

# *EEF - NET*

*News · Information · Discussions on Ecumenical Learning*

*Edited by the Education and Ecumenical Formation Staff of the World Council of Churches*

*No 17 / December 2005*

*Christian  
education  
belongs ...  
to the  
whole church*

## Dear Colleagues in Education and Ecumenical Formation

*The WCC Assembly is an important moment in the life of the ecumenical movement and of the Council itself. This issue of EEF-NET is the last before the representatives of the churches, plus the many others who also want to participate, meet in Porto Alegre for the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly. Even if you are not able to come to Brazil, we want to encourage you to make use of the opportunity the Assembly represents.*

*A year ago we produced an educational resource as a supplement to EEF-NET for preparing for the Assembly which we know many have used and found helpful. To encourage you further, the first article in this issue reminds us how we can relate to the Assembly as it happens. There is still time to plan formal and informal learning opportunities round the Assembly.*

*We also feature two very different initiatives – one is an ecumenical formation project for young adults centred on the Assembly, organised through the Scholarships programme; the other is the WCC Interfaith Education Project and the launch of its online survey, aspects of which will be discussed in a Mutirão workshop. If you have experience in interfaith education, we strongly urge you to take part in the survey.*

*This WCC Assembly will be the first to meet in Latin America. Many aspects of the region will be celebrated in and around the Assembly. In terms of education and ecumenical formation, we could not miss the opportunity to reflect on educación popular and the contribution to it of Paulo Freire. We include a general introduction and an article from a Latin American perspective. The theoretical bases and the practice of popular education have much to say to ecumenical formation.*

*With rapid advances in communications technology, much is made of the ‘information soci-*

*ety’. A new UNESCO report should challenge us to think more about the ‘knowledge society’. We introduce some themes from this report to encourage us to think about the difference between information and knowledge – not only in the development of our own societies but also in the churches and ecumenical movement. It sometimes appears that even in the realm of faith we are caught up in the information frenzy rather than promoting knowledge.*

*Looking to the future, the WCC reshapes its work following each Assembly to take account of the priorities which emerge. After Porto Alegre, there will be a process to develop new focuses, strategies and ways of working. The outcome of this will be approved by the newly elected WCC Central Committee at its first full meeting in September 2006. Staff will leave, be reassigned or be appointed to fit the needs. At this time, we cannot tell you whether there will be this programme or that for the seven years leading to the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly. We plan to produce one issue of EEF-NET in 2006 which will highlight the relevant outcomes of the Assembly and where this takes the concern for education and ecumenical formation.*

*Transformation does not sit easily with a global obsession with educational testing and targets which reduce education to a tool for serving narrowly defined (often purely economic) objectives. The theme of the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly – God, in your grace, transform the world – reminds ecumenical educators that, in the end, we are not in the business of reorganising, rearranging or improving but of transforming and being transformed.*

*The education and ecumenical formation staff of the WCC*

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## ***Participate in the WCC Assembly – Where You Are***

***The 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches meets in  
Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14-23 February 2006***

The internet will make it possible for many more people to be a part of the WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre than ever before. For individuals and groups in churches, schools, seminaries or at home, access to the internet creates opportunities for participation.

Log on to [www.wcc-assembly.info](http://www.wcc-assembly.info)

Internet use is often seen only as an individual activity and we hope that many individuals will take advantage of the opportunity to access the Assembly. However, it can also be a group or communal activity for congregations, classes and groups.

- Look at the Assembly website together.
- Join in the worship.
- Discuss the issues together.
- Through music and decoration create a Latin American ambience.

It may not be as good as actually being present in Porto Alegre but it is a good way of bringing the Assembly to life.

The five-language website will help you to follow the life and work of the Assembly as it happens via the online news coverage, video summaries and live webcasts of the plenary sessions, access to important documents, and an e-news service open to the public from the website.

On the website you can already find a comprehensive overview of what will happen in Porto Alegre, including

- the Assembly theme (“God, in your grace, transform the world”),
- the issues and concerns that the church representatives will discuss, such as economic justice, religious plurality, violence, and church unity,
- the prayers and Bible studies that will be part of their life together in Porto Alegre,
- news, feature articles and photos on the event, the theme and, in relation to that, “stories of nsformation” from the churches,
- the programme, preparations and documents.

You can make the Assembly a part of your educational programmes and the life of your congregation. Courses on ecumenism can be brought to life by experiencing the excitement of the Assembly gathering.

You can make the Assembly an ecumenical formation experience by joining the thousands of Christian women and men from around the world who come together for ecumenical encounter, prayer, celebration and deliberation.

## *The Young Ecumenists Group: Learning together, transforming the world*

*An ecumenical formation training initiative during the  
WCC 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly*

*Tara Tautari*

Twenty five young adults will be involved in this exciting learning opportunity focussed on the WCC Assembly. They come from all around the world and from a wide range of confessional families and have been identified as emerging ecumenists and leaders from the churches and networks they represent.

The Scholarships programme has enabled the participation of individual young adults at previous Assemblies. For Porto Alegre, a more intentional ecumenical formation process has been planned. Each year the Scholarships programme funds many group training proposals in different parts of the world. This time it is implementing its own group training project.

The purpose of this special gathering of younger church leaders and ecumenists during the Assembly is to promote ecumenical formation and leadership development. The gathering will have the theme “Learning together, transforming the world” and will explore the complexity and challenges of ecumenical education and formation, and its contribution to building human capacity in all aspects of sustainable development for churches and church-related organisations.

The participants are already in contact with one another before the Assembly, using a dedicated website. This is an exercise in web-based encounter and learning – an approach which will probably become more significant over the coming years.

Participants have been encouraged to develop a collaborative community of learning that integrates various communication technologies with face-to-face learning encounters.

There will be space during the Assembly for participants to engage in critical reflection on issues and themes of significance to the churches and the ecumenical movement; to share local experience; and to explore ideas for the future. The meeting will also be an opportunity to promote ecumenical formation and leadership development, in a setting in which worship and spiritual reflection is an integral part of the process.

The on-site Assembly gathering will feature three key components:

- Participation in the ‘ecumenical conversations’ element of the General Assembly –

providing opportunities for sustained dialogue on significant issues to the Churches.

- Participation in the *Mutirão* at the Assembly including workshops, exhibitions, and other offerings on many different issues, organised by churches and related organisations from all parts of the world.
- Participation in Ecumenical Formation seminars during the Assembly.
- The Young Ecumenists Group will also present the results of a case study conducted in preparation for the General Assembly, focussing on 'blended communities' (integrating online learning and face-to-face meetings.) The workshop will explore the relationship between youth and e-learning technologies, and their value in building faith-based collaborative communities of learning.

It is anticipated that the gathering will serve as a unique opportunity, connecting partici-

pants from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, and providing them with an 'ecumenical space' to dialogue in-depth on the important issues of the assembly focus. Other outcomes include:

- An increased awareness among participants of the contribution of ecumenical education and formation to building human capacity in all aspects of sustainable development for churches and church-related organisations.
- Exchange of stories from participants as a rich and evocative way to share experience across countries and contexts.
- Knowledge sharing, networking & building on existing learning among participants who are emerging ecumenists and church leaders.

There will be a follow up process following the Assembly to maximise the learning opportunity and to assess the process.

## *Online Survey on Interfaith Education Launched – WCC Interfaith Education Project*

More and more, learning about, from and with peoples of other faiths is being recognised as a vital aspect of education in faith communities and in state education systems. A web-based survey on interfaith education has just gone online to discover examples of good practice across the world.

You will find the survey on :

[http://www.zoomerang.com/  
survey.zgi?p=WEB224NRA5G9EM](http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB224NRA5G9EM)

Project coordinator Christy Lohr says: "This survey provides a means for individuals from around the world to be involved and provide input on ways to shape future resources to support educational outreach."

The initial findings of the survey will be used as a basis for discussion at a Mutirão workshop during the WCC's 9th Assembly in Porto Alegre next February.

The online survey is a key aspect of the WCC's Interfaith Education Project which is being hosted by Hartford Seminary, USA. Hartford has an established interest and academic reputation in inter-religious issues.

The WCC has a long history of involvement in inter-faith dialogue and employs specialist staff in this area to support and encour-

age the ecumenical movement in appropriate approaches. The current activity in the area of inter-religious education is more recent and has been the responsibility of the WCC's staff for education and ecumenical formation. Although there is a considerable overlap between inter-faith dialogue and inter-faith education, and there needs to be continuous conversation between those involved in each, there is a specificity about each which requires focussed attention. A dialogical process is not the same as an educational process. Both require our attention.

The outcomes of the WCC's work on inter-faith education were published by the Comenius Institute, Germany in 2003 – *Shared Learning in a Plural World: Ecumenical Approaches to Inter-religious Education*. The conclusion of an evaluation of this concluded that merely to repeat the same exercises of multi-faith consultations would not add to what had already been stated and that further research is needed.

The background to the Interfaith Education Project is the use and misuse of religious faith to promote disharmony and violence within communities and between groups of people and nations. This is in contrast to the religious ideals which promote the opposite. It can arise from ignorance about different faiths or misinformation which can be accidental or deliberate. Religious identity is often formed by applying positive

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interpretations of our own faith and negative interpretations of the faith of others. It is a short step from holding a negative view of the faith of others to dehumanising them. This makes it 'permissible' to marginalise or even act violently against them.

There is an increasing recognition within many faith communities, state authorities and other bodies that the development of a sympathetic understanding of different faiths through education is necessary for the well being of humanity. It is also being recognised that such an approach can enrich people's own faith identity rather than weaken it.

There are many people throughout the world who are undertaking what could be described as inter-religious education – faith communities, religious bodies, state education systems, private schools and non-governmental organisations. Some are

inter-connected, others are not. This survey is the first step in identifying what is being done in different parts of the world and then to analyse the explicit and implicit values and the methodologies of the inter-religious education being offered.

Resource material using good examples revealed by the survey will be produced in due course. It will assist educators in faith communities and education systems to develop interfaith education appropriate to their contexts.

We invite all readers of EEF-NET to participate in the process by logging on to

<http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB224NRA5G9EM>

*For further information about the survey, contact:*

*Christy Lohr - [christylohr@gmail.com](mailto:christylohr@gmail.com)*

## *Popular education, Latin America and the WCC*

The issue of EEF-NET immediately before the Assembly in Porto Alegre, provides an opportunity to reflect on an area of work where the WCC has had a significant impact in the past – popular education. This article is followed by one which assesses popular education in Latin America.

The term ‘popular education’ carries a particular meaning. It is not the opposite of unpopular education. Neither does it refer to the mass education of the population through schooling systems. It is people’s education – that belongs to and involves the people, that is rooted in the context of their lives, that is action oriented and transformative. Carlos Tamez, a Latin American popular educator, said:

Popular education is not popular because it is large scale, or because it is accepted by the people: rather, to be called popular it must have objectives, characteristics, content, and a methodology that is consistent with the needs of the people and their concrete experiences.

Writing in the WCC’s *Education Newsletter* in 1995, Philippe Fanchette commented on popular education:

The starting point is the day to day life and experience of people, their spirituality, their pains, joys and hopes. It affirms people’s knowledge, helping them to make sense of their day to day life, cou-

pling specialised knowledge with local memories. This helps them look critically at power relations in society, organise with others to change their situation in accordance with God’s dream and stand for the poor and marginalised. In the kind of education we are dealing with, empowerment has exclusively to do with changing both the condition and the position of the poor and marginalised.

The WCC could be said to have been involved with adult education from its beginning. There was the hope that participants in the ecumenical movement would learn about and from one another. However in 1970 a radical paradigm shift began with the appointment of Paulo Freire as a consultant. Up to that point knowledge was seen as the source of action. In order for people to act, knowledge had to be brought to them by those who knew.

Paulo Freire, together with his wife, had developed a creative method of literacy training for the people of Recife in Brazil. This adopted a dialogical and collective approach to learning based on language around people’s own lives. The pedagogy was learner rather than teacher centred. The success of his approach was such that first the state of Pernambuco and then the whole nation of Brazil adopted it in 1964. Only a few weeks later a right-wing military coup removed the civilian government and Freire was detained and then went into exile. However, *Educación Popular* took root in Latin

America where military dictatorships banned political action and only church-protected groups could operate.

In 1969 Freire's seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published. This articulated his critique of 'banking' education:

... in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider know nothing ...

...liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information ...

...problem posing education ... breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education ... through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teacher .. they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow ...

A key term *conscientização* (conscientization – meaning more than intellectual awareness raising) has become the symbol of Freire's pedagogy.

It was this approach that was spread through Freire's work with the WCC as well as through his books. In Africa, a Kenya-based team produced a three volume manual *Training for Transformation* in 1974 which became widely influential. All kinds of other programme emerged in different parts of the world on education/training/learning for social change/transformation/empowerment. Civic and human rights educational programmes were also influenced by the popular education approach.

However, the schooling model of education was (and is) so well entrenched that in many cases the new terminology was adopted without any significant change in practice. It is questionable, for example, how far the WCC was changed by Friere even though it remains happy to claim him. The default educational position, as also of most of the churches, is that of *those who are knowledgeable* give knowledge to those who *know nothing* rather than knowledge coming from the *dialogue* between the *teacher-student* and the *student-teacher* as a collective experience in a community of learning.

Later, *Educación Popular* came under criticism in Latin America because of the association of many of its proponents with specific political models for change. However, women's groups who were struggling against marginalisation found value in the popular education approach. Philippe Fanchette, as above, argued that:

the women's movement ... reaffirmed its relevance as education against marginalisation and helped give popular education a firm grounding – including an academic one – as an alternative pedagogical model for de-excluding and de-marginalising persons and groups.

Although WCC has not had specific programme work on popular education since 1996, when Philippe Fanchette left the staff, the popular education approach remains significant in our understanding and practice of ecumenical formation. Its emphasis on transformation is especially relevant for the Assembly theme: *God, in your grace, transform the world.*

# *Contributions to the Latin American Debate on the Present and Future Relevance of Popular education*

*Carlos Núñez Hurtado*

## **1. The Main Contributions of Popular Education over the Years**

There is no doubt that the current of thought and action known generically as popular education has a common origin. However it may be reflected in Latin America, there is one founding inspiration: the thinking and life of Paulo Freire.

Freire summarised his concept as follows:

As a knowledge process, as political enlightenment, as a manifestation of ethics, as a quest for beauty, and as a scientific and technical enabling process, education is a practice that has been indispensable and unique to human beings throughout history, as a movement and as a struggle.

This ethical, epistemological, pedagogical and political Freirean legacy is reflected in popular education in the constant quest for coherence between theory and practice.

Having adopted this ethical and political stance from and for life, it has sought to create and re-create the concept through numerous socio-educational, historical and contextual activities. It has therefore made

a commitment to a vast number of transformative projects and processes. The majority (especially in the early stages) had particular geographical grassroots associations with marginalised rural and urban populations.

This development of reflection on theory and practice within popular education has widened its horizons and explored other fields of knowledge, contacts and interaction with other subjects. New concepts and scenarios have begun to be considered, both from a theoretical point of view and through the formulation of strategies and proposals for action.

These are a practical reflection of changing but committed interpretations of a context that has itself been changing over the years. Popular education has retained its original pillars (ethics, politics, epistemology, methodology and pedagogy), but its dialectical nature, its inherent flexibility and ethical and political commitment have kept pace with societal demands. It has certainly acknowledged and responded to new challenges and viewpoints. It accepts that some analyses have become obsolete. It is working to build new paradigms. Its dialectical approach only allows it to build what is new by systematising and critically reflecting on past practice.

“No knowledge exists which was not born out of other knowledge, did not previously exist and by existing today has not replaced what existed before,” Freire tells us in *The Political Dimension of Education*. Popular education does not follow the fashion. It does not incorporate anything new – regardless of where it comes from – eclectically or fashionably without regard to its historical practice.

Paulo reminds us that

knowledge is a process that constantly results from the way in which human beings respond to reality. But as soon as I draw a distinction between existing knowledge and the act of creating knowledge, I tend to take control of the existing knowledge as an accomplished fact and to transfer it to those who do not know. This is what happens in universities, which are centres for the transfer of knowledge...

Interpreting this context from the standpoint of “complexity” (or “integrality”, as it is called in popular education), presents us today with a new challenge, which can only be met through practice, so that new interpretations, themes, readings, actors and autonomous subjects are seen from this complex perspective. Popular education must respond to these challenges in and through new scenarios which continue the struggle.

Hence, the main contributions of popular education over the last forty years have, in my view, been as follows:

It has been and remained a living, flexible, rigorous, committed and dynamic movement combining theory and practice.

It has successfully changed, critically and self-critically (undogmatically), revising its founding positions.

It has developed a vast number of projects and processes that have demonstrated and been sources of commitment, humanity, solidarity and development of abilities (skills).

It has provided theoretical and practical development in fields of knowledge connected to topics and sectors of great relevance, such as the environment, human rights, conflict resolution, peace, gender, local power, etc. Popular education has been a pioneer in these and an obvious point of reference.

It has influenced social change through its ability to sway public debate and to encourage citizens to become new leaders of society, culture, education and politics.

It has overcome the crisis of paradigms without abandoning the struggle to transform and humanise the process of civilisation, despite undergoing internal crises brought about by confusion over paradigms.

From its long-standing practice it has come to appreciate that the public arena is also one of its concerns. And hence, it has had an impact in the area of public policy.

It has had a marked impact on societies (or sections of society) as a result of social and political change, as in the case of Nicaragua, Cuba, Uruguay and Brazil.

It has retained the ability to network its forces. Without this, isolation and dispersal might have brought the work to an end.

To sum up, the current of thought and action of popular education, embodied in many different ways and with varying emphases,

has achieved relative seniority in the discussion and practice of transformation, both at the level of micro experience and at that of public policy and formal power.

## **2. What Arguments Put Forward by Popular education are Still Relevant and What Changes Have Been (or Should Be) Made**

In a way I have already provided an answer. However, I shall expand a little. My current reading of the theoretical and practical arguments of popular education still relates to its four founding pillars, namely:

a) *The Ethical Framework* - We begin from a profoundly human ethical framework that entails a moral interpretation of the Latin American (and world) environment and leads us – inevitably if we are consistent – to make a renewed commitment to social transformation. Although there is no doubt that the world is now different, it is for all that still profoundly unjust, inhumane, depredatory and excluding.

In a changing world, some phenomena are genuinely new because the field of knowledge – information technology, genetics, etc. – used not to exist or did not take its present form. It is only possible to interpret these phenomena from the standpoint of ethics and its moral application, which are also the basis of our approach and commitment.

Popular education has never had a closed, dogmatic doctrine or ideology. We have been guided by ethics. Morality, which is always the historical and contextual expression of ethics, is what moves, changes and adapts as the world changes. Anyone who has lost their enthusiasm and thinks that nothing can be done any more has forfeited

hope and abandoned the ontology of our approach. Given the increasing complexity of the challenges of globalisation associated with the neoliberal model, our ethical position leads us once again to reiterate our long-standing commitment, but in accordance with the signs of the times.

b) *The Epistemological Framework* - One of the essential elements of the approach relates to our interpretation of knowledge as a human, social phenomenon, and in consequence to the theory of knowledge that we adopt. Knowledge can never be understood and used as an instrument of domination and/or alienation. Education understood and practised as an act of liberation requires an epistemological framework in which knowledge is continually socially constructed by the learning subjects, as a personal and social act of (self-)understanding and (self-)liberation.

Popular education uses a dialectical epistemological framework. We reject a positivist focus which converts the learner into a mere object who passively receives pre-arranged knowledge – what Freire calls banking education. In popular education, reality is the true source of knowledge, and we cannot simplify it by isolating it from its changing socio-economical, cultural and political context. “Knowledge is a process that constantly results from the way in which human beings respond to reality,” Paulo reminds us.

To sum up, popular education adopts a complex, process-based, holistic, contextual, historical and dynamic epistemological-dialectical focus which extends beyond the partialised, employment-based vision promulgated and maintained by the positivist paradigm. It incorporates the realm of feelings (the key to learning), but within the more complex knowledge process.

“All knowledge starts from feelings, but if it remains at the level of feelings it does not construct knowledge because it only turns into knowledge once it goes beyond the level of feelings and provides grounds for action,” Paulo tells us.

c) *A Consistent Pedagogical Approach* - By referring to popular education we may tend to restrict our approach solely to the educational or – even worse – to the simple use of tools or dynamics. But, as a consequence of the ethical and epistemological framework outlined above, we need to go beyond this reductionism and to follow our methodological approach, which creatively synthesises both the management and the direction of the act of education. It is not possible to leave educational practice to chance. “The teacher must teach and the learner learn,” Freire tells us, and his famous saying that “nobody teaches anyone; we all teach each other” must not lead us irresponsibly to abandon the role of educator.

In popular education, education is a democratic and democratising act, both in the classroom and elsewhere. The key is the democratic attitude of the teacher, whose approach is based on the pedagogy of dialogue and participation. The teacher can both teach and learn; may speak but only because he or she knows how to listen; may offer knowledge because he or she is open to the knowledge of others; and can produce a synthesis between the act of teaching and the act of learning as teacher-learner, learner-teacher.

In accordance with its basic principles, popular education states that the starting point for any process of education is where the learner is, wherever this may be. “The starting point is the common consensus of the learners and not the demands of the teacher,” Freire says.

This always involves creative acts by the teacher, the constant inventor of all the means by which the object of knowledge is problematised and discovered or apprehended by the learners. They will have worked on it through continual dialogue between themselves and the teacher, who leads them democratically and patiently, using the loving understanding and solidarity of the act of education.

d) *Socio-politics* - Our ethical reasoning necessarily has political implications (in its broader dimension and interpretation). In consequence, popular education states that all education is a political as well as a pedagogical act. There is no way it can restrict itself to declarations of principles and not become engaged socio-historically. Given our ethical point of view, our political standpoint must favour and be that of the poor of the Earth.

It is not possible to remain neutral or uninfected. Hence, educational practice, which sees itself as a political practice, refuses to be imprisoned by the bureaucratic restrictions of school procedures. The fierce debate provoked by the refounding of popular education, negating its political dimension and contrasting it with the rigour of pedagogy, ran the risk of denaturalising its inherent political dimension and approach. It is not a matter of politicising learning; even less, of the party allegiance or ideology of our teaching approach. It does mean acknowledging the world as we experience it and making decisions as a result: either for humanisation, or for barbarism.

In other words, if we recognise the political dimension of education we are in fact deciding “for someone or something”, and hence educating “against someone or something”. It is a question of choice.

### **3. Main Considerations in Strengthening a Popular education Movement in Latin America that Can Contribute to Social Change**

The fundamental premise is to look for coherence, a fundamental value which provides a balanced synthesis between discourse and practice. We cannot pursue a discourse which is not backed by consequent practice.

The crisis of paradigms has turned former militants into neoliberal functionaries and/or marketing advisers. In the face of this market ethic, popular education must continue – both in theory and in practice – to maintain the coherence and relevance of its arguments. “There must be a renewed emphasis on hope, for there is no hope in merely waiting, nor can what is hoped for be achieved by waiting, which is a vain hope. Hope is necessary but not sufficient; it alone does not win battles, but without it the fight flags and wavers,” as Paulo warns.

Hence, one urgent task is to keep alive hopes of a better world. We need to educate for this, and to educate ourselves for it too. In consequence, we need to restore our critical capacity and to denounce the aberrations that neoliberal ideology presents to us as normal. We cannot go on keeping quiet under the pretext of thinking ourselves postmodern. We must dare to proclaim our findings and our proposals. Today, the crisis has allowed us to think, to feel and to argue and work in different ways. We need to build on this approach. We must return to the conviction of working together. We have permitted international cooperation to pursue frankly questionable criteria and activities because we have not challenged them jointly.

To sum up, I believe that we need to work on ways of

- re-establishing mechanisms of communication at the grassroots,
- return to strategies for training and multiplying teachers with rigour, creativity and solid methodology,
- relaunch the notion of networks (which recognise and respond to present-day reality),
- take the initiative again in finding sustainable ways of coordinating and influencing the main networks on the continent, and elsewhere,
- publicly reposition the ethical, epistemological, pedagogical and political debate, avoiding both ambiguities and false certainties – DEBATE is the word, both in the international arena and within the civil society in our countries.

Lastly, we need to go back to establishing – or strengthening, as the case may be – an articulate, critical, living movement with its own thinking and a genuine influence at the grassroots, in universities, among the wider public, etc. And this requires a collegial, enabling, decentralised and truly democratic management style. Work on this has begun. It needs to be pursued.

*Carlos Nuñez headed IMDEC in Mexico for many years and is a former President, now Honorary President, of the Latin America Council for Adult Education. He teaches Educación Popular at the National Pedagogical University of Guadalajara.*

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## *Creating a Voice for Religious Education in Europe*

*Peter Schreiner*

*CoGREE is the Coordinating Group for Religious Education in Europe which brings together - EAWRE: The European Association for World Religions in Education; ECCE: The European Conference on Christian Education; EFTRE: The European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education; ICCS, The Intereuropean Commission on Church and School; IV: The International Association for Christian Education*

“Living together with the Other – Education & Religion in a European Context” was the title of a conference of the Coordinating Group for Religious Education in Europe in October in Berlin. With this event, CoGREE has intensified collaboration among the six member organisations especially through dialogue with the European Commission and sharing insights of developments in Religious Education in theory and in practice in Europe. The event was organised in co-operation with the Protestant Academy in Berlin, the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Comenius-Institut in Münster.

One of the speakers, professor Friedrich Schweitzer from Tuebingen university, mentioned that from his perspective “CoGREE is the most important attempt at developing a unitary voice for religious education in Europe. Yet, the process of including others in this association is not complete.” He proposed to include a wider range of Christian denominations and also representatives of other faith traditions in the network.

The Dutch religious educator professor Bert Roebben presented current changes in the perspective of religion and religious

upbringing in a “post-secular Europe”. He underlined the need of “learning by encounter in the presence of the Other” and the aims of creating “confidence in life” and “to move the soul” in a dynamic time of permanent turbulence.

A special highlight of the conference was the participation of the Commissioner of The European Union for Culture, Education, Training and Multilingualism, Ján Figel. He underlined in his presentation that the “relation between education and religious and ethical values is vital for the future of Europe.” And he stressed also that “the shared values of different religious traditions can provide a collective sense of good conduct in private and public life.” Education plays a decisive role when it comes to European Citizenship based on the community of values: peace, solidarity, democracy, respect for human rights, including the right of religious freedom.

Ján Figel mentioned the proposal of the European Commission that 2008 be declared the “European Year of Intercultural Dialogue” and encouraged the CoGREE member organisation to take part in the planned activities and programmes.

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Prof. Ulrich Becker, a former staff member in WCC's Office of Education, who acted as rapporteur of the conference, proposed that CoGREE should be developed as a dialogue partner for churches and politicians on the European level. He also encouraged closer links between research projects in religious education and their outcomes to strengthen models and experiences in the teaching and learning of the RE classroom. This could also help to realise demands for value education with a specific policy.

The task in following up the conference is to evaluate the manifold proposals for the work of CoGREE in future and to develop

instruments and activities for that. A statement about the importance of education that takes account of religion has been discussed in Berlin that can give guidelines for the work. Papers and other contributions to the conference will be available under [www.cogreee.com](http://www.cogreee.com)

*Peter Schreiner is the secretary of CoGREE and works for the Comenius Institute, Germany. He serves as a member of the WCC Commission on Education and Ecumenical Formation.*

Contact: [schreiner@comenius.de](mailto:schreiner@comenius.de)

## *Towards Knowledge Societies*

### *A reflection on the UNESCO report*

As this report makes clear, knowledge and information are not the same. Much has been made of the information revolution brought about by electronic communications. What does this mean, though, for the development of knowledge societies?

In one sense, all societies in the past and present have been and are knowledge societies of one kind or another. However “the control of knowledge can go hand in hand with serious inequality, exclusion and social conflict. Knowledge was long the exclusive domain of tight circles of wise men and the initiated few.” In the history of the churches, the responsibility of all in the Christian community for reading and interpreting the scriptures has been a hot issue. Technology opens up the capacity for openness in creating and sharing knowledge but can also lead to the partition of knowledge and exclusion.

“A knowledge society is a society that is nurtured by its diversity and its capacities. Every society has its own knowledge assets. It is therefore necessary to work towards connecting the forms of knowledge that societies already possess and the new forms of development, acquisition and spread of knowledge ..” An information society is the product of technological developments. However, a knowledge society takes in social, ethical and political dimensions. The diversity of societies, e.g. cultural and linguistic, makes a single model of knowledge society impossible.

Whilst education and critical thinking are important, space should be made for local or indigenous forms of knowledge. “The increasing importance of cultural and linguistic diversity underscores the extent to which problems of access to knowledge are bound up with the production of knowledge. Fostering diversity also means nurturing the creativity of emerging knowledge societies. Such a prospect fulfils not only an abstract ethical imperative, it above all aims to raise in each society an awareness of the wealth of the forms of knowledge and capacities it possesses, in order to increase their value and take advantage of what they have to offer.”

The report points out the paradox of talking about knowledge societies when “languages are vanishing, traditions falling by the wayside and vulnerable cultures becoming marginalised or tumbling into oblivion throughout all the world’s regions.” Knowledge is not only western, scientific and technological. “An analysis of knowledge societies cannot avoid seriously thinking about the future of linguistic diversity and ways to preserve it in a world where the informational revolution may lead to the risks of standardisation and generalised formatting.”

A knowledge society should include and integrate all its members. Knowledge should be seen as a public good, available to each and every individual. The report reminds readers of the significance of the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the emphasis on

- freedom of opinion and expression,
- the right to education,
- the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

“The rise of a global information society spawned by the new technology revolution must not overshadow the fact that it is valuable only as a means to achieve genuine knowledge societies.” An excessive focus on information generated by the technological revolution may lead us to be confused about knowledge. Information is no more than “a fixed stabilised form of knowledge, pegged to time and to the user” and becomes a commodity to be bought and sold.

The amount of information available and the speed of its transmission have outpaced our capacity “to master the available information with critical judgement and thinking, and to analyse, sort and incorporate the items they consider most interesting in a knowledge base”. We can easily identify the technology gap that exists globally but we may not be equally aware of the education gap which also exists in technologically advanced societies. “The tools that can be used to “process” that information are not always up to the task. In knowledge societies, everyone must be able to move easily through the flow of information submerging us, and to develop cognitive and critical thinking skills to distinguish between “useful” and “useless” information. Useful knowledge is not simply knowledge that can be immediately turned into profit”.

The educational challenge is one that needs to be confronted by organisations as well as societies. On these grounds, ecumenical organisations and networks will have to pay far more attention to the dimension of learning in their life and activities.

While basic education for all people in the world has still to be achieved, the idea of lifelong learning may appear to be a luxury. However, continuing adult education has “acquired decisive importance today because it appears to be an essential condition for development.”

The nature of knowledge societies means that there should be a greater awareness of global and local issues - environmental, technological, economic and cultural. “Knowledge is a potent tool in the fight against poverty”.

The report contains challenges not only for the work of the ecumenical movement for society but also for our own movement. How do we understand the difference between information and knowledge, especially when many ecumenical courses concentrate on information about different traditions? Wisdom and discernment are part of our language but how do we apply them to the flood of undifferentiated information? How do we ensure that all in the movement participate in the creation and ownership of knowledge and not just those in positions of expertise or leadership? How do we use technological developments without be used or shaped by them?

*UNESCO, 2005*  
Available as a book or on <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001418/141843e.pdf>

## *News from the WCC Education and Ecumenical Formation Staff*

Much of our attention as staff for the past months has been directed towards the Assembly. There are several areas where our EEF concerns will be discussed. The whole Assembly and, in particular, the Mutirão programme is intended to be a participative ecumenical formation experience.

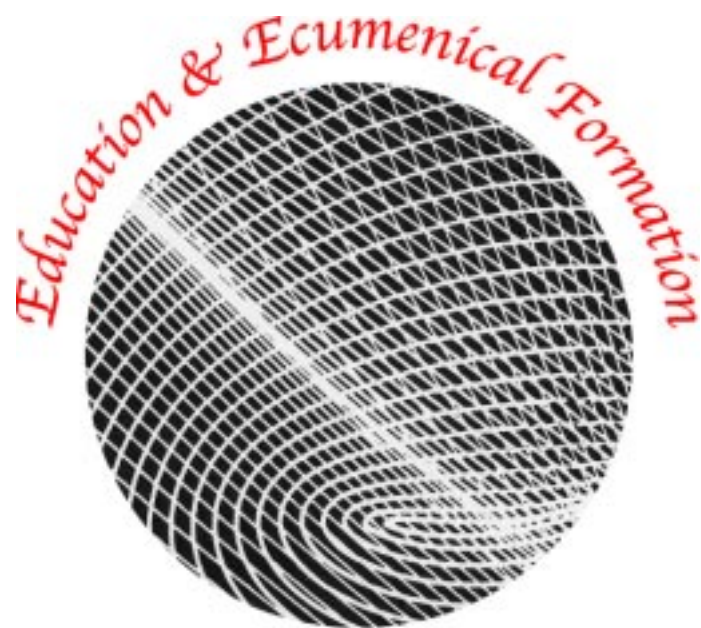
- For delegates, one of the Ecumenical Conversations is on ecumenical formation and will be moderated by David Goodbourn, a member of the Commission on Education and Ecumenical formation.
- The Mutirão programme contains three ecumenical formation sessions.
- Several Mutirão workshops which directly deal with issues of education and ecumenical formation which are being facilitated by people in the networks to which we relate, including OIKOSNET. Examples of some of the issues are: learning and teaching, interfaith education, methodologies, theological education and people with disability; peace; indigenous and tribal theologies, contextual Bible study methodologies; theological education and HIV/AIDS, the Tamar Campaign (see EEF-NET No 16).
- The Scholarships programme is enabling a group training for a selected international group of young ecumenists at the Assembly (see earlier article). It is also arranging a reception for former scholars and others associated with the programme to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its work.

➤ A theological café is being offered on the campus by the local association of theological schools. This will include panel presentations on theological education from Africa, Asia/Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe and Caribbean/Latin America and Women & Theological Education.

➤ An ecumenical congress for theological students from Latin America and further afield is also being organised in conjunction with the Assembly.

We have also been working with other colleagues on the Bible study material and on training for moderators and delegates in the consensus decision making process. Although we have other responsibilities in the Assembly, it is good to be able to report that we are able to contribute our professional skills in the area of education and ecumenical formation.

The five yearly external evaluation of the Scholarships programme was not complete in time for the November meeting of the Scholarships Working Group. However, the Working Group was able to begin to reflect on some issues which will emerge. Unlike the previous evaluation which was done by questionnaires from Geneva, the evaluators have been able to directly discuss the programme with requesting bodies, scholarship holders, member churches and other partners. Consideration will now be given to the evaluation report at the April 2006 meeting.



**Education and Ecumenical Formation**  
**World Council of Churches**  
P.O. Box 2100  
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland