

2023 CWM Theological Education Consultation and TEEL Launch

Life-Affirming Theological Education in Mission

23-27 January 2023, Manila

Host: Union Theological Seminary

Final Statement

We gathered for five days at Union Theological Seminary where we were blessed by the beauty of the campus, nourished by the abundant hospitality of the community, inspired by the rich spiritual life of the chapel, which deepened our engagement with the issues at stake, and challenged by the rigour of the discussions in the conference hall. A highlight of the event was the launch of the Theological Education for the Economy of Life (TEEL) programme, which provided a foundation on which to imagine further steps towards the development of life-affirming theological education.

Theological Education for Economy of Life (TEEL) as part of Life-Affirming Theological Education (LATEM)

Theological Education for Economy of Life (TEEL) is part of the Life-Affirming Theological Education (LATEM) process. This type of transformative education looks critically at past theological teachings and traditions, and discerns life-affirming theological understandings for the present and the future. It also enables the Church to engage with society, academic institutions, market, geopolitics and public sectors while empowering people of faith and goodwill with responsible theological world views and liberating praxes. It raises a question on how churches, pastors, teachers, missionaries, clergy and lay Christians, working with people of other faiths, can participate in God's mission and rise to life together and the whole creation especially at these times of crisis. Its methodological approach is that of engaging all to dialogue and to mutually share knowledge, reflection and action.

The TEEL curriculum, therefore, contributes appropriately to LATEM in terms of its three units which are:

1. Discerning the signs of the times and analysing the current system.
2. Exploring and engaging Alternatives to the economy of Death.
3. Rising to Life: Living out the new Heaven and Earth.

The provision of both TEEL and LATEM should be based on participatory methodologies where learners and facilitators exchange world views and praxis in a mutually reinforcing manner. Attempts are made to avoid the traditional teaching systems where learners are recipients and teachers are givers of knowledge.

The Consultation affirms that TEEL is part of LATEM that will include other issues including interrogating power, peace, politics, culture, digital revolution, gender justice, ecological justice, patriarchy, agism, casteism, ancient and contemporary slavery, migration, human trafficking, racism, violence, religious fundamentalism and other induced human crises.

Rationale for a Re-Set: Towards a Life-affirming Theological Education

However, certain trends and realities of today's world necessitate the need to expand the scope of our current efforts. With the neo-liberal economy as the ideological vision of our generation, creation and accumulation of wealth have become the decisive factors for all relationships at the levels of people, communities and countries. Abuse and exploitation of the vulnerable earth and human beings are its most obvious strategies as well as consequences. Religious resources and institutions seem to have become the high priests of this idolatry of mammon. In many parts of the world, religion seems to have become a powerful source of hatred, division and violence, and a barefaced defender of greed and injustice.

Furthermore, with unbridled technology continuing to harm earth's eco-system and dehumanize millions, the fate and future of the earth now seems to hang on the growing power of technology and the purposes for which it is used. The political fallout of these processes warns of the danger of oligarchies replacing democratic institutions. These hegemonic powers with their insatiable greed for wealth and power and their aggressive assertions of domination are writing the script for the future that offers no future for many. These global trends pose serious moral challenges that cannot be ignored by faith communities and institutions.

Hope is found among those who through actions of courage, dissenting voices, alternative discourses, collectives of resistance, counter-cultural expressions, and community actions, are challenging the dominant vision of the future. Inspiration comes from movements of marginalized communities – peasants, Indigenous peoples, racially oppressed people, Dalits, women, farmers, champions of environmental protection, and many others who resist political repression, militarization, and injustice.

This points to the reality that the world indeed is at a crossroads facing a sharp moral divide. It, therefore, seems to be a decisive moment – for churches, for all faith communities, and particularly for theological educators, to discern their role in shaping the emerging world. Will they allow themselves to be preoccupied with issues of survival, continuity, and the patronage of the powerful and wealthy? Or will they choose to be with the restless others who are clamouring for a new world? Can theological educators offer readings of the Bible that meet the challenges of our time? Can they equip church communities to resist idolatry and injustice, and to become communities of hope in a time of despair? Can they discern where the renewing Spirit of God is at work, perhaps in surprising places? Can they re-shape ministerial formation to serve the needs of the church today and tomorrow? To meet these challenges there is need to re-set theological education.

An Initial Agenda for the Re-setting of Theological Education

We have identified five issues that could form an initial agenda for an ongoing process of consultation and mutual challenge in relation to re-setting theological education.

1. Contextualization of theology, while a unifying commitment for the network, requires problematization, re-definition and re-imagination.
2. A life-affirming theological education needs to expose, interrogate and challenge death-dealing economic and political systems that threaten the human community and all life on earth.
3. A preferential option for justice needs to shape pedagogy so that such methods as immersion, solidarity, participation and co-learning are valued and practised.
4. Fresh thinking is needed as regards what students are expected to know, to be and to do; and forms of assessment need to be shaped accordingly.
5. Without sacrificing academic integrity and accountability, theological education needs to adopt “movement-mode” – ready to meet the high cost of being prophetic, revolutionary and transformative.

Recommendations for Next Steps

We recommend that:

1. Participating institutions **explore** how appropriate aspect(s) of the Theological Education for the Economy of Life (TEEL) programme can be integrated into their curriculum.
2. Institutions with a passion for life-affirming theological education that engages today's situation of crisis **commit** to an ongoing process of consultation convened by CWM, and sharing of ideas, people and resources, seeking to become an ever-expanding movement.
3. CWM **investigate** the possibility of hosting an online platform for the sharing of resources that will support the delivery of life-affirming theological education.
4. CWM **prepare** a proposal for an online PhD programme in mission studies which would be delivered by a network of committed institutions and educators, possibly supported by the creation of a permanent centre; and which would enable emerging scholars and leaders to complete in-depth studies of cutting-edge issues.

Conclusion

We depart from UTS to our home countries full of the spirit of collaboration, creativity and innovation where sharing of knowledge, experience, human and non-human resources to enhance the shaping of this Life- Affirming Theological Education will be the norm.