

INTERVIEW WITH ANNETTE SCHEUNPFLUG, COUNCIL MEMBER OF GPENreformation



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “GPENreformation [the Global Pedagogical Network – Joining in Reformation] is about offering Protestant schools a forum for exchange and networking. So far more than 850 individual schools and many school associations are linked in this network, representing over 25 million students.”
- “It makes sense to express ourselves together in this way, because Catholic and Protestant schools have the same mission to serve people and to take responsibility for the development of the community based on our common Christian convictions.”

You are a member of the GPENreformation council. Could you briefly explain the origin and goals of the organization?

The Global Pedagogical Network – Joining in Reformation (GPENreformation) is an international network of Protestant educational institutions such as schools and universities as well as churches, associations, and organizations supporting them (for more information, see our website at <https://www.gpenreformation.net/>). Linked by common roots in the Reformation movement of the 16th century, members of different Protestant denominations get in contact with each other. Our goal is to learn together and from each other globally in order to develop high quality education and to share solidarity worldwide. Schools, individual institutions and associations are welcomed as members.

The network is supported by a small council, runs an office with two employees in Germany and has installed “ambassadors” in all regions of the world where Protestant schools exist. GPENreformation is still a very young network going back to the activities in preparation of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? Annette Scheunpflug, a member of the Council of the Global Pedagogical Network – Joining in Reformation, explains the objective of the organization and some of the challenges and opportunities faced by Protestant schools. She also reflects on the collaboration between GPENreformation and the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC) for a joint contribution to UNESCO.

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On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther is said to have nailed his famous 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, which ultimately triggered the Protestant Reformation. The churches and the state celebrated the anniversary of this event in 2017 in Germany. During the same period, the desire for a networking of Protestant schools worldwide grew among the churches, in academia and among the schools themselves. In 2013, an activity was launched under the slogan Schools500reformation - 500 Protestant schools celebrate 500 years of the Reformation. It was intended to network Protestant schools with one another. Up until 2017, this project was part of the activities for the Reformation Anniversary 2017. Starting with a conference in Eisenach, a town at the foot of the Wartburg where Luther translated the New Testament into German, 30 representatives from the network of Protestant schools met to consider how such a network could take shape. The first step was to start a worldwide joint educational campaign aiming to discover and explore the Reformation roots and share these findings.

Later a campaign was started in the summer of 2015 when pupils from participating schools were encouraged to raise their voices and - like Martin Luther at his time - to formulate theses for a better future. More than 900 young students sent their theses on how to improve the world to Wittenberg. They put their protest against grievances in today's world, their comments to church and school life into words, and formulated ideas of a better future. After three regional conferences in Africa some of these students were invited for the Reformation anniversary in 2017 to Wittenberg to exchange ideas and join in the celebration of their faith during this Reformation summer. After the Reformation summer activities in 2017, the network became independent.



Picture: Reformation anniversary in 2017 in Wittenberg.

GPENreformation is about offering Protestant schools a forum for exchange and networking. So far more than 850 individual schools and many school associations are linked in this network, representing over 25 million students. Forty "ambassadors" are active in their respective countries. In addition to the network, there is a "Researcher's Council" mandated to bring together academics and scientists who are engaged in research on Protestant education and schools and wish to enhance their exchange and cooperation.

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In summary, the aim of GPENreformation is to exchange ideas, work together, learn from one another, and strengthen the profile of Protestant school. Furthermore, this network intends at the same time to intensify contacts with our Catholic sisters and brothers and to expand inter-religious dialogue. It is also important to remind churches, governments and multilateral organizations such as UNESCO of the importance of the Christian school system.

What are the main activities of GPENreformation today?

The greatest emphasis lies in substantive work with the schools. During the present situation of the worldwide pandemic, GPENreformation tries to provide support and solidarity, for example by common prayers and talks of hope. We are currently building up a platform to enable exchange about lessons and joint teaching.

This decade is also about supporting schools in being ambassadors for peace and encouraging people to become peace workers. One important activity is that the Protestant school associations in the Kivu region in Central Africa own a large role model project to strengthen human rights work and peace activities; they started among others activities such as teacher and student exchanges and encounters in the region. We would like to share these experiences with our worldwide network. That is why a joint international conference on peace education is planned in Brazil in 2021.

GPENreformation is still in the process of building up and consolidation. Therefore, it is an important objective to make this network widely and publicly known and to mobilize Protestant schools to join in. We are presently establishing a foundation to lay the financial basis for GPENreformation, which is still a bit weak at the moment. Besides this, we intend to open a regional office in Africa.

You recently worked with the International Office of Catholic Education for a joint statement on Christian schools. Why did you do this and what did you learn?

GPENreformation is concerned that many decision-makers see all schools that are not state run schools with scepticism and reservations. They consider them often as schools for better-off people with elitist demarcation. In reality, however, Christian schools are often located where the state does not run schools, serving the poorer groups of a population. Therefore, these schools should be perceived as facilitators of the public good. Expressing this was important for our co-operation and promoting this understanding seems very important to us.

Catholic and Protestant schools have the same mission to serve people and to take responsibility for the development of the community based on our common Christian convictions.

For GPENreformation, it was a very good experience to receive an invitation from our Catholic sisters and brothers for this joint statement. After all, it makes sense to express ourselves together in this way, because Catholic and Protestant schools have the same mission to serve people and to take responsibility for the development of the community based on our common Christian convictions. The experience of this joint work was extremely good. We had the chance to get to know each other a little better and to try out a trustful form of cooperation. For me personally, the reliable cooperation and commitment with the Catholic partners was a very encouraging experience.

What are the main challenges and opportunities that Protestant schools face?

As for the international dimension, the organizational structure of Protestant education is still quite weak or not well elaborated. The World Council of Churches as the global representation of Protestant and Orthodox churches does not yet have a specific department for schools to coordinate and represent this educational work. This is why there is still a lack of a common strategy and mutual and reciprocal support. Only in a few countries and regions, a stable and reliable cooperation within the Protestant family of churches exists in this area. This often weakens the institutions. In a region, for example, it is better to have a strong joint teacher training institution for the Protestant school system than a separate institution for each small church, which can hardly develop its own charisma. It is of great importance to enable collaboration in such a setting. In this respect, the Protestant school system lacks coordination and cooperation.

In addition, in some Protestant schools, the profile of what constitutes Protestant education is not always sufficiently visible. At the same time however, it is also evident that the offer of Protestant education meets with a great response and interest. Even in secular states, Protestant schools are very popular and could welcome many more students than there are places available. The communication of the Gospel and the associated values of freedom and peace, justice, and the integrity of creation are more relevant than ever. The work for educational justice and education for all is still a great necessity, as is the diaconal access to education.

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What is your personal journey? How did you come to get engaged with Protestant schools?

I work as an educational researcher at a university in Germany. I have been active in the church since my youth as a member of the Protestant Scout movement. Even as a young person, I encountered other young people from other countries and continents through the movement. As a researcher, I was active in the evaluation of German development cooperation programs which, among other things, deal with programs at schools run by Protestants. And as a committed Christian, I became a member and later the chairperson of the Chamber for Education, Children and Youth, which advises the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany. At the moment, I am leading an academic program that offers a master's degree in school quality for individuals in a leading position in faith-based schools in African countries. At many of these stations of my volunteer work and my job, I got in contact with Protestant schools. Against this background, it was a pleasure and an honor to get involved in setting up the GPENreformation cooperation. I really hope that this work will bear lasting fruits. I do very much hope that we will succeed in establishing a permanent, robust network structure.

Could you share with our readers a more personal anecdote about your passions, your interests?

My Christian belief is firmly linked to the joy of music. Singing, making music, or listening to music are an important part of my life. During my life, I have experienced very often how music brings people together and by playing my flute, I forget daily stresses. Moreover, it is an expression of our Christian faith and it creates motivation, joy, and easiness of life. I also enjoy reading and am a passionate scientist. Conducting research about schools and learning interests me very much and I have experienced this as very enriching.