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The Art of Empowerment in Religious Education: Report on the EFTRE 2025 Conference in Budapest [21–24 August 2025, Budapest]

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The 16th conference of the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE) convened 60 participants from 20 European countries under the theme “*The Art of Empowerment in Religious Education*.” This gathering, hosted at the Lutheran Theological University in Budapest, invited religious educators, researchers, and policymakers to explore how empowerment can lift up teachers and learners in a time of societal upheaval. The conference theme emphasized four interrelated facets—*community, complexity, compassion, and commitment*—as keys to empowering Religious Education (RE). Against the backdrop of ongoing transitions and crises in Europe, participants reflected on urgent questions: *What does the “art of empowerment” consist of? Is it a hard or soft power? How can empowerment create community for learning amidst complexity?* These questions framed four days of keynotes, collaborative workshops, site visits, and dialogues aimed at equipping RE professionals with renewed inspiration and practical strategies.

Day 1: Thursday, 21 August 2025 – Opening and Keynote Address

The conference opened on Thursday afternoon with registration and a warm welcome session that included an innovative “speed-dating” icebreaker for attendees to quickly connect with new colleagues. Dr. Eszter Kodácsy-Simon (Lutheran Theological University, Budapest) then set the tone with the first keynote, titled “*Questioning Empowerment, Empowering Questions: Existential Challenges for Religious Education*.” In her thought-provoking address, Kodácsy-Simon explored how educators might critically interrogate the notion of empowerment itself, while also modeling how empowering pedagogical questions can address students’ existential needs. Emphasizing themes of dialogue, resilience, and hope in the RE classroom, her keynote highlighted the importance of taking children’s and youths’ existential questions seriously and integrating them into clear learning processes. This focus on existential themes—connecting to learners’ search for meaning and identity—resonated strongly with participants. Following a short break, the afternoon continued with the first set of parallel workshop sessions (75 minutes each) drawn from an open

call for contributions. Teachers and researchers led hands-on workshops on practical topics ranging from “*Circling Around Identity*” to “*Empowerment of Teachers: Creating Space for Collaborative Learning*.” These workshops offered interactive methods and new didactic approaches that participants could bring back to their classrooms. The day concluded with an informal welcome supper in the campus gardens, allowing delegates to socialize and reflect on the ideas sparked during the opening sessions.

Day 2: Friday, 22 August 2025 – Comparative Perspectives and Cultural Immersion

Friday’s program began with a morning session titled “*What’s Up in RE?*”—a series of country presentations showcasing current developments in RE across Europe. In three parallel panels, educators from different nations offered concise 10–15-minute reports on topics relevant to the conference theme. For example, one session compared recent RE curriculum reforms in Finland and Northern Ireland, highlighting efforts to balance secular and faith perspectives in national frameworks. Another session examined challenges of providing RE for religious minorities in countries like Romania and Bulgaria, shedding light on how smaller faith communities’ educational needs are being addressed. Each pair of country case studies was followed by a lively plenary discussion, giving participants a chance to compare approaches and reflect on shared challenges and innovations in RE across contexts. These collegial exchanges fulfilled EFTRE’s aim of learning from firsthand insights into national developments, linking local challenges to broader European trends.

After a networking break, the second major keynote address was delivered by Dr. Arniika Kuusisto (University of Stockholm). Her lecture, “*Child in Time: Supporting Children and Youth in Worldview Construction and Existential Resilience*,” examined how RE can foster young people’s resilience in constructing their worldviews. Kuusisto drew on developmental and educational research to discuss practical ways teachers can nurture students’ sense of meaning, identity, and hope amid an increasingly complex and individualistic era. This keynote reinforced the conference’s empowerment theme by focusing on accompanying the young in their search for orientation and compassion, thereby building their capacity to cope with personal and societal challenges. Participants noted that her insights on existential resilience and holistic support for youth were especially timely as educators seek to address rising anxiety and fragmentation among students.

Following a midday lunch, the conference turned outward to engage with Budapest’s rich religious and cultural heritage. Participants divided into small groups for site visits (each led by local guides) to explore the city’s historical tapestry of faith and memory. One group toured major places of worship in Budapest, including the monumental St. Stephen’s Basilica and landmark Lutheran and Reformed churches, tracing the story of Christianity in Hungary from its early martyrs through Reformation struggles. This walking tour also paused at the famous Dohány Street Synagogue—viewed from outside due to the Sabbath—to acknowledge the Jewish community’s past and present and the tragic impact of the 20th-century Holocaust on Hungarian Jewry. Another group visited the Ottoman Turkish heritage of the city, centered on the tomb

of Gül Baba—a 16th-century dervish saint—learning about the Islamic influence during Ottoman rule and how that legacy has been preserved and memorialized. A third contingent confronted the dark history of oppression at the House of Terror Museum, which documents the fascist and communist regimes in Hungary—a sobering but important reminder of the struggles for freedom and human dignity. A final tour ascended the historic Buda Castle Hill to visit the National Gallery and Matthias Church, using the city’s art and architecture as a springboard for discussing ways to integrate cultural heritage and remembrance into citizenship and RE. These immersive excursions not only enriched participants’ understanding of Budapest’s multi-religious past and present but also sparked dialogue on how encounters with history and diversity can empower students in their own contexts.

In the evening, all delegates reconvened for the official conference dinner—a scenic boat cruise along the Danube River. Dining against the backdrop of Budapest’s illuminated skyline, participants relaxed and deepened their bonds as a community of practice. Many described this dinner cruise as a highlight of the conference. The informal conversations and camaraderie on deck solidified connections across national borders, exemplifying EFTRE’s ethos of being “like a family” of RE educators rejoicing in being together. Indeed, by the close of Friday night, new friendships and plans for future collaboration were already taking shape, underlining how social moments contribute to professional empowerment as much as formal sessions do.

Day 3: Saturday, 23 August 2025 – Workshops, Collegial Counseling, and Assembly

Saturday’s agenda combined intensive professional exchange with reflective peer consultation. The morning once again opened with parallel “*What’s Up in RE?*” country presentation sessions, continuing the comparative exploration of RE developments. Topics on this second day ranged from structural questions of RE models (e.g., a presentation on Switzerland’s decentralized cantonal system versus recent curriculum changes in Sweden) to urgent issues of teaching in crisis contexts (for instance, how RE is adapting amid the war in Ukraine and fostering resilience for both teachers and students there). Another duo of talks examined students’ religious identity and participation in highly secular societies, drawing on longitudinal research in the Netherlands and other European settings. As on Friday, these sessions allowed participants to glean insights from different corners of Europe—from coping with conflict to navigating secularization—and to engage in comparative discussion about common challenges. By sharing these grassroots perspectives, the conference reinforced a sense of European solidarity and learning community among RE practitioners.

Late Saturday morning featured the third keynote of the conference. Dr. Fahimah Ulfat (University of Münster) spoke on “*Bridging Histories, Empowering Futures: Jewish–Muslim Relations in Religious Education.*” In this stirring address, Ulfat tackled the complexities of interreligious encounter and historical memory in the classroom. She illustrated how understanding the intertwined histories of Jewish and Muslim communities—including experiences of coexistence and conflict—can empower students to engage with religious diversity in a more informed and empathetic way.

Her talk encouraged educators to address controversial or painful historical issues (such as antisemitism and Islamophobia) through an age-appropriate, dialogical pedagogy that links past to present. By demonstrating approaches to “bridging histories,” Ulfat added a vital dimension to the conference’s empowerment theme: the idea that confronting historical injustices and fostering mutual understanding are themselves acts of empowerment for a new generation. The keynote’s message of hope through dialogue in complexity resonated deeply, given Europe’s current social tensions, and equipped participants with concrete ideas for interfaith learning activities.

After a lunch break, attention shifted to peer-led learning experiences. The early afternoon was devoted to the second round of parallel workshops, providing another 75-minute block for practical engagement. (The conference program featured two such workshop slots in total, each offering 4–7 options in parallel.) On Saturday, as on Thursday, delegates could choose a workshop aligning with their interests. The offerings spanned a rich variety of pedagogical themes. Some workshops focused on empowering *student voice and identity*—for instance, using values clarification exercises or “*multicultural student body*” board games to help young people navigate diversity with confidence. Others centered on empowering the educator: one session examined strategies for teacher resilience and creativity in a digital age, under the motto “those who are empowered can empower others.” There were also philosophically oriented workshops, such as “*Active Listening as Empowerment*,” which introduced techniques of deep listening and critical hermeneutics to transform classroom dialogue. In another, participants discussed virtue education as a means of strengthening human dignity, reflecting on how cultivating virtues like gratitude and justice in students can contribute to an empowered moral community. Across these diverse topics, the workshops maintained an interactive “hands-on” character—teachers exchanged experiences, tried out new methods, and considered how to apply these insights back home. The collegial atmosphere encouraged everyone to actively engage and fill their “suitcase” with practical ideas and materials for future use. By the end of the afternoon, many remarked on how energizing it was to learn *with* and *from* peers, epitomizing the conference’s spirit of mutual empowerment.

Mid-afternoon, the focus shifted to a more *reflective* mode with the “I wonder...” collegial counseling session. This innovative format, also born of the open call, provided a structured space for participants to bring forward personal challenges or dilemmas they face in their RE practice. Organized in a World Café style, the session featured multiple small-group tables, each dedicated to one “I wonder...” question and suggestions for collaborations posed by a participant. Teachers from different countries discovered that many of their worries were shared, whether it was about curriculum changes, new approaches, or different contexts for collaboration and research on RE. By the end of the session, participants had not only crowdsourced concrete solutions and ideas but also experienced the supportive fellowship that is a hallmark of EFTRE’s network. As one could observe, this collaborative problem-solving embodied the conference’s theme—turning uncertainty (“I wonder...”) into empowerment through community and compassion.

The late afternoon of Day 3 was reserved for the EFTRE General Assembly, an official meeting of the forum's member representatives. In this business session, reports on EFTRE's activities were presented, and the membership discussed organizational matters such as upcoming projects and governance. Notably, the assembly welcomed new representatives from several countries, expanding the EFTRE "family" and ensuring a broad pan-European voice in guiding the forum's future. The General Assembly also provided an opportunity to reflect on the trajectory of EFTRE's mission in light of the conference insights—affirming commitments to ongoing exchange and empowerment initiatives beyond the conference itself.

Day 4: Sunday, 24 August 2025 – Closing Keynote and Reflections

The final day of the conference began on Sunday morning with a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie. The fourth and concluding keynote address was given by Prof. Bert Roebben (University of Bonn), who is also the Chair of EFTRE. In a fitting capstone to the conference, Roebben's lecture "*Empowerment in and through Vulnerability? 'Weak Religious Education' for a Strong Europe*" challenged participants to rethink prevailing notions of power and strength in education. Drawing on theological and pedagogical insights, he proposed that embracing vulnerability and a "weak" posture—one open to questioning, listening, and humble dialogue—can paradoxically lead to a more resilient and "strong" outcome for RE in Europe. This concept of "weak RE" builds on the idea that teachers do not need authoritarian certainty to be effective; rather, by acknowledging uncertainty and mutual vulnerability in the classroom, they empower students to take ownership of their learning and values. Roebben's keynote struck a reflective, almost prophetic tone, inviting educators to consider how empowerment can arise from humility and openness. It resonated with the conference's earlier discussions on active listening and existential questions, tying together the threads of community, compassion, and complexity in RE. As the talk concluded, attendees gave a warm round of applause, appreciating the depth of wisdom and forward-looking challenge it offered as they prepared to depart.

A brief plenary reflection session followed the keynote, titled "*What's Next for Religious Education?*" Here the conference moderators facilitated an open floor for participants to share concluding thoughts, key takeaways, and commitments to action post-conference. Delegates voiced how the past days had empowered them with new perspectives and concrete ideas—from trying a new pedagogical method gleaned in a workshop to initiating international teacher exchanges or collaborative research inspired by conversations over coffee. The theme "*Art of Empowerment*" was repeatedly cited as a call to action, urging teachers to foster agency, empathy, and critical thinking in their pupils. Several speakers highlighted the importance of continuing the dialogue started in Budapest, whether through EFTRE's online seminars or bilateral partnerships. In sum, the reflection session underscored that the end of the conference was in fact a *beginning*—a launchpad for ongoing empowered practice in classrooms across Europe.

By late morning, it was time for the formal closing of the conference. The organizers expressed gratitude to the local Hungarian hosts, the speakers, and all participants for

their enthusiastic engagement. In a ceremonious moment, the EFTRE flag (bearing the forum's logo) was passed to representatives of the next host country, symbolically announcing the plan for the 17th EFTRE Conference in 2028. Though tinged with the poignancy of farewell, the atmosphere was hopeful—fortified by the new knowledge, friendships, and inspiration everyone was taking home. As a final optional activity, some attendees joined an afternoon excursion to Budapest's Great Synagogue, taking advantage of the post-Shabbat opening hours to tour this magnificent historical temple. This visit, offered outside the official program, provided a reflective coda linking back to the conference's exploration of religious heritage and dialogue.

Conclusion: Reflections on Pedagogical and Professional Impact

The EFTRE 2025 Conference in Budapest will be remembered as a profoundly empowering gathering for religious educators, both pedagogically and professionally. Over four days, attendees not only examined empowerment as an abstract theme but also *experienced* it in practice—through participatory workshops, honest collegial conversations, and immersive learning in the host city. A clear message emerged from the keynotes: good RE can indeed contribute to greater commitment, compassion, and community among students, even in an age of individualism and polarization. To achieve this, RE teachers must engage students' deepest existential questions and values, employing what one speaker called an “existential hermeneutics and didactics” that connects content to lived experience. The conference equipped educators with concrete tools for this task—whether techniques for active listening to foster understanding or new approaches to values and identity exploration to build student agency. Many participants reported that they felt re-energized to implement such methods, having seen them modeled and discussed in a supportive setting.

Equally significant was the professional uplift that came from simply being together as a European RE community. EFTRE's network has long prided itself on a familial atmosphere, and in Budapest this collegial “vibe” was palpable. Seasoned educators and newcomers alike formed mentoring relationships and planned future collaborations across countries. The informal chats over coffee or during the Danube dinner were not mere social niceties but fertile ground for sharing best practices, research ideas, and encouragement. This kind of peer support is vital for teachers who often work in isolation within their national systems. By connecting across borders, they realized that their challenges—from curriculum debates to handling diversity—are often shared and so can be tackled with shared wisdom. Attendees left feeling less alone and more empowered as professionals, knowing they are part of a larger movement striving to make RE a force for good in a changing Europe.

The EFTRE 2025 Conference succeeded in turning the *art of empowerment* into a lived reality. Participants returned to their home countries with more than just notes from lectures; they carried with them a renewed sense of purpose, a repertoire of innovative pedagogical ideas, and an expanded network of colleagues-friends. As one of the highlights—the twilight cruise on the Danube—vividly demonstrated, the journey of empowerment in RE is not one we undertake solo, but together in community. The Budapest conference has empowered RE teachers to continue that

journey, inspired to engage the hearts and minds of young people and to navigate the complexities of our time with faith, courage, and compassion. The Greek Journal of RE can look forward to the ripple effects of this conference as Greek and other European educators implement these insights, fostering empowered classrooms that contribute to a more understanding and committed society. The art of empowerment, as celebrated in Budapest, is set to reverberate through RE in Europe in the years to come.