

Ecumenical Covenant on Theological Education

Leadership formation in the changing landscapes of World Christianity

Public Statement of ETE Accompaniment Group, endorsed by WCC Central Committee August 2012

The following public statement was formulated by the ETE Accompaniment Group during its meeting in Bossey Ecumenical Institute 14-17 March 2012. It is recommended to the WCC Central Committee of WCC in August 2012 to be received and 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.¹ 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

¹ For historical details see: Christina Lienemann, Training for Relevant Ministry, 1996 and Dietrich Werner, Promoting ecumenical theological education in World Christianity – an unfinished agenda, in: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1634/promoting-theological-edu.html>

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.² 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

² See: Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, Joshva Raja (eds): “Handbook on Theological Education in World Christianity”, Regnum Publishers 2010

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.”³

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.”⁴

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.”⁵

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.”⁶

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

³ World Study Report on Theological Education 2010, WCC-ETE p. 54

⁴ World Study Report on Theological education p. 18

⁵ World Study Report 2010, p. 27

⁶ World Study Report 2010p. 32

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.⁷ Ecumenical formation includes

- 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 theological discourse which can already be observed in a number of member churches.

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.“⁸

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,

⁷ See: WCC Document Magna Charta on Ecumenical Formation in Theological Education, 2010:

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-theological-education-ete/wcc-programme-on-ecumenical-theological-education/magna-charta-on-ecumenical-theological-education-in-the-21st-century-ete-reference-document.html>

⁸ : Message of the world conference of WCC on theological education in Oslo 1996

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. 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 factors⁹:

- 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
- 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 project¹⁰ 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.

⁹ See: Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, *Edinburgh 2010 Vol II, Witnessing to Christ Today, Section on Theological Education and Formation, Edinburgh 2010*, p. 148-174; Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson, *Mission Today and Tomorrow, Final Report on the Session on Theological Education and Formation, Regnum Edinburgh 2010 Series, Oxford 2011*, p. 158-165

¹⁰ <https://www.research.net/s/globalsurveyonthetheologicaleducation>

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"¹¹

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.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

¹¹ THE 3RD CONSULTATION OF THEOLOGICAL FACULTIES IN EUROPE 7TH – 10TH JULY 2010, GRAZ, AUSTRIA "Jeopardised or in demand? Academic Theology in Europe between Education, Science and Research", see: http://www.uni-graz.at/grazerprozess/tagung2010/Final_Statement_2010_en.pdf

¹² International consultation on quality in theological education, WOCATI, Johannesburg June 2011, see: <http://wocati.org/index.php?id=1863>

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 Education¹³ 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 prophetic 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 not only in

¹³ See: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/education-and-ecumenical-formation/ecumenical-theological-education-ete/wcc-programme-on-ecumenical-theological-education/towards-a-common-charter-on-quality-in-theological-education-dietrich-werner.html>

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



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- 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.

The WCC Central Committee meeting in Crete, Greece (28 August to 5 September 2012) received this statement of the ETE Accompaniment Group and endorsed this to be communicated with all WCC member churches as well as with regional associations of theological education institutions in order to serve the continued dialogue and relationships between churches and institutions of theological education.