

NACFLA Presidential Address 2001

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In the spring of 1991, exactly 10 years ago, over 60 professors from 33 American and Canadian institutions met at Wheaton College for a conference. We read papers, back then, and, under the leadership of Claude-Marie Baldwin and Jacoba Koene, we decided to start an academic organization for Christians in foreign language teaching. We initially gave ourselves the long name of *North American Association of Christian Foreign Language and Literature Faculty*, with an even more cumbersome acronym *NAACFLLF* (since shortened to the present title, NACFLA). I still clearly remember the rainy Thursday night when the late Wahneta Mullen, a dear colleague from the Wheaton French department, welcomed the participants graciously into her home.

For many of us, this meeting was a joyful reunion, because the preceding year, in January 1990, we had attended a weeklong academic development seminar for foreign language educators teaching at Christian colleges. The seminar was sponsored by the CCCU, the *Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities* (more recently renamed the *Council of Christian Colleges and Universities*). It was at a time when a decided shift took place in the North American Christian College movement. The new call was for more explicit and self-conscious teaching of all subjects from a Christian faith perspective—foreign languages included. Many of us had to write, maybe for the first time, in-depth statements on the “integration of faith and learning” in our field, and we all felt that the old clichés wouldn’t do any longer. Hence, the interest in the workshop was high and the topic was a timely one.

Already in the mid-eighties, I suggested to Karen Longman, who was at that time responsible for the academic development of CCCU faculty, the need for a seminar in foreign language education. In 1987, a phone call from the CCCU office reached me in Germany, where I had just begun a sabbatical leave, saying that the Murdock Foundation wanted to finance a faculty development seminar for Christian foreign language professors. I was elated about the good news, but also in shock, because the CCCU had appointed me to organize and teach the seminar.

I was to hire one or two Christian experts as workshop presenters. But who were the authorities in our field who could guide and inspire us, who had thought deeply about issues of Christian integration in foreign language education? I did not know of any such persons. And to make matters worse, no substantial literature existed on the topic. Yet, by God's grace, I was able to enlist the retired Earl Stevick, one of the great linguists and experts on language learning theory in the sixties and seventies, to come to Florida for our seminar session. Someone had told me that he was a believing Christian.

Earl Stevick was a Godsend, a wise and kind Christian man at the end of a very creative and productive career. During that week in Florida he taught us an ethos of language teaching marked by love, wisdom, patience, and gentleness. But on the theoretical side, Stevick could not help us break new ground. I still recall the evening when he told me what a precious gift it was for him to be among Christian foreign language teachers interested in deeper, foundational questions of faith-learning integration, but that he regretted not having had such questions put before him earlier in his academic career. And now, at an advanced age and in frail health, the challenge just came too late. But he encouraged the others and me to go boldly forward with this important project.

Yes, we were blessed by Earl Stevick during this historic week in sunny and balmy West Palm Beach, Florida. All 20 of us were filled with energy, enthusiasm, and vision, and at the end of this momentous week, we decided to meet again at Wheaton College and perhaps even organize as a learned society.

Without the administrative genius and organizational experience of Claude-Marie Baldwin from Calvin's French department, who was one of the seminar's participants, our organization would not have taken shape as quickly and well as it actually did. Other Christian academic organizations have been much more cautious and have met for years and years be-

fore organizing officially.¹

Compared to other young Christian academic organizations, we left the starting block early and with enormous momentum. We have run fast and far and God has blessed us greatly. At eleven conferences we have presented exactly 337 papers;² we have published conference proceedings; we have a list serve; we have a website; and, since last year, we have a refereed journal, all of which, when taken together, is an astounding accomplishment, particularly in view of the fact that we are an organization with only about 100 plus active members from 40 – 50 different colleges. We have grown into a warm and supportive family of colleagues from very different Christian traditions and denominations, which normally do not have any contact with each other. Our yearly conferences are a source of inspiration and encouragement to respond faithfully to our common call as foreign language educators at Christian colleges. We have discussed and shared ideas and insights into the practical aspects of language teaching, into presenting culture from a Christian perspective and into reading and interpreting literature with Christian eyes and hearts. We have been blessed by such an academic, social, and spiritual fellowship. NACFLA meetings helped many of us in our academic development: they focused our scholarship, perhaps changed our pedagogy, and certainly sharpened our Christian sensitivities as foreign language teachers.

For my own professional growth and development—and I believe I can speak also for David Smith—NACFLA was immensely significant as a testing ground for the major ideas and themes that went into our book, *The Gift of the Stranger*.³ Sometimes, when I suffered from writer's cramp, doubting if anyone would ever want to read what I was trying to say, I thought of you, my NACFLA colleagues, which gave me courage to go on. Frankly, without the West Palm Beach Seminar and NACFLA, our book would not have been written. So, thank you my friends.

Through the last decade, many people have put countless hours, energy, love, and ingenuity into helping this NACFLA plant grow. Gratitude goes to colleagues present and absent who served the organization in different roles, who organized and hosted the conferences, who wrote newsletters, published proceedings, served as committee members, chairs, presidents, treasurers, secretaries, program chairs, editor, or webmaster—all this without ever having been granted released time by their respective administrations. And naturally, I am very grateful and appreciative for you who have been attending our conferences faithfully over the years, who have

given thoughtful papers, and shared your professional wisdom, faith, and experience as language teachers. Without you, we simply would not exist. So, thank you, my friends.

We can be proud of what has been achieved so far, and it is right and fitting for us to thank God for NACFLA, this precious and dear gift to us all. It is also right and fitting, at the end of my tenure as president, for me to make a few observations and suggestions and to share my vision of NACFLA for the next decades. I want to concentrate on two issues: membership and scholarship.

It is obvious that NACFLA is entering a new stage in its development. I believe that the founding years, in which we have grown very fast, are now over. We need to pause and reflect. We need to shift gears. If we continue just as we are, I dare say we will stretch ourselves too thin, and we risk becoming a small comfortable coterie of Christians talking to each other and thus contributing to a *ghettoization* of Christian scholarship.

Our membership base is small. Some of the founding mothers and fathers who have carried the organization will soon retire or have already retired. It seems to me – allow me to use this somewhat simplistic image – that we are at a point in our evolution and growth where we need more potting soil and a bigger pot, good compost and faithful watering, loving, thoughtful care with the right exposure to the light. These ingredients are needed if our NACFLA plant is to grow, thrive, bloom, and bear more fruit.

Fortunately, to increase our membership base, i.e. to increase the size of the pot and the volume of potting soil, should not be difficult. Almost all of the present NACFLA members come from CCCU colleges—that is to say, from one hundred or so Christian institutions representing many traditions in the conservative spectrum of North American Protestantism. I estimate that only a third of the foreign language faculty in CCCU colleges are bona fide members of NACFLA. My hunch is that there are potentially two hundred additional members in CCCU institutions out there. We have not made an organized effort to invite them to join us. I suggest, therefore, a major membership campaign during the coming years, and I trust we can count on your cooperation. Please think also of the next generation: tell your graduates about us who are pursuing advanced degrees, and encourage them to join NACFLA already as graduate students so that they will become full members when they assume teaching positions.

I believe, however, that our membership shouldn't just come from the network of the CCCU. A month ago, a reviewer of the *Gift of the Stranger*

called David Smith and me, thanking us for our contribution to Christian foreign language education. It was a colleague from one of the Concordia Colleges who had written the review for an established Lutheran educational journal. I was grateful, thinking that it would be splendid if professors from Lutheran Colleges came to the NACFLA conferences, or if some Catholic colleagues would want to join us, so that together we could be busy with the project of developing a Christian mind in our discipline. I hope our major membership campaign will reach out to institutions outside CCCU circles.

Naturally, not all Christian FL professors will be drawn to us. Furthermore, it will be much harder to establish contact with the Spanish, French, and German faculty in secular universities who are devout Christians. For many believers working in secular academic settings, the talk of Christian perspectives in FL education does sound as odd and bizarre as it does to most of our secular colleagues. But, nevertheless, there are Christian colleagues in public universities who are interested in our work and who would like to belong to and contribute to an organization like ours. We need to find ways of contacting more of them.

And now a few comments on scholarship. I am always delighted and proud when I think of how much talent, creativity, scholarly intelligence, and Christian wisdom we have among us. As I mentioned earlier, NACFLA members have already read 337 papers—panel discussions not included. A very impressive accomplishment indeed. Naturally, not all papers were of publishable quality—that would be an unrealistic expectation and against the spirit of our conference. However, rarely, in the past ten years, did we hear substandard papers. Nevertheless, I consider it vital and of utmost importance that we continue to model and uphold high standards and that we encourage each other to generate rigorous, quality Christian scholarship. Wouldn't it be regrettable if we were to think, "Unquestionably, the paper I'm about to give is not up to MLA standards, but for NACFLA it will do"? Surely, such an attitude would both grieve our Lord, who has given us this organization and hurt our cause.

In that regard, I propose for the future that we write our papers less in isolation before we read them at the conference, perhaps starting an "academic buddy" system, whereby presenters send a message on the NACFLA list serve such as, "I intend to write a paper about how to teach *Cajas de carton* from a Christian perspective" or "I'm writing on using poetry for teaching the subjunctive in German. Who wants to be a critical

reader of my paper before I present it?" I'd also like it if during the conference sessions we provided more time for honest and productive feedback by our peers. You see, I would like us to take more responsibility for one another's academic flourishing.

I am aware that we do not typically teach at research universities, with graduate programs where we could steer graduate students to write dissertations in our field, or where we undertake big research projects ourselves. Almost all of us come from four-year colleges, and many of us work in small departments with a heavy teaching load. Due to the nature of our job, most foreign language professors, I dare say, are generalists and see themselves as teachers first and scholars second. We all know how hard it is in our context to pursue a rigorous schedule of research, especially if our institution does not have the financial means to grant release time for scholarship. Given limited time and resources, some of us will be more motivated and productive if we undertake projects as a team. What we cannot do alone, we might accomplish together as a body of Christian scholars.

But what about the very content and direction of our Christian scholarship?

So far an intuitive awareness, shaped by our own particular religious traditions, has guided each of us in our understanding of what a Christian perspective is or entails. We don't seem to have unanimity in this matter, nor, in my opinion, should we strive for conformity in thinking about these issues. This is not what worries me. But what I am concerned about is a certain lack of unity of vision and purpose.

When I think about the 337 papers given, what comes to my mind is the image of brave pioneer folk who ventured out boldly, pitched their tents, built their little individual huts, every one to his or her own specification, just as they needed or wanted them, some here, some there, all over the place, a great, colorful, interestingly scattered settlement with the tendency toward urban sprawl. For example, we have 79 papers on ways of teaching language in the Christian college classroom. But we have no idea what these papers have in common, or what they accomplished or contributed to the larger scheme of things. The person who writes the 80th paper on the subject is unlikely to build on anything already produced, and thus has to start from scratch, thus perpetuating the individualistic research mentality so rampant in North American humanities.

It seems to me that we have come to a point where we need some city planners, with a settlement and development vision to survey the land,

take stock, cluster the huts into bigger buildings, solidify shaky foundations, raise some barns, build a schoolhouse, develop parks, and join hands and hearts in projects for the public good. In other words, we need scholars able to synthesize what we have accomplished so far and able to help us set an overall research agenda. This kind of inquiry would give each one of us a good sense of what needs to be done in the field of Christian foreign language education, and where we can contribute with our talents, gifts, resources, and sabbatical leaves.

I wish to finish my comments with my picture of NACFLA's future.

- I see NACFLA ever more fully becoming a birthplace for solid, rigorous, playful, curious, creative, and shalom-bringing scholarship that breaks new ground and re-vision our discipline.
- I see us receiving major funding for some of longer-term team projects, such as the writing of curricular materials, in-depth textbook analysis, or the development of electronic resources for the Christian foreign language teacher in cultural or literary studies.
- I see the fruits of our work transforming our classroom pedagogy and curriculum.
- I see our work to be engaging, life-bringing, and helpful to the wider Christian academic community and also to people outside Christian academia in North America. I see the *Journal for Christianity and Foreign Languages* playing an important role in this context with high quality articles.
- I see us becoming an important resource for Christian foreign language teachers in many countries all over the globe, especially in those areas where the need for Christian direction is greatest, such as in the former East block countries.
- I see the members of NACFLA developing and cultivating a greater sense of ownership of their organization. I see everyone eager to promote NACFLA and the journal, even donating a gift subscription of JCFL to their alma mater!
- Finally, I see the membership doubling in three years, tripling in five years.

We need to ask God's gracious help for NACFLA. We will bear fruit as an organization if our professional lives are fed by a deep, thriving faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, dear colleagues, let us be of good cheer, eager to work together for a great cause and confident that, if we stay faithful, the Lord will bless us.

Thank you, my friends.

NOTES

¹ For instance, it took the mathematicians twelve years to start the ACMS the *Association of Christians in Mathematical Science* and after eleven annual conferences, each with about 40 participants, our colleagues in Physical Education, are still not ready to start their own organization.

² The 2001 NACFLA conference at Wheaton College is included in this count.

³ Smith, David I. and Carvill, Barbara. *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Education*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2000.