

TRAVEL THROUGH MEMORY LANE :
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
ORBIT

By

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Introductory Comments

It is a great privilege to be invited from retirement to participate in this event. In my perspective, especially because I turned three score and ten on July 9, 2007, this is added grace. I thank you for inviting me, for the remembrance and for the affirmation that though I may be retired, I am not retarded!

In my African culture, there is a proverb that “ when you die, your ghost may not prowl around in the land of the living”. In accordance with that word of wisdom, I decided when I retired from ETE/WCC at the end of 1998, that I would refuse all invitations to WCC activities. I have kept that almost rigorously, except for a session in Johannesburg and a consultation in Hamburg. So this invitation has been a test of my resolve. I finally decided to accept the invitation. Alas! I am unable to be present because on Monday the 19th May 2008, I had a procedure on the sole of my right foot to remove some growth so I am immobile. So I am sending a paper and will accompany you in hearth and prayer.

ETE Represents A Special Ecumenical Fulcrum

I hovered toward accepting the invitation because I realized I cared passionately about ETE and its mission sufficiently to do what it takes to secure ETE’s future. After reflection and prayer I have come to the conclusion that through all the changing scenes of life, ETE’s ministry is still valid and crucial, especially in a divided world in which the Una Sancta is also sundered . Equally attractive was the prospect of meeting again my cherished friends and colleagues around the globe, especially Ofelia Ortega, Ross Kinsler , Sunday Olanyana, Dietrich Werner and Petros Vasiliades. I mention these names to make a deep point: the forum provided by ETE represents a veritable global platform and fulcrum of the ecumenical imperative of scripture. Never shall we cease reminding the WCC that when tensions develop in WCC orbit, ETE represents the point at which theological educators and institutions across the divides and times are able to engage each other around the Word of God in dynamic and human ways. ETE

represents the one wing of WCC which comes closest to the modeling of the ecumenical imperative, in spite of all the inevitable politicking in the ecumenical movement . This is a vocation and instrument which destroying amounts to cutting the nose to spite the face.

Memory Vis a Vis Vitality and Viability of ETE

My brief is to recall the story and meaning of the ETE and take lessons for the future . As I see it is another version of what ended my time in Geneva: Viability of Theological Education and Ministerial Formation ¹ ETE's salvation and future lies with the word viability i.e the ability to give life and renew. What context and vision spawned ETE stream?

The present Ecumenical Theological Education through its various “incarnations” goes back institutionally to the vision of Accra Conference of the International Missionary Council December 1957 – January 1958. The venue and date of TEF's emergence was striking. It all began at the Accra, Ghana meeting. On 6th March 1957 Ghana had gained independence from British Colonial rule. It followed similar developments in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. It was to usher in a torrent rush to independence and sovereignty of the countries, of the south. The rhetoric of that whole movement was freedom , pride in native identity a refusal to be in the image and likeness “of colonial” nations. This had been fuelled by the experience of Third World soldiers in the World Wars where they saw that the White feared like Black, alike they died. The mystery around the white man was pierced once for all. The logical conclusion was authenticity and integrity of the churches of the south.

Against that background, IMC meeting in Accra decided to set up Theological Education Fund, to enable Churches of the South to develop Churches, institutions and persons with authenticity to teach in their context And so, Contextuality and Contextualization² became mantra of TEF .

¹ J. S. Pobee (ed.) Towards Viable Theological Education Ecumenical Imperative, Catalyst of Renewal. Geneva: WCC 1997

² Christine Lineemann – Perrin, Training for a Relevant Ministry , A Study of the Work of the Theological Education Fund. Madras: The Christian Literature Burea. 1981; William P. Russel, Contextualization : Origins Meanings and Implications. Rome: Theological Faculty Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinans 1995; TEF Learning in ContextU Learning in Context Bronley : TEF 1973

This is not the place for exposition of contextualization except to say three things 1. It is an attempt to model the core Christian message of the incarnation . How may the incarnation look like in our African context ? And how do we hold the different models in the World Church? That is the ecumenical thrust of TEF-ETE tradition.

Second, contextuality is a hermeneutic for modeling the ecumenical imperative “ to sum up all things to God through Christ” (Eph. 1;10) so as to show God the Lord is King and Lord of all creation (Ps 24: 1). TEF was just an instrument for pursuing that goal.

Third, under the caption of contextuality there emerged the critical Asian Principle (CAP 1972) to guide theological education and theological construction – authenticity, integrity and creativity as the debate has gone on, it is proposed to replace Principle with Guidelines. It signals a quest after renewed paradigm which is “biblically based, missiologically oriented , educationally shaped, pastorally advocated and spiritually empowered “³ . This latter quotation is in a way a redefinition of the threefold Asian Critical Principle in new times.

Though TEF was suspect in some quarters and even viewed as a diminution of the norms of theology, in fact it represented how the incarnation had been modeled throughout history , as represented by various minting of church Semitic , Hellenistic, Latin, Slavic, Celtic, Ethiopian, English etc. What is at stake is the true fullness of the Una Sancta . The work of the stream which started from TEF is a vital ministry to the realization of the true Una Sancta through theological education and ministerial formation. Is that agenda complete?

Successive Incarnations of Theological Education and Ministerial Formation

What started as TEF in Accra in 1958 went through successive mandates and designations - TEF, PTE (Programme on Theological Education), ETE (Ecumenical Theological Education) , ETF (Ecumenical Theological Formation) . Time does not allow me to dwell on these designations except to say they represent thrusts , orientation, twists and turns of the basic conviction that theological education and ministerial formation are vital and must be relevant For example, the dropping of Fund signaled vision and programmes were the focus , rather than funding which had the potential of derailing vision. They represent the dynamic nature of the institution and what it represented. Funding was designed to be only an enabling tool, not the operative thing.

³ Thu En Yu, “ Revisiting Mission and Vission of ATESEA” in Ministerial Formation July 2007 : 15

All the twists and turns were done with great pain. I was privileged to be at the Alajuela, Costa Rica meeting of TEF which discussed the transition from TEF to PTE. It was a frightening impassioned encounter fuelled by cultural difference, of temperant and the broad ecumenical difference, Latin and Greek, Northern Europe and Central/ Southern European. I recall particularly the clash between a Danish Lutheran Professor and a Greek, Orthodox Professor. In the ecumenical arena disagreements , however heated, may not lead to violence and falling out of communion.

Some Thrusts of TEF-ETE Stream

Allow me here only to rehearse out of the treasury of TEF tradition some key themes around which the work has been organized.

- i. Financial Viability and Enabling
- ii. Contextualization
- iii. Theological Education by Extension
- iv. Theology by the People
- v. Spirituality
- vi. Viability of Theological Education – Theological education and ministerial formation as agencies of renewal not only of those in statu pulillari but also of the community of faith.

These themes were handles on to the ecumenical vision and imperative. But also they were signals of the dynamic nature of what ETE. represents, an instrument which was not doing business as usual but always seeking to foster . It is this dynamism that enabled ETE to survive several previous attempts to argue that what ETE's mission was accomplished.

Memory

It is by design that I have done the presentation in the manner I have . In our times there is a danger of not taking history seriously and reinventing the wheel. We do well to heed the insight that “ people without memory are condemned to repeat it” Memory is critical for the vitality, viability , renewal and Survival of ETE. Let me single out one note of the memory. My Institutional engagement with TEF-PTE tradition spans 1972 to 1998. In that period we faced one crisis and threat after another. Speaking for myself, I weathered the storms with spirituality, a basic element of which is sense of vulnerability. My sense of vulnerability (of ETE) led me to read anew the challenge of Scripture that “ Thy Will be done”.

In the final analysis, God’s will will be done. In the meanwhile, let us endeavour to discern what God has for us in our times. That was what the process of Theological Education attempted to do. Waiting on God is not equal to doing nothing. The focus may not be projects, programmes; rather it must be a vision for ETE tradition in new times. That is what was done in the late 1990’s when in the process of restructuring, for ETE by the Oslo “ global assembly of 120 theologians, educators, administrators, representatives from partner agencies, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestants from various traditions including the Pentecostal. The consultation completed a three – year process during which a number of regional consultations were held ; more than eighty articles directly relating to the topic appeared in various journals, especially Ministerial Formation; and eight books were published , among them a collection entitled Sixteen Bible Studies. Theology, Ministry and Renewal of God’s People. This preparatory process, enabled participants at Oslo to debate a number of critical and timely issues” ⁴

⁴ Thomas FitzGerald, “ Preface” in John Pobee ed. , Towards Viable Theological Education Geneva: WCC 1997: VIII

It has been important to quote in extenso from Tom FitzGerald , then Executive Director , WCC Programme unit I: Unity and Renewal , because it lays out the elements that made it difficult for the powers-that-be, especially the Zimbabwe Assembly not to take us seriously . The new profile was not done by programme executives in Geneva, nor yet by the Working Group. It was truly global and ecumenical and the end product represented the heart-beat of the WCC constituency and beyond. The theme of the process and the entire process resonated with the constituency as was evidenced from the enthusiastic engagement by churches and academy, denominations which were normally lukewarm towards WCC or hostile to it.

Allow me a personal comment. I was conscious of the politics of the future of ETE when I led the team to and through the process. I had no doubt I was in shrewd political dance without so naming it. Never shall we loose sight of the politics of discussions of the future of units of WCC. The issue is how we do our politics neatly. I commend to you clear profile, vision and steps as powerful elements of the politics of commending your future “ not survival”. Have the confidence that ETE is a vital instrument and in God’s hands will be enabled to continue as an instrument of renewal.

Allow me another important ingredient. One of the particulars that came out of the process was the collection of Bible Studies. The Oslo Conference itself every morning had an integrated series of five Bible studies led by Fr. Samuel Ryan S. J ⁵ The choice of the expositor was deliberate. Indian and third world and Roman Catholic. I leave you to reflect on this in terms of the ecumenical participation and leadership and the change of the church demographics in which Asia, Africa, Pacific and Latin America have become the heartlands of the World Christianity. Above all , there was clear signal that ETE represented more than intellectual and academic pursuit; it was as well concerned with spirituality and worship, the core business of the churches. The Assembly seeing itself in ETE, had no choice but to own it.

⁵ S. Ryan Bible Studies in Pobe of cit 12-43

In the structuring of things also, particularly the funding , the host church, Church of Norway, Evangelisches Missionswerk (Hamburg) , the Vatican etc made substantial contributions. Participants were encouraged to contribute the widow's mite. This signaled the corporate ownership of the project. The staff in Geneva did not do it for them. Now, They could not but speak for ETE's continued existence. For me all this was an attempt to model a deep theological point, central to ecumenism, namely Koinōnia/ communio . The root meaning is participation, which signals that each constituency has a stake in the project and therefore , see themselves in the renewal of the project. That itself is a version of TEXT AND CONTEXT , the code, contextualization.

Now to the Vocation of ETE. The global consultation etched out future tasks: A Programmatic study; B. Project Related Cooperation; C. Communicatiion; D. Regional Focusing ; E. Global Co-ordination⁶ I wish to submit that in varying degrees these are still relevant to the mission of ETE. Only let me emphasize the missionary dimension, Pentecostal/ charismatic direction. These are areas that help churches to own ETE. ETE was born in CWME/IMC. We have been faithful to that naissance But at that stage, the challenge of the communications revolution and of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement called us to take them on . The ecumenical imperative church means making connections was modeled in life-style and themes.

There are four areas I must signal. First is the area of funding which was very much with the ETE tradition from beginning. The trouble is for many,ETE was money and the vision of which the money was enabling tool was often lost . In any case , even in my tenure funds were getting scarcer and scarcer. ETE has to learn to reimage herself as not primarily a funding source.

Not unrelated to the funding issue, second , was the very Third World focus of ETE. I took the position from 1983 that such orientation would ghettoize ETE which undermines the ecumenical vocation. My colleagues were not exactly pleased with my efforts to be more open to the pockets of poverty in the North. In a sense when we moved in Eastern Europe, it was a gentle suave way of changing the Third World orientation of ETE.

⁶ S. Ryan Bible Studies in Pobee of cit 160-161

The participation of German institutions in the process of viability, the cultivation of the Orthodox were all parts of that vision of prying open the vision and orientation of ETE. On this score, allow me to pay tribute to Ophelia Ortega who was most supportive of my lead in those directions.

Third was the issue of such allied institutions as Ecumenical Institute, Bossey and WOCATI. Oslo 1997 was clear that ETE as ETE had a distinctive role which cannot be confused with others, namely the following:

- Programmatic dialogue on key themes of theological education at the world level
- Project-related networking between regional associations and donor agencies
- Promotion of common standards in ecumenical curriculum and ecumenical teaching.
- Programmatic efforts to facilitate the access of women in the theological education institutes both in the North and South

As WOCATI is a loose network of regional associations meeting every fourth year, it should not be seen constitutionally or functionally as gradually replacing ETE which understands itself not only as a forum for dialogue but also as a strategic instrument of the missionary calling and ecumenical movement ETE should maintain structural links with WOCATI by being present on its executive board but it cannot be absorbed into its structures “⁷.

I have no close-up encounter with ETE now. But I want to believe that insights from Oslo conference are still valid by the large, and, therefore, ETE tradition is by no means passé. Let us remind the powers that-be that the aforementioned thought was carefully arrived at by a global and ecumenical constituency and may not be lightly dismissed out of hand.

⁷ Pobe of cit 161 - 162

The relationship with Bossey has been mere trickish. ETE and Bossey are both concerned with ecumenical formation but with different foci. Bossey is a residential enterprise; ETE is a regional and extra mural. That difference calls for different styles. ETE is called to go out and engage the churches in situ, in their context and bring back the experience to enrich WCC. Bossey is as a laboratory for the practice of ecumenical formation.

I was happy to be involved there, but I was clear that my focus was to engage colleagues in the regions. That was good because even academic dean at one stage with another persons as Director. But two issues need to be flagged. First was the tendency for funds specifically collected and designated for regional operations of ETE being without consultation being approved for residential operations . That was not keeping faith with the donors. Second was politics. The record is there that I decided to resign as Dean because of unnecessary politics. The Bossey staff often saw ETE staff as intruders, who may give service and contribute funds but not be in leadership positions.

ETE is in theology and education. Its vocation is at once theology and education. Both words are important. As Christians theology it is as much a rational endeavour as it is concerned with spirituality, missions ecumenism. Many theological educators are not spiritually alert. The report of the Oslo conference had a subtitle “ the ecumenical imperative, a catalyst for renewal” Renewal is impossible without the Holy Spirit Let the staff of ETE be practitioners of theology , education and renewal.

Finally let us have confidence in ourselves that in the final analysis the will of God will prevail.