

*Testimony from Ms Eva Abel, Kenya*

Ecumenical studies have made me realise that churches have made significant strides toward christian unity. This is a positive sign that churches agree more than before, giving hope for the future of the ecumenical movement.

Sadly, however, there is a disconnect in the ecumenical flow. In most instances, the top leadership of churches and theologians, especially those who participate in the ecumenical movement, haven an ecumenical attitude. At the grassroots, Christians from different churches intermarry, work together, are neighbors, and rarely have doctrinal conflicts in their daily lives. Recently I was talking to an Anglican priest in my country who did not want his young children to accompany their aunt to her pentecostal church, saying they would be indoctrinated. As an ecumenist, I tried to intervene so that the children exposed to another tradition would enhance their spirituality and help them understand the concept of One Church even if it will make sense later. I was unsuccessful because he told me, "the ecumenism you are studying at Bossey does not work here" many clergies would behave the same.

One root challenge of ecumenism is ecclesiocentric obsession. I will call it selfishness, fear, and not giving time to visible unity as each church is busy building its dynasty. Clergy do not want their members to go to other churches because they lose their "sheep" and the benefits they bring, primarily financial. One of the ways pastors maintain Christians sometimes is to talk negatively about other churches to show that they are not a church or Christain enough. In Kenya, for example, many churches strategically create programs that attract many members since the Church's primary source of income is tithes and offerings. Hence the more Christians a church has the more money it will have.

The competition for "sheep" is not only an ecumenical challenge but compromises the moral authority of church leaders to speak against moral evils in society since they are afraid to lose the support of wealthy Christians. In some African contexts, we have a high population of Christians and unethical behaviors like corruption which is a root cause of many challenges like poverty, violence, and climate crises because the Church has lost its prophetic voice.

If church leaders unite, they can speak as one voice, and many injustices will cease and enhance development. The Church can also engage in interreligious dialogue as a united church to challenge religious extremism and conflicts more effectively.

During my studies at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, I have started to work on a Master thesis that focuses on the pastoral response of churches in Kenya to gender-based violence in the country. I explore how the communal effort of churches to address gender-based violence becomes an occasion for ecumenical collaboration. The church is a unique societal institution. What should the churches do together in a society with an increasing number of victims of violence? Moreover, especially when it is in the midst of the vulnerable, like women and girls who suffer violence because of their gender?

My role as an upcoming ecumenist? Building ecumenical relationships, academic ecumenism, and living ecumenism in formal and informal settings. Since the Church of Christ is one, Christians need to practice that, and the ecumenical movement gives this space by bringing churches together to achieve the mission of Christ to the world.