

**EMBRACING THE PAST, ENVISIONING THE FUTURE:
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF TRANSITION**

In this time of world tension and ongoing conflict in Iraq we are acutely aware that many individuals, communities, and societies are in some form of transition. The violence that has marked the early years of the new millennium taps into the human religious imagination. Such times call for discerning hearts informed by good religious education.

The theme for the joint meeting of the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education *and* the Religious Education Association held this past November was *Embracing the Past, Envisioning the Future: Religious Education in an Age of Transition*. In the context of our present realities, we embraced the past 100 years of the study and practice of religious education and sought to identify and understand the significant transitions in the field and how these influence our engagement of the future.

The 2003 meeting provided a timely opportunity for assessment, visioning, and new commitment to the work of religious education. As we envisioned the future, we explored how the beginning of the new millennium marked by ready global communication and the migration of peoples, requires of us a new religious literacy. Many of us have as our heritage a predominantly Eurocentric understanding of our faith traditions. We were invited to become more conversant with religio-cultures at home and around the globe. Whereas in the past we sometimes minimized what was different among us, we were reminded that without an understanding of our differences we miss the truths that we have to offer to one another. We asked: What does it mean to be religiously literate today? How have the assumptions about the distinctiveness of religions changed since the beginning of the 20th century? What values or truths do our faith traditions have to offer for the good of all humanity? How do we as religious educators situate ourselves as we move into the third millennium?

Meeting in Chicago on November 7–8, this 2003 joint meeting of the APRRE and the REA was couched in a special time of transition. The year saw the 100th anniversary of the Religious Education Association and modern professional religious education. Even as we

ratified our plans for the joint reorganization of these two associations into one, *The Religious Education Association: An Association of Professors, Practitioners, and Researchers in Religious Education*, our deliberations fostered new conversation about how we view theory and practice in the various contexts of our work.

In my presidential address (included in this issue) I drew on recent personal cross-cultural experiences in Canada and East Africa. I spoke of the need to transcend the boundaries of latent ethnocentrism and racism, sexism and homophobia, educational and economic power, and Eurocentrism—both theological and linguistic. I also spoke of the need for us as professors and practitioners to break the culture of silence and to identify and speak to the issues of pain and suffering where we work and live.

The articles published in this issue were selected by peer review from among those presented at the November 2003 conference. Together they provide a purview of aspects of the genesis and history of the REA, identification of present challenges for religious education, and vision for the future.

John Elias's article, "Catholics in the REA: 1903–1953," provides a description of the somewhat rocky involvement of Roman Catholics in the Religious Education Association during the first 50 years of its existence. It is an important backdrop for a more informed and inclusive approach to contemporary relationships in the field of religious education.

Through her article, "Seeing What is Not There Yet: Sophia Fahs, Entelechy, and the Religious Education Association," Lucinda Nolan offers a theological biography of Sophia Lyons Fahs. Fahs' life and work not only unfolded during the first 70 years of the REA but were also inexorably linked to its founding vision and work through her study at the University of Chicago with William Rainey Harper, at Columbia University Teachers College with Frank Murray, a disciple of John Dewey, and at Union Theological Seminary with George Albert Coe. Having found her own voice in a synthesis of a progressive educational thought and liberal theology, Fahs went on to offer her own unique contribution to religious education through her work at The Union School of Religion and Union Theological Seminary. Nolan finds that Fahs "reflected many of the identity bearing modalities that continue to give shape and continuity to the organization [REA]."

In an article entitled "The Clue to Christian Religious Education: Uniting Theology and Education, 1950 to the Present" Jack Seymour asks "Indeed, what *is* Christian Education?" Focusing on articles

published in *Religious Education* during the last 50 years Seymour concludes, “that theology is the clue—a theology that is in partnership with education considering the power and insights of educational research, human development, and social analysis.” Further reflection on the questions of purpose, ecclesiology, and method lead Seymour to call for “the partnership of a theology of identity and a theology of a human coalition” as we move into the future.

In an essay arising from their panel presentation, “Realities, Visions and Promise of a Multicultural Future,” four young scholars, Boyung Lee, Katherine Turpin, Ralph Casas, Lynn Bridgers, and Veronice Miles with Mary Elizabeth Moore provide an overview and critique of REA’s recent educational work. This is followed by an explication and argument for: “engaging in post-colonial analysis, de-centering assumptions, searching for a story to claim, taking time and entering deep waters” as ways in which we may learn how to honor diversity.

Finally, in an article titled “From Individual to Corporate Praxis: A Systemic Re-Imagining of Religious Education,” Barbara Fleischer traces “historical underpinnings of religious education models that emphasize a corporate approach to praxis-oriented education” beginning with Dewey and Coe and leading into more recent work on “learning organizations.” Drawing on the notion of “systems thinking” that underlies the functioning of a “learning organization,” Fleischer proposes a model for Christian education that “weaves religious education into the fabric of communal pastoral planning and action.” Her goal is to promote an understanding of religious education as integral with other ministries forming the system that constitutes congregational life.

Together these articles provide us with a rich sense of our history and the wisdom of the past. They further encourage us to envision the “Realities, Visions and Promises of a Multicultural Future.”

Lorna M. A. Bowman, APRRE President