

# Statement on Higher Education, Christian Identity, and Public Impact in Latin America

From December 1–3, 2020, nearly 100 participants from over 20 countries gathered virtually for the Red Internacional de Educación Superior Cristiana (RIESC) conference titled “Educación superior, identidad cristiana e incidencia pública en América Latina” (“Higher Education, Christian Identity, and Public Impact in Latin America”). It was held as part of the celebrations surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana (FTL, Latin American Theological Fellowship). The conference was cosponsored by RIESC, the FTL, and the Comunidad de Estudios Teológicos Interdisciplinarios (CETI, the Community of Interdisciplinary Theological Studies). The participants joined the online conference primarily from Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean, though some were from the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Australia. This statement is a collaborative outgrowth of the primary presentations from that conference.

The goal of this conference was to evaluate the connections over the past few decades between theological reflection

and production and the realm of higher education and its concrete impact within Latin American society. This evaluation was specifically focused on the role of the *universitas christiana* both in society and in the church of which it is an organic part. The *universitas christiana's* relevance and impact were analyzed according to its three primary functions (teaching, research, and extension programs) in light of the urgent problems in Latin America today.

## The Latin American University and Its Context

Latin American universities are in large part a product of the reality and contradictions of the region. They reflect the region's potential and possibilities in terms of resources and institutional processes as well as the context of underdevelopment, dependence, growing inequalities, and other social crises worsened by the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the

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catastrophic effects of global warming. As the guiding and chief educational entity for national development, the university walks a delicate line between exercising a progressive and renewing influence, or reinforcing the status quo.

Similarly, Protestant universities in Latin America reflect the Latin American context, yet also their Protestant culture and experiences. They are produced from the mixture of these realities and contradictions. In the majority of Latin American nations, Protestantism remains a minority faith, and

Protestant universities certainly reflect this condition. Most are much smaller than and have been in existence much less time than the region's Catholic and public or private secular universities. As such, they are not in a position to compete with their

well-established counterparts. With hope and a firm grasp on the strengths of their heritage, Protestant universities in Latin America must work to overcome the limitations of both their Latin American and Protestant contexts.

## Christian Identity

### *Clarifications*

We understand the identity of “Christian university” to extend beyond organizations whose origins and formal, legal status is related to the Christian church. It also encompasses all Christians—students, teachers, and administrative personnel—who find themselves in secular higher education settings.

Regarding those institutions that specifically identify as Christian, we consider that their Christian identity is emphasized not only in their doctrinal declarations or statements of faith but also, and more importantly, in how the values of God’s kingdom are lived out in their activities. Recognizing the dialectic that exists between an institution’s nature and its mission in the context of action, Christian universities must constantly evaluate themselves through ongoing processes of internal renovation: *universitas reformata et semper reformanda est*.

At the same time, universities that espouse the Christian faith must strive to connect all disciplines with theological reflection. Since theology transverses all fields, Christian universities must integrate theological reflection across the curriculum spectrum. This must be undertaken without qualms or hesitation in all processes and activities related to teaching, curriculum decisions, research, and extension programs for community engagement.

### ***Identity and Belonging in the Protestant Evangelical Context***

Given the diversity among evangelical Protestants, Protestant Christian universities must recognize that theological formation must be intersectional as well as interdisciplinary and intercultural, and they must learn to participate in spaces of pluralist dialogue. We can and should maintain dialogue with social movements, civil-society organizations, diverse universities and research outlets, and political circles in order to contribute appropriately from our evangelical specificity to the plurality of knowledge and solutions for our region's problems. For us, theology must mean learning to reflect on a faith that inhabits the world in which we are incarnated and of which the Holy Spirit invites us to be a part and to influence with authentically gospel-based transformation.

### ***Protestant and Catholic Distinctives in Latin American Christian Higher Education (CHE)***

Simultaneous with pluralist dialogue, we must maintain clarity regarding the unfolding Christian mission in the world and the specific role that Christian higher education (CHE) plays in it. For CHE in Latin America, this role is played in a context of predominantly Catholic influence. We Protestant evangelicals must develop an integrated, historical awareness of the presence and spread of Christianity in the region. This will help us take appropriate actions in the present and future as we seek to impact society from a transformational, humble, and consistent Christian posture.

Without overlooking the real differences between Protestant and Catholic Christians, we recognize that there is much room for working together toward societal transformation. Protestants have much to learn from the experiences of

the Catholic sector given the longevity of their institutions in the continent.

## The Impact of CHE in Latin American Reality

### *Worldview as the Starting Point*

The foundation for Christian higher education is a worldview that recognizes that the world is good; that God is active in the world; that the divine presence is here. The Holy Spirit at work among us is the same Spirit active at the creation of the world. When we go out in mission or work in any field, God is already there, waiting for us. As we encounter other people, other disciplines, other cultures, and other religions, we see God's common grace at work. We are one humble part of God's great work among the plurality and differences in this world. This is the foundation for our studies in every sphere of the world, whether human or social sciences, the arts, natural sciences, geography, medicine, engineering, philosophy, agronomy, etc. A simple summary of this posture is, "Our world belongs to God."

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A second tenet of our worldview is that human beings are created in God's image to act as the caretakers and administrators of this planet. The third tenet flows from this: in solidarity, we form communities of mutual help for ourselves and in support of others for the greater good of all. The fourth tenet of our worldview recognizes that the holistic well-being of humans encompasses multiform healthy relationships: with God, with our neighbors, with our communities, and with our own selves. This reflects the robust Hebrew concept of *shalom*.

### ***The Priority of Engaging with the Church Itself***

We underscore the important role that the Christian university should have in guiding the church regarding its impact on society and in training congregations—especially young people—and church leadership to work for the renewal of the social fabric of their surroundings. A natural outcome of the church maturing and developing is the improved development of society in general.

Given the diversity of the Protestant sector that is reflected in its educational institutions, cooperation among the various universities, whether tied to a particular denomination or not, is crucial. As the Qonakuy platform emphasizes, each should “bring its best to interact with the best that others offer.”

### ***Christian University Student Action***

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Speaking generally, Protestant evangelical university students in Latin America take initiative with and feel responsible for mission in the university, mainly expressed through evangelism, discipleship, and service. The theoretical framework for their missional activity is based on the foundational concepts of *misión integral* (integral or holistic mission) and the kingdom of God; as well as on the rich historical heritage of church contributions and commitment to social transformation. The students’ work as missional agents within the university is characterized by an awareness of their social context and the belief that every human need is an opportunity for Christian service. Recognizing that most Protestant Christian students are in secular university settings, they seek to live out an incarnational, holistic, and intellectually credible Christian witness.

### *The Primary Activities of Universities*

Latin American Protestant institutions of CHE are responsible for rigorously engaging the currents of contemporary thought that are influencing the social, cultural, and development processes of the region. These include the paradigms of interculturality and decoloniality, the dialogue of ways of knowing and epistemologies of the Global South; complex thought and interdisciplinarity; diversity, ecology, and sustainable development; the revindication of femininity in social processes; etc. What is needed is a new university culture that is clearly dedicated to living out a humanist ethic and is clearly committed to social transformation. University culture must disavow the patriarchy embedded in all dynamics of society and culture and offer alternatives to it, beginning by recognizing the equal status of women in academic life.

Latin American universities, whether faith-based or secular, are responsible for fulfilling the conditions that allow them to respond to the challenges of contemporary society from a place of academic excellence. Each institution's duty is to improve its performance at every level and in response to urgent challenges. This implies decisive action in relation to its primary functions of teaching, research, and extension—bolstered, naturally, by excellence in administration. Meanwhile, universities are likewise responsible for developing the civil conscience of students, teachers, and administrative staff.

Regarding the primary task of teaching, universities need to abandon their linear categories and “banking” paradigms in favor of holistic formation that integrates the multiple fields of knowledge through practices that are multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary. Such an epistemological perspective does not eliminate the uniqueness of each specialty but rather fosters

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integrating perspectives within the disciplines. Symbiosis between disciplines can generate new fields of research and professional practice.

Regarding the primary task of research, universities must be uncompromisingly committed to the great social and developmental needs and problems of our nations. Research and implementation must contribute to the generation of new ethical, economic, and social realities in communities, regions, and specific sectors within Latin America. To support the processes of research, Protestant universities must undertake the enormous effort of recording, classifying, and documenting the work already occurring all over the continent. This will allow the breadth of their contributions to the international research community to be accessed, utilized, and appreciated.

Regarding the primary task of university extension programs, universities need to better understand the purpose, importance, and reach of these efforts at community engagement. Extension makes the university relevant to its surrounding community as the educational institution develops effective answers for the community's concrete needs. These answers are created and cocreated as teachers, students, social entities, and community members work together to generate knowledge. Extension is the privileged space of student and professor social action and is the crucial point of contact between the university and the community. In putting the capabilities of the university at the disposal of the community to generate projects with transformative impact, extension programs must prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable sectors, including the natural world.

To fulfill its primary tasks with excellence, every university can benefit from interuniversity cooperation. These bridges of mutual support can span local and international distances as well as creedal and secular divides. Protestant,



Catholic, denominational, interdenominational, secular, public, and private universities can all benefit from sharing spaces and experiences and establishing cooperative networks with each other. This cooperation should also extend to other regional and international development organizations, whether faith-based or not. Such interuniversity and interinstitutional cooperation strengthens the sense of meaning and the projects that flow out of the foundational principles and commitments of the world of higher education.

### ***Urgent Changes in the Field of Economics***

Given its structural, systemic, and all-encompassing nature, as well as how it impacts every social and cultural dynamic, changing the reigning economic system in the world must be at the heart of all CHE endeavors toward societal transformation. In all of its primary functions and their outworking, the university must emit a clear ethical judgement against the current system and contribute to theoretical and practical systemic alternatives. These alternatives from institutions of CHE must bring the values of God's kingdom to bear on reality: justice, equity, and solidarity. We lament how economics departments in Protestant universities blindly accept, teach, sacralize, and spread economic liberalism despite the fact that there are robust resources for economic alternatives in line with biblical values. Some of these alternative initiatives include social and solidarity economics, circular economics, feminist or women's economics, the economics of care, and assuming local and global actions at the same time. In varying degrees, these models apply the biblical image for the church as an interdependent body of diverse members functioning in solidarity to the whole of society.

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In this sense, for the primary and supporting activities of universities, a central tenet of their commitment to social transformation must be a commitment to the eradication of poverty and inequality and to confronting the globe's current ecological and climate problems. Toward that end, the network of Christian universities must be committed at a minimum to supporting the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its seventeen sustainable development goals. This agenda represents a baseline worldwide consensus and invites all parties to multidisciplinary, pluricultural, and ecumenical action.

## **Conclusion**

We close this statement by lifting a prayer to the Creator of the universe for guidance and direction along paths of wisdom. May God's grace and providence lead as we serve Latin America's church and peoples through the sphere of higher education. We invoke the power and presence of the Most High as we prioritize close-knit cooperation between Christian institutions of education that we may respond effectively to the challenges in our region and thus bless our Latin American brothers and sisters. All glory to God alone.