

Ecumenics, Teaching Ecumenics and
Ecumenical Formation
The Intentional Study of Ecumenism as an Essential
Element in Theological and Pastoral Formation*

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Abstract: The article proposes that Ecumenics is an integrative focus for theological study, seeking as it does to study the theological foundations of unity and diversity, and the historic divisions of the churches and the attempts to overcome them. It explores methodologies appropriate to conflict resolution and reconciliation, and examines the history and character of ecumenical initiatives. It makes a key distinction between teaching ecumenically and ecumenics and then proposes three "types" for developing courses in ecumenics. Finally, it outlines particular opportunities and challenges afforded to ecumenical institutes. These include the ability to critically analyse the ecumenical agenda, and to hold the ecumenical memory by reminding churches of ecumenical studies, insights and initiatives already undertaken.

ECUMENICAL CENTRES are a relatively recent development in the life of churches, colleges and universities. As a phenomenon they have arisen since the Second World War, to address conflict division and resolution and to help churches move towards manifesting communion and union as a witness to reconciliation in a divided world. Each of the ecumenical centres has its own particular profile and specific task. Some centres have arisen within university departments to teach and research a particular corpus of experience and literature, for example Thessaloniki. Other centres have been founded by churches, for example Paderborn, or by councils of churches, for example the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. Some centres have been established and sustained because of the enthusiasm of an individual, for example Paris, while others draw on the expertise of a sizeable staff, as in Bangalore. Obviously the foundation itself determines the possibilities and agenda of the different centres.

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Just as the sources of the foundation exhibit variety, the specific functions of the centres demonstrate diversity. The Strasbourg Institute, associated with the Lutheran World Federation, is concerned solely with research on ecumenical topics, while the Marburg Centre and the Irish School of Ecumenics combine research and teaching. Some centres explore the full agenda of the ecumenical movement, as in Utrecht, while others confine themselves to exploring a specific issue or relationship, for example Orthodox-Roman Catholic relations, which forms the core of the work in Münster and in Bari. Despite the provenance and the specific task upon which an individual Centre of Ecumenical Studies is engaged, all somehow have to wrestle with the theme stated in the title of this paper: "Ecumenics, Teaching Ecumenics and Ecumenical Formation – the intentional study of ecumenism as an essential element in theological and pastoral formation".

At various points in the development of the Irish School of Ecumenics, we sought to reflect on this theme.¹ Of course, with this title each word carries weight and one runs the risk of engaging in verbal semantics. While this article cannot engage in a thorough analysis of the topic – each phrase, if not word, of which comes freighted with its own particular history – I hope to raise up some important distinctions, issues and perspectives which may serve to stimulate discussion.

ECUMENICS

John A. Mackay in his study entitled *Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal*, speaks of "Ecumenics" as follows:

The field of discourse of the Science of Ecumenics embraces everything that concerns the nature, functions, relations, and strategy of the Church Universal, when the latter is conceived as a world missionary community. Questions pertaining to the Church's essence, its mission, its unity, and its relations in the world, which have hitherto been discussed under diverse designations, will be treated together as constitutive phases of a single discipline.²

With this definition, Ecumenics is being proposed as an integrative focus for theological study. It is being suggested that this provides a framework where all the theological disciplines are seen to be interrelated and interdependent. Within this definition the being of the Christian community as the community of word, worship and witness – to take up the

1. See Michael Hurley, "Ecumenism, Ecumenical Theology and Ecumenics", in *Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Spring?* (Dublin: Veritas, 1998); also, "Ecumenical Formation: A Methodology for a Pluralistic Age – The Case of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Supplement to *Theological Education*, 34 (1997); Russell Richey (ed.), *Ecumenical and Interreligious Perspectives: Globalization in Theological Education* (Nashville: 1992).

2. John Mackay, *Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964).

three marks of the church as defined by Martin Bucer, Jean Calvin and John Knox – provides a basic structure for study and reflection. While John Mackay develops this theme throughout his study, it seems to me that an important distinction is already being made between teaching ecumenically and ecumenics. Ecumenics is being perceived as relating to a particular body of experience and literature. The vision, material and methods of the ecumenical movement are the matter to be subjected to critical investigation.

Ecumenics, then, seeks to study the theological foundations of unity and diversity, and of historic divisions and the attempts to overcome them. It explores the methodologies appropriate to conflict resolution and the reconciliation of communities. Ecumenics examines the history and character of ecumenical initiatives, charting the developments and raising questions to the perceived advances and failures. It examines what happens at the points where communities interact and move into new relationships, and suggests issues which are appropriate to the development of the ecumenical movement. Ecumenics requires that those involved in the study are prepared to be self-critical and open to change.

With such an agenda, it is clear that the exploration will involve wrestling with biblical sources, the history of the Church, confessional and systematic theologies, ethics, and also with other disciplines. It is clear, too, that factors in the division of churches and communities are complex and involve political, social, cultural and economic factors as well as theological insights.³ Indeed, sometimes division has occurred for political or social reasons and later been provided with a theological rationalisation for what has happened.

Ecumenics, then, is the analysis of the vision, history, issues, theological concerns and methods of the ecumenical movement.⁴ The ecumenical movement might be described as a ten-point journey from conflict to communion. While one has to place all sorts of exceptions and caveats around this characterisation, it can be traced out as follows. Churches have (1) found themselves in *conflict* with each other, trying to ensure that other communities do not receive any recognition. While this is an extreme situation – though it is evident in history – the communities can (2) find themselves in *competition*, until such time as they are forced (3) to *co-exist* with each other, at least recognising the right of others to exist even although there may not yet exist any

3. See, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York, Meridian 1957) and the discussion of non-theological factors in church unity and church division, initiated by C. H. Dodd in the World Council of Churches, 1949-1952.

4. This is in fact the substance of a Proposal on Ministerial Education to the Uniting Church in Australia from the Commission for Church Unity – in the light of a General Assembly decision in 1997. A basic outline course, which covers precisely these concerns, is being proposed.

positive relationship between communities. Movement from conflict to co-existence is often encouraged by factors or forces outside the life of the communities themselves. As churches co-exist, so individuals and groups for a variety of reasons may seek to discover each other – at school, workplace, market or due to the need to make common cause politically. The first tentative explorations are (4) *comparative* – the acceptance of the other insofar as they agree with “me”. This comparative method and stance is evident in doctrinal and ethical discussion in the first phase of the ecumenical movement. But it is soon found unable to take the churches further. On the basis of comparative acceptance, they undertake (5) to continue on a path of *co-operation* and (6) to seek *consensus*. In this work, the interdependence of the communities is perceived so that they move (7) to a relationship of *complementarity*. Aware of their complementarity, communities (8) embrace *commitment* to each other, and (9) through *conversion* permit themselves to include the other in their own self-definition, moving (10) towards manifesting *communion*. The ecumenical movement then has experienced a ten-stage journey from conflict, competition, co-existence and comparative acceptance, to co-operation, consensus, complementarity, commitment, conversion and communion.⁵

To make progress on this journey, three methodologies have been evident – comparison, consensus and conversion.⁶ Churches and communities oscillate along the ten-stage ecumenical journey. Churches are at different stages on the journey with different partners. Ecumenics critically examines the methods, issues, history and instruments of this movement. Such a critique is of necessity interdisciplinary. Ecumenical research aims to make connections, to demonstrate interdependence and interrelationship, and to draw on the insights of different disciplines. Is it possible to discuss the nature of the church without drawing on all the theological disciplines as well as those social science disciplines which enable us to understand the nature and mechanisms of community?⁷ Is it possible to discuss the office of the Petrine ministry without exploring a variety of models of community which hold together unity and diversity? Is it possible to explore ways of phrasing theology apart from the cultural and social context in which they have been crafted? Ecumenics is of necessity “interdisciplinary”.

Ecumenics then is the science of the Church universal, and is an interdisciplinary critical investigation of the body of literature, method-

5. For a fuller exposition of this theme see my “Beyond the Limits of the Familiar Landscape”, in Alan Falconer (ed.), *Faith and Order in Moshi*, (Geneva: WCC 1998) 41-45.

6. For an examination of methods, see Kuncheria Pathil, *Models in Ecumenical Dialogue* (Bangalore: Dharmaran Publications, 1981).

7. See the Irish School of Ecumenics thesis on this by Joseph McCann, published as *Church and Organization: A Sociological and Theological Enquiry* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press 1993).

ologies, and experience as communities journey from conflict to communion.

TEACHING ECUMENICS

Every subject within the theological disciplines needs to be taught ecumenically. It is clear that sensitivity to different experiences and modes of interpretation is intrinsic to any theological research and analysis. This is clear because of the interdependence of confessional traditions in the articulation of theological insights. As an example one may note the dependence of John Calvin on the Fathers of the Eastern Church in his understanding of the Triune God. One may also note the parasitic relationship of the different stances on episcopacy and synodical or presbyterial modes of polity. It is important that in our teaching the interdependence of our theologies and theological insights is noted as we struggle to articulate truth.

However, there is also the explicit agenda of the ecumenical movement which needs to be taught and appropriated. How might one teach this body of material? Some fifteen years ago, the Irish School of Ecumenics – along with the Washington Consortium of Theology and the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey – organised a conference on the teaching of ecumenics. Many of us struggled with teaching methodologies. In my reflection for this paper it seemed to me useful to refine the analogy I used then from classical music, even although I recognise that it derives from a European cultural tradition and is conditioned by it.

A SYMPHONIC ANALOGY

The anticipated effect of a performance in the European cultural musical tradition is that the listener also becomes drawn into or absorbed into the movement and colour of the composition. While this analogy, therefore, is limited by its evident cultural limitation, it has the advantage of offering a participatory model and of conveying the sense that the “listener” is drawn into the very dynamics and dynamism of the work itself, just as the student should be drawn into the dynamics and dynamism of the ecumenical movement through the study of the material.

A trend of thematic development can be discerned in the classical tradition of symphonic writing where in each movement of the symphony connected thematic material is evident in more or less orderly fashion which leads to the full unfolding of the theme. The theme is then examined and developed in either its elemental or decorative aspects. After this development, the theme is recapitulated in the same sequence and in much the same fashion as its original

statement (sonata form). In this classical form there is nothing superfluous; everything is intimately and explicitly connected to the main theme.⁸ The form is self-contained.

The second symphonic form to consider is the development of this classical form discernible in some of the Romantics as exemplified in Brahms and Schumann. These Romantic composers attempted to provide a thread of unity existing from movement to movement, either through rhythm or through the repetition of thematic material. In Schumann's Fourth Symphony, for example, a single theme recurs in various guises in all four movements – a transformation regarded as a hallmark of Schumann, Berlioz and Liszt. The last movement introduces new material, but without destroying the cyclic nature of the whole work. Cyclic structure, which relates separate material by means of re-use of thematic material, is a feature of symphonic writing after Beethoven.⁹ Thus in this romantic form the theme is the thread that runs all through the work providing cohesiveness. Whatever does not directly concern this thread is less significant overall, no matter how effective in its original setting. What *is* significant is how the different movements contribute to the development of the main theme, and the way in which that main theme is transformed as it progresses from movement to movement.¹⁰

The final symphonic form for consideration is that which is evident in the writing of the Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius. His symphonies as a whole are built on a mosaic pattern, which basically presents a mass of seemingly unrelated or even abrupt theme-fragments, as he simply set down musical ideas as they came to him, some of which seem to lead nowhere. As Donald Grout notes in his *A History of Western Music*:

His originality consists partly in the free use he makes of familiar chords, partly in his orchestration (emphasizing low registers and unmixed colours), but above all in the nature of his themes, his technique of thematic development, and his treatment of form. Instead of full periodic melodies, a theme may be built of short motives that, first sounded separately, gradually coalesce into a complete entity (as in the third movement of the Fourth Symphony). Motives from one theme may be transferred to another, or themes dissolved and their motives recombined in such a way that the original theme is gradually transformed by the replacing of its

8. See Samuel Amirtham and Cyrus Moon (eds.), *The Teaching of Ecumenics* (Geneva: WCC 1987).

9. See "Symphony", in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *Grove Concise Dictionary of Music* (London: Macmillan 1988), especially regarding Haydn, who is described, with reference to his symphonic writings, as "often building whole expositions on a single thematic idea" (pp. 744-45).

10. See "Musical Forms and Genres", in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 24 *Macropaedia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) p. 582.

motivic units one by one until a new structure results (first movement of the Third Symphony).¹¹

Without trying to press the analogy too far, I suggest that these three types of symphonic form provide different models for approaching and discerning the development of unity and communion.

The "classical" form suggests an approach, which examines an event itself, and is primarily concerned with stimulating interest in that event alone. Thus in communicating the main motifs and dynamic tensions of the WCC Assembly at Vancouver, an account of the event which was Vancouver is given to stimulate interest in, and to show the range of concerns of, the contemporary ecumenical movement. The significance of the event, which is made the object of the exercise, is then seen in terms of its importance for the contemporary church, its impact on the people attending, its range of concerns, and its specific pronouncements. Such an examination of an assembly, for example, may further demonstrate how the churches of different confessional traditions can take decisions together on theological questions and ethical issues, and how the issues of brokenness in our world impinge on the life and reflections of Christians throughout the world. The "classical" form therefore concentrates on one event exploring all the facets of that event, and noting its impact on the participants.¹²

The second form in our analogy – the "romantic" – suggests that an event is significant insofar as it contributes to a larger development. The event or aspects of the event are explored, and their significance assessed in the light of what has gone before and in their impact on later developments. An example of this might be seen in terms of the Lund Faith and Order World Conference, noted for the two principles and the ecclesiology which emerged at the conference. Prior to the Lund conference, a comparative method of doing theology had been operative. Representatives of different churches described their theological understanding of a given topic, for example eucharist, after which the common elements from the presentations were affirmed, and the divergences noted as items for further exploration. At the Lund Faith and

11. Donald Grout, *A History of Western Music* (London: Dent 1983) p. 665. These symphonic forms are evident also as types of structure in the writing of poets in the same period. They are exemplified also in the paintings (and possibly also the music and poetry) of Mikalojus K. Ciurlionis (1875-1911), the Lithuanian poet, painter and musician, who developed a series of "sonata" form paintings where a theme is developed on three or four canvasses in some cases according to "classical" musical form, and in others according to the "romantic" or "Sibelius" types.

12. Thus the material available for an exploration of the Vancouver Assembly would include the preparatory materials, for example *Images of Life, Issues, Lord of Life*, and especially John Poulton, *The Feast of Life* (Geneva: WCC, 1982); the report of the Assembly: David Gill (ed.), *Gathered for Life* (Geneva: WCC, 1983); the reports by various participants, for example Martin Conway, *Look, Listen, Care* (London: BCC, 1984); and the video and tape cassette material on the Assembly issued by the WCC.

Order World Conference a new methodology emerged when it was suggested that the theologians from different Christian traditions should attempt to articulate a common theology on specific questions. Parallel to this methodological development, the conference also affirmed that the churches should do everything together except those things which deep differences of conviction prevented their so doing.

The ecclesiology which underpinned those changes was that the church is a pilgrim people, which is striving constantly to articulate its theology, learning as it journeys and not constrained by the theological statements of the past nor the ecclesiastical structures and ethical positions adopted in different circumstances and ages. The "classical" form of examining the Lund conference would be to explore these themes and their relationship to each other, through an examination of the reports and the thinking of the participants who made the proposals and discussed them. While such an investigation in this "classical" form of the Lund conference can lead to an appreciation of the dynamics and perspectives of Lund, what makes Lund "significant" is its continuity and discontinuity with previous Faith and Order conferences, and its importance in charting the methodology and agenda for future Faith and Order work. The significance of the Lund Faith and Order conference and other such events becomes apparent in their relation to the wider work of Faith and Order and the forms in interchurch dialogue. In this way, the Lund conference and other events demonstrate their significance when the "romantic" form is employed.¹³

It is, however, the analogy with the symphonic writing of Jean Sibelius which provides the most demanding exploration of ecumenical events and the ecumenical agenda. It is not enough simply to trace an element in the contemporary ecumenical movement. The real significance of any ecumenical event is the way in which it helps to illumine the vision of ecumenism, or challenges the current practices and theologies of the churches-in-isolation, and helps the churches to make more manifest the unity of Christians and their communities.

Of course, it is not simply that the theology and practice developed in the ecumenical movement challenges the contemporary churches-in-isolation. The theology and practices of the churches-in-dialogue are

13. See the Lund Faith and Order report in Lukas Vischer (ed.), *A Documentary History of Faith and Order 1927-1963* (St Louis: Bethany Press, 1963). The significance of the methodological change is emphasised by Kuncheria Pathil in *Models in Ecumenical Dialogue* (n. 6 above). The "Lund Principle" led, amongst other things, to the Nottingham Faith and Order conference (1964) and the pledge of the British churches to try to unite by Easter Day 1980. It thus led indirectly to the formation of the United Reformed Church, and to the covenant proposals in England and Wales, the covenant of the churches in Wales, the multilateral conversations in Scotland, and to the Methodist-Presbyterian shared church and ministry schemes in Ireland – to name its impact on churches in only one very small geographical area. As part of the study of ecumenical conferences and events it is important to include consideration of the effect those events have on the life of churches in a particular region.

also subject to critique in the light of the gospel. The significance of the event is, therefore, found in relation to the way that it is illumined by or illumines the gospel. Any one event, therefore, is significant in its relation to the theological vision of the unity of Christians and their communities. By placing ecumenical events in this context, then, their significance emerges through their contribution to the total vision of the unity of the church for the sake of the unity of humankind. It is largely by placing “significant events”, as for example WCC assemblies and Vatican II, in this context that one is led to a greater commitment to ecumenism.

However, in the light of this “type”, the significance lies in its relation to the overall theme. Its significance only becomes apparent in the light of the total statement of the theme, in the same way as is evident in a symphony of Sibelius, where the significance of a phrase, or a half-formed idea, which in its place in the ordering of the work seems to lead nowhere, and its influence only becomes apparent in the full flowering of the theme at a later time. For example, the concept of “ecumenical space” is prominent in much contemporary ecumenical work. The first mention of the idea is found in the Louvain report of the Faith and Order Commission (1971). The idea was not taken up then, but since 1995 has become a cohesive framework for developing the understanding, the ethos and structure of the ecumenical movement.¹⁴

At this point, perhaps, a fourth example from the Western musical tradition should be given, namely, the “unfinished symphony” – though not so much in the Schubertian style as in that of Sibelius. The challenge of ecumenical teaching lies in the appropriation of the vision by the student. Since the churches’ quest for unity is still in process, the student is being invited to enter the dynamics and dynamism of a movement which he or she is to take part in developing. The task is to transform what has gone before in the light of changed interchurch relations, contemporary theological insights, and the concrete tensions and opportunities of the world situation.

It may well be that the three “types” I have elaborated – and it must be stressed again that the musical analogy cannot be pushed too far – can themselves be seen as a process of development in academic study, just as they are in the history of musical development. The circumstances of the teaching ethos and the demands of the curriculum in different situations will, however, determine whether or not it is possible to conduct a course according to the “classical”, “romantic” and “Sibelius” mode, or employ all three in a process of development. However, the significance of the material under discussion is evident

14. See Konrad Raiser, “Report of the General Secretary”, in Diane Kessler (ed.), *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1999) 88-94.

only in the light of the gospel and the total ecumenical vision. Seemingly insignificant details become keys to understanding that vision, whereas often that which was thought to be of great significance is seen to be of less importance. Is it sufficient to assume that by giving attention to one ecumenical report, issue or event, attention has been paid to "ecumenics"? Or is it possible to envisage a more extended treatment of the ecumenical agenda which will help the student to appropriate critically the concerns of this significant movement?

ECUMENICAL FORMATION

The analogy of the unfinished Sibelius type symphony naturally leads into a consideration of ecumenical formation. It is possible to teach excellent courses on ecumenics, where the participants remain unformed ecumenically – informed but unformed. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, for example, has produced a most extensive and impressive theological syllabus for the teaching of ecumenics and yet is clearly aware that more needs to be done.¹⁵ While talk of ecumenical formation is of recent provenance,¹⁶ the concern that gave rise to it has belonged to the character of the centres for ecumenical studies from the beginning. Thus the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey was established primarily as a centre for lay ecumenical training. There was an awareness that the whole people of God needed to be formed and re-formed ecumenically.

In a recent research project of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, one research team noted:

Ecumenical formation is an interconfessional and intercultural process of reconciling and equipping the church for its ministries. It is interdisciplinary in that it brings together in the participant the various disciplines of biblical study, theology, church history, worship, social ethics and practical theology. Through shared encounter, participants practise self-critical discipline that allows for a moment of reception of both cognitive and spiritual insights. Ecumenical formation is always grounded in a contemporary issue(s) in church and society. It is experiential, in the integration of scholarship and praxis.¹⁷

15. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993). See also John Mutisa-Mbinda, "The Viability of Ecumenical Formation of Theological Students, Seminarians and Future Pastoral Workers", *Ministerial Formation* 76 (January 1997) 8-11.

16. See Konrad Raiser's address at the Jubilee Celebration of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, 1996: "Fifty Years of Ecumenical Formation. Where are we now? Where are we going?", *The Ecumenical Review* 48/4 (1996) 440-451.

17. Cited by John Lindner, "Ecumenical Formation: A Methodology for a Pluralistic Age", *Theological Education* 34 (1997) 10.

Although there is much in that definition that is helpful, it seems to me that ecumenical formation exists to enable communities to appropriate life-styles which are inclusive and which allow for the embrace of the "other". Such an attitude is dependent on a life-style of vulnerability, and of preparedness to change. Conceived in this way, ecumenical formation will involve an exploration of kenotic theology and life-styles, an examination of theology as the theology of the wayfarers and of the interdependence of human beings – *creatio imago Dei Trinitatis*.¹⁸ Without such an attitude, there can be no movement towards communion and unity.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CENTRES FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

While centres for ecumenical studies may be involved in ecumenical research, teaching and formation, they also serve the wider ecumenical movement in a number of specific ways.

Ecumenical centres hold "the ecumenical memory". While churches and their ecumenical instruments of necessity focus upon the immediate ecumenical issue under discussion, their representatives are very often unaware of the previous decisions and research undertaken on the subject under consideration. In recent years, for example, participants in a number of international conferences and consultations have expressed their inability to do theology together without a prior agreement on the relationship between "scripture" and "tradition" and on the methods for interpreting scripture. While undoubtedly the issue of hermeneutics needs to be raised afresh in every generation and be the subject of continual reflection and examination, a framework for doing theology together was agreed at the World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal (1963) in the report on "Tradition, tradition and traditions" – a report which is largely consonant with the Vatican II Constitution "Dei Verbum" – and in the Barr Report (1968) on hermeneutics. This is only one of the countless examples that one might take. It is clear, therefore, that centres of ecumenical studies have the specific role of reminding the churches and their representatives of the history of the development of the various subjects under discussion through teaching and writing.

By holding the "ecumenical memory", ecumenical centres also have a specific contribution to make to the search for "a vital and coherent ecumenical theology". Churches and ecumenical instruments of necessity focus on the immediate ecumenical question which they must face. Such ecumenical activity may be undertaken by a commission concerned with justice and peace, with the question of episcopacy and episcopate, or with Jewish-Christian relations. Very often, the various

18. For a development of these themes, see my article, "Beyond the Limits of the Familiar Landscape" (n. 5 above).

committees operate in isolation from each other, and without a strong sense of the total ecumenical enterprise. That this risk of bifurcation is real has at various times been evident in the World Council of Churches, for example. After the World Council of Churches Assembly at Vancouver (1983) there was a call to the council to develop "a vital and coherent theology" – a project which was undertaken by José Miguez Bonino. Centres of ecumenical studies, holding the ecumenical memory as they do, are ecumenical instruments which can provide such a "vital and coherent ecumenical theology", and this imposes upon them an obligation to articulate constantly such a theology.

The third specific role of such centres is to provide critical analysis of ecumenical texts and proposals. Drawing on the ecumenical history and on the awareness of the full ecumenical agenda, ecumenical institutes are in a privileged position to enter critical dialogue with ecumenical texts and initiatives. By their existence outside the formal structures of the churches or their ecumenical instruments, ecumenical centres can focus primarily on the subject under discussion rather than on the specific confessional theologies or stances of the churches. They may also offer critical perspectives on the specific context in which discussion is taking place and action contemplated. This work of critical analysis is another vital contribution which such centres can make.

Centres for ecumenical study provide an "informal structure" of reconciliation. They provide the "space" and the "time" whereby a subject or proposal may be examined in its own right. Sometimes, in ecumenical instruments, a subject is explored with the awareness of how far the participants are mandated by their sponsoring bodies or churches to proceed, or how far they can "sell" a particular proposal to their constituents. In both bilateral and multilateral discussions, there have been a number of occasions when discussions have been dominated by such considerations. In an ecumenical study centre the "topic" under consideration takes priority. For example, consultations on human rights undertaken by the Irish School of Ecumenics pursued the subject critically and comprehensively. The Irish churches and their instruments then provided a forum whereby specific issues and proposals were discussed in respect of the immediate concerns and situations of the churches in Ireland. Centres of ecumenical studies have the possibility of being "prophetic" on topics of the ecumenical agenda, and of providing the necessary facilities for critical discussion by members of the churches who represent their churches on ecumenical commissions and councils.

Centres for ecumenical study can also provide a place whereby research is undertaken on behalf of ecumenical instruments. Frequently, councils of churches propose that research be undertaken on a specific issue, but their staff do not have the time or the facilities to undertake this. Throughout its history, some students at the Irish School of

Ecumenics took up such topics on behalf of the British Council of Churches (or its successor body – the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland). This has enabled the students to feel that they are undertaking a worthwhile topic, and has given them the opportunity to insert themselves into the main stream of ecumenical endeavour. The World Council of Churches and other councils of churches at regional and national level are also instruments seeking this possibility. In addition to helping students and staff, this has also provided a service for ecumenical instruments.

The Centre for Ecumenical Studies is a significant instrument for both the Melbourne College of Divinity and the ecumenical movement. While it has a modest beginning, may it grow and develop to embrace some of the challenges outlined above.