

# Ecumenical Vision: Perspectives of Indonesian Seminaries

Daniel Nuhamara<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Historically the churches and seminaries in Indonesia have been very closely related, mutually benefiting from each another. On the one hand, the churches founded the seminaries to respond to the need for trained pastors and other kinds of ministers in their congregations. On the other hand, the seminaries have helped the churches to grow in many ways, assisting them in shaping their visions.

In this short paper, I will try to present some facts and figures, and describe some of the challenges and opportunities faced by seminaries in relation to an ecumenical vision.

### 1. Some Facts and Figures

According to the data in the department of religious affairs, there are more than 200 theological seminaries and Bible schools in Indonesia. Those schools or seminaries belong to four main theological associations.

First is the Association of Theological Schools in Indonesia (Persetia), which consists of 40 member schools which were founded denominationally or inter-denominationally. The Indonesian Council of Churches (PGI) helped in its establishment, which means that this association has an ecumenical nature and an ecumenical spirit. Persetia is an open association whose member schools are from various theological backgrounds, which claim to be ecumenical, evangelical, or Pentecostal. Majority of the member schools are founded and supported by mainline Protestant churches. One of the membership qualifications is that the school must be supported by at least one church synod. This means that the seminary should have close ties with a particular denomination or some denominations. At the moment, there are about 8000 students enrolled in these 40 theological seminaries or faculties.

Second is the Association of Evangelical Theological Schools (Pasti), which has more than 80 members throughout Indonesia. Though the number of their member schools is bigger than Persetia's, their actual enrollment is lower than Persetia's. Pasti member schools are supported by churches with smaller membership or by foundations without a clear relationship with any particular church denomination.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Daniel Nuhamara served as dean of Theology Faculty of Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga, Indonesia from 2001 until 2009. He is currently the chair of the Association of Theological Schools in Indonesia (Persetia) and a member of the Executive Committee of the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia. This paper was presented at the South East Asia Sub-Regional Consultation on "Churches- Seminaries: Appraising our Ecumenical Vision for Today's World", held in Manila, Philippines on 26-28 November 2008.

Third is the association of Pentecostal Bible/Theological Schools, many of which do not have set academic standards.

Why do the Evangelical and Pentecostal seminaries have their own associations when Persetia is an open association? A similar question can be asked of the evangelical churches and Pentecostal churches having their own councils or fellowships. One of the reasons is because they have a different understanding of the mission of the church in the world. However, some of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have also joined the Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia (PGI or the Communion of Churches in Indonesia).

Apart from these three associations among the Protestant denominations, there is an Association of Catholic Seminaries with 10 members. These seminaries function mainly to provide priests and other lay ministers for the Roman Catholic churches.

These four associations of theological seminaries reflect the four major groups of Christianity in Indonesia, which have long existed in the country. More recently, there has been a trend or stream of independent missionaries coming from abroad, holding business visas, without a clear connection with the national/local churches. These missionaries come with a strong financial support from their churches abroad (such as South Korea and USA), and they have started theological seminaries independent of the established denominations, with the goal of church planting or starting new churches. This is problematic because they are generally busy transferring church members from one denomination to another — i.e. proselytism.

## **2. Vision and Mission of Persetia and Its Member Schools**

I will focus on the Association of Theological Schools in Indonesia (Persetia), in which I am involved, and its member schools. It is strange that the Association has no formulation or statement of vision and mission. However, it has a stated goal, which runs as follows: “to advance and develop theological schools, the science of theology, and theological thoughts for the ministry of the church in the world and especially in the context of the Indonesian nation and society.” Every generation of Executive Board and the member schools should struggle to understand and give meaning to this broad formulation of purpose. As an association of theological schools/institutions, Persetia must, first of all, see as its main task the development of each member school into a good educational institution, which gives good quality education.

Second, it must create means for developing theology and theological thought that form the foundation and basis of the church ministries to the world and the Indonesian society. This has to do with the vision and mission of the church. What is the mission of the church? Certainly, it is the church that should struggle together to formulate its understanding of the mission of the church. However, theological seminaries should be the place where this question is discussed academically and where an adequate theological statement should be developed. The failure of theological education to come to terms with this issue also affects the church’s understanding of its own mission, because most of the church leaders are products of the seminaries.

Looking at the vision and mission of some seminaries that are members of Persetia, it surprises me to see that “the ecumenical dimension” is rarely mentioned, except for one or two schools. This phenomenon indicates the lack of understanding of or attention to the ecumenical vision and mission.

Many theological seminaries within the association were founded and owned by a church, churches, or denominations. Therefore, the seminaries tend to serve the need of those churches and denominations. This does not imply that the main task of a seminary is to do the mission of a church or denomination. It is also normal that those seminaries owned and founded by a church or denomination should help to nurture the identity and development of the denomination. However, to nurture and develop a denomination should not be taken as an adequate reason for the existence of a seminary. Therefore, a seminary’s vision must be related to the task of enabling the church to take part in God’s mission to the world.

What then is God’s vision/ mission? Is God’s vision limited to humanity or does it encompass the whole creation? Is it just for the life hereafter or does it include life here and now? At this point it is likely that the evangelicals will answer those questions slightly differently from those who claim to be ecumenical. As an open association, we in Persetia try to listen to each other and come to more or less a common understanding that the church’s mission should be the preaching of the whole Gospel for the whole of humanity and creation. Because of this broad understanding and the huge task it entails, we are called to work together with an ecumenical spirit. And we work together not only with those who have the same faith but with others who are also working for justice and peace and a more humane life.

However, we are challenged by the evangelical faith about the Great Commission of making disciples. Should this aspect of preaching the good news be left behind? We must be critical of the label, “great commission,” which should be understood as broader than simply trying to bring people to church and making them church members. I do believe that disciples are those who follow the teacher in doing what the teacher does. So to follow Christ is to love God and our neighbors. The great commission is to do the greatest commandment, which Christ taught as loving God and loving the neighbor as oneself.

### **3. Nurturing the ecumenical vision and spirit**

As an association of theological schools we do have programs for faculty and students (graduate and undergraduate level). In the following I will describe some programs that we have been doing and will continue to do in the future.

**a. Study Institute.** Every year a number of faculty in a certain field of study are brought together for two weeks to struggle together. Initially that was done to help the faculties from the association’s member schools to improve their knowledge and to catch up with the latest development in the field in order to improve their teaching. Lately, these meetings have changed their approach from field of study to a focus on certain topics which are in line with ecumenical concerns. These topics include feminism, environmental issues, HIV/ AIDS, globalization, inter-faith dialogue, etc. as seen from a theological/Christian point of view. We are hoping that through such discussions the faculties who take part in the Study Institute will bring back those issues to be included in their teaching at their respective

schools. In such a study we do invite a resource person to help with the discussion. What we need to do in the future is to invite resource persons from ecumenical bodies such as World Council of Churches (WCC), Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), and PGI to share their ecumenical vision. Otherwise, such abundant and well prepared resources will not reach the grassroots, such as theological seminaries or local congregations.

**b. Summer School for graduate Students.** Every year Persetia organizes a two-week course for graduate students who are mostly pastors doing their M.Th. degrees. More than one hundred graduate students attend this summer course facilitated by foreign faculties from overseas seminaries. There are two main purposes for this course. First is to give an international dimension to the graduate program by inviting professors from abroad. Second is to provide opportunity for graduate students to struggle together about their common vision and mission for their ministry as future leaders of the churches in Indonesia, and thereby nurture the ecumenical spirit of solidarity and cooperation. This program has been running for more than a decade now and we will maintain it.

What needs to be done in the future is, first, to include the graduate students from evangelical and catholic associations. Second, to always include the sharing of ecumenical vision from ecumenical bodies such as WCC, CCA, and PGI while also inviting resource persons from other streams of Christianity. So far we have always invited Catholic theologians as resource persons.

**c. National Consultation of Indonesian Theological Students.** This is a program held once every two years, bringing together undergraduate students from member schools. This year, we made a radical change whereby we invited students from three main associations: Persetia, Evangelical, and Catholic seminaries. Resource persons were also from these three associations. This is part of the ecumenical formation where undergraduate students, the future leaders of the churches, are exposed to the current challenges in Indonesia and challenged to develop relevant theology to meet those challenges. More than 70 students from all over Indonesia attended the most recent Consultation, the largest group ever representing the three associations. The consultation is also an opportunity to be exposed to the ecumenical vision but through listening to one another in a dialogical environment. We celebrate our differences with a willingness to learn from one another and a desire to work together in responding to God's mission in the world especially in Indonesian context. According to the report, the consultation established a network of theological students that facilitates an opportunity to communicate more intensively in the future. It is called the Fellowship of Indonesian Theological Students, from these three associations.

**d. Theological Journal.** Persetia has a biannual Theological Journal whereby articles related to ecumenical issues can be published and disseminated. However, due to our financial limitation, the Journal does not come out regularly. We do, however, maintain this program as a strategic means for spreading and nurturing the ecumenical vision and mission. What needs to be done in the future is to include articles published by ecumenical bodies such as WCC and CCA, translated into Bahasa Indonesia for a wider readership

e. We are thankful that in many PGI's programs/seminars/workshops such as Church and Society Consultation, Seminars on Religions, etc., Persetia's member schools are included, thereby saving our limited resources for other programs. What needs to be done in the future is to also invite the evangelical and Catholic associations to such programs of PGI.

f. As finance is becoming a critical matter of concern, we need to consider the possibility of having a consortium model of theological education in the near future. This will allow the pooling of resources in several areas, including theological schools from various denominations and associations, such as Persetia, Evangelical, and Catholic associations. This has been done or tried out in Western countries.

## **Conclusion**

Theological seminaries in Indonesia are many compared to the total number of Christians. They are grouped into four associations of theological schools namely: Persetia (interdenominational), the Evangelical, the Pentecostal, and the Catholic. To have a common vision based on God's vision is not an easy one. Nevertheless, some efforts have been attempted and it is promising. We must first of all create a good climate of mutual learning and listening in order to come to a common understanding. Even reaching a common understanding is difficult, but we can also celebrate the differences and learn to work together.