

Magna Charta on Ecumenical Formation in Theological Education in the 21st century - 10 key Convictions

**ETE/WCC-Reference document
for use in associations of theological schools and colleges,
WOCATI and in the Edinburgh 2010 process**

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 a body of Christ (*missionary or participatory dimension of ecumenical formation in theological education*). 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. Talking about theological education for the whole people of God in recent years also involves inventing and strengthening new models of academic ecumenical theological training for migrants and churches with migration background (for instance African churches in Europe) as often established systems of theological education cannot easily adapt to their needs.

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 character 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 (*didactical, practical or liberational dimension in ecumenical formation in theological education*). 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 Committee 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, ecumenical biblical hermeneutics, 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 of 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.

9) New challenges for ecumenical formation in the beginning 21st century

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 colleges/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 denominationalism 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-programmes and embarking on properregional development plans for the future of theological education.
- k) support and enhancement of bilateral and multilateral initiatives for the recognition and accreditation of institutions of theological education in the global South in other countries (both in the South as well as in the North) is an urgent task for mutual cooperation between associations of theological schools in WOCATI and beyond.

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.

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