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William H. Harrison

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Book Review

Formation for Transformation: Ecumenical Reception through Ecumenical Formation.

Bruce E. Myers.

Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022.

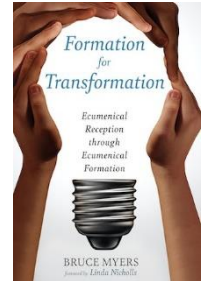
Bruce Myers, Anglican Bishop of Quebec and experienced ecumenist, brings us the fruits of his doctoral research in this passionately argued call for increased formation in ecumenism. I found the book persuasive enough that, immediately upon finishing, I queried whether we were including a course in ecumenism as part of our new curriculum planning. We are!

The core of the book's argument is in chapter three, "Transformative Learning," and chapter five, "A Proposed Revised Practice." Transformative learning, in this case, draws from Paulo Freire and Jack Mezirow, and emphasizes formation that enables a changed frame of reference with an abiding effect, so the student will encounter and understand the world differently going forward. Myers invites us to see this kind of learning at work in his experience in the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. Here, students are instructed in ecumenical texts while learning with and from people of other Christian traditions, engaging with each other both formally and informally. The result tends to be graduates with both a deep appreciation of the work of ecumenism and an openness and receptiveness that prepare them for life in a divided Christian church that needs to work toward greater unity.

Myers reviews Canadian Anglican seminaries and theological colleges, examining the extent to which they match this approach. He finds that none fully serves his hopes. While some include multiple Christian heritages in their faculty, reading lists, and student communities and may even be intentionally ecumenical, they lack the other aspect of training that Myers regards as indispensable: a required course specifically focused on ecumenism, built around study of ecumenical agreements.

Myers's proposed practice sees a required course in ecumenism as central. Myers draws on the work of Mitzi Budde, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America deacon now serving at an Episcopalian seminary, who is a noted ecumenist. Budde imagines ecumenical curriculum as a three-stage process: "inform," in which the content of ecumenism is taught; "form," in which students engage socially and culturally with each other informally; and "transform," in which students become an ecumenical community of learners drawing intentionally on the whole church's tradition (pp. 127–32). This last element is probably the most decisive recommendation because it changes the structure of curriculum. The transformation that Myers imagines, drawing on Budde, places a course that is structured around ecumenical documents at the centre of a proposed curriculum, so that students learn to do theology ecumenically from the beginning. Because the book is written especially for Anglicans, the documents Myers suggests would serve an Anglican context particularly, but the general point is universalizable.

As noted above, I find Myers's argument to be helpful. As a leader at a Lutheran seminary that is seeking (and working with partners) to be more ecumenical, I think that we can benefit from Myers's account of, and recommendations toward, ecumenical formation. I will encourage both faculty and students to read the book. Like Myers, I hope that students will be transformed in the ecumenical encounter, engaging with each other and the world in



a way that will change them—make them more ecumenical—forever. I would like to see our students recognize their relationships with students from other Christian denominations as not merely colleagues but also guides, people who can help them to gain insights that are otherwise inaccessible. I would like our graduates to have exactly the deep sense of mutual support from people in other denominations that Myers celebrates.

I continue to reflect on whether basing a curriculum on a course specifically on ecumenism is the only, or necessarily the best, way to develop students to be ecumenically minded. As a possible alternative, I offer our “Diaconal Theology and Practice” course, which has a reading list built around a combination of Lutheran and Anglican texts, with the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission III report “To Love and Serve the Lord” as its centrepiece. Rather than a course that takes ecumenism as its core subject matter, this course takes the diaconate as its subject matter and ecumenism as part of its method. Our students discover *diakonia* as a nexus of ecumenical possibility and as a location for a different way of being church (also, a different way of thinking about deacons!). For members of the ELCIC, this has a special resonance in light of the 2019 national commitment to “Reimagining Our Church: Public Ministry in the ELCIC,” which explicitly commits us to being a more diaconal church. The outcome is a group of students whose identity is deeply formed both as Lutheran and as ecumenical—and they have a rock-solid relationship with a major ecumenical document that is an important accomplishment in a growing ecclesial relationship.

Part of the reason for my question about Myers’s preferred method is that I wonder about the role that ecumenism should have among the competing concerns to which contemporary theological education must respond. Because Bossey is specifically a place for the study of ecumenism, it may not be an altogether helpful example for other theological institutions that have other priorities. Theological educators have a variety of goals with students, including training them in the following: to communicate the good news to non-Christians; to share in the life and transformation of existing ecclesiastical structures; to participate in the call to God’s justice in the world, as it touches (in no particular order) reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, engagement with “Black Lives Matter,” response to international violence such as the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and welcome to the lives and insights of LGBTQ+ people. Christians differ on all these matters. Ecumenism can be a way to move forward, but it can also be a way to focus on ourselves and our interdenominational debates. The book would have been richer with more consideration of the risks in theological training for ministry, including seminary formation, that starts from a position that engages these complexities.

Readers should note that the book began as a DMin thesis and has not fully transcended its origins. As a result, some thesis-related habits affect its readability. The text is marked by generous use of quotations, including those of the extended and indented variety, which interfere with rhetorical smoothness. The book is organized on thesis-structure principles, with short sections touching different topics (relevant literature, for example), which may detract from clarity of argument for some readers.

Limitations notwithstanding, Myers has made a valuable contribution, inviting us to active engagement with the substantial accomplishments of Christian ecumenism over recent decades—a too-often forgotten resource.

William H. Harrison
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon