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Ecumenical, Interreligious and Global

The future is Lutheran Buddhist?

By Michael Reid Trice

In October Christians will begin a “year of faith,” to mark the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), whereby the Catholic church started a process of soul-searching in “the first gathering together... of the whole mystical flock of our Lord,” as Pope John XXIII described it. Amid monumental challenges, the Council redefined what it meant to be Catholic in the modern world. Numerous documents were created, including the 1965 pastoral constitution on The Church in the Modern World, the drafting of which framed the ecumenically foundational 1964 Decree on Ecumenism. Clarity on the nature of the Church in the 20th century prepared the ground in an ecumenical quest for Christian unity.

Protestant communities, which had had a much longer effort for ecumenical unity, responded to Vatican II with enthusiasm. As a result, an increased global engagement in bilateral and multilateral dialogues has marked the last fifty years. In terms of world Christianity, these dialogues — from Anglican-Methodist to Baptist-Roman Catholic — not only *both* hit their mark for fortifying ecumenical global conversation, but *also* largely missed the target in terms of the reception and integration of these very dialogues into local communities back home, including colleges and universities. In areas where the reception of these dialogues lagged, some wondered what formal ecumenical dialogues hoped to achieve in practical terms, and for whom.

In the mid-1960s in the United States, growing numbers of professional ecumenists within Catholic and mainline Protestant communities were forging ahead in formal dialogues. Yet the spirit of grass-roots ecumenical attention in colleges and universities was more engaged in cooperating alongside significant revolutions taking place within society. These included civil rights efforts and protests against the U.S. presence in Vietnam.

A further difficulty arose that remains unresolved fifty years later. Walter Cardinal Kasper coined the phrase “two-speed ecumenism” to describe this difficulty. If the first speed represents local and national dialogues, then this was perceived as less relevant to the so-called second speed of dialogues that the Vatican initiated with global conciliar entities. This problem of dual speeds compounded an earlier issue of credibility for well-coordinated dialogues in local, national and international contexts.

Two speeds

Cardinal Kasper was right to use the two-speed ecumenical image. However, today we perceive this difficulty in different terms. The real issue today is the credibility of an ecumenical approach in the 21st century. Pope John Paul II recognized this issue of credibility in his 1995 encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, where he hoped to stoke

ecumenical hopefulness about the ultimate aims of Vatican II. In the text, the Supreme Pontiff asked the Christian world to discover anew, with him, how he might exercise his office as a sign of unity in a way that is “open to a new situation.” In short, *Ut Unum Sint* was a bold invitation to conversations between the Pope and Christian communities, about the

future of Christian unity in its new historical context. Only a few appreciated the courage of this encyclical. Instead, a growing public interest focused on broader interreligious engagement. The laity grew less concerned with seeking Christian unity through formal dialogues and became more interested in immediate interreligious responses to the serious social ills in the world.

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Furthermore, in 2012, fifty years after Vatican II, the context has changed dramatically.

First, mainline denominations in the United States are shrinking and/or they are embroiled in debates about sexual mores. Second, ecumenical councils at the local, state, national and international levels are under duress due broadly to the widening gap between financial obligations and a shrinking constituency. As a consequence, conciliar organizations, such as the U.S.-based National Council of Churches, have to re-imagine their future within more limited constraints. And third, as professional ecumenical offices and church councils shift their focus to include interreligious engagement, the initial quest for Christian unity gets sidelined in the larger conversation about religious diversity. One might think that the ecumenical speed for the 20th century needs refitting for the 21st, but this isn't so. What must take place is a reassessment of the quest for Christian unity within a changing global landscape.

For Jesuit colleges and universities, this is a very bright moment.

The decrees of General Congregation Thirty-Four of the Society of Jesus encourage ecumenical and interreligious commitment in a global context. This directive aligns well with a university context because students represent a demographic today that thinks less about ecumenical doctrinal considerations, and more in terms of encountering faith embodied in the lives of others. Even as a broad category, students today consider their core identities in hybrid or hyphenated terms, between religions that appear more porous.

When I taught at Loyola University in Chicago, I recall one of my students who spoke with me after class of being a Lutheran even as she simultaneously spent years as a practicing Buddhist. She understood her core identity as Lutheran-Buddhist within the liminal and relational hyphen between traditions. This student represents many students in Jesuit colleges and universities today who were raised under the cultural mantra of diversity. They interpret multi-culturalism and religious pluralism as the rule rather than as an exception. These same students resonate deeply with the Ignatian spirituality of self-awareness (*examen*), effective love (love through action) and varying expressions of spiritual direction.

For over seven years I served as one of the ecumenical executives for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Today I serve alongside exceptional faculty as the assistant dean for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue at Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry (STM). A recent initiative highlights the profound quest for depth in people's lives. Our school hosts an annual Search for Meaning book fair. This year over 2,500 students and members of the community poured onto the campus to hear poet Mary Oliver, Father James



Students expand their educational experience by studying abroad.
Loyola University New Orleans.

Martin and forty other authors speak on themes of self-awareness and spiritual focus. Next fall, in a new lecture series 'Faith and Values in the Public Square,' we have asked a well-known economist (who is Christian) to discuss the value of hope in the midst of stifling forms of personal debt, including student-loan debt, that affect all communities of faith today. People are obviously looking for new depths of meaning. In our intentionally ecumenical context, these robust efforts contribute to ecumenical and interreligious engagement with global implications.

A key theme within the foundational *Decree on Ecumenism* is often overlooked; and we need frequent reminders to embrace it: "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart." A "renewal of the inner life" is what is necessary for such change. Jesuit colleges and universities are the fertile ground for such changes of heart. With renewed ecumenical approaches, we can help students to understand the nature of religion itself and to develop an interior life that keeps apace with relevant questions in a religiously pluralistic world.

Ecumenical, interreligious and global: Jesuit colleges and universities are the best centers to convene serious ecumenical and interreligious conversations. The Jesuit charism of "holy restlessness," for intentional ecumenical and interreligious dialogue has more potential than few others can claim today. ■