Chapter 13

Ecumenical Formation and Theological Education

54. Leadership Formation in the Changing Landscapes of World Christianity: Ecumenical Covenant on Theological Education

Public Statement of ETE Accompaniment Group, Crete, 2012

This document is a reference text of the ETE International working group which has developed important resources for theological education and leadership development in the past working period of WCC. Taking up certain insights from the "World Study Report on World Christianity" from Edinburgh 2010, the paper argues for an "Ecumenical Covenant" for Ecumenical Theological Education to become part of the commitment of churches to journey together in the post-Busan period so as to give the promotion and support for leadership development and ecumenical formation the proper place on the priority list of mandates both in the ecumenical movement as well as for the member churches of WCC.

Study Questions

1. How is the strategic role of ecumenical formation and theological education seen and argued for both historically and theologically in their relevance for the future of World Christianity?

2. What are major challenges and new potentials for the future of theological education and ecumenical formation in the 21st century?

3. How are the role and potential mandates of WCC and other players seen for the future of theological education and ecumenical formation?

The following public statement is recommended for dialogue and study to WCC member churches and their dialogue with regional associations of theological schools in the process leading to the assembly in Busan. The statement aims at highlighting the strategic significance of ecumenical formation and theological education for the future of the ecumenical movement and reminding the churches of their responsibilities in the context of emerging challenges for the 21st century.

I. The Legacy of Ecumenical Commitment for Theological Education

The concern for ecumenical leadership formation and theological education has been an integral part of the ecumenical movement from its early beginnings and an essential dimension of the missionary engagement of Christian churches all around the globe. From very early beginnings a concern for the promotion of education was a key feature of Christian mission through the centuries. Many of the educational structures and institutions in the countries both of the North and the South owe their existence the pioneering work of Christian missionaries and educators. It was the Edinburgh 1910 world mission conference which has put missionary training and theological education firmly on the agenda of the ecumenical movement. Already Edinburgh 1910 highlighted

• the strategic importance of (theological) education as an indispensable element of any Christian mission both in the past and in the future;

• called for a massive quality improvement in training of missionaries which should be drastically upgraded in academic level and enlarged in terms of the disciplines covered;

• the call for intentionally moving beyond denominational lines in theological education and promoting the establishment of centralized mission colleges jointly supported by different denominations and mission agencies;

• the need to deliberately move towards theological and Christian education in vernacular languages.

It was due to the sustained commitment of the International Missionary Council (IMC) that the passion and zeal for translating the message in new cultural contexts by establishing institutions of missionary training and ministerial formation has found visible expression in the
ecumenical movement. When the WCC was founded in 1948 the Amsterdam founding message stated: “Here at Amsterdam we have covenanted ourselves afresh to Him and have covenanted with one another in constituting this World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together.” We affirm that this covenant for all of WCC’s future includes the binding obligation to deepen mutual solidarity and collaboration for strengthening theological education and ministerial formation in the churches. Four different instruments were created to serve the needs for ecumenical leadership formation, Christian education and theological training in the churches brought together in the fellowship of churches in WCC:

- the Theological Education Fund (1958-1976) of IMC in London, which brought together more than 100 mission partners all around the world for joint action in building up and strengthening capacities for theological education in the churches of the South and promoting contextualization of theological education. TEF was integrated into WCC in 1976 to give shape to the subsequent programs of PTE and ETE which served programmatic work on ecumenical theological education and curriculum innovation for institutions of theological education in the South and has benefitted through its programs, publications (Ministerial Formation) and project grants more than 1200 theological schools and their theological students all around the world;

- The World Sunday School Association which gave rise to the World Council of Christian Education (WCCE) which was integrated into WCC in 1971, in order to strengthen ecumenical collaboration and conceptual understanding of programs for Christian education in schools and in Sunday School Movements;

- The Ecumenical Institute of Bossey which was even founded prior to WCC in 1946 in order to serve as privileged ecumenical conference and study centre and has offered ecumenical formation programs for around 3000 theological students since then;

- The WCC Scholarship program which has offered scholarships to both theological and non-theological study programs for younger Christian leaders for more than 60 years.

In integrating the tradition and constitutional mandates both of TEF and WCCE the WCC has taken up the moral and institutional obligation to continue that heritage of work for ecumenical formation, Christian education and ministerial formation while seeking new and creative ways of implementing this task under the new conditions and challenges of the 21st century. While each program of WCC has its own implications for ecumenical formation, Christian education and theological education history has shown that churches also need a visible and distinct programmatic activity in WCC to give shape to common action, ecumenical coherence and international collaboration in these areas. How this can be achieved institutionally and continued programmatically without leaving out or weakening one of the essential components and how to find proper collaboration and support for this work in WCC is a matter of concern to be discussed in the process towards Busan.

II. The Strategic Role of Theological Education for the Future of World Christianity

The commemoration of 100 years of Christian mission during the Edinburgh 2010 conference has affirmed again the strategic role of theological education for the future of World Christianity. The preparatory study leading to the Edinburgh 2010 section on theological education has stated 

“that some major advancement was made in some areas, namely the creation and pluralisation of independent institutions of theological education in the churches of the South. Also some major efforts have been made in order to work out indigenous and contextualized models of theological education. At the same time it is ...(obvious) that new and old challenges in the area of theological education continue and persist to hamper the relevance and accessibility of theological education for Christian mission today. Some crucial challenges seem to be even more dramatic than 100 hundred years ago. Thus there is an urgency for increasing coordinated efforts for international networking and solidarity in promoting theological education in the fellowship of churches. Some would speak of an emerging global crisis in theological education which is becoming obvious increasingly and will be marking the next decades in the 21st century, having the potential


of endangering the very future and integrity of World Christianity.

It has become a common conviction therefore, “that the concern for the promotion of theological education has been and should remain a priority area of joint witness and cooperation within the global missionary (and ecumenical) movement. ...The task for providing accessible and contextually relevant forms of theological education for each part of the worldwide fellowship of Christian churches is far from being accomplished. On the contrary, at the beginning of 21st century we are facing a new urgency and increasing demand to cope with the huge challenges, crisis symptoms and fundamental changes of theological education which are caused by the dramatic changes in the landscape of world Christianity.

The Central Committee reminds the WCC member churches that “Churches should regard the support for theological education (both with regard to lower degrees as well as higher degrees at Master level) as one of their most important priority mandates and obligations. A church without proper and qualified theological education systems tends to diminish itself or ends in Christian religious fundamentalism. A church with properly developed theological education qualifies itself for greater degrees of interaction and outreach to the different levels and challenges in its society as well as to a deeper commitment to holistic Christian mission. Churches should have a clear sense of ownership of their institutions of theological education without falling into the trap of dominating or curbing them.”

The Central Committee concludes with conviction of the World Study Report on Theological Education “that theological education is the seedbed for the renewal of churches, their ministries and mission and their commitment to church unity in today’s world. If theological education systems are neglected or not given their due prominence in church leadership, in theological reflection and in funding, consequences might not be visible immediately, but quite certainly will become manifest after one or two decades in terms of theological competence of church leadership, holistic nature of the churches mission, capacities for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and for dialogue between churches and society. The transmission of the ecumenical memory and vision to future generations of pastors and church workers is a priority need in many WCC member Churches, its continuation is far from being secured at present.”

III. A Fresh Understanding on Ecumenical Formation in Theological Learning

The basis of the WCC affirms: “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” In the constitution of WCC the concern for ecumenical theological education therefore receives a high priority: It is defined as one of the primary purposes and functions of the WCC to “nurture the growth of an ecumenical consciousness through processes of education and a vision of life in community rooted in each particular cultural context” (WCC constitution par III). The ecumenical movement from its very beginning had a profound impact on the understanding of Christian education in general and ministerial formation for future ministers and priests in particular. If the ecumenical movement as a whole is about strengthening common witness and promoting new forms of the visible unity between churches of different denominational and confessional traditions then the scandal of churches remaining in disunity and using distorted images of sister churches in one’s own educational materials and publications needs to be overcome with foremost priority in the area of theological education and ministerial formation. The strengthening and pursuit of church unity in theological education therefore is a Gospel imperative for any church joining in the affirmation of the church as being “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” in its essence (The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed [381])

For the challenges at hand for Christianity in the 21st century a fresh understanding of ecumenical formation in theological training and Christian education is needed which takes note of several transformation processes which affect the setting and needs for ecumenical learning at present. Ecumenical formation today has received a much wider and more comprehensive frame of reference.

• the support of interdenominational or non-denominational institutions and programs of theological education (which was intentionally supported already by the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the IMC);

• the introduction of distinct courses and curriculum models on ecumenism and World Christianity in each local theological school or faculty and the development of related proper teaching materials on ecumenism and vital issues for church witness (such as courses on HIV/AIDS, Disability issues, Eco/Justice, Diakonia);

• the inclusion of materials for interfaith-learning in theological education;

• the contextualization of the theological curriculum according to needs for common witness for justice, peace and integrity of creation;

• the enrichment of the theological curriculum and proper inclusion of issues from the perspectives of women and children;

We state with a sense of urgency: There is no future for the ecumenical movement as a whole if there is no commitment to ecumenical formation processes in formal and non-formal theological education programmes of WCC member churches. If theological education fails to be guided by an ecumenical vision of a church renewed in mission and service to the whole of humankind there will be a serious shortage in terms of a new generation of Christian leaders, pastors and theological teachers carrying on the ecumenical vision and commitment into the 21st century and a widening gap and estrangement between the majority clergy and ever fewer experts on the ecumenical movement and ecumenical witness as a whole. Ecumenical formation is not only a „constitutive mark of the church being the church“ (Vancouver 1983) but also an essential priority and new urgency at the beginning of the 21st century.

IV. Major Challenges and New Chances for Theological Education in the 21st Century

The Edinburgh 2010 study process on theological education has identified as the most important challenges for reshaping and strengthening theological education and missionary training for World Christianity in the 21st century the following factors:

a. Disparity in the availability of resources for theological education between the North and the South and within several regions

b. The tremendous rise in the number of higher education students in the South in general and the rise in applications for theological study programmes in particular

c. The growing interest of Pentecostal churches in theological education programmes

d. The urgent needs prevailing in many contexts to create more space for women in theological education, theological leadership and in the ministries of the church

In the beginning of the 21st century we find ourselves in a new historical situation where we both need a fresh articulation of the ecumenical vision as well as a significant new commitment for ecumenical education and formation if the ecumenical movement is to remain a vital force for renewal and conversion in global Christianity. In a situation which is marked by the fact that the rapid globalization of markets, media and technologies has given rise to counter-reactions in terms of growing fundamentalism which is affirming exclusive and closed national, ethnic, cultural and religious identities all are obliged us to renew and rethink our commitment to ecumenical formation as an priority for safeguarding the continuation of the ecumenical movement and ecumenical witness as a whole.

What the WCC has stated on earlier occasions with regard to theological education holds true until the present:

“There is a need to keep before the churches and the younger generation a concern for the visible unity which links sharing in God’s mission and the pursuit together of justice and peace with the need to heal divisions between the churches through mutual dialogue, mutual recognition and reconciliation. Those involved in theological education and ministerial formation have a vital part to play, not only through giving an ecumenical dimension to all parts of their curriculum, but by embodying ecumenical principles through the sharing of resources, the establishment of ecumenical colleges, institutions, courses and federations, and the interchange of faculty and students of different traditions.”


e. The lack of common quality standards and mutual recognition between theological schools of different contexts, denominational background and theological orientation

f. Denominational fragmentation of the international landscape of theological education institutions

g. The grave lack of scholarships and grants available for higher studies in theological education and the increasing difficulties of churches to fund their institutions of theological education

h. Changing structural conditions of theological education (the move in some contexts away from church-related seminaries towards state-funded departments of religious studies)

i. The fundamental implications of global migration movements and changing and increasingly diverse constituencies for programmes of theological education

The current global survey on theological education project with its empirical research has shown, that 33% of all respondents have stated that there are not enough or even far too few theological schools and theological education programs in their region.

The Edinburgh 2010 report also had stated: The integrity and authenticity of all the diverse streams of World Christianity in the 21st century can be maintained and deepened only if we move beyond a situation in which Christianity seems to flourish where theological education does not and vice versa, but where instead innovative forms of theological education are emerging which are life-giving, renewing, participatory and relevant for the growing charismatic renewal movements in the South and for the renewing churches in the North. What we need for the future is a more intentional cooperation and strengthened instruments both from churches and ecumenical agencies to contribute to the advancement of theological education and ecumenical formation in the 21st century.

V. The Role and Relevance of Christian Theology in Higher Education Institutions

The WCC also alerts the churches on certain trends and changes in the area of higher education institutions and related university policies which affect the role of Christian theology. The plausibility and legitimacy of ‘theology’ (as a confession bound distinct academic discipline) in secular university contexts is increasingly questioned in several places. There is a trend to move away from theological faculties and to give priority to departments of religious studies in state-funded universities. Reports from both Great Britain, Scandinavia and Germany indicate a decline in research projects and teaching positions in theology proper and a shift towards projects and positions in the field of religious studies. Very similar changes and trends are reported from a number of African as well as—to a minor extend—from Asian countries and certainly from the US context.

Therefore churches wherever politically possible should engage with governments in order to secure the future of theological education in their university settings. There is a move from denominational seminaries to studying in university faculties of religion. This means that many of the theological seminaries are at risk of closure or the dimension of ministerial formation has been weakened. This also risks a disconnect from the international communions of various Christian traditions. Also inter-denominational theological seminaries have been closed or are threatened in some contexts. Increasing tendencies of universities to integrate on theological education under Philosophy and Religion departments put pressure on churches to look for their denominational oriented training centers.

The Central Committee therefore joins in the voices of the Third Consultation of Theological Faculties in Europe in Graz, Austria, July 2010 which made a plea to recognize the validity and importance of theology within the university context and stated:

“The move to Religious Studies is in part a response to a decrease in student numbers, in part a reflection of an interest in the religious pluralism of Europe. However, the inevitable result is a decrease in the number of faculty in traditional theological disciplines. We recognize that Theology and Religious Studies can be complementary disciplines in a faculty.” It further emphasized the “urgent need to make the case for the importance of theology in the context of universities in Europe. The case for theology taking its place amongst the humanities (and indeed the sciences) needs to be made by University teachers, church leaders and Christians with influence on the authorities. Reasons for the ongoing significance of theology include the rich history of theology in the Universities from their birth, the growing importance of religion in European and world politics, and the postmodern critique of any claim to an ultimately non-confessional worldview”.

VI. Common Convictions on Essential Elements for Quality Theological Education

The Central Committee welcomes the new international dialogue on quality in theological education and the theological perspectives which have been developed on this.\(^\text{12}\) It is the role of WCC to call churches for more unity and common collaboration. In the area of theological education the commitment to church unity across denominational boundaries and to common quality standards are necessarily interrelated. Increasingly the debate on quality standards has become an important dimension in conferences of regional associations of theological schools. The Draft Version of a Common Charter on Quality in Theological Education\(^\text{13}\) which has been developed by WCC-ETE is recommended to be further discussed with representatives of member-churches, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic partners. The Central Committee confirms that there should be common affirmations in the area of quality in theological education which are of theological significance. It can be commonly affirmed for instance

- **That reading and studying the Bible as the Word of God should form the basis and undisputed primary resource of any theological education** which takes part in the continuous effort to translate the message of God’s love and hope for future generations in given cultural contexts. Therefore immersing oneself into the rich treasures of its symbols, narratives, images and stories can serve as a common ground between different Christian traditions and also as an inspiration for alternative ways of theological reflection beyond critical reasoning.

- **That World Christianity needs a multitude of different contextualized forms of theological education** and the task of Edinburgh 1910 for theological education in vernacular languages and cultures is only gradually and very incompletely fulfilled. Therefore an urgent need remains in many places for culturally and linguistically appropriate programmes and resources of theological education.

- **That the Church, Christian mission and theological education are inseparably interlinked** with each other although conditioned by various social and political contexts this inter-linkage might be expressed in different ways,


church-related theological seminaries, faculties of theology or Divinity Schools in secular universities. The concrete implementation of this vital interrelatedness between Christian mission and theological education remains a constant task for all churches and institutions of theological education as long as the fundamental task for translating the message is taken seriously.

- **That Theological education always is in critical and anticipatory solidarity with Christian churches.** The process of theological education both reproduces and reflects existing ecclesial and denominational realities and identities, but in its prophetal role should also challenge the existing patterns of both the church and the world from the perspective of the Kingdom of God and his love for all creation.

- **That Theological education essentially is an ecumenical task of all Christian churches together.** Theological education curricula which do not pay proper attention to the wider spectrum of different denominational traditions and are not done in an ecumenical spirit violate the unity of the body of Christ and lead to a prolongation of the denominational fragmentation of the body of Christ. Thus the rise of religious fundamentalism, including within Christianity, and the diminishing understanding of the values and significance of the ecumenical movement present two of the most serious challenges for the future of theological education and its task to promote a proper and holistic understanding of Christian witness, service and unity.

- **That Educating the whole people of God is a key to mission and Christian mission should be the organizing focus and reference point of theological education.** As Christ’s mission has had a deep concern for children, *any mission-minded theological education in the 21st century needs to have concern for children’s ministries and children’s theology* in order to give visible expression to the fact that children represent 30% of world Christianity while still being marginalized in theological curricula. We are called to an expanded definition of theological education as theological formation begins at a very young age, and does not happen only in schools and churches. Children should be seen at the centre both in church life as well as in programmes of Christian education and theological formation. As most theological education for children is still left to women, theological education institutions are called to support theologically-sound role models of both sexes today.
VII. The Future of WCC’s Involvement in Ecumenical Formation and Theological Education

For the future of ecumenical formation and theological education work in the different programmatic components in WCC we affirm the following priority suggestions:

• the area of ecumenical formation and theological education should receive a visible, distinct and strong role in the future working agenda and structure of WCC in the post-Busan period.

• The WCC needs a proper and high level international “Joint Working Group on Ecumenical Formation and Theological education” which would bring together major players both from WCC’s constituency as well as from non-WCC member churches such as Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and other players.

• The formation and work of regional forums of associations of theological schools in Africa, Latin America and Asia which serve a crucial tool for bringing together churches and networks of theological education from all denominational background needs to be continued, accompanied and further strengthened in future.

• a more visible commitment of WCC is needed in the area of Christian education which historically for long decades had belonged to its core mandates.

• WCC needs to encourage churches to come together for a new international dialogue on the concept of ecumenical formation for the future of world Christianity. What is our common understanding of ecumenical formation at present? Do we have clear objectives for ecumenical formation defined which correspond to the needs of churches in the changing ecclesial landscape? Could it be that there is a shift of emphasize in the concept and understanding of ecumenical formation shifting from doctrinal and denominational dimensions to ecological and interfaith-related issues and themes? What are the most important agents of change and strategic partners in ecumenical formation today?

• As the churches continue to struggle with increased costs as well as diminishing financial means for theological education institutions, with decreasing enrolment numbers of theology students in several regions as well as with the search for more relevant forms of ministerial formation at present it should be the role of WCC to bring together both global and regional partners in order to develop a common framework of information and action for advancing theological education in all areas in need. Do we have a sufficiently clear understanding on what the changing ecclesial landscapes actually mean and imply for theological education in future?

• WCC in dialogue with representatives of churches as well as associations of theological schools should closely monitor ongoing processes on accreditation, quality assurance and recognition of theological institutions. Churches in today’s context have to struggle and to cope with increased demands for state accreditation for their schools which can threaten some of their theological schools (Indonesia).

• WCC should assist churches to continue to develop internationalization in theological education by investing in networking between institutions of theological education of different parts of the ecumenical family.

• Churches should raise their prophetic voice and fight for the future of sound and biblically based ministerial formation and theological education where its continuation at present is endangered for political or financial factors.

• Churches should invest more in common interfaith components in theological education.

• Churches should invest in theological teachers exchange and facilitate mutual learning between institutions of theological education.

• In order to fulfill its role the WCC needs more support from its member churches to continue the service of its instruments for ecumenical formation and theological education in the ETE program and the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey. Both staff secondment, direct financial support as well as support with expertise, collaboration and joint projects will help to sustain this work in future.
55. Magna Charta on Ecumenical Theological Education in the 21st Century

Ecumenical Theological Education Programme of WCC, 2008.

For the Edinburgh 2010 study conference, which included a major stream of reflection on theological education a reference document was produced by WCC, department on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) which articulates key elements in the concept of ecumenical formation.

Study Questions

1. Why is the paper seeing a growing need for ecumenical formation for the future of World Christianity?

2. What are essential dimensions in an ecumenical understanding of theological education and what are core competences needed for the future of World Christianity?

3. What is meant by “costly” ecumenical learning in theological education and what are potential practical models?

1. Ecumenism as an Urgent Need in Theological Education

The basis of the WCC affirms: “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” In the constitution of WCC the concern for ecumenical theological education therefore receives a high priority: It is defined as one of the primary purposes and functions of the WCC to “nurture the growth of an ecumenical consciousness through processes of education and a vision of life in community rooted in each particular cultural context” (WCC constitution par III). The ecumenical movement from its very beginning and even before the founding of the WCC 1948 (comp. history of World Council of Christian Education) had a profound impact on the understanding of Christian education in general and ministerial formation for future ministers and priests in particular. If the ecumenical movement as a whole is about strengthening common witness and promoting new forms of the visible unity between churches of different denominational and confessional traditions then the scandal of churches remaining in disunity and using distorted images of sister churches in one’s own educational materials and publications needs to be overcome with foremost priority in the area of theological education and ministerial formation. The strengthening and pursuit of church unity in theological education is a Gospel imperative for any church joining in the affirmation of the church as being “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” in its essence (The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed [381]) (interdenominational or ecclesial dimension of ecumenical formation). The emergence of interdenominational or non-denominational institutions of theological education in the 50’s and 60’s which was intentionally supported by the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the IMC as well as the introduction of distinct courses and curriculum models on ecumenism and the ecumenical movement was a consequence of this ecclesiological insight. The emphasize on interdenominational cooperation in theological education as well as the development of proper teaching materials on ecumenism remains an indispensable and in many places still lacking component of the theological education of pastors and ministers. There is no future for the ecumenical movement as a whole if there is no commitment to ecumenical formation processes in formal and non-formal theological education programmes of WCC member churches. If theological education fails to be guided by an ecumenical vision of a church renewed in mission and service to the whole of humankind there will be a serious shortage in terms of a new generation of Christian leaders, pastors and theological teachers carrying on the ecumenical vision and commitment into the 21st century and a widening gap and estrangement between the majority clergy and ever fewer experts on the ecumenical movement and ecumenical theological discourse which can already be observed in a number of member churches.

2. Contextualization of Theological Education

Ecumenical formation in theological education is guided by the vision of the church truly united and serving the renewal of the human community. Therefore, ecumenical formation reaches beyond the realm of issues of inner church unity in addressing fundamental questions of the human family and the survival of the whole earth. Being inspired by the ecumenical vision of God as the owner of the whole earth (oikumene) as well as the eschatological vision of a new heaven and a new earth, theological education in ecumenical understanding will always try to respond to the pressing needs of social contexts and to be related to issues of human survival both in global and in
local environments. Relating theological education to the realities of particular social and cultural contexts, liberating theological education from any captivity of certain social milieus, cultural one-sidedness and spiritual blindness to religious values existing in certain indigenous traditions has been a major emphasis of the WCC in the programme on theological education (PTE) since the sixties (social or contextual dimension in ecumenical formation of theological education). The demand for contextualization of theological education in terms of opening its agenda to the realities and challenges of different church contexts, cultural identities and living situations both in the global South as well as in churches in the West facing consequences of globalization and pluralization of life-styles and religious orientations in their own midst remains an ongoing task for theological education worldwide. Some of the areas in which contextualization of curriculum designs were most prominent and successful for ETE in recent past was the development of HIV/AIDS curriculum and doing theology from disability perspective.

3. Theological Education for the Whole People of God

Ecumenical formation in theological education since the rediscovery of the importance of the laity and their missionary role in church and society (Evanston Assembly 1954) is also guided by the rediscovery of the comprehensive character of the ministry of the whole people of God, to which all are called who have received baptism. Ministerial formation in the ecumenical debate on theological education since the 70’s was understood as a particular expression and a specific part of the more comprehensive task of equipping the whole people of God for the multiple forms of ministries of and in the Christian community. New forms of lay theological formation, non-residential forms of theological education both for lay people as well as for future ministers have been a fundamental contribution to broadening theological education for the whole people of God which is an essential demand for a holistic and participatory understanding of the mission of the church as learning community. What has changed theological education most dramatically in the past decades is also the growing participation of women in teaching, research and theological networking in many regions of the world. Feminist and womanist theological networks, the deepening of feminist hermeneutics as well as the promotion of women in leadership positions of theological teaching and research is an indispensable part of ecumenical formation in theological education today. How to support women in theological education and theological research and how to maintain a proper balance between lay formation programmes and ministerial formation programmes (and to secure sufficient interaction between both) remain two major concerns in the work towards theological education for the whole people of God.

4. Interfaith Dialogue in Theological Education

Ecumenical formation in theological education fourthly is guided by a vision of sharing and mutual discoveries reaching beyond the realm of Christianity to the human community in the whole inhabited earth (oikumene) and taking into account the challenges of Christians living in close neighbourhoods and experiencing mutual sharing and solidarity with people of other faith traditions in many church contexts. Thus interfaith encounter and learning about what can be affirmed in common action for peace, justice and human dignity with people of other living faith traditions is an integral component of ecumenical formation (interfaith dimension of ecumenical formation) which is not endangering one’s own Christian identity but rather deepening it in processes of communication and sharing with people of different faiths. With the recent Letter of some 140 Muslim Leaders (“A Common Word between Us and You,”) to Leaders of Christian Churches around the world at the feast of “Eid al-Fitr al-Mubarak” 2007, which marks the end of Ramadan, and the answer from WCC this whole dimension again becomes an urgent priority also for institutions of theological education.

5. Spiritual Formation in Theological Education

Very often ecumenical formation processes have been described as having a profound spiritual basis and characteristic referring back to the very biblical understanding as the church as learning community (spiritual dimension of ecumenical formation). “Learning in the Bible is a process by which people relate to God and God’s way of truth, righteousness and peace, that they may in obedience practice that way in relation to each other and extending to the nations…Learning does not simply mean acquiring knowledge or skills, or being intellectually equipped, or just memorizing some catechism of faith. Rather it means so entering with our whole being and with all the people into a relationship with God through God’s self-revelation, that our horizons are widened and our wills are strengthened to be right with God and with one another in word and deed”(Philip Potter in Vancouver 1983). If ecumenical formation is about becoming open and responsive to the will of God in the whole of our own existence, ecumenical formation is not just a cheap way of adding some
additional pieces of information to the theological curriculum, but involves a certain aspect of deep and spiritual conversion and metanoia in the understanding of both one’s own Christian existence as well as one’s own confessional identity, a conversion from denominational self-centredness and cultural captivities to the realities of God’s mission in the whole of the inhabited earth. “Having ecumenical spirituality in common prayer and other forms as the underpinning of ecumenical formation invites all to conversion and change of heart which is the very soul of the work for restoring unity.” (Study document on “Ecumenical Formation” of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC Geneva, 1993).

6. Ecumenical Formation as Informed Participation in the Ecumenical Movement

There finally is a certain methodological principle at work in the understanding of ecumenical formation which is due to the appropriation and integration of much of the didactical and catechetical revolutions and fundamental paradigm changes occurring in the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’, methods of conscientization and the methods of learning by involvement in common action which have come up strongly in the ecumenical debate of learning during the 70’s and 80’s. Already in the early and first statement of WCC in 1957 on ecumenical education the emphasize was put on concrete practical involvement as a prerogative of proper ecumenical learning: “Ecumenical education can no longer be limited to the history of attempts to reunite churches or the growth of ecumenical organizations. Ecumenical education essentially means fostering understanding of, commitment to and informed participation in this whole ecumenical process” (Central Comittee 1957).

Ecumenical formation is not possible without a didactical and pedagogical approach which fosters practical involvement in both local, regional and global projects of ecumenical cooperation and human struggles for dignity, reconciliation and social justice. What in certain areas is referred to as “globalization in theological education” (though this term is not without ambivalence) can be understood in terms of equipping both future ministers, church workers and lay people for informed and theologically reflected participation in the global ecumenical movement by deepening their formation in intercultural theology, interreligious dialogue, history of ecumenism, ecumenical Missiology and ecumenical social ethics while at the same time remaining faithful to their own contextual demands for relating the Gospel to a given culture and situation.

7. Major Goals and Principles of Ecumenical Formation

What follows from these six fundamental dimensions of ecumenical formation for understanding the goals and principles of ecumenical formation has been spelled out in the 1989 key WCC document on “Alive together—a practical guide to Ecumenical Learning” in certain alternative key formulations for principles of ecumenical learning, namely:

a. Learning which enables people, while remaining rooted in one tradition of the church, to become open and responsive to the richness and perspectives of other churches, so that they may become more active in seeking unity, openness and collaboration between churches;

b. Learning which enables people of one country, language, ethnic group, class or political and economic system, to become sensitive and responsive to those of other countries, ethnic groups, political and economic situations, so that they may become active participants in action for a more just world;

c. Ecumenical learning is what happens when diverse persons, rooted in their own faith traditions and complex experiences of culture, gender, nationality, race, call etc. become open and responsive to the richness of perspectives in the struggle of others, together seeking to know God and to be faithful to God’s intention for them in their world.

d. Ecumenical learning is a process by which

- diverse groups and individuals
- well rooted in their own faith, traditions, cultures and contexts,
- are enabled to risk honest encounters with one another before God,
- as they study and struggle together in community,
- with personally relevant issues,
- in the light of the Scriptures, the traditions of their faith, worship and global realities,
- resulting in communal action in faithfulness to God’s intention for the unity of the church and humankind, and for justice, peace and integrity of creation.

Or, to recall a formulation which was used during the Vancouver Assembly in 1983: Ecumenical learning both in
theological education as well as in Christian education as whole is characterised by the essential marks that

a. it transcends barriers—of origin and biography, individual as well as community limitations, because it responds to the exhortation of the word of God and the far-reaching horizons of God’s promise

b. it is action-oriented, not satisfied with information but seeking to enable Christians to act in order to learn, to be right with God and with one another, in word and deed

c. it is done in community, in which people are asked to establish relationships with one another and also with those who are far away and with what is unfamiliar

d. it means learning together, detecting the global in the local, the unfamiliar in the context of one’s own environment, in order to become aware of one’s own limited horizons and implications

e. it is inter-cultural, promoting the encounter of different cultures, traditions and forms of life because only a widening of perspectives will bring about experiences of the riches in creation in nature, in history and culture

f. it is a total process, social and religious learning are not separated from each other but constitute a unity.

8. Theological Competence Redefined for an Ecumenical Age of Global Christianity

This can be summarized: Theological education of the church as a whole cannot be complete without unfolding itself and being directed towards equipping a future generation of both ordained and non-ordained partakers of the manifold ministries of the church with

a. a pastoral competence which is about enabling and building up individuals as well as Christian communities so as to become living witnesses of the life-giving power of the Gospel and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in word, liturgy and sacrament;

b. a competence of leadership which empowers rather than controls the manifold gifts of a given Christian community and helps to enable, equip and discern these gifts and charismata for the benefit of both the upbuilding the local congregation (oikodome) as well as peace and justice for the whole of the human community;

c. a theological competence which is about the ability to give a voice to the spiritual experiences of a Christian community, interpreting both biblical and church tradition in ways meaningful to contemporaries and to relate the faith insights of a local community to the treasures and challenges of the church universal and the contemporary discourse in culture and society;

d. a missionary competence which is about the ability to discern and to give shape to the demands and promises of the Gospel in relation to the missionary and evangelizing vocation of the church and the longing for healing and wholeness, peace and reconciliation in the human community;

e. an ecumenical competence which while including the other dimensions emphasizes particularly that no church can be the church for itself alone and each church is becoming truly the church in the full sense of the word if and so far it is related to the fellowship of Christian churches truly united both locally and globally in prayer, witness and service. This means that theological education is taking seriously the basic nature of both the catholicity and apostolicity, oneness and holiness of the church universal.

In essence, what is at stake therefore in ecumenical formation in theological education today is nothing less than rediscovering and adjusting to the truly global and ecumenical nature of the church, existing within the manifold forms of global Christianity which has become a new reality only after the gradual shift of centre of gravity from the North to the South and meanwhile presents itself as a multi-centered global Christianity of the South or the “two-thirds-world.” For most of the past centuries of the history of Christianity, theological reflection, interpretation of Christian tradition and the perception of cultures and living conditions in the “peripheries” was heavily influenced and carried out from the viewpoint of one or several dominating centres of global Christianity (Jerusalem in the first century, Rome up to the fourth century and much beyond, Western Christianity over against Eastern Christianity in the Middle Ages, North Atlantic Christianity over against Christianity in the South for some 200-300 years during colonial expansion and domination). While dominance and cultural and economic ethnocentrism are still continuing with regard to American and/or Western culture and life-styles at many levels in theology and theological
education, global Christianity of the South for the last 30 years or so (comp. the role of the Bangkok world mission conference in the ecumenical debate on mission 1974) has entered into a stage in which a truly multi-centered understanding of Christianity has emerged and an unprecedented genuine plurality of Christian interpretations has been developed and is promoted. Ecumenical formation (or globalization in theological education) is the unfinished theological and didactical process by which churches worldwide are aligning and opening up themselves to the realities of a truly multi-centered and multi-faceted global Christianity in the 21st century thereby challenging any attitude, hidden prejudices or overt practices of cultural, theological and interpretative domination by any assumed majority culture within global Christianity. This means that ecumenical formation is about reappropriating the ecumenical nature of the church as confessed in the creed (one, holy, catholic and apostolic) though under new and unprecedented historical conditions.


In the beginning of the 21st century we find ourselves in a new historical situation where we both need a fresh articulation of the ecumenical vision (which has lost some of its momentum and support in the local levels) as well as a significant and relevant new commitment for ecumenical education and formation in the member churches of WCC as a whole if the ecumenical movement is to remain a vital force of renewal and conversion in global Christianity. The new situation is particularly marked by the fact that the rapid globalization of markets, media and technologies has given rise to counter-reactions in terms of different forms of growing fundamentalism affirming exclusive and closed national, ethnic, cultural and religious identities. These factors of increased fragmentation and fundamentalist trends in the midst of globalization oblige us to renew and rethink our commitment to ecumenical formation as an urgent necessity and priority for safeguarding the continuation of the ecumenical movement and ecumenical witness as a whole. To promote an ecumenical orientation in theological education is the only possible option to maintain an „alternative and ecumenically responsible vision of globalization” over against growing trends towards either withdrawing Christian faith from public responsibility and dialogue altogether (privatization), or turn to denominational provincialism and ecclesial self-centredness (confessionalization) or to seek refuge in religious fundamentalism (simplification) within the Christian family or in relation to other religions. Thus ecumenical formation is not only a „constitutive mark of the church being the church“ (Vancouver 1983) but also an essential priority of new urgency at the beginning of the 21st century.

10. Costly Ecumenical Learning—Suggestions for Practical Implementation in Theological Education

There is no cheap way of adding ecumenical formation into existing schemes of theological education and curriculum plans. Rather introducing ecumenical formation has a certain price as it can entail a reordering of priorities in theological education in terms of both contents, methods and working principles applied—but the costly way of integrating ecumenical formation is rewarded by a profound process of truly broadening and deepening theological education:

a. powerful and dominant cultures as well as theological perceptions are called to give up their sense of control, allow for more inclusivity and processes of reorientation by minority cultures and theological perceptions which contribute to the holistic character of the body of Christ truly united;

b. majority denominational traditions of a certain region are challenged to include proper presentations and truly participation of Christian minority traditions within their own context as well as from other contexts in their theological curriculum and theological teaching materials (handbooks);

c. theological education institutions of one context and denominational background are challenged to develop long-term partnership and exchange programmes with theological education institutions from a different context and church background;

d. students are challenged to learn at least one language different from their own native language and the dominant language of their context to be immersed and introduced into the challenges and dynamics of proper intercultural communication (for instance with immigrant cultures in their context);

e. crossing cultural and denominational boundaries for a certain period within a certain period of one’s own theological education programme becomes an obligatory component of any programme of theological education;

f. participating in ecumenical stewardship and ecumenical sharing of financial resources for theological education worldwide in the context of grave and
persistent inequalities in terms of financial means for theological education becomes a structural component for each theological college/faculty/university (either by giving scholarships to a college in another context or extending ecumenical journal subscriptions for other colleges, providing placements for international students and lectures in one’s own college):

g. ecumenism, intercultural theology and ecumenical missiology are both necessary dimensions and horizons within the classical five disciplines of theological science as well as deserve and demand for a distinct place and realm of study and research in the composition of theological faculties;

h. individualism, voluntarism and onesided denominalism in college life are challenged by the deliberate introduction of ecumenical elements into the regular worship life of any given college (e.g. intercessions for other churches; statements of faith from other traditions; music and hymns from global Christianity);

i. mutuality and reciprocity are supported in the partnership relations between colleges/faculties in one context to colleges/faculties of another context (in order to avoid onesided dependency, one-directional giving mentalities; lack of respect and mutuality in processes of sharing between contexts of inequality);

j. churches are challenged to strengthen their sense of responsibility and ownership for institutions of theological education as a vital source for their own renewal by accompanying theological education institutions properly, making provisions in church budgets for relevant and appropriate financial support for institutions of theological education, creating scholarship endowment funds particularly for Master and PhD-programs and embarking on proper regional development plans for the future of theological education.

The WCC assembly in Porto Alegre has highlighted the centrality of ecumenical formation for all aspects of the work of the WCC as well as for theological education in its member churches. The process to unfold the concrete implications of this overarching and manifold task has only just begun.


The text “Edinburgh 2010 and the Future of Theological Education in the 21st Century” is only included in the digital version of this reader. Please visit www.globethics.net/web/gtl or use the CD-Rom included in this book.

57. Global Study Report of WCC on the Future of Theological Education in World Christianity (Geneva 2010)

The Global Study Report on the Future of Theological Education (100 pages) is only included in the digital version of this reader. Please visit www.globethics.net/web/gtl or use the CD-Rom included in this book.

58. Reception: A Key to Ecumenical Progress

Text from Joint Working Group 2012

The text “Reception—A Key to Ecumenical Progress” is only included in the digital version of this reader. Please visit www.globethics.net/web/gtl or use the CD-Rom included in this book.

59. The Ecumenical Movement in Theological Education and in the Life of Orthodox Churches

International Inter-Orthodox Consultation, Sibiu, 2010

The text “The Ecumenical Movement in Theological Education and in the Life of Orthodox Churches” is only included in the digital version of this reader. Please visit www.globethics.net/web/gtl or use the CD-Rom included in this book.