

Empowered to Serve: Resilience and Impact in Changing Times

Rev. Adane Woldemariam Michael¹, Rev. Chrispine Ouma Nyandiwa, PHD²

^{1,2}The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya P.O. Box 62157, 00200 Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The text provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities associated with ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, particularly within the context of university/college chaplaincy. The detailed exploration provides a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics involved in ecumenism and interfaith dialogue within the university/college chaplaincy setting. It highlights the importance of promoting inclusivity, fostering understanding, and navigating challenges to create a more harmonious and accepting spiritual environment. There are two forms of dialogue: ad intra (Ecumenism) which focuses on unity and collaboration within Christianity. The other one is ad extera (interfaith dialogue), which addresses interactions between different faith traditions. Religion is depicted as a potent force, capable of influencing individuals to extreme actions. Chaplaincies play a crucial role in navigating faith issues. Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue within chaplaincy present both opportunities and challenges. By addressing doctrinal differences, respecting religious freedom, and acknowledging diverse needs, chaplains can contribute to inclusive spiritual care and foster collaborative communities. The success of chaplaincy in a multi-faith context relies on effective training, ongoing education, and institutional support, ensuring that chaplains are equipped to navigate the complexities of diverse religious landscapes.

Keywords: Chaplaincy, Ecumenism, Interfaith, Opportunities, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

When the missionaries brought faith in Africa they sowed the good seed but in a controversial manner. They preached one faith in Christ but they themselves were divided: Catholics against Protestants and Protestants against Catholics; Protestants against themselves and even different Catholic Congregations against one another; It was not only the division within Christianity. Islam against Christianity and Christianity against Islam. Note that these religions were both foreign to Africans. Those who brought these religions carried along their own sentiments and interests which may have not been part of religion: the hatred, the suspicion, the competition for converts, the stereotyping. All these were deeply planted in the hearts of the converts more than the Gospel message itself. Regions and territories were segmented and partitioned as belonging to a particular faith, denomination or congregation. In Kenya, for instance, within the Catholic Church, the Coastal Region was left for the Holy Ghost Fathers; Central Region for the Consolata Missionaries, Rift Valley for Missionaries of St. Patrick and Western Region for Mill Hill Missionaries.

Religion plays a very central function in any human life. It touches the deepest core of human life. Just like political and sexual affiliations, religious affiliations can move someone to kill or to lose his/her life. Chaplaincies handle faith issues of both students and staff. Engaging in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue can be a testing endeavor with both challenges and benefits. It truly is a faith journey, needing perseverance and dedication. As John Paul II has pointed out, it is an essential component of the Church's evangelistic

mission, thus it is not optional. The main goal of dialogue is to learn or develop new perspectives and understandings of reality, to forge bonds with others, and to take action to advance peace and respect for one another. There are two forms of dialogue, i.e., Dialogue *ad intra* (Ecumenism) and Dialogue *ad extra* (Interfaith Dialogue).

METHODOLOGY

The literature review and some fieldwork were employed in the paper's methodology. The data included in this paper came from both primary and secondary sources. Individual interviews, focus group discussions, and unstructured questionnaires were used as data gathering tools in the field study, based on the cluster methodology, to arrive at the findings.

Ecumenism

A movement within Christianity called ecumenism seeks to strengthen unity and collaboration between various Christian traditions and denominations. The Greek word “οἰκουμένη - *oikoumene*,” which means “*the whole-inhabitant world*,” is where the word “ecumenism” originates (*What Does Ecumenical Mean? [Ultimate Guide!]*, 2022). Encouraging Christians to have a shared understanding and purpose despite their differences in doctrine, organization, and theology is the main objective of ecumenism.

In order to further his ecumenical version, John XXIII founded the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity in 1960. A full encyclical on ecumenism was later written by John Paul II (*Ut Unum Sint*, 1995). It is quite evident that ecumenism, the movement that advances Christian unity, is not merely a ‘tack on’ to the Church’s customary activities, he said. Instead, since ecumenism is an inherent aspect of her life and career, it must permeate all she does and says. Ecumenical communication is, in fact, a component of the modern Church’s revitalized mission (Kroeger, 2020).

Three Dimensions of Ecumenical Dialogue: Firstly, there is theological dialogue, where experts explain the beliefs of each individual church, so that their characteristics become clearer and better mutual understanding is fostered. The second dimension involves practical co-operation and especially common prayer, and represents the very heart of the ecumenical movement. This aspect of dialogue encompasses not only academic theological dialogue but the whole life of the Church and of all the faithful. The third dimension is renewal and reform of our own Church so that she becomes more fully an authentic sign and witness of the gospel and an invitation for other Christians (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964). Ecumenism is impossible without both institutional revitalization and individual conversion. The ecumenism *ad extra*, the dialogue with the other Churches and Ecclesial communities, presupposes therefore the ecumenism *ad intra*, learning from each other and self-reform. Full communion cannot be achieved by convergence alone but also, and perhaps even more so, by conversion which implies repentance, forgiveness and renewal of heart. Such conversion is a gift of grace too –*sola gratia, sola fide*. Therefore, in the end, unity is not created by us. The unity of the Church is the gift of God’s Spirit which has been solemnly promised to us. Therefore, theological ecumenism must be linked to spiritual ecumenism, which is the heart of ecumenism (Kasper, 2000).

It’s common to draw a distinction between the dialogue in truth and the dialogue in love. While both are significant, they belong together and cannot be divided. Love without truth is void and dishonest; truth without love is hard and repelling. Therefore, we must look for the truth in love while keeping in mind that love can only be real when it expresses the truth.

Even though ecumenism has made great progress toward encouraging harmony and collaboration among Christian traditions, there are still difficulties and roadblocks, such as firmly held theological disagreements and historical disputes. According to Cosmin (2019), theology should be the first area of inquiry for

everyone who has doubts about the ecumenical movement. This is so since it was precisely these theological disputes that led to the original denominational split.

Interfaith Dialogue

In contrast to the ecumenical movement, interfaith dialogue focuses on what makes each of us unique; our distinct differences rather than what unites us. A healthy and courteous discussion of the sharing of ideas and beliefs between persons or groups representing other religious or faith traditions is known as interfaith dialogue. Building bridges for cooperation, encouraging peaceful coexistence, and fostering mutual understanding are the objectives of interfaith dialogue.

In a world where individuals of different religious backgrounds live in close proximity to one another, interfaith dialogue is an invaluable tool for fostering harmony and understanding. By highlighting the common ideals and aspirations that all religions share while honoring the distinctive features of each one, it contributes to the development of a more accepting and peaceful society. As of Cosmin (2019), the majority of us, meanwhile, actually don't know anything about other people's religions other than our own. People with diverse opinions may find it difficult to communicate with one another as a result of this information gap. Interfaith dialogue is now unquestionably necessary because of this lack of connection in a pluralistic society. We can only understand each other better through interaction. Working together through interfaith dialogue enables our world to celebrate our diversity as well as our similarities.

Dialogue between religions bears testament to Christ. It is a conversation about salvation and a component of the Church's overall mission. According to John Paul II, dialogue is the best way to work towards a better human community through fostering respect for one another, working together to solve problems, and supporting the socio-political endeavor of nation-building. Pope John Paul II frequently frames interfaith dialogue in terms of the relationship between God and humanity. One way to be open to God who is present in, with, and through others is to be open to them in conversation (*HR: Recognizing the Spiritual Bonds, 1994*). According to John Paul II, there is no conflict between the Church's view of the economy of salvation and her advocacy of interreligious understanding.

Kroeger (2020), it is evident that Pope Francis has the same viewpoint on interfaith engagement. Pope Francis discusses interreligious dialogue in sections 250–254 of his lovely book *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). He claims that evangelization and interfaith dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another (EG 251). According to Pope Francis, interfaith dialogue is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities, and it is a necessary condition for peace in the world (EG 250). Pope Francis met with Ahmad Al Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, during his visit to the United Arab Emirates from February 3–5, 2019, and the two of them signed the paper "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together."

Forms of Dialogue

1. The dialogue of life, by which people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. It happens naturally when people take part in festivals and rituals that celebrate life.
2. The dialogue of action, in which Christians and non-Christians work together for the complete emancipation and development of humankind. The main objectives of such a discourse among the religions are to unite for the cause of the underprivileged and marginalized as well as to restore justice and ensure peace.
3. In the dialogue of the heart (spiritual experience), individuals, grounded in their respective religious traditions, exchange their spiritual wealth, such as in relation to religion, methods of seeking God, prayer, and reflection. Every person has an insatiable desire for transcendence, and every religion has

a method for satisfying this need for fulfillment and significance. Dialogue of heart offers the possibility to explore the religious traditions of each religion to experience the communion with the Ultimate Reality.

4. The discourse of meaning, (theological reflection), in which experts aim to comprehend their own religious traditions more thoroughly and to cherish one another's spiritual principles.

Opportunities and Challenges for Ecumenism and Interfaith Dialogue in Relation to University/College Chaplaincy

In the framework of chaplaincy, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue offer both opportunities and challenges for advancing spiritual assistance and care in a variety of contexts. Chaplains serve in various institutions, such as hospitals, prisons, the military, colleges and universities, where individuals from different religious backgrounds may seek their services.

University/college chaplains serve students/staff from various religious backgrounds and worldviews, and they play a crucial role in providing a safe and inclusive space for spiritual exploration. Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue within the context of university chaplaincy provide unique opportunities and challenges due to the diverse and dynamic nature of university settings.

OPPORTUNITIES

- **Promoting Inclusivity:** Ecumenical/Interfaith dialogue in chaplaincy allows chaplains to provide inclusive spiritual care, respecting and accommodating the diverse religious and spiritual needs of the individuals they serve, including the non-believers in our institutions.
- **Cultural and Religious Diversity:** University chaplaincies often serve a diverse students/staff body with various religious traditions, worldviews, and cultural backgrounds. This diversity provides an opportunity for chaplains to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding.
- **Ecumenical/Interfaith Collaboration:** Chaplains can work together across religious boundaries to share knowledge and best practices, enhancing the quality of care they provide.
- **Ecumenical/Interfaith Workshops and Events:** University/college chaplaincies can organize interreligious workshops, discussions, and events that encourage students to explore and understand different faiths and belief systems.
- **Fostering Understanding:** Engaging in ecumenical/interfaith dialogues can help individuals from different religious traditions and Christian denominations to gain a deeper understanding of one another's beliefs and practices, promoting tolerance and empathy.
- **Promoting Tolerance and Acceptance:** Chaplains can create an environment where students/staff from different religious backgrounds feel respected, valued, and included, promoting a culture of tolerance and acceptance on campus.
- **Addressing Universal Spiritual Needs:** Chaplains can draw on common spiritual themes, values, and practices that transcend specific religious traditions to address the universal spiritual needs of those they serve.
- **Spiritual Exploration:** Chaplains can support students/staff in their spiritual and existential quests by providing a safe space for exploration and self-discovery, regardless of their religious affiliations.
- **Crisis Support:** In times of crisis or tragedy, chaplains can provide support and comfort to students/staff, recognizing that different individuals may draw on various spiritual or religious resources for solace.
- **Conflict Resolution:** In settings with diverse populations, chaplains can play a role in mediating religious or spiritual conflicts and promoting reconciliation.
- **Multi-faith Services:** Chaplains can organize and lead multi-faith religious services or rituals that bring people from different backgrounds together in moments of reflection, celebration, or mourning. During such moments the real Ecumenical and Interfaith relations become quite vivid.

- **Ethical and Moral Guidance:** University/College chaplains can engage students/staff in conversations about ethics, values, and moral choices, emphasizing shared principles that cut across religious traditions.

CHALLENGES

- **Doctrinal Differences:** Theological and doctrinal differences among different religions can be challenging for chaplains when attempting to provide spiritual care that is inclusive and sensitive to each individual's beliefs.
- **Balancing Inclusivity with Authenticity:** Chaplains may face the challenge of balancing the need to provide inclusive care with the authenticity of their own religious identity and beliefs.
- **Religious Freedom and Sensitivity:** Chaplains need to respect individuals' religious freedom and be sensitive to their preferences while providing spiritual care.
- **Navigating Religious Practices:** Chaplains may encounter difficulties when trying to accommodate the diverse religious practices and rituals of their patients or clients within intuitional constraints.
- **Training and Education:** Ensuring that chaplains are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage in ecumenism and interreligious dialogue is a challenge that requires effective training and education programs.
- **Resource Constraints:** Chaplaincy programs may face limitations in terms of staffing, funding, and physical space, which can hinder their ability to effectively support a diverse student population.
- **Resistance to Change:** In some settings, there may be resistance to adopting more inclusive and interfaith approaches to chaplaincy due to institutional or cultural factors.
- **Confidentiality and Trust:** Building trust with individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can be challenging, especially when they are unsure about the chaplain's ability to keep their conversations confidential.
- **Respect for Secular Perspectives:** Chaplains should be aware of secularism. That means they should engage with respect for these secular and non-religious worldviews, as a significant portion of the students/staff population may identify as secular or non-religious.
- **Lack of focus:** For any interfaith/ecumenical dialogue to succeed, all parties must be clear on the conversation's goals. People can use this to determine which chats to join. For instance, scholars who specialize in scripture, historians, linguists, and other academic disciplines must be included if discussing intricate theological matters is the aim. These conversations may not feel comfortable for laypeople, who are typically younger. Conversely, those who are less interested in theology or who do not fall into a certain religious or spiritual group (such as agnostics or atheists) would find discussions centered on personal values and experiences more interesting. Scholars desiring to examine religious nuances would likely avoid these conversations. As a result, having a variety of talks, each targeted at a certain audience, is essential.
- **Compromise:** when people feel that they need to "water down" or compromise their religious identity in order to fit in. This frequently happens when participants in a debate encounter an impasse that cannot be resolved, such as the question of whether Jesus was the Son of God (a Christian believe) or a prophet (a Muslim belief). The goal of interfaith discussion should be to enable each participant have a deeper understanding of their own religion and identify the distinctive aspects of it. Both sides ought to consent to disagree in the scenario as it is described. They ought to acknowledge the existence of differences and make an effort to comprehend them without sacrificing their own convictions. When the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was negotiating a deal with non-Muslims, he encountered a similar circumstance. If he agreed to worship their various gods for the next year, they would worship his god for a year. The Qur'an's Chapter 109, verse 6, describes his response: "For me is my religion, and for you is yours."
- **Proselytizing, or attempting to convert others:** This is also antithetical to the idea of respecting each other's differences. Participants in a dialogue are free to assert that they are telling the whole

truth. After all, similar assertions made by numerous religions frequently contradict the doctrines of other religions. Instead of advancing their own beliefs, participants in interfaith discourse should aim to learn about those of other religions. While some Muslims view Islamic missionary work, (dawah), as an integral part of their tradition, Muslims must also abide by the Qur'anic principle that "there is no compulsion in religion," found in Qur'an Chapter 2, Verse 256. Thus, interfaith discussion should not be conducted with the intention of converting others, even though there may be a time and place for proselytizing (as in other traditions like Christianity).

- **The condition of the Young People today:** The youth culture, influenced deeply by postmodernism, has lost all sense of the sacred, lacking any sacramental meaning, no transcendental purpose or sense of providence. The concept of transcendence has lost any meaningful place in modern secular thought. According to the norms of contemporary modern secular thought, God is dead. The youth no longer accepts the possibility of affirming his/her belief in a transcendent God. They *Lack of the Sense of Absolute Truth*. The young people today postulate that there is no absolute Truth. Most of them hold to the notion that truth is a contrived illusion, misused by people and special interest groups to gain power over others. Their mentality demonstrates that truths always exist in plural versions. Instead of being a "universe," truth is more like a "multiverse" with many incarnations. Sad enough to some of them truth and error are synonymous. Worse still, many young people have *lost the sense of the sacred*. the youth refuses any appeal to mystery or to the supernatural. As a result, they believe that man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. In addition, there is a culture of disinterestedness, non-responsiveness and indifference in many issues, including religion.

Dialogue between faiths can be a very effective means of reconciling social divides. According to a social science study, developing a close relationship with someone from a different background and getting to know them better leads to a more positive perception of that person's entire group. The same logic applies with interfaith conversations. If we as chaplains pursue interfaith/ecumenical dialogue while attempting to address the challenges discussed above, we can break down stereotypes and find more areas of common ground.

CONCLUSION

Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue in chaplaincy offer opportunities to provide more inclusive and culturally sensitive spiritual care while fostering understanding and collaboration among diverse religious communities. However, they also face challenges related to navigating doctrinal differences, respecting religious freedom, and addressing the diverse needs and preferences of those seeking spiritual support. Effective training, ongoing education, and institutional support are key factors in successfully navigating these challenges and maximizing the opportunities for chaplaincy in a multi-faith context.

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