



Bridging Gaps

*A Dialogue between theologians from
The Netherlands, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern
Europe*

A project of the Faculty of Theology of the VU University
Amsterdam and the Protestant Theological University
sponsored by 'Kerkinactie' (Protestant Church in The
Netherlands), vCAS and several theological seminaries.

Meeting new worlds in Amsterdam

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September 2016

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Have you ever wondered...

what the influence of culture and context on theology is, and vice versa? What it's like to have the chance to pursue your academic subject of interest in a new and stimulating environment? ... to study in the heart of Europe? ... to live and learn with other theologians from totally different cultures? ... to step back and take a critical look at your own culture? ... to discover Amsterdam together? Maybe Bridging Gaps is the project for you!

Bridging Gaps

Every year, in September, October and November, a number of students from abroad study for three months at the Theological Faculty of VU University Amsterdam. The main focus of *Bridging Gaps* is to offer these students the opportunity to further deepen a part of their theological studies in The Netherlands, without the burden of a 'regular' Western academic curriculum. Students are offered a scholarship which covers travel and living expenses. Scholarships are mainly provided by Kerkinactie and a fund from VU University.

Students are supervised by academic professors and are exposed to Dutch ecclesiastical and social reality. Although the academic side of their stay has priority, all students also participate in church activities and – through lectures and preaching – share stories about their life back home.

Bridging Gaps consists of the following four central components:

1. Personal research done under the guidance of an academic professor.
2. Intercultural exchange and lectures. This exchange consists of: classes, exposure and group dynamics.
3. An introduction to and exchange with Dutch churches.
4. Exposure to Dutch society, culture and church life.

Contextual Theology is the basis of the *Bridging Gaps* project. The research of all students had to be relevant to their own context.

Background of the project:

Since 1980 the Faculty of Theology of the VU University Amsterdam has maintained valuable contacts with many theological institutions throughout the southern hemisphere and Europe. What started hesitantly as a dialogue with liberation theologians and an exchange of students, has evolved into the Centre for Contextual Bible Reading..

Bridging Gaps is one of the activities of this centre.

In the *Bridging Gaps* program students from the southern hemisphere and Eastern Europe can come to VU University for a period of study and research. They receive personal supervision and comfortable housing. This meeting of the minds between theologians from Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe has produced some fascinating discussions. Time and again it has become clear how important it is to look beyond local boundaries and local theology. It cannot be denied that discussions with people 'from another world' offer much insight.

By now we have had the privilege to offer hospitality and guidance to a large number of students from different countries of origin. We happily share some of their experiences in their own words.

Foreign students speak ...

'It is a great joy for me to be a part of this bridging gaps program because we could learn about other's faiths, cultures and contexts. It really broadens my thoughts and worldviews in my theological journey. I am motivated to be a global person in a global age through sharing our differences and contextual reading of the texts.'

Than Sang Awi, Myanmar, (BG 2012)

'After we studied very hard, there was an opportunity of visiting some sites such as Utrecht museums and the Dome Church which was destroyed by a storm hundred years ago, historical areas of Amsterdam central station were some of the most significant areas. Moreover, we have visited historical sites such as the Protestantse Diaconie Amsterdam (the place where the poor work and eat, the addicted persons helped and counseled, street persons met and served and so on), Jewish historical Museum, where the oldest Bibles and other manuscripts are found, Jewish Synagogue, Kerk in Actie, Bijbels Museum, the churches of Catholic and Protestant joined together and where the poor are being fed and helped and finally, we have visited the tourist site at Zaanse Schans.'

Teku Kebede Ashame, Ethiopia (BG 2012)

'It has been a privilege to do research in a well-resourced environment. Although the system initially was new and frustrating, once it became more familiar it really worked well for me. It was a blessing to be able to find material that is not necessarily available in my home institute.'

Dawid Mouton, South Africa (BG 2012)

'From the first day of my arrival, when dr. Hans de Wit and Maria Berends met me at the airport, all through the program and to its last days, I have had the most wonderful combination of intensive and effective individual research, stimulating class discussions, unforgettable church visits, and an amazingly enjoyable fellowship and friendship with my colleagues from the Bridging Gaps 2003.' *Corneliu Constantineanu, Evangelical Theological Seminary Osijek Croatië, member Pentecostal Church Romania (BG 2003)*

With whom do we co-operate?

Over the years, strong bonds have been forged with a great number of seminaries and institutes. In Latin America, this entails all major seminaries and faculties. Within Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe we have contacts with many institutes and seminaries.

All Theological Students are encouraged to apply, even if you are not sure about official bonds with the Bridging Gaps program.

Your stay in The Netherlands

Study activities

During your stay, your main activity will be to work on your research. You will meet regularly with your supervisor and at the end of your stay you will be expected to present a final paper. Besides this paper you will be asked to write an evaluation of your time in The Netherlands.

During the first seven weeks you will join classes '*Class and Context*'. '*Class and Context*' consists of a series of seven lectures held once a week starting in the first week of September. These lectures are given by drs. Willemien van Berkum and focus mainly on the contexts of the participating students and questions arising from these contexts. The classes start with a presentation by the students, detailing their own cultural and religious context. During the classes there are opportunities for discussion and exchange of personal experiences. Students are expected to prepare presentations for these classes. The Bridging Gaps students will also participate in classes from PThU and VU University. For these classes the students have to read the mandatory literature.

Place of residence

Your place of residence will be the StudentHotel. A tram and metro stop is located nearby (metro/tram stop Jan van Galenstraat).

Foreign students and lecturers of various departments stay at the StudentHotel. The rooms are completely furnished, including blankets and sheets. They also contain a private bathroom. The Kitchen is shared with several other people. The rooms are available from September 1st until November 30th. The StudentHotel is situated less than 30 minutes from the city centre of Amsterdam, the cultural heart of the region. Here, you can find music of every genre and from every continent, ranging from local street musicians to the international performers who play in the Concertgebouw (municipal concert hall). Then there are the many museums and splendid libraries, magnificent theatres and cinemas playing movies from all over the world. And of course there is the international cuisine found in the many restaurants throughout the city. The city centre is a perfectly safe place, even during evenings for walking and admiring the historical architecture and, weather permitting, lounging on one of the numerous street cafes.

Use of library and computers at the faculty

At the faculty you will get an access-card to use the extensive library of VU University Amsterdam. All computers have unlimited internet access. Information about the library can be found at our website: www.godgeleerdheid.vu.nl/en/students/library/index.asp

Visa

For most of the participants it is necessary to obtain visa. Information about obtaining visa can be found on the website: <http://www.minbuza.nl/en/services/consular-services/visa>

Financial support

If selected, you will receive a scholarship. This scholarship will cover all expenditure for flight, accommodation, study, as well as those for board and lodging. Also the excursions will be paid for. You will get an allowance to pay for your living expenses. From this allowance you will also have to pay for your own travelling costs.

Insurance

The Bridging Gaps Program will provide an insurance for the period of your stay in the Netherlands and during your travels. This will cover health, life, accidents etc. This insurance will be covered by the scholarship.

Excursions

Every year we make a few excursions, the costs of which are covered by the Bridging Gaps Program. Every year the excursions will be slightly different. A few examples from the excursions of past years:

1. An excursion through historical Amsterdam with Roman Catholic priest Padre Theo. 'De Wallen' (The world famous Red Light district) are his pastoral ground. His inspiring guided made the history of the city come alive. Besides the 'Wallen' he showed us many other noteworthy areas of old Amsterdam. We visited the Jewish Quarter, the old slave traders houses and view a number of churches. After this intriguing and extended walk ended the day on a festive note in one of the many restaurants of Amsterdam.
2. Excursion to Utrecht. In Utrecht we visited the Centre for Global Ministries of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands. Students were able to meet the representatives of the desks responsible for their own continent. At the end of the day there was a visit to the beautiful city-centre of Utrecht.
3. Visit to the drugpastorate, streetpastor and other social projects. These visits showed the students some places where diaconal work is done for people who live in the margins in Amsterdam centre (drugaddicts, homeless, migrants, illegals).
4. Visit to religious or cultural musea. For example: the students were able to visit the Jewish Historical Museum and had a tour through the Jewish Quarter. Or the students can visit the 'Tropenmuseum', where they will learn about the Colonial past of the Netherlands.

Church participation

Every student will be asked to participate in church services. A number of weekends will be spent at a church community somewhere in The Netherlands (students will visit in pairs).

Some churches will ask participants to participate in a service by praying, preaching or by telling about their own background. During your three month stay you will pay approximately two to four visits to different (protestant) churches.

Application procedure

All partner institutions receive a letter of invitation in September, asking them to nominate students suited for participation in this project. Along with this letter of invitation they also receive brochures to announce the project to their students. The deadline for application is December 31st.

In February the Selection Committee for the Bridging Gaps program assembles to make a selection of the applicants. The committee consists of at least a professor of the faculty of Theology of VU University, a professor of the Protestant Theological University and a delegation of Kerk in Actie. Every year, the number of applications is greater than the number of scholarships. This unfortunately makes selection necessary. The selection is made partly on the merit of a research proposal submitted by the student. This proposal must be relevant to the local situation of the applicant and the VU University (or one of its sister faculties in The Netherlands) must have adequate expertise to make the stay worthwhile.

In March the selection procedure will come to an end and VU University will announce the selected students. At that moment the procedure to obtain visa must be initiated. Selected students will maintain close contact with the contact person of the Bridging Gaps program

Requirements to apply

- The student will use the 'format proposal Bridging Gaps' to submit a research proposal and all personal details.
- The research proposal is to be approved by the student's local seminary as well as by the student's supervising tutor.
- The research proposal has to be relevant to the student's own context.
- In addition to this the Bridging Gaps program requires a testimonial from an authorised institute or a teacher concerning your command of the English language. It is considered essential for application that you have a good command of English. Therefore you may be asked to take the TOEFL-test (short for: Test of English as a Foreign Language).

Applicant Profile

You are a theology student in at least your third or fourth year of bachelor study. Ideally, you have already obtained a first degree, and are now specialising. The three-month stay would make an important contribution to a specific study project or a MA thesis. You are not older than 40 years old.

Criteria according to which the applicants are selected

- Consistency, originality, contextuality and thoroughness of the research proposal.
- Economic, social and cultural situation (precedence is given to students from underprivileged circumstances)
- International experience of the applicant (less experience being better than more).
- Your academic situation
- Your academic specialisation. The committee will ensure that the number of applicants is distributed evenly over the teachers at the Faculty of Theology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
- Availability of the eligible university teachers at the VU.
- Potential contribution of the VU to your field of research.
- Even geographical distribution (i.e. not all students can come from one particular country or region).
- Even distribution between male and female students.

- Your religious background (Preference is given to those who have a strong relationship with their local and/or national church)

Documents to be submitted with the application

You are expected to submit the following documents:

- The format which is sent to you with this brochure. This format contains your curriculum vitae and your research proposal.
- A testimonial from an authorised institute concerning your sufficient command of English.
- A testimonial from a teacher, dean or other authorised academic institute concerning your academic ability and the study project in The Netherlands.
- The signed declaration of intent (included in the letter of invitation).

Address

Applications should be sent to the following address, which can also be used to obtain further information. You can send your application by email.

Gijsbert Steenbeek (secretary to the Bridging Gaps program)

Emailadres: g.a.steenbeek@student.vu.nl

Telefoonnummer: +31 (0)6 23 70 34 55