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ICETE: Vision to be Embraced

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Introduction

Sometime ago, while attending a seminar in South America, I informed one of the participants, with whom I was having dinner, of my plan to attend this consultation. When, in response to his query about the sponsorship of the event, I made mention of ICETE, he jokingly corrected me by saying ‘Oh, you mean Ice Tea?’ In a very defensive retort, I

insisted that my pronunciation of the acronym was correct, and explained that, although we were going to meet in London, ICETE is not about drinking tea, but about the setting of the eye on a goal, the starting at a target, the striving toward an aim.

Following that dinner time conversation, I turned my attention to preparing for this presentation. Without too much probing, I discovered that my interpretation was correct. It was not the result of a novel, fanciful and eisegetical exercise. Of a truth, underlying our organization is a vision that motivated its creation, explains its *raison d’être* and, as I will argue shortly, justifies its continued existence.

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I. The ICETE Vision

But what is the ICETE vision? I am prepared to stand corrected if I am mistaken, but my examination of the record suggests that ICETE’s throbbing heartbeat is the enhancement or the strengthening of evangelical theological education through international cooperation and networking. Its self-understanding is that of ‘a

forum for contact and collaboration'¹ for providers of theological education. The purpose of such collaboration is 'mutual assistance, stimulation and enrichment'.² From the outset ICETE's premise seems to have been this: if evangelical theological educators coordinate their efforts, evangelical theological education can experience greater strength and therefore achieve greater excellence.

This vision of strength and excellence through cooperative labour seems to have been collectively designed and corporately owned. The 'mechanism for ongoing contact'³ was hammered out by the Council's five charter members at its very first Consultation. Commenting on that inaugural meeting Paul Bowers boasted:

For the first time ... there now exists an international medium for communication, coordination, collaboration among schools, programmes, agencies and associations anywhere in the world concerned with evangelical theological education.⁴

Zenas Gerig, who represented the Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association (CETA) at that historic consultation, was no less jubilant. For him, the formation of ICETE was a very 'significant development'⁵ in theological education. And for Gerig, the Council's significance stemmed precisely from its self-assigned role, namely, to be 'a strategic forum for ongoing cooperation among evangelical theological edu-

cators and associations worldwide, and a catalyst for excellence in theological education'.⁶

The theme of collaboration for mutual enrichment was later picked up by the widely acclaimed *Manifesto for the Renewal of Evangelical Education* and the very important vision statement adopted by the ICETE Consultation at Moorlands College, Sopley, UK in 1996. The Sopley document saw collaboration as a major commitment of ICETE, and the *Manifesto* listed it among the essential requirements for the renewal of evangelical theological education. With passion, the *Manifesto* urges the ICETE constituency to eschew the isolationist mentality and pursue cooperation and partnership. Article 12 of the *Manifesto* reads:

Our programmes of theological education must pursue contact and collaboration among themselves for mutual support, encouragement, edification and cross-fertilisation. We are at fault that so often in evangelical theological education we attend merely to our own assignments under God. Others in the same calling need us, and we need them. The biblical notation of mutuality needs to be much more visibly expressed and pragmatically pursued among our theological programmes. Too long we have acquiesced in an isolation of effort that denies the larger body of Christ, thus failing both ourselves and Christ's body. The times in which we serve, no less than biblical expectations, demand of each of us active ongoing initiatives in cooperation. This we must accomplish by God's grace.⁷

From all that has been stated so far, ICETE's understanding of its man-

2 ICETE, *Strengthening Theological Education Through International Cooperation*, (Brochure), (1999) Also, *ICETE Constitution*, Art. III, para. 2.

3 ICETE News, (January 2000), p. 3.

4 ICAA Compendium 1988, p. 3.

5 Zenas Gerig, *The Story of the Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association* (Kingston: Christian Press, 1993), p. 47.

6 Gerig, *Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association*, p. 47.

7 ICAA, *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education* 2nd ed. (1990), pp. 8,9.

date and vision could not be more clear. Indeed, one could say that if a clear vision alone were sufficient for success, ICETE would have no shortage of it. But things don't work that way. Despite the Council's clear grasp of where it is heading, in recent times the sailing has not been smooth. The truth is, that by themselves, visions never accomplish anything. To achieve results, visions must not only be conceived, but also sustained and pursued. To be converted from potentialities into actualities, dreams must be kept alive and acted on. Dreams only dreamt will forever remain dreams.

II.

These considerations have led me to the view that the imperative of the hour is not necessarily the reinventing of a new vision, but the embracing and the pursuing of the old with a fresh commitment and renewed vigour. When we consider what is happening around us and the opportunities that lie ahead of us, the conclusion that we are driven to is the need for a deepening of cooperation with ICETE, not a reversion to a do-it-alone paradigm. There are several factors that ought to motivate us in this direction.

The first that begs consideration is the spirit of the time. Many names can be given to it, but I have chosen to call it the 'pull toward togetherness'. Of late it looks as if, all of a sudden, the dwellers on planet earth have been awakened to the idea that it is not good for humans to be alone. In various parts of the world, people are finding all sorts of ways to forge closer ties among themselves, with a view to increasing their strength. The last decade of the twentieth century could arguably be called the

decade of power bloc formation. In that short span of time we have witnessed the coming into being of the European Union, the formation of the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the emergence of the 'Pacific Rim', and the creation of the World Trade Organisation.

In Latin America and the Caribbean we have seen the creation of a multiplicity of economic sub-groups. There is the 'group of three', consisting of Mexico, Columbia and Venezuela, the Southern Cone Group, spearheaded by Argentina, the Andean Pack Group, the Association of Caribbean States which brings together the fifteen Caribbean Community countries, the non-independent territories and all the South American countries washed by the Caribbean Sea. And what shall we say of the business world with its recent practice of merging already gigantic businesses into mega-companies?

But the urge for togetherness does not end there. We have seen it also in the realm of education. With the advent of distance learning, several First World institutions are teaming up with partners in the Two-Thirds world in an effort to extend their 'market'. In the Christian and theological education sub-sector, there is movement as well. In the latter part of the 1970s, several Reformed institutions came together and formed what later became the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (IAPCHE). Their overriding purpose is the 'promotion of communication and cooperation among scholars engaged in Christian

education and research'.⁸

The early 1990s saw the establishment of an umbrella group of an even wider scope. It is the broadly ecumenical body known as the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI). Closely linked to the World Council of Churches, this global network sees itself as meeting the need for closer cooperation among theological institutions 'at the local, national and regional levels'.⁹

It is evident that both internationally and regionally, the mood is for *rapprochement* not isolation, interdependence not independence, cross-fertilization, not separation. ICETE saw this twenty years ago and displayed great foresight in challenging the evangelical community to embrace the cooperative vision. Time has proved this to be right. What is needed now is the intensifying, the deepening, and widening of what was initiated some twenty years ago.

One may quite correctly argue that to show that a thing is timely does not necessarily mean that thing is to be endorsed, let alone embraced. A thing may be in vogue, but if it does not meet a felt need, it can reasonably be set aside as superfluous. This is the question: 'Is working together for the provision of quality theological education for the benefit of the global church a superfluous notion?' I think not. And there are several arguments that could be advanced in support of this negative reply, but I will focus on one, namely, the present need of the church.

It is common knowledge that at the moment the majority of evangelical Christians live in the Two-Thirds world. In 1996 the percentage was estimated at 70%. With the rapid growth of the church in the developing and the former Eastern bloc, the need for theological education in these parts of the world has increased considerably. Speaking for Latin America, Emilio Nunez and William Taylor identify the 'shortage of biblically trained leaders'¹⁰ as one of the serious problems faced by the church. I suspect that the situation may not be much different in other parts of the world. I heard of an African denominational leader who, faced with a lack of workers to disciple new converts, was thinking of asking his church members to stop evangelizing!

There is no doubt that the need for biblically-trained disciplers to nurture the growing church is greater than it has ever been in modern times. A vast army of Christians need to be trained at all levels and in various ways: formal and informal, face to face, and at a distance. Meeting this pressing need requires a cooperative effort of immense proportion. All of our resources must be efficiently deployed. Otherwise, the harvest will be spoilt for lack of care. In the case of Latin America, Nunez and Taylor found that inefficient use of resources due to lack of cooperation is one of the major impediments to the delivery of theological education. Listen to their lament:

Too many of (the Latin American institutions) operate on specific and limited theological platforms. Either they are non-Pentecostal and hence close their doors to

8 IAPCHE, *Christians and Higher Education in Eastern Europe: Proceedings of the 1993 Debrecen Regional Conference*, Sioux Centre, IA, (Dort College Press, 1993), p. 21.

9 World Conference of Association of Theological Institutions, *Constitution and Bylaws*, (1992), p. 1.

10 Emilio A. Nunez and William D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 165.

seventy-five percent of evangelicals, or they promote Pentecostal distinctives to the point that the non-Pentecostal does not feel comfortable. These centers carry their ministries largely unrelated to each others.... Most of these institutions remain independent of global associations such as (ICETE).¹¹

The point being made here is that, given the great need facing us, partnership must not be seen as a luxury item that we may purchase if we can afford it. Rather, it is a basic necessity that we must secure if we are to meet the nurturing needs of a fast growing global church.

There is a third factor that I think needs to be given full weight as we consider responding to the beckoning of the ICETE vision of strength through partnership. The factor is feasibility. This year, the Council commemorates twenty years of existence and service to global evangelical theological education. A review of these years will reveal failures, unmet expectations and unreach goals. Indeed, the Sopley vision statement candidly acknowledges that 'ICETE continues to fall short of its mandate and potential'.¹² And as we look ahead we see uncertainties and daunting challenges.

And yet the story cannot stop there. If the review exercise is to be fair and objective it must include the achievements as well—and there are some notable ones! Mention must be made of the twelve consultations that provided the platform for fellowship, cross-fertilization, and the discussion of pertinent issues relating to our task. The review must highlight the several publications which continue to be widely used by theological educators the world over. It ought not to

overlook ICETE's valuable input in the support, strengthening and establishment of regional bodies and associates. Through these and various other services, the council has contributed significantly to the strength and quality of evangelical theological education throughout the world.

Modest as they are, these successes must be recognized and heartily celebrated. They form part of our God-given heritage for which we must be grateful. Modest as they are, they serve as reminders of the fact that the vision is achievable. Yes, in changing times, we need to take a hard look at our priorities and methodologies. But the message of these past achievements is this: with the participation of all, we can, with God's help build a stronger organization which will in turn be better able to serve us.

I will be the first to admit that there is an element of pragmatism in the reasons advanced above for closer cooperation within our organization. However, I want to be clear that even if we were to discard all these factors with all their attendant benefits, it would still be incumbent upon us to work closely together as we seek to fulfil our vocation of leadership training for God's church. For when all is said and done, our strongest motivation for togetherness is our partnership in the gospel. The gospel to which we adhere demands our unity. It calls for the removal of all dividing walls between us and a commitment to a mode of relationship based on solidarity, mutual assistance and interdependence.

It sees us as belonging to the same company, being accountable to the same Master and striving to achieve the same objective. If for no other reason than this, let us rise and embrace the collaborative vision.

11 Nunez and Taylor, *Crisis*, p. 166.

12 *A Vision For ICETE's Future*, (1996), p. 1.