

The birth of the IAPT, a personal impression

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It was in 1991, in Princeton, after a meeting of seven men and one woman – I am very honoured I was that woman – that the IAPT was born. But like all births, this birth was not an unexpected event. There was a gestation-period: a period of bi-lateral international meetings between practical theologians. For instance, in July 1990 about twenty practical theologians from the Netherlands and the USA met in the Mennonite Center in Elspeet, in the Netherlands. The theme was: “Transformation of the Local Church”. Although these bi-lateral conferences were interesting and fruitful, the need was felt for a broader organization, where practical theologians from all over the world could communicate. Other disciplines had such organizations. It was time for practical theology to become an adult discipline on the forum of theologies.

So in 1991, August, 1-4, the seven founding fathers and the one founding mother came together in Princeton, where Rick Osmer was our host. The first evening we met each other for dinner in Rick’s home: it was clear that we had one purpose and were eager to work together. But still there were differences of opinion that would have a long life in the IAPT, once founded.

One important point of discussion was *the name* of the discipline, which was related to the *methodology* of the discipline. Hans van der Ven was very outspoken: the name of the discipline had to be ‘empirical theology’. The ‘practical’ in the name we were used to would, according to Hans, make the discipline less scientific, because less theoretical, in the eyes of the academic public. Long discussions followed, but the outcome was that the name would be ‘practical theology’, but that one of the methods to gather data in researches would be the empirical method. The issue is still alive in the IAPT. I thought at the time that although practical theology was coming of age, some practical theologians still suffered from a hidden inferiority complex. Were they as ‘scientific’ as their colleagues of other disciplines? Was practical theology not - heaven forbid - *applied* theology??? Methodology is still a hot topic. Scholarly traditions of both sides of the Atlantic Ocean met and still meet.

Another issue – at least for me – was *gender*. Some founding fathers were not yet used to have a woman of equal rank in their midst. One (rather elderly) founding father asked me at breakfast:

“Are you married?”. I: “Yes”.

“Do you have children?”. I: Yes, I do.”

‘How many?’. I: “Five”.

The founding father, rather sternly: “So you want to have it both ways.”

This left me rather speechless with my cornflakes. This conversation or interrogation was just a little incident. Although my voice was not as strong and confident as some male voices, I was heard by most of the fathers. But when the IAPT was founded and alive, the gender-issue remained. There were for a long time not many female members. Not only are there in many countries – like mine – still more male than female full professors, and is a

professor in the public opinion in the first place a *learned man*, many women do not only publish books and articles, but babies, children also. Their list of publications (of the books and articles) tends to be shorter than those of men, in general. So at the conference in Bern the women-members came together and decided to publish a book, written by female members of the IAPT. Denise Ackermann from South Africa and I edited the book *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context* (Louvain, 1998). Fortunately, by and by more women became members, even presidents.

I raised another issue at the Princeton meeting, which is not fully solved up till now. Because I had taught some years in Indonesia I knew of some practical theologians who would be happy to become members. They were professors, only... their lists of publications were very short. The reason of this phenomenon is that in many countries in the so called Third World a practical theologian with a PhD degree does have an enormous workload teaching, is a member of the synod of her/his church, has to sit on numerous committees, because practical theologians with doctorates are so very scarce. When we were talking about conditions for membership, I said that it probably would be a good thing if candidates for membership from countries in Asia, Africa or South America (and also of Eastern Europe) could be judged considering their own contexts. But the general opinion was that the future organization had to be very careful to uphold its scholarly image, so... One founding father said: "But do they speak English?". Indeed, some speak not much English, French or German, according to the colonizing nation they were living under. Although there is some progress, I think it is still an issue for the IAPT to be really international, open to the scholarly traditions and possibilities of all national and cultural contexts, willing to learn from one another. The danger of a new academic colonization by the Western hemisphere is not fully over yet.

At the end of our days together in Princeton: the IAPT was born: an Academy, no less.