

# Affirming Our Ecumenical Vision, Perspectives of Philippine Seminaries

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## Introduction

We met as Philippine participants for the first time, acquainting with each other as strangers and friends alike. We came from the different parts of the country with our varied cultural distinctiveness. We spoke in different dialects, but agreed to use the English language instead for faster communication. Our ages ranged from the late 40s to the mid-60s. Each of us underwent basic theological training within the Reformed tradition of our denominations. Much later, some of us attended seminaries for further training outside our own tradition. Some of us have experienced being persecuted by the dominant Roman Catholic Church. To our delight, 4 of us discovered we are children of minister-fathers who pioneered in the ministry the hard way. Each of us was molded by the complexity of the socio-economic-religio-political realities of our basic communities. These experiences brought us to the need of working ecumenically with our other Christian and non-Christian brothers and sisters towards a better life for Filipinos. Today, each of us strives for justice, peace and integrity of creation, hoping to pass these values on to the generation following us.

## On Schools

There are about 24 Bible schools and seminaries within the ecumenical fold of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. These belong to the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, United Methodist Church, Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches, Philippine Independent Church, Philippine Episcopal Church, and Iglesia Evangelica Metodista En Las Islas Filipinas. These are administered mostly by theologically trained leaders. Most have doctoral degrees especially as the academic competence is required by the government through the Commission on Higher Education and the churches through the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST) and the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA).

## Observations

The group observed that:

- (a) former heads of theological education had not prepared second-liners to take over the future leadership. Of the present participants, not one had been involved in previous meetings/organizations of heads of schools related to ecumenical learning.

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- (b) In the Baptist Convention experience, there is a regular coming together among members/heads of Evangelical schools where they have close fellowship and gain support from each other. Why is this not experienced among the ecumenical circles? (We did not delve into this matter further.)
- (c) Our commonality was based on our varied involvements in ecumenical work as far back as the Martial Law regime – continuing until today. This is especially true in the ministries with and among the children, youth, family, women’s empowerment, Basic Ecumenical Course and the Regional Ecumenical Council which NCCP had engendered through the years.

### **On Vision, Mission, Goals**

All Bible Schools and seminaries have statements of their vision, mission and goals. Some of the academic articulations seem too sophisticated for the average students to understand. A good number of the schools translate their VMGs in the total life of their students.

### **On Finance**

Almost all schools live on hand-to-mouth existence. Many are still dependent on grants and scholarship aid from abroad and local benefactors/donors. The financial survival is still a continuing predicament especially among the poorer schools. Several have major problems on financial management. Very few are stable and secure financially.

### **On Studentry**

Fewer students come to the Bible schools and seminaries nowadays. Most are attracted to get education in order to earn more here or abroad. The proliferation of the Presbyterian Church of Korea’s theological schools with their scholarship grants have adversely affected the population of the ministerial formation centers, the relationship between and among local churches and the efforts towards self-reliance and self-support. The students naturally adopt their donors’ conservative outlook and the wholistic ministry is thereby jeopardized.

Most of the students who go for ministerial training come from the lower rung in the economic ladder of Philippine society. Majority come from the rural communities and are non-literate in the English language. Neither are they prepared to do the heavy academic training expected of them. The erosion of quality in the Philippine educational system and the influx of cell phones, multi-media gadgetry and the increasing attraction of modernity brought about by globalization have negative effects on the oral and written English communication of students. Moreover, the cultural changes and urbanized living shock the students naturally. Soon, they begin to imbibe the existing dominant values. Even before they graduate, they have taken up already middle class values, become somehow materialistic and individualistic. Even when they are yet in the formation centers their running joke is “becoming a Rector, a Bishop, a superintendent, a conference minister,” etc. Immediately after graduation, many of them look for parishes with “better pay, better benefits and

air-conditioned study rooms.” A few schools have alternative offerings that provide communal learning, non-competitive scholastic processing and intensive, intentional spiritual directing.

## **Climate of Relationship**

There are factions and divisions existing in every denomination. The winds of conservatism and the charismatic movement are fanned by some influential church members who send their “chosen disciples” to “effect change” in the seminaries. The issues between conservatism and liberalism, US policy and local autonomy, the traditional and contemporary worship, being strong denominationally and the nature of one’s political agenda – all these are still hotly debated.

Oftentimes, the observant or participating student is confronted by these complex scenarios making him/her confused. These are aggravated when they see the gap between the academic circles and the rural life realities or the lifestyles of leaders and the ordinary members in the pew.

## **On Ecumenism**

The term “ecumenism” or “ecumenical” is still misunderstood as this is misconstrued by many to mean communism. The praxis of ecumenism is still sadly lacking among theologians and academicians.

For the group, many words describe ecumenism: justice and peace, renewal, ecological wholeness, expression of the meaning of life, the end of religious bigotry. The group defined “ecumenism” based on what Jesus Christ said and did: “to share abundant life for all and with all.” Presently, as a school offering, Ecumenism is being incorporated with courses or modules in Ecology, Creation Spirituality, Theology, Christian Education, Liturgy, Music, Teacher Education, Missiology, Field Education, History, Process Retreats and by actual living with and among creation. Other schools offer Ecumenics as a separate course by itself and connect with other schools for exchange of faculty and perspectives.

## **Challenges**

- a. There is a need to nurture the attitude of appreciating Ecumenical Learning in seminaries.
- b. There is a need to practice ecumenism in our day to day relationship with and among people, with and among other creations of God.
- c. The study of Ecumenism and the fostering of ecumenical partnership do not have to be monopolized by a select few or by the “in-groups” as it was practiced in the past. Sharing from varied religious traditions and practices can become gainful opportunities for the interplay of unity amidst diversity. Or, simply being attentive and caring towards one’s neighbor is already practicing ecumenicity.
- d. There is a need to revisit/reclaim the experiences of former school heads who were starting out in the ecumenical leadership journey, and learn collectively from their gains, losses and hopes.

## **Conclusion / Group Dynamics**

We affirm that the ecumenical spirit pervaded our animated discussions especially that we had one member of the Roman Catholic Church. Each had a story to tell. Each had a heart to listen. Nobody monopolized the discussion and no one hugged the leadership. Each took his/her task seriously and happily. In fact, some sharing went more deeply into the lives and ministries of the participants – going beyond the plenary discussion and group sharing time.

The positive attitudes of the participants from the Philippines could be described as trusting, caring and friendly. These comments from the other countries show that Ecumenical Learning can be fun and transforming when we are deeply conscious and open to the dialogic spirit of God.