

NETWORK OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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**INSTITUT LUTHÉRIEN DE THÉOLOGIE
CAMEROUN**

**MEKANE YESUS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
ETHIOPIA**

**LUTHERAN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
MADAGASCAR**

**MHS SCHOOL OF MISSION AND THEOLOGY
NORWAY**

**LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE
UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA**

**MAKUMIRA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
TUMAINI UNIVERSITY, TANZANIA**

**DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES
MAKERERE UNIVERSITY, UGANDA**

Our network is ten years old!

By Knut Holter, MHS School of Mission and Theology

The idea of a formalized network – what we today know as the Network of Theology and Religious Studies – goes back to a consultation in Stavanger in November 2000, and already in January 2001 the network was operational. Now, in December 2010, we are therefore able to look back at ten years of institutional collaboration. There will probably not be any lavish celebrations in that connection; nevertheless, a few words about our expectations and achievements back in 2000 and now in 2010 may be appropriate at this stage.

The aims back in 2000

It was the MHS School of Mission and Theology (Norway) that initiated the consultation in November 2000. The background for this initiative was the acknowledgement that the MHS throughout its history (since 1843) had developed close interaction with many theological institutions in Africa; still, the contact had been on a rather informal level. The time had now come, it was felt, to formalize this contact, and six African institutions of higher education in the fields of theology and religious studies were accordingly invited to a consultation in Stavanger to discuss a possible establishing of a network of tertiary institutions of theology and religious studies, with special attention to the challenges facing these disciplines in Africa.

The following institutions were represented at the consultation: Institut Luthérien de Théologie, Meiganga, Cameroun (Rector: Dr Joseph Ngah), Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Principal: Dr Yonas Deressa), Lutheran Graduate School of Theology, Fianarantsoa, Madagascar (Dean: Dr Randrianasolo Joseph), MHS School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway (Rector: Dr Thor Strandenæs, Dean of Studies: Rev Einar Engebretsen, Library Director: Rev Arne B. Samuelsen, M.Phil. Coordinator: Dr Ove C. Hanssen, Network Coordinator: Dr Knut Holter), Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mapumulo [now: Lutheran Theological Institute, Pietermaritzburg], South Africa (Chair of the Board: Dr Ramathate T.H. Dolamo), Makumira University College of Tumaini University, Usa River, Tanzania (Provost: Dr Gwakisa E. Mwakagali), Department of Religious Studies, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda (Head of Department: Dr Serapio Kabazzi-Kisirinya).

All participants agreed to establish a network, consisting of the seven institutions that were represented. The purpose and aim of the network was envisioned as a sharing of spiritual, academic and economic resources and experiences, through various kinds of South-North, North-South and South-South collaboration. Three key areas of collaboration were identified:

- to promote exchange of students and teaching staff
- to promote research collaboration
- to promote cooperation with regard to infrastructure development

As for the organizing of the network, it was agreed that the participating institutions will keep in touch through a newsletter published biannually. And as for the coordination of the network, it was agreed that it shall alternate between the participating institutions. For the period 2001-2003 the responsibility for coordination was to be located in Stavanger, and Knut Holter of the MHS School of Mission and Theology was asked to serve as General Network Co-ordinator.

Ten years of collaboration

The network consultation in 2000 identified three areas of collaboration, and the three may serve as headings with regard to what we have achieved throughout our first ten years of collaboration.

a) Exchange of students and teaching staff

A number of students – as well as some senior academic staff members – have benefitted from exchange programmes in the network. Some examples are:

- Students North>South: Makerere University (Uganda) regularly receives BA students in Religion and Intercultural Communication from Norway for one month visits. In addition, there are several examples of Norwegian B- and M-students who have visited one of the African network institutions on a more individual level, for periods of one to three months.
- Students South>North: The MHS School of Mission and Theology (Norway) has normally 10-12 MA students and 3-5 Ph.D. students from other network institutions.
- Lecturers: Throughout our ten years of collaboration, there have been many examples of exchange of lecturers, both South>North and North>South. However, at the time being, there are no specific programme and funding for this.

b) Research collaboration

When we look back at ten years of research collaboration, we see a number of successful projects. Some are of a more individual type, but quite a number have included several researchers and institutions. The following survey will group the material in two, research projects and academic conferences.

First, we have seen three large scale research projects:

- ‘Africanization of Biblical Studies’ (2002-2006). This collaborative project – directed by Knut Holter and funded by NUFU: The Norwegian Programme for Development, Research and Education – included five institutions: Makerere University (Uganda), MHS School of Mission and Theology (Norway), Makumira University College (Tanzania), Lutheran Graduate School of Theology (Madagascar), and University of South Africa (South Africa). The aim of the project was to gain knowledge of how the academic discipline of Biblical Studies can be developed as an African discipline, proceeding from African contexts and responding to African challenges. This aim was approached in the form of a staff development project, with three Ph.D. projects related to three of our Eastern African network institutions: Peter L. Kimilike (Makumira University College), Georges Razafindrakoto (Lutheran Graduate School of Theology), and Philip Lokel (Makerere University) all succeeded and got their Ph.D.s in 2006. The results of their research have been disseminated through various channels. One is an essay collection based on the project: Knut Holter (ed.): *Let My People Stay! Researching the Old Testament in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2006. Another is a publishing of a revised version of one of the theses: Peter Lechion Kimilike: *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs: An African Transformational Hermeneutic of Proverbs on Poverty*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008 (Bible and Theology in Africa, 7).

- ‘Africanization of pastoral care’ (2006-2009): This collaborative project – a project that has lacked an overall funding, but nevertheless has succeeded due to the ability of the organizers to make the best out of some minor funding from the participating institutions – was initiated by Øyvind M. Eide (MHS School of Mission and Theology, Norway). Together with Leif Gunnar Engedal (MF Norwegian School of Theology, Norway), Peter L. Kimilike and Emeline Ndossi (both: Makumira University College, Tanzania), he organized a group of Tanzanian pastors to work with the potential of a contextualization or Africanization of the academic discipline – and practical skill – of pastoral care. A number of workshops and seminars have been organized, and three books have come out of the project. First, an academic book, reflecting on the topic: Øyvind M. Eide, Leif Gunnar Engedal, Lechion Peter Kimilike and Emeline Ndossi: *Restoring Life in Christ: Dialogues of Care in Christian Communities. An African Perspective*. Neuendettelsau: Erlanger Verlag / Usa River: Research Institute of Makumira University College, 2008 (Makumira Publication, 19). Second, two textbooks, with cases and reflections, have been published by the same four researchers: *Restoring Life in Christ: Pastoral Care and Domestic Violence. African Experiences*. Arushas: Makumira University College, 2009, and *Restoring Life in Christ: Pastoral Care and Human Suffering. African Experiences*. Arushas: Makumira University College, 2009
- ‘Reintegration of female ex-child soldiers in Eastern Africa: Religious, ethical and practical perspectives’ (2007-2011). This collaborative project – directed by Bård Mæland and like the biblical project above funded by NUFU: The Norwegian Programme for Development, Research and Education – includes three institutions: Makerere University (Uganda), Makumira University College (Tanzania), and MHS School of Mission and Theology (Norway). The aim of the project is to gain knowledge of how religious organizations can participate in the reintegration into society of female ex-child soldiers in Northern Uganda and in the

Dem. Rep. of Congo. The project is organized as a staff development project, with three Ph.D. projects related to two of our Eastern African network institutions: two Ph.D. students from Makerere (Christine Mbambazi and Helen Nkabala Nambalirwa) and one from Makumira (Emeline Ndossi); in addition there have been two MA students from Dem. Rep. Congo, who have graduated from Makerere's programme on Peace and Reconciliation Studies. The project has not yet been completed. Still, two conferences and one conference volume has already come out of the project, cf. below, international academic conferences.

Second, not less than five international conferences have been organized:

- 2005: Makerere University (Uganda): 'Interpreting classical religious texts in contemporary Africa'. Participants from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Norway, Madagascar. A conference volume was edited by Knut Holter: *Interpreting Classical Religious Texts in Contemporary Africa*. Nairobi: Acton, 2007.
- 2009: Makumira University College (Tanzania): 'Africanization of pastoral care and counselling'. Participants from Tanzania, Norway, and Ethiopia. For publications, cf. above, the research project with the same name.
- 2009: Makerere University (Uganda): 'Living together: International conference on inter-religious dialogue'. Participants from Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Malawi, Kenya, Norway, Egypt, Germany, and Bosnia. A conference volume is being edited by Jan Opsal, and is planned to be published in 2011.
- 2009: MHS School of Mission and Theology (Norway): 'Religion, culture and the reintegration of former female child soldiers in Northern Uganda'. Participants from

Uganda, Tanzania, Norway, United States, Ireland, Bosnia, and Nepal. A conference volume was edited by Bård Mæland: *Culture, Religion, and the Reintegration of Female Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010 (Bible and Theology in Africa, 10).

- 2010: Gulu and Makerere University (Uganda): ‘Dissemination conference of the project “Religion, culture and the reintegration of former female child soldiers in Northern Uganda”’. Participants from Tanzania, Uganda, Dem. Rep. Congo, Norway. As far as publication is concerned, cf. above, the 2009 conference.

c) Infrastructure development

- Textbook programme: The network consultation in Stavanger in November 2000 pointed out the current textbook situation for theology and religious studies in Africa as a major challenge. As a response to this, a couple of attempts were made to establish a textbook program, based – on the one hand – on the general lack of textbooks relevant to the individual institution (language, context, price etc.), and – on the other hand – on the valuable experience many senior academic staff members have in teaching their subjects. Two books – a monograph and a conference volume – came out of these attempts to establish a textbook program. In September 2008, the Network of Theology and Religious Studies approached the Norwegian Mission Society, applying for funding of a re-establishing of a textbook program. The response was positive, and an annual sum of NOK 55.000 (approximately US\$ 8.000) has been granted for this purpose for 2009, 2010 and 2011.

The grant from the Norwegian Mission Society enabled the Network of Theology and Religious Studies – in collaboration with the MHS School of Mission and Theology – to launch a textbook program for 2009, 2010 and 2011. Senior academic staff members within the network

institutions have been invited to apply for scholarships enabling them to spend periods of three months in the Research Library, MHS School of Mission and Theology, with the purpose of writing a textbook that reflects the demands of their institutional context.

The following books have been funded by the programme:

- Joseph Ngah (Cameroun): *La rencontre entre la religion africaine et le christianisme africain*. Ngaoundéré: Tello editions, 2002.
- Knut Holter (Norway) (ed.): *Interpreting Classical Religious Texts in Contemporary Africa*. Nairobi: Acton, 2007.
- Jean Koulagna (Cameroun): *L'Ancien Testament: pour commencer*, Stavanger: MHS School of Mission and Theology, 2010.
- Jean Koulagna (Cameroun): *Dire l'histoire dans la bible hébraïque. Perspectives exégétiques et herméneutiques*, Stavanger: MHS School of Mission and Theology, 2010.

The 2010 textbook scholarship was granted to Misgana Mathewos (Ethiopia), who will publish a commentary on Genesis 1-11 in 2011. The 2011 textbook scholarship has just been advertised, with March 1, 2011, as the deadline for applications.

- Library collaboration: The libraries are in many ways the hearts of our institutions, and the question has several times been raised how a closer interaction between the network libraries could be developed. Back in 2002, an application developed by Arne Samuelsen, Librarian of MHS School of Mission and Theology (Norway), was sent to NUFU: The Norwegian Programme for Development, Research and Education for funding of a pilot project, but with a negative response. Later, an initiative for library collaboration was made by Annalise Zaverdinos, Librarian of Lutheran Theological Institute (South Africa), cf. *Network Newsletter*

15 (2008) 5-6. Her initiative ought to be followed up by other librarians; she can be contacted at zaverdinos@ukzn.ac.za.

- There have been some examples of academic and administrative interaction with regard to promotion, evaluation and accreditation. A very recent example is the contact made by the Dean of the Lutheran Theological Institute in Cameroun to a couple of other network institutions in connection with plans of upgrading the institute.
- It can also be mentioned, I think, that the Network Newsletter has probably contributed to keeping the idea of a network alive.

Some reflections about past and future

We have achieved quite a lot throughout our ten years of collaboration. In many ways we have achieved more than we were able to foresee back in 2000. Nevertheless, there is no reason to lie down and rest on our laurels; we have to continue reflecting on what we can do to continue and improve our various examples of interaction.

Three topics should here be addressed. First, as it has been repeatedly emphasized throughout our ten years of interaction, the network *per se* has no money; all our projects depend on separate funding, from external funds and internal prioritizations. Accordingly, we – and ‘we’ is here understood as the academic and administrative staff in the network institutions – have to continue developing projects that have a profile and quality that attracts external funding and internal prioritizations. To some extent this has proved possible in the past, as the survey above demonstrates. Still, with regard to the future, it requires a continuous attention to programmes and projects of state and NGO

funding agencies, and, not least, it requires a general focus on the question of quality, in our research, our classrooms, and our administrations.

Second, we have to admit that we – mainly due to funding reasons – have not yet succeeded in establishing programmes and projects that effectively encourage South/South interaction. More or less all our programmes and projects have a South/North rather than a South/South direction. There are admittedly many benefits of the current South/North focus, but as a network consisting of seven institutions – of which six are located in Africa – we aim higher, acknowledging the potential of closer South/South interaction with regard to exchange of students and staff members, research collaboration, and development of institutional infrastructure.

Third, we also have to admit that the organizing of the network has not yet found a satisfactory solution. At the consultation back in 2000, we foresaw – somewhat optimistically – that the seven network institutions would be able to meet relatively regularly, at least on a leadership level. So has not been the case, due to funding difficulties. There are certainly a lot of travelling and meetings related to the network, but mainly on a project level. Since 2000, the leaders of the network institutions have met only once, in 2005, when a workshop related to the ‘Africanization of Biblical Studies Project’ was used to facilitate a second network consultation. Two things came out of this second network consultation. First, that each network institution should appoint a local network coordinator, to relieve the Rector/Provost/Head from the administrative burdens of the network collaboration. However, only half of the institutions have followed up this administrative re-organizing. Second, that Rev (and later Dr) Peter Lechion Kimilike of Makumira University College (Tanzania) was elected General Network Coordinator, succeeding Dr Knut Holter of MHS School of Mission and Theology (Norway). However, Kimilike was only able to fill this position for a year or so, as he was soon called away from Makumira, to develop a new campus of Tumaini University, and Dr Holter – who therefore happen to be the present writer – took over the responsibility again.

These three topics – and others, such as for example the question of whether the network should welcome other Southern and Northern institutions into its fellowship – will have to be discussed when a third network consultation convenes, hopefully in a not too distant future.

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