

Ecumenical Youth Formation as an Integral Part of Theological Education

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In this paper we are going to emphasize the need for theological education to serve the broader vision of ecumenism. Secondly, we will stress the importance of developing holistic approaches to education including intergenerational perspectives and praxis. By drawing on the experiences of young people, we attempt to develop an understanding of why both ecumenical formation and intergenerational approaches are important to theological education with ideas for practical follow up.

The Role of Theological Education

Theological education may be seen as enriching different church identities and applying dogma to everyday life. Ecumenical formation may be understood as a process by which the understanding of the Christian family is expanded. Both processes are important and complement one another. However, theological education may persist without necessarily encountering other Christians, learning from their rich traditions, understanding and experience of the bible or challenging commonly held stereotypes.

Youth ecumenical formation is undoubtedly the most vital and crucial part of theological education, as educating youth means equipping the future generations theologically in order to face the challenges of their time. In this perspective, we believe that youth ecumenical formation does not refer only to the 18 to 30 years old age group, but it should be an educational process already starting from the early age of 7 years old –when children’s formal education usually begins– and continuing throughout their life as teenagers and adults. Thus ecumenical formation should be approached as an ongoing educational process, whose coherent aim through its different stages is serving to build-up the Body of Christ, in other words the unity of the Church.

Consequentially, there are two points that need to be emphasized. First, there should be a clear re-affirmation of the broader vision of theological education, and careful long-term planning. In this sense, the goal of youth ecumenical formation has to be clarified and underlined, and attention must be given so that all initiatives and projects in the different phases of formation serve this purpose. Especially in the midst of the global economic crisis, we believe it is urgent to ensure that resources spent on theological education serve its specific goal and that they are spent in effective ways, so that concrete outcomes of transformation are traced in the faith communities. Secondly, youth have different needs depending on the different age groups, as well as the different cultural, ethnic and religious contexts (multi-religious or atheistic contexts, minority churches, ethnic churches etc). Young people can never be treated as a homogenous group. Ecumenical formation cannot disregard these different needs, but should respond to and satisfy them based on an interdisciplinary approach while maintaining an overall inter-religious understanding.

In this Historical Moment—What Young Ecumenists Are Inheriting

A key question we must consider in the area of theological education with each new generation is how has the ecumenical movement affected our theological institutions and churches up until now, if at all? What ecumenical common sense does each new generation grow up with? In this specific historical moment we look back at one hundred years since the mission conference in Edinburgh 1910 in which young leaders played a key role. We look back at the past 20 some years of churches in dialogue on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. We look back over thirty years since the World Conference on Faith, Science and the Future at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The Second Vatican Council which influenced the Roman Catholic Church and its relations with other churches along with these other

major ecumenical landmarks are well ingrained in what we might consider the “ecumenical common knowledge” available to this generation .

All of this builds towards a certain communally held understanding of where we are in the ecumenical journey. And while it may seem we are just celebrating a “bunch of anniversaries”, we must critically discern the way forward and examine how theological education is responding to emerging issues today. The ecumenical movement may easily become trapped in a mode of nostalgia or a sort of fatigue. Young people tend to have little patience for this and it is essential to remember that a new generation is just discovering the gems of Christian unity. It should not be underestimated that for each new generation, discovering together with other Christians the message of unity in the prayer of Jesus (John 17: 21, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”) can profoundly impact one’s life.

Young people pose many challenges to traditional and institutional theological education insofar as many are engaged in Christian communities outside the confines of conventional churches or denominations. In some churches young people’s presence and involvement is continually diminishing while in other churches and countries youth make up a disproportionate part of the population however, this is rarely reflected in the church leadership. Nonetheless, many cases would show that young people are hungry for spirituality, meaningful community, mentorship, peace, justice and to grow in their Christian faith. Churches and theological institutions must ask how they are relevant to the younger generation. What are young people searching for today and what is theological education offering? A successful way to find out is to work directly with young people and be open to their suggestions and opinions.

Young people find themselves in different positions while engaging with theological education. For instance, youth are directly engaged in theological training to become pastors, priests, teachers, lay leaders etc. In addition, young people also play important roles in church congregations, Christian NGOs and ecumenical networks or organizations without necessarily having formal theological training. In this case, all those engaged in theological education, both young and old, are challenged to share their knowledge, experience and talents with one another.

In some contexts, young people go through theological training but find few opportunities to serve the church. However in other situations, churches are in desperate need of pastors and leadership and not enough people are engaged in theological education. How can we face such challenges together as an ecumenical family? Can we share gifts and resources so that we proclaim the good news of the gospel by word, deed, prayer and worship, and the everyday witness in Christian life? In what ways can we help one another to carry on our mission in the world as Christians?

When Theological Education is oriented towards building up and strengthening the relationship between people and God, with one another, and the whole creation, it can be regarded as participation in God’s mission for the human race and creation. It can be a way to raise up a strong new generation of Christian leaders for whom the vision of Christian unity –and in extension the communion of all people with one another, God and creation– is an integral part of their identity and understanding of the church’s mission. Through ecumenical formation, young people discover that they are part of something bigger and deeper than they could ever imagine, and is a factor that has often strengthened young people’s commitment to the church. This commitment transforms into an enormous potential to reinvigorate and renew the church.

Holistic and Intergenerational Approaches to Theological Education

We must ask ourselves how far ecumenical formation has advanced along with new methods or holistic approaches to education. We can apply the model of Incarnation to theological education as a way to provide educational methods that embrace the human person as a whole. As Christ fully received human nature and renewed it in Him, so must theological education receive fully the human person (soul, mind, body, senses, imagination), transform it and prepare it to be sent in the contemporary society. But holistic education is also that which relates the person to the whole community and engages that whole community with the knowledge and experience from communities of the past, as well as the challenges and concerns of future communities.

A holistic character of theological education would envisage intergenerational and interdisciplinary perspectives in combining spirituality, bible, pastoral care, mission and important contextual issues that the local community and whole Christian family face. Theological education needs to equip people to tackle emerging issues so that the education remains relevant for the community.

Theological education is not only the transmission of Christian faith and ecclesial tradition from one generation to the other, but learning from the gifts, talents, experiences and expertise of people of all ages. An intergenerational approach necessitates the longer term vision of the ecumenical movement and theological education because it encourages a broader and richer perspective on theology and ecumenism representing the needs of people at different stages in their life. Inherent in such an approach is the understanding that each generation may offer valuable contributions and in doing so challenge norms that may limit how we conceive of knowledge or who holds knowledge. Theological knowledge is communally held and is a resource for all people. Intergenerational approaches affirm the concept that learning continues throughout our life time and the importance of bridging the gap between generations so we can listen and learn from one another.

Theological Education and Ecumenical Challenges

Often when the World Council of Churches organizes ecumenical learning programs seminary students who participate explain that they do not meet other young people outside of their own church tradition. Some young people have followed up this concern by starting local ecumenical projects that bring students together from different seminaries either to pray, socialize or organize a joint workshop on a topic of interest. In every case it is essential that international ecumenical formation experiences are followed up with local action. Ecumenism at a global level can be very attractive or sound exciting but if it is not combined with practical ways to increase contact and cooperation between Christians in their local setting then such ecumenical encounters become nothing more than tourism.

Some questions that may be pertinent to those engaging in theological education: How does theological education make concrete attempts to bring young Christians together locally? How does theological education help young people to make the connection between local realities with global concerns? How does it help young people to feel part of a larger Christian history and family? How is such education made accessible to young people despite ethnicity, gender, ability or class? How does theological education relate to young women and young men and encourage them to work together as equal partners by raising-awareness about gender and power? How does theological education renew the church and encourage young people to invest their talents and time? How does theological education make ecumenism accessible for practical exploration in the church and everyday encounters?

Sometimes we witness that the ecumenical movement suffers from a lack of vision and loss of direction or enthusiasm. Perhaps this is a side effect of institutionalization of ecumenism over the last one hundred years or more. We need to reaffirm why Christians need each other and why we are called to

be the one Church of Christ. For young Christians encountering each other for the first time the promise of unity is often an exciting possibility.

Theological education can serve as a bridge in two ways. Firstly, to help transfer knowledge from generation to generation about both the achievements, failures and ongoing challenges of the ecumenical movement. This will help young people to have a sense of ownership of the ecumenical legacy and understand the history that they inherit and will ultimately shape. Secondly to facilitate the reception of major church agreements or processes into local reality and practical follow up. Much work is still needed in this area so that the major landmarks and achievements of the ecumenical movement have resonance and relevance in local church contexts. There is a gap between what church leaders and confessions decide together and how this reaches local congregants. Theological education could help the ecumenical movement to work less with top down approaches but rather discover the needs from the local churches first and ensure this informs larger ecumenical processes through participatory methods. Theological education can also mediate communication between different ecumenical actors and be the testing ground for innovative thinking and new approaches to our work.

We often forget that Christ did not come into history and this world to satisfy and please everyone, to compromise with the regular cosmic order. On the contrary, he came to challenge and transform the existing structures of the world and the status quo (Matthew 10:34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”) We often hear, teach and preach about the prophetic role of the Church and theology. But today are we the prophetic voice that challenges the structures of this world, hence the existing structures of the educational systems?

Recommendations—Intergenerational & Ecumenical Approaches to Theological Education

These recommendations are geared more towards theological educators and young adults. However we encourage any efforts to broaden or adapt these ideas for wider application.

-Encourage international exchange of pastors, teachers, professors scholars and students between theological education programs and universities. This can strengthen ecumenical understanding, commitment and creative thinking for the future. It will also widen the perspectives of those who experience life, faith and church in another context.

-Implement ecumenical formation programs for all ages. This can happen on an academic level for adults (such as the concept of [WCC Ecumenical Institute of Bossey](#) by extension in different regions). Ecumenical formation for children and adolescents can start even as simply as meeting young people in other churches to pray and play together.

-Take advantage of communication technology as much as possible to offer ecumenical formation programs and courses via the internet. Such e-learning models are used by many educational institutions and prove to be effective especially with younger generations.

-Encourage face to face encounters between Christians and also look beyond traditional church confessions to where young people may be leading very active and faithful lives despite not being connected to institutional church. Face to face encounters and building meaningful relationships will always engender more long term ecumenical engagement.

-Seek new methods and increase cooperation for interregional networking and ecumenical formation of youth. Young people cannot afford to be isolated in a world which desperately needs greater

intercultural and interreligious understanding. This work should start locally in the community and local church where people can meet, break down stereotypes and learn about their similarities in order to live and work together.

-Invest in both lay theological training and academic education for young people.

-Make space for young leaders, experts, clergy, lay, activists, theologians to shape the content and curriculum of theological education. This will ensure that the education offered will be more relevant to the new generation and the whole community.

-Include intergenerational perspectives in theological education to encourage ecumenical formation. Highlight examples of how young people are contributing to theology, ecumenism and church life. Encourage mentorship between young and old in theological education in a way that respects the wisdom and contributions each person can bring. Make contact with other theological institutions and encourage meetings or exchange between the students.

-Ask ecumenical organizations or networks for input or resources to share with students on ecumenical formation.

-Create curricula based on common theological values, mostly with regard to on the respect of “otherness” in order to prevent Christianity from further divisions, and also face religious fundamentalism. As our community life mirrors the life of the Triune God –three distinct and unique persons enjoying communion– we need to respect everyone’s particularity and learn from their singularity and the different gifts they bring.

-According to the needs or deficiencies of the particular contexts, the curricula should emphasize biblical studies, the historical approach to patristic theology, Liberation theology, and include more courses on women’s theology.

-Promote awareness on gender issues and address the issue of human sexuality in the context of a Christian and inter-faith theological anthropology.

-Include the issue of HIV/AIDS in the curricula and equip future church leaders to work with those affected and their families and work to prevent the spread of the virus. Inform churches about the ecumenical and theological resources available to address HIV/AIDS.

-Support more women with scholarships to study theology and promote them on permanent staff and decision-making processes.

-Study the issue of modernity and post-modernity and respond to the challenges posed, by incarnating the Gospel’s values in contemporary society.

-Share resources and strengthen the communities—especially those most in need of resources. Expand the model of lending libraries that already works successfully in many parts of the world. Build digital libraries accessible to all.

-Address the theological challenges that the issue of violence in its different aspects has posed. Seek ways of tackling structural violence and economic injustice in relation to trade, hunger and poverty.

-Address the urgent issue of ecology and climate change, as well as the contemporary challenges of bioethics.

-Provide hope and meaning for life to people who suffer from depression, with symptoms that are not always visible, hence not easily treated.

-Seek ways of satisfying the needs of the people who are not actively involved in the life of the church. At the same time, be relevant to and embrace those who do not necessarily identify themselves with a particular church.

-Support the theological work of institutions in situations of severe restriction and oppression.

Some helpful examples of ecumenical education:

-School for Ecumenical Leadership Formation—S.E.L.F. together with the [World Student Christian Federation in Asia/Pacific](#) region and [Christian Conference of Asia](#)

-[KETKO](#) ecumenical training by the [Finnish Ecumenical Council](#)

-Share with other theological institutions or programs your success stories!