

Speech at the 10 year- celebration of UNISA – GBFE Cooperation

Dear members of Unisa Administration,
Dear Prof Bejnath,
Ladies and gentleman,
Dear colleagues,

We are gathered to celebrate 10 years of UNISA-GBFE Cooperation – a great opportunity for me as GBFE President to thank all of you who made our enormously successful cooperation work. As you know GBFE stands for Gesellschaft für Bildung und Forschung in Europa, which is translated as Network for Education and Research in Europe. Our cooperation started in a time of transition in South Africa as well as Europe. There were numerous challenges, and the venture could have easily collapsed for numerous reasons. South Africa just experienced the victory of ANC and all those forces leading your beautiful country to democracy. UNISA as well as hundreds of other institutions faced the difficult challenge of transformation and restructuring. And theology, which was abused as one of the legitimising spiritual forces of apartheid, was in no way left aside. Sometimes, coming to UNISA, I have the impression theology has even become the experimental field for the transformative process in the new South Africa.

In Europe similar forces marked an unprecedented crisis of the Christian church and her institutions of higher education. The term post-Christian Europe best expresses the tensions and struggles we are going through. There is, however, a new hope for European Christianity, and this hope largely comes from the newer expressions of the Christian faith. Those free Churches are often of migrant background and develop outside of the main line denominations. Their members are active, their faith vital and church growth stable. Many of those new churches have established their educational institutions, but the cooperation with the state-churches has proven to be difficult and problematic. The original GBFE member institutes or campuses all came from those free churches. They felt being marginalized and academically outcast.

Here in South Africa, at UNISA, a new day for those European educational institutions started. UNISA has offered GBFE the most valuable asset, you can find in academic education – space for creative academic work. For this I am most thankful. Let me name some of the marks of this space.

- a. We found an institution working in bold humility, to use David Bosch's dictum. Your own history has taught you to listen to other voices before you come up with strong judgements. At our European universities we often see a rigid scientific dogmatism ruling the day and quenching academic creativity. Abduction as a main source for genius development in science is neglected, intuition as a source of knowledge promotion is outsourced to science fiction, creative and non-traditional methodology is looked upon sceptically. No wonder, creative and non-traditional approaches of the new Christian realities in Europe face enormous resistance. At UNISA we have entered a truly liberal university, interested not in conservation of methodology, but in live-giving knowledge. Thank you!

- b. We found at UNISA a university with a deep commitment to praxis. Theology in Europe tends to be more theoretical and less praxis-oriented. As a matter of fact praxis orientation is often viewed as a regression into a theology of experience as promoted by Schleiermacher centuries back. And nothing seems to be regarded a deeper sin in theological faculties than that. Here at UNISA we were encouraged to think *doing theology*, theology which comes from praxis and leads to praxis. For the majority of our students - a warm invitation to enter a path of transformative theology in a wholistic way. Again thank you.
- c. We found at UNISA a theological faculty with a deep interest in context and culture. Theology in Europe is often done deductively. The theological sources are carefully examined, the context, in contrary, is neglected. The results are classic, generic and mostly removed from life and praxis of the church. Here we have had to learn the important interplay between text and context, theology and culture. And this has enormously enriched our academic work as well as praxis of church work. Thank you.
- d. We found at UNISA a multiculturally and dialogically committed faculty devoted to finding a way of true multiculturalism in work and life of the church and society. At home in Europe we face the challenge of a multioptional and multicultural society for the first time in our history. The church will have to become a mediator par excellence if we expect to continue in the sea of cultures and religions coming to us. Here at UNISA we have been learning together with you, how to overcome prejudices and develop a dialogical theology. Again – thank you!

Well, you have offered space, creative space to us. And I dare to hope, that in the course of the last 10 years UNISA theology has also profited from our presence in this space. Having observed our cooperation for years, it seems to me, some of the issues you work on, and some of the solutions you come up with, bear a slight trace of our cooperation. Thank you for letting us cooperate!

10 years of UNISA-GBFE cooperation has been a successful venture. And as always, this cooperation owes much to all of us. Naming certain people by excluding others is never easy. I really cherish each and every one's contribution. Thank you. And yet, let me mention some of us in a very special manner. Our cooperation would not have become as successful without the energy and work of Willem Saayman, Klippies Kritzinger, Nico Botha and Mariki Willemse. Thank you, discipline and formerly department of missiology for investing all the time into our cooperation far beyond missiology only, especially in the beginning.

We equally thank all the departments to which the cooperation has since expanded: Practical Theology, New and Old Testament and Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Ethics, Church History and Christian Spirituality. Your cooperation has been marvellous. Forgive me for not mentioning all your names. I do this because there are so many contributing to the cooperation.

And then I would like to address my special word of thanks to the department of international affairs. You have trusted us and we see today the fruit of our cooperation.

Last but not least, what would all our work mean without a strong support of UNISA's leadership. I always marvel you for finding time to meet us Europeans and then again provide all needed support. Thank you.

Thank you to all of you! Let's continue with our fruitful cooperation.