

Reconstructing theological education and the unity of the church

Interdenominational co-operation and ecumenical learning in theological education

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Ecumenical theological education is under threat. The threat is sometimes obvious – as when denominations decide to invest in their 'own' institutions and withdraw from existing ecumenical institutions or set up parallel ones. The threat is sometimes subtle - as when students choose places to study which confirm their denominational perspective (or a particular tradition within a denomination), or when those who sponsor them send them to institutions that reflect their own tradition. This threat is not universal, but it is common and growing. It happens where churches are declining so denominations re-trench and preserve 'their' resources. It happens where churches are growing so denominations strengthen the resources they see as contributing to success and protecting their success in a competitive 'market'. Ecumenical learning seeks to hold and embody a larger vision of the unity of the Church, which is constantly threatened by our very human and real concerns about resources (how we protect and increase what is ours), or with power (how we best promote our interests in either a declining or a competitive environment). When the churches organize their education and training resources around such concerns it is not surprising that their ministers and leaders learn to replicate such assumptions and priorities in their own ministries. The possibility that we will learn what it means to live from each other and not just with or for each other remains distant.

In the UK, which is my context, commitment to ecumenical institutions is weaker now than 10 years ago, and where it exists the preferred model is one of interdenominational cooperation. Most prominent among such cooperative, federative arrangements is the Cambridge Theological Federation. This Federation “brings together the teaching and learning of seven institutes through which people of different churches, including Anglican, Methodist, Orthodox, Reformed and Roman Catholic”¹. Included in this Federation are two colleges of the Church of England which are shaped around evangelical and liberal catholic 'parties'. Each college or institution retains its independence and its primary accountability to its denominational body, but students share some of their learning and worship. Ecumenical theological education takes place in a conversation between several sites of learning – the house/college/institution in which a particular tradition is embodied and to which particular commitments are made; and the Federation encountered in classes or worship or meals. A slogan expresses the educational and formational approach: roots down, walls down, bridges out. In other words, being firmly rooted in a denominational (or 'party') institution allows students to cross ecclesial boundaries to engage with others and then reach out in mission and ministry. The slogan does not assume that this process is sequential (*first* roots down, *then* walls down, *then* bridges out) but it does appear to privilege the 'rooting', so that being rooted in a denominational (or party) environment is a necessary condition for the formation of Christian identity and the practice of mission and ministry.

Interdenominational cooperation and even federation is a model the churches can accommodate reasonably comfortably.² In the context of the Cambridge Federation, given the range

¹ <http://www.theofed.cam.ac.uk/index.html> accessed 21/09/09

² The Federation's website names the sharing of resources as forming a “truly ecumenical environment”.

of churches and institutes present, it is probably the only model of relationships that is possible. Do models of association and federation lead to significant change for students; or does it give an ecumenical veneer to denominations and parties, if the 'norm' and primary place of formation is still in their own denominational or party context? Does the experience of this kind of ecumenical environment nurture the hope and goal of further growth together, or does it inoculate against it? The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham offers a different model and experience. In 1970 a union took place of two denominational colleges – the Queen's College (Anglican) and Handsworth College (Methodist). Negotiations for this union were extraordinarily rapid and the proposals caught a positive mood in the two churches which were actively engaging in unity proposals.³ The new Queen's College as a uniting and united college could be welcomed as a sign of new and common future. The birth of this new College was not without its difficulties, perhaps exacerbated because one college (Handsworth) closed and moved to the existing Queen's campus. Questions about how to create ecumenical space are made much more complex when the architecture of the institution are shaped by one denomination. The presence of a sanctuary lamp in the chapel was an early point of controversy and questions have remained ever since about how to create shared space which isn't either bare (so that no tradition is represented) or symbolically overflowing so that every tradition is represented. Queen's was conceived as a laboratory in the context of a uniting church where its ministers in training could learn – joyfully as well as painfully – how to form a new and common space for worship which brought together the riches of two traditions. As we shall see the questions become more complex when this aspiration has to be sustained when there is no shared or common vision for a uniting church. What then is the experiment? What kind of ecumenical space is being formed?

The new ecumenical Queen's College was soon enriched by two new partners: the United Reformed Church began sending ministerial candidates for their training, but never formally became a sponsoring church (which might be considered surprising given its explicit ecumenical commitments); and the West Midlands Ministry Training Course which was formed as a regional provision for part-time learning and formation of Anglican, Methodist and URC ordinands. Over the next twenty years much was learned about living, worshipping, learning ecumenically so that at the turn of the millennium a new institution came into existence - the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education. The Foundation brought together into a single body all the activities of the College, the Course and a new Research Centre. There is one campus, one faculty, one governing body, and one chapel. Students learn and worship together, and even though many students are part-time and geographically dispersed across the Midlands, the opportunities to come together as a single Foundation body are greatly valued. The Foundation seeks to live out the Covenant to which the Church of England and the Methodist church are committed, but not to limit its ecumenical life to those two churches, but to use the experience of covenanting as a basis for entering relationships with other churches and denominations. As a result, in recent years the Foundation has become more denominationally diverse than their original partner bodies and most recently this ecumenical commitment has proved attractive to Pentecostal black majority churches as a place for their ministers, pastors and lay people to learn and train. The presence of mission students, often experienced ordained ministers from a variety of churches, adds another level of diversity in terms of nationality, language and culture. The Foundation is committed to being a place that is inclusive, welcoming all to learn and worship together; its student body and faculty is diverse in every measure – theological conviction and tradition, denomination and ethos within denominations, nationality, ethnicity, language and culture.

The primary conviction that shapes common life, learning and worship is that the formation of Christian identity happens in and through the dialogue and encounter with those who are different. When we encounter others we not only learn from them, but often even more significantly we learn about who we are. Learning in a diverse context does not smooth out differences or

<http://www.theofed.cam.ac.uk/about.html> accessed 21/09/09

3 J Munsey Turner, "Ministry to the Whole Person" p. 33 in *Queen's Essays*, ed J Munsey Turner, (Birmingham: the Queen's College, 1980)

somehow dilute a particular identity (although this is often expressed as a fear); instead learning from as well as about another normally clarifies and strengthens a student's own denominational and theological commitments and convictions, not least because these have to become conscious and something that can be articulated, promoted, defended if need be, with those who do not share them, and yet have an equal place in the life of the community.

For this kind of dialogue and learning to take place several things are required: a sufficient group of those in the same tradition or denomination; shared commitments to mutual respect and a desire to learn from others; a reflective process in which learning is not just *about* another tradition, but its impact on one's own understanding and practice of faith and ministry. It means on the part of faculty a 'non-anxious presence' which is confident enough to hold the disagreements and conflicts that inevitably result. It means on the part of the institution and its governors a commitment both to the spirit and the processes of covenanting, living out and practicing a model of ecumenism that continue to be a challenge to the churches.

In the context of a united or uniting church ecumenical learning and formation has a clear rationale and shape. A united or uniting College becomes both a means by which a new identity can be shaped and a testing place for how this may happen in local congregations and in the practice of ministry. In the UK the failure of successive Anglican-Methodist covenanting proposals, and rapidly declining levels of commitment or enthusiasm for a uniting church, poses difficult questions for Queen's. Can ecumenical learning in this cold ecumenical climate be sustained or even justified?

An initial response is simple. The Church of England and the Methodist Church *have* entered a Covenant that commits them to growing together in order that union may take place⁴. Even though energy, vision and commitment to this Covenant may in practice be weak it cannot simply be ignored or sidelined. Given the number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) in the UK in which ministry is shared, the covenant is lived, Christians of different denominational traditions are worshipping together and engaging in mission and ministry together, at least one training institution must seek to prepare ministers for this reality.

But, Queen's experiences the same sense of isolation as many LEPs when their parent churches give a lower priority to their ecumenical work and commitments. Having to be ecumenical 'on your own' is a contradiction in terms, yet it is a reality that most ecumenical institutions live with. The rest of this paper outlines three places in which the tensions emerge and how we are seeking to address them.

First, despite liturgical convergence in many areas of corporate worship, the question as to what 'ecumenical' worship is and how it 'forms' worshippers remains problematic. Denominations want worship to form their ministers (and members) in practices and patterns of public worship that embody their traditions, disciplines and histories. They want ministers to represent these traditions faithfully and loyally. Through their corporate worship theological institutions not only want to wean those entering public ministry off individualistic and narrow habits of worship, but to form them in habits of the worship of the church. Since the church only exists in particular bodies this formation must of necessity be tradition specific. Ecumenical institutions also want to wean people off individualistic and narrow habits of worship, but see denominational forms as being in their own way constricting and wish to introduce people to the riches of different traditions. Rather than looking to the past to provide the habits and patterns into which people should be formed, they prefer to look to the future and to the ways in which new and richer forms can be shaped. This tension is powerful and ecumenical institutions often lurch between the two, with two common ways of constructing ecumenical worship resulting:

1. A rite or pattern is created which draws on different traditions but which is new and therefore 'belongs' to no particular denomination. This worship may powerfully **express** the corporate life of the community and its commitments, but its critics protest that it forms people for no existing church. Advocates argue that such worship is deeply rooted in existing traditions and that it transforms people for the church as it is called to be.

⁴ *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant*, Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing, 2001

2. Denominations and traditions 'take it in turn' to have their liturgical moment. Advocates argue that this enables everyone to experience a tradition in its own integrity, helping to broaden horizons, to inculcate habits of generosity in worship of deferring to the experiences and interests of others, and to learn from such experiences which can enrich the practices of their own tradition. Critics argue that such approaches ossify traditions, failing to recognise how traditions themselves are multiple and evolving, tending instead to encourage a view that identifies and defines denominations and traditions by what is different.

Both of these ways have been tried at Queen's and their respective strengths and weaknesses have become apparent. In recent years a different approach has been taken which starts from the insights of liturgical scholarship that is widely shared across denominations – that worship has a common *shape*. This has become common place certainly between Anglicans and Methodists and is embodied in their worship books and resource documents. Can a common shape of worship provide an ecumenical form which then allows for specific denominational traditions to be drawn upon? Our experience in recent years is that this not only enables us to express our corporate life but also to form us in particular traditions.

Second, ecumenical commitments can easily become rhetorical or confined only to enthusiasts while the majority keep their heads down and only wholeheartedly engage with the parts of the institution's life that attract or confirm them in their current position. How does an institution become intentionally ecumenical in ways that invite and engage the majority? Queen's has prioritised the practices of *covenanting* as an instrument and process to help us enter into and live out of a commitment to unity. The Anglican-Methodist covenant in particular offers valuable ways of fostering mutual, committed relationships which are mission focused. Such covenanting is understood in terms of *attitudes* as much as *practices*. At its heart is a commitment to a way of being, expressed in terms such as generosity, mutuality, receptivity.

We give visible expression to our commitment to grow together and express the unity that God gives the Church by covenanting together. This makes explicit and 'public' the values and commitments of the Foundation, and by inviting every member of the Foundation to make this covenant it helps pattern personal commitment to growing together in mission and unity as a fundamental part of a spirituality of ecumenical life together. The Joint Implementation Commission in its interim report of 2005 names the following qualities of covenanted relationships:

- Their covenant commitment will be by deliberate choice;
- It will aspire to be energised by the 'constant love' that we recognise in God, and by the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit;
- It will be purposeful (in tune with God's ultimate purpose);
- It will be marked by a gracious giving (liberating, not patronising);
- And a grateful receiving (love-enhancing, not servile);
- Which in turn will be characterised by mutuality and Christ-like self-sacrifice;
- And, at its heart, it will be eucharistic (i.e. founded on gratitude).⁵

Third, ecumenism can be an introverted stance, focusing energy and resources on internal debates and ecclesial pre-occupations. Ecumenical institutions can easily fall into habits of language and practice that assume unity is what we create, whereas unity is what God has given and calls us to live in. God's mission is our unity; God's mission forms and creates our unity; when our churches and those who belong to them work together in mission so they also grow together in unity. Unity is

⁵ *In the Spirit of the Covenant* p. 17 Interim Report (2005) of the Joint Implementation Commission Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2005

not a precondition for mission; mission is the means to unity. Colleges by their very intensity of life are already prone to such introversion and introspection, so how can ecumenism be a spur to outward, mission focused life?

One way is to promote the good news that can be told by ecumenical churches whose life is vibrant and whose mission and ministry is engaging and effective. The common perception that ecumenical commitments sap energy for mission and are only entered at moments of decline can be easily refuted. Another way is to be grasped by the vision and scope of ecumenism as the oikoumene of the world in its search for justice and peace. A further and very concrete way is to articulate our understanding and practice of ecumenical learning as a means of transformation of individuals and communities. Dietrich Werner draws on the WCC Vancouver Assembly to enumerate several characteristic marks of ecumenical learning:

- 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.⁶

It would be too much to claim that these statements and principles were consistently embedded in our practices but we are committed to them inform as deeply as possible how we seek to learn together.

Worship, covenanting, and ecumenical learning: three sets of practices in which Queen's continues to be a laboratory for ecumenical theological education. Through these means we believe that the possibility that we will learn what it means to live from each other and not just with or for each other draws slightly closer.

⁶ Dietrich Werner, *Magna Charta on Ecumenical Formation in Theological Education in the 21st century - 10 key Convictions* p.4 http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p5/ete/WOCATI_2008_-_Magna_Charta_on_Ecumenical_Theological_Education_in_the21st_century-ETE_Reference_document.pdf accessed 21/09/09