in the US and Canada—many, if not most of them—understand that our destinies as institutions in the global north are linked with the institutions and peoples of the global south. I also believe, sadly, that it is possible to separate these destinies and simply do our work without attending to making these explicit connections—to join together our destinies. Indeed, human history has shown that in the long march of time, empires and civilizations, even institutions of higher education, have survived beyond our individual lives without attending to their neighbors.

But this may not be the best of who we are as human beings called to hospitality, friendship, and collegiality with/to our neighbors. So in the end, after all is said and done, this matter of global engagement comes down to a religio-moral choice: Not only to answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” but to make a choice: “Choose you this day whom you shall serve?” And, after these travels, my own hope is that we can answer “As for me and my house, we will serve the God who loved the whole world enough to give of ‘himself’ so that all might have life and might have it more abundantly.”

I do not mean to be “pollyannic” about this. There is no room for romanticizing “global engagement” and “theological education.” That said, in a time when US exceptionalism seems to have been resurrected, where the “new normal” seems to be predatory, self-serving accumulation, and xenophobic, unapologetic, cruel, political engagement has become the preferred way of neighborliness, I believe we can do with a little bit more of both personal and public virtue that is unashamedly kindhearted, hospitable, caring, and gentle—if we are afraid to admit that the greatest of “these” is love. Or, to recall that wonderful song from the old classic movie, “Goodbye, Mr. Chips,” “Did I fill the world with love, my whole life through . . .”

—Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, August 2019