

**United Theological College:  
a centre for ecumenical education in Zimbabwe?**

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*Abstract*

This article seeks to explore the meteoric rise of the United Theological College as a centre for ecumenical education in Zimbabwe. Since its inception in 1956, the college has grown to be the epicentre of inter-denominational theological education. The college is run by the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, the Uniting Presbyterian Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The college recognises and values the different traditions of worship and doctrines of the participating churches and believes that individuals and communities can be transformed through the witness of a united church of Jesus Christ. In the framework of ecumenism and Christian unity, matters related to doctrinal and liturgical issues, the interpretation of the Bible, social thought and social action of different Christian communities are studied and discussed. Despite their different doctrinal approaches, a strong ecumenical awareness within the churches drives them to train their pastors at this ecumenical college. This article will argue that in this ecumenical process, however, the college has experienced not only dynamic growth, but also limitations. The article is intended as a contri-

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bution to the ongoing ecumenical dialogue and inter-church relations among students of different denominations.

### **Introduction**

The United Theological College is an ecumenical institution that attests “to the training of quality pastors, teachers of the Christian gospel as well as church participants for churches in Zimbabwe, the Southern African region, and the entire globe” (United Theological College Mission Statement 1956). According to De Santa Ana (2003:17), this

new type of ecumenism looks neither to Rome (which has become the true centre of ecumenical and international dialogue) nor to Geneva (where many ecumenical organizations are located, e.g. World Council of Churches) in order to develop new styles of ecumenical dialogue, namely those in which divisions are not as important as common action in service of the people.

The college recognises and values the different traditions of worship and doctrines of the participating churches and believes that individuals and communities can be transformed through the witness of a united church of Jesus Christ.

There are several words and concepts associated with ecumenism. Defining the term *ecumenism* is important, because the study of ecumenism lacks a generally accepted vocabulary and clearly defined basic concept. In the words of Morris (1986:395), “efforts to create a unique ecumenical vocabulary run counter to the efforts to generate a unique ecumenical mentality or spirituality”. Many of the disagreements that arise in arguments about ecumenism are, in fact, semantic. Ecumenism is a comprehensive term which refers mainly to initiatives aimed at greater religious unity or cooperation. The word is derived from the Greek word *oikoumene*, which means “the inhabited world” (*Wikipedia*, accessed 29 April 2009). In this article the word ecumenism will be used in its narrower sense to mean greater cooperation among different religious denominations of one of these faiths. In this case, it denotes the promotion of unity or cooperation between distinct Christian denominations. It is a faith movement which strives for greater mutual respect, toleration and cooperation among various Christian denominations. Ecumenism does not seek to reconcile members of various Christian denominations into organic unity with one another, but simply to promote better relations.

The writer utilised the observation, interview and documentary methods to come up with this article. The writer observed five “Ecumenism”

lectures in progress at the college. He interviewed and interacted with a significant number of staff members and students, both former and current. The documentary method enabled the writer to critically utilise published and unpublished materials on United Theological College.

### **History of the United Theological College**

United Theological College (UTC), formerly Epworth Theological College, was founded in 1956 by the Wesleyan Methodist Church. At one point the Wesleyan Methodist church, now the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, decided to relocate its theological training school from Waddilove near Marondera to Epworth Mission Farm, where it became known as Epworth Theological College. The Wesleyan Methodist Church was by then under the leadership of the General Superintendent, by the name of Jesse Lawrence. The main reason for this move was to give theological students easy access to the then University College of Rhodesia; Epworth Mission Farm is situated about 11 km east of Harare city centre.

The power of context is of immense significance in understanding ecumenism. The establishment of United Theological College was a result of a long and arduous history of rapprochement among the churches (it is noted that in spite of its shortcomings, Christianity has registered notable progress in ecumenical cooperation). Among the formative voices from the very beginning of the ecumenical trend were the various student movements, including especially the World Student Christian Federation and the Young Men's Christian Association. Most of the churches in Zimbabwe were by then led and controlled by European and American mother churches. As such, these leaders were on good terms with such student movements; consequently, they were averse to denominational divisions. Zimbabwean churches were appealing to the spirit of ecumenism resulting from the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Two of the major aims of the World Council of Churches are to facilitate common action by the churches and to promote cooperation in study. In order to consummate the fellowship of protestant churches worldwide, the then Rhodesian Council of Churches, an affiliate body of the World Council of Churches, decided to gather resources and establish an ecumenical college. Epworth Theological College was identified as a suitable location and centre for ecumenical theological training because of its capacity, centrality and adequate land for expansion.

Epworth Theological College was therefore officially incepted as an Ecumenical Protestant Seminary in October 1956. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, United Congregational Church

of Southern Africa, Uniting Presbyterian Church and African Methodist Episcopal Church (called the participating churches) resolved in principle to cooperate in sponsoring the college for the training of pastors and other church workers. Leaders of participating churches embraced a positive ecumenical spirit of worshipping God as different Christian denominations in Zimbabwe. Thus Epworth Theological College is a child of ecumenism.

In 1959 the United Methodist Church, formerly the American Methodist Church, which had its own theological training school at Old Mutare, decided to work together in practice with the Methodist Church by sending three students to Epworth Theological College (*United Theological College Handbook* 2000:2). With the coming of these students the seeds of ecumenism were sown. The United Methodist was then under the leadership of Bishop R Dodge. The United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe, formerly the American Board Mission, which had its own theological training school at Risitu, also joined the college two years later in 1961. The college was thus experiencing growth and the spirit of ecumenism was gathering momentum. It now represented "three in one". Pastors "fashioned and baked" by ecumenism were produced. They became shining examples of how three churches could work together harmoniously.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, formerly the Evangelical Lutheran Church, became an active participating member of the ever-growing interdenominational institution in 1965. The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa became an active member in 1969, bringing the number of active participating churches to five. With this addition, the thriving Epworth Theological College became the largest ecumenical college in the country.

The Anglican and Presbyterian churches each sent students once to the college in the 1970s but did not become full participating churches (*United Theological College Handbook* 2000:2). The Anglican Church founded its own theological training school in 1978 and decided not to train with other mainline churches at Epworth Theological College. However, the Uniting Presbyterian Church eventually became a full participating member in the late 1980s. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, formerly Fambidzano (an independent group of churches), joined the ecumenical grouping in the late 1990s, bringing the number of active participating churches to seven. There are currently seven participating churches in the college.

In 1976 the name of the college was changed to United Theological College. The reason for the change of name was to capture the ecumenical thrust and centrality of the interconnection of the different Christian traditions and practices by replacing "Epworth" with "United". There was a great emphasis in the churches on uniting professing Christians of all denominations and beliefs. Unity was not sought by pretending that there were no

differences, but by recognising and respecting those differences. The participating churches focused on the great orthodox truths all Christians share.

UTC has continued to expand over the years in response to the ever-increasing number of students. At the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 the college could accommodate about 40 students. In 1985 the institution could no longer cope with the influx of students, necessitating further expansion, which was effected in 1986. In 2008 135 pastoral students went into residence and another two students are day scholars. The institution is regionally acknowledged as the largest ecumenical college in southern Africa for the teaching of theological studies. The college is a member institution of many regional academic bodies such as the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA). It engages with other theological colleges in Zimbabwe for purposes of inter-college activities such as sharing of syllabuses or course outlines, presentation of academic papers, games and the like.

Graduate pastors and teachers of UTC are having a measurable impact on institutions throughout southern Africa. Some of the notable personalities who are the product of UTC are Rev CS Banana, the first president of Independent Zimbabwe, Abel Muzorewa, the first black bishop of the United Methodist Church and Prime Minister of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, N Sithole, the founding president of the current ruling party in Zimbabwe, N Kunonga, the Archbishop of the Diocese of Harare, L Kadenge, the president of the Christian Alliance in Zimbabwe and F Chirisa, the current bishop of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe.

In the 1970s the college was a hotbed of political consciousness. Perhaps this explains why so many graduates of UTC became activists in liberation movements such as the Zimbabwe African National Union, founded in 1963 with Ndabaningi Sithole as the first president, and the United African National Congress (UANC), with Bishop Abel Muzorewa as president. There was also political factionalism, especially between the above political parties.

### **College governance**

The college operates under the Board of Trustees as the supreme authority of the institution. The board is ecumenical: it consists of heads of participating churches. Board members choose one from their number to chair proceedings annually. Usually this is done on a rotational basis among the seven participating churches.

Below the Board of Trustees is the College Council. It comprises three members from each participating church, the principal, the vice-principal, one member of staff appointed by the staff themselves, the bursar of the college, three representatives of the Students' Union, the head of women

workers at the college, and three eminent persons appointed by the council. Of significance are the three members from each participating church, usually one pastor and two lay persons. These three members are mandated to be the watchdogs of ecumenism. The College Council is mandated to oversee the everyday business of the college.

The college administrative structure is as follows: the principal, the vice-principal, the Dean of Studies, the Dean of Students, the chaplain, the bursar, the librarian and the head of women workers. Usually the principal is selected on a rotational basis from the participating churches. There is a quota system for the teaching staff; there should be at least one lecturer from each of the participating churches. This lecturer is responsible for teaching her or his denomination's polity. Other denominations can have more lecturers, depending on the need for staff in certain critical disciplines.

In principle, there should be smooth running of affairs and handover of leadership at the college. However, the college has been rocked by in-house fighting on many occasions. For example, in 2007 the Board of Trustees failed to agree on who should be the principal of the college. They resorted to asking the University of Zimbabwe to be the arbiter in the matter. The power dynamics were temporarily resolved by the University of Zimbabwe. The "Big Brother" and "ownership" mentality still exists, especially with the Methodist Church as the founding church and the United Methodist Church as the church with the largest number of students at the institution.

### **The vision of participating churches**

The college's vision is clearly spelt out in its mission statement, which recognises this ecumenical spirit:

As an ecumenical institution, the United Theological College recognizes and values the different traditions of worship and doctrines of the participating churches and believes that individuals and communities can be transformed through the witness of the United Church of Christ (*United Theological College Handbook* 2000:1).

A strong ecumenical awareness within the participating churches drives them to train their pastors at this ecumenical college. Church leaders have realised the need for theological education. It is the responsibility of theological colleges to train church leaders capable of doing God's work. Pobee (1997:54) concurs that we need:

... theological education with a strong ecumenical dimension to contribute to the process of reconciliation and unity by being a profound catalyst for renewal. It does not aim at creating a hybrid or artificial expression of theology, but seeks to bring the churches, together with their teachers, their students and their theological tradition, into creative contact and thus break down the ecclesiastical isolation of teachers and students. Misunderstandings are faced and the insular patterns and imitations of particular theological reflection and tradition are challenged and overcome.

The point here is that theological education will empower pastors to enable churches to reduce the escalating fragmentation of the church. When we talk about the unity of the church, we are talking about the life of the church, and theological schools cannot sit back and be spectators. Theological schools are centres of intellectual activities, places where all activities of the church are examined, communicated and given meaning. They form the foundation on which the leadership of churches and Christian organisations is built.

In establishing the college, the church leaders were following the teaching of Jesus. At the root of the ecumenical movement is the sharp contrast between the divided state of the church in actuality and the affirmation of all Christians that the church is in some sense “one”. St Paul speaks of the church as the one body of Christ, and the Gospel of John records Christ’s prayer that his followers “may all be one” (John 17:11). The New Testament sees loyalty to Christ in terms of self-sacrificing love for one another and the transcending of those barriers which divide us. Accordingly, the church leaders realised that they were not so different after all and that they could compromise and work together. Christians can help one another in the issues they all agree upon. Moreover, theological differences among Protestants, especially since the increase in liberal influence, are much less likely to follow denominational lines.

Unity in diversity is about ensuring that students look at each other’s ability and denomination, free from stereotypes, biases or preconceived notions made about that denomination due to the long history of separate growth. Diversity requires doing things differently and affirmatively. The churches cannot afford to play ostrich; ecumenism requires compromise. It cannot flourish amid indifference. One of the main prerequisites for acceptance of diversity is tolerance, which presupposes a learning process. UTC is at the epicentre of teaching students tolerance, as opposed to intolerance, which ignores the overlapping and common aspects of denominations and their interconnections. The development of prejudice against other denominations and cultures must be avoided. Indeed, there cannot be peace among religions until there is peace among denominations. A religion

divided against itself encourages intolerance, hatred, and even war, as in Northern Ireland.

The meaning of the ecumenical movement can clearly be seen in the nature of United Theological College. The ability to accept diversity, to welcome pluralism and to show true tolerance towards those with identities very different from our own is the hallmark of ecumenism. Oger (2002:86) states that:

Diversity is an invaluable source of talent, creativity and experience. Diversity increases competitiveness because it expands the potential for ideas and innovations. Mixed teams can approach problems from several directions at once because of different cultural and social backgrounds of the players ...

The end product of ecumenism in teaching is better because it includes input from different perspectives and experiences. UTC has become a symbol of diversity in Zimbabwe and the whole southern Africa region. The maturing policies and study programmes of UTC have greatly benefited the students and broadened their theological understanding.

### **Catchment area**

The catchment area is largely Zimbabwe and southern Africa, though the college has recruited students from as far afield as the United States and Britain. This gives the college a dynamic dimension. The college has trained many students from the southern Africa religion. For example, in the 1986–1989 class there were three students from the United Methodist Church of Malawi, two students from the United Church of Christ in Mozambique, one student from the United Congregational Church of Botswana and one student from the United Methodist Church of Zambia.

All applicants desiring to train for the Christian Ministry at the United Theological College apply through their own church denomination. Responding to the recommendation of the Acting Education Officer in South Africa, Solly Ndaba, that Frans Magkhutle be considered for a Diploma in Theology at UTC, the principal, Rev FK Gambiza, stated that as a matter of policy “those students who attend UTC do so through their particular church groups or are sponsored by church. I would advise that Mr Magkhutle’s application be sent to UTC through his church either in South Africa or a sister church in Zimbabwe” (Gambiza 1990).

The 2008 class list reflects the ecumenical nature of the college. The following table shows the number of students from each church:

<i>Name of church</i>	<i>No. of students in Level 1</i>	<i>No. of students in Level 2</i>	<i>No. of students in Level 3</i>	<i>No. of students in Level 4</i>
Methodist Church in Zimbabwe	6	5	3	3
United Methodist Church	17	13	19	18
United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe	0	3	3	2
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe	7	11	7	4
African Methodist Evangelical Church	1	2	2	3
United Congregational Church of Southern Africa	1	0	2	0
Uniting Presbyterian Church	1	0	0	0
United Evangelical Church of Africa	1	2	0	0
Independent African Church	0	0	1	0

There is no quota system for churches at the college because the college's capacity for more students has not been exhausted. Any church with adequate resources and demand for pastors can send as many students as possible. Applicants from non-participating denominations are, however, required to ensure that they have full financial support before they come to the college.

Learning in a diverse environment is important; the experience is different from one in which students are more uniform. In an application letter to the college, an applicant, Philip Nathan Persons, fully captured the importance of diversity (Persons 1991):

But of course I do not mean to ignore the conventional and enormously useful reasons for seminary study in Africa. Even though I have worked in the inner city and have a rich variety of life experiences which I think will have well-prepared me for most of what can befall me in an American parish, I

recognize that I am truly deficient in the sense of what is actually cross-cultural. I believe it would be invaluable to me to gain some knowledge of the black experience on its native soil, in a country where I will experience what it is like to be in the minority racially.

The applicant, Persons, was recommended by the United Church Board for World Ministries Secretary for Africa, Bonganjalo Goba, to study for a semester under their Theological Fellowship Program (Goba 1991).

#### **Programmes of study**

UTC has a rich tradition: the college offers an interdenominational and inter-cultural theology. The first programme offered to students at UTC from 1956 to 1970 was the Central African Diploma in Theology. Although the diploma was not controlled by the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the university influenced its formation. Holders of this diploma qualified for degree programmes at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

Historically, the relationship between UTC and the University College has existed since the 1960s. An associate institution is one which seeks to obtain the university's participation in its work. It allows joint administration of university-approved programmes of study leading to university-conferred diplomas.

Currently, UTC offers a four-year Diploma in Theology for ministerial candidates, and the two-year Diploma in Religious Studies which is offered in association with the University of Zimbabwe for both ministerial and non-ministerial students.

Even though the college professed to be an ecumenical college, there were no specific courses for this movement before 1990. The courses for the whole curriculum were: Old Testament, New Testament, New Testament Greek, Systematic Theology, African Theology, Black Theology, Christian Ethics, Church History, Homiletics, Christian World, Christian Education, Field Education, Polity, Church Administration, Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counselling, Sociology, World Religions and Ideologies, and African Traditional Religion. The Academic Dean says that "ecumenism was taught and addressed through all the courses on offer. It was taught as part of major subjects" (Mandevhana 2009). There was, however, a need to teach Church Unity or Ecumenical Theology as an independent subject.

The first review of the curriculum was made in 1970. The five participating churches reviewed and restructured the original curriculum, which had been designed solely for the Methodist Church students. The second review was made in 1980. The 1980 curriculum review captured the ethos of the new independent nation. It recognised the need "to take serious note of all these changes which must result in a re-examination of every aspect of the life of

the church, the speed of cultural change, and the demand for relevant ministries in the church for presenting the Gospel meaningfully to the world of today" (*United Theological College Handbook* 1990:1).

Of significance is the Diploma in Theology for pastors. One of the core courses is Ecumenical Theology offered to first-year students. This is the result of the 1990 curriculum review.

### **Limitations**

The challenge of achieving unity in diversity at UTC is not a small one. In its ecumenical drive the college has experienced not only dynamic growth, but also limitations. The challenges to be addressed are many. UTC is emphatically not a "church" and has no authority over its constituent members. It is rather inter-church cooperation; an example of cooperative activity in Christian unity rather than of any formal church union. This college provides a forum for the continued discussion of the challenge of unity of the church. In the words of A Moyo, a lecturer at the college, "It is a miracle that this ecumenical college is still existing and functioning" (Moyo 2009). Even well-meaning people may harbour views that unfairly limit individuals.

Zwana (2009:292) highlights the failure of ecumenism in the emergence of church-related universities in Zimbabwe. He notes that, particularly in the early stages of the evolution of church-related universities, ecumenical ventures were considered but the ideas did not take root for a variety of reasons. Zwana cites ethnicity, regionalism and historical backgrounds among the major reasons for the failure of ecumenism in higher education in Zimbabwe. Christian churches participated through their mission stations in fostering ethnic and regional identities.

Thus ecumenism has ended at Diploma level for the Protestant colleges. The emergence of church-related universities saw an increase in competition and rivalry rather than cooperation, as each church, in spite of the lack of an adequate resource base, sought to take advantage of the liberalisation of the higher education sector by the state. For example, the United Methodist decided to go alone by founding Africa University in eastern Zimbabwe, the United Church of Christ in Chipinge district in south-eastern Zimbabwe, and the Methodist church at Waddilove in Marondera.

Denominationalism should not be taught to the point of separating Christians from other Christians. One hour at UTC every week is reserved for the teaching of the course Church Polity. Each church exclusively teaches students its denomination polity. What can be observed in this regard is a limiting of the gospel, a redefining of what it means not to be a Christian, and a growing emphasis on exclusion. The minister from one denomination

cannot serve in another denomination because she or he is not considered fully qualified. The pastor must go through a process of internship under a senior pastor in order to be accommodated.

According to Davis (1993/1994:57), "It is not uncommon to experience such a sense of umbilical attachment to one's religious and cultural past as to avoid any possibilities of new life-support systems." This is a negation of the ecumenical belief that one denomination is as true as another. The issue of diverse histories is perhaps among the most difficult items on the ecumenical agenda. Each church is a product and trustee of its own respective history. There are cracks in the whole ecumenical movement. Fault lines of ecumenism are, as pointed out above, most clearly revealed in the teaching of the exclusive course called Church Polity. It would be logical to teach to all students not only what is common among them but also what is different.

Learning at an ecumenical college does not necessarily mean individual students are of ecumenical persuasion. The leaders of the participating churches are in dialogue and represent distinct constituencies. A split loyalty sometimes emerges in some students. Should they obey and follow their conscience as regards ecumenism, or follow the official position of their church? Some students at the college disown ecumenism. What is important for them is to pass the course and serve their churches.

It must be said, of course, that this whole movement is still largely a movement among the intellectuals, and that the new vision of the church has only begun to be meaningful to the average Christian. The ecumenical dialogue is now a specialised area of theological activity and it is often forgotten that the process needs to be owned and understood by an ever-widening circle of Christians. The whole process is the preserve of universities, colleges and seminaries and ecclesiastical leadership. I wonder how much of this ecumenical dialogue trickles down to the ordinary Christians in the local parishes and assemblies.

There are scarce resources for teaching ecumenical studies. For example, there is not much literature: most of the textbooks are outdated. In contrast, churches usually acquire and donate up-to-date textbooks about the history of their denominations. These are the textbooks that are used to teach Church Polity.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion: the college has grown to be the epicentre of inter-denominational theological education in Zimbabwe and the southern Africa region. In the sphere of church history, the developments towards church unity and mutual understanding are best manifested by UTC. The college recognises and values the different traditions of worship and doctrines of the partici-

pating churches and believes that individuals and communities can be transformed through the witness of a united church of Jesus Christ. However, the challenge of achieving diversity at UTC is not a small one. In its ecumenical drive, the college has experienced not only dynamic growth, but also limitations.

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