

Promoting Ecumenism between Catholic and Protestant Churches in Thailand

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Religions in Thailand

The main religions in Thailand are: Buddhism (Hinayana or Theravada), about 94 %; Islam, 4.5 %; Christianity, 1%; the rest are Brahmanism, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc.

Christianity in Thailand

Christian churches fall under the supervision of the Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Culture, of the Government of Thailand. There are 5 main Christian groups in Thailand: Roman Catholic, Church of Christ in Thailand, Evangelical Fellowship in Thailand, Thailand Baptist Church Association, and Seventh Day Adventist Church Foundation of Thailand.

From 1988, three Protestant groups form “The Thailand Protestant Church Coordinating Committee” and its purposes are: (a) to affirm the unity among all Protestant groups in Thailand; (b) to bring good cooperation and collaboration in all ministries and religious activities; and (c) to be the coordination-center with the government sector and the private sector.

Some Historical Beginnings of an Ecumenical Vision

In the 20th century, after protestant churches had gone through a period of aggressive and uncompromising faith, which existed in each group, the ecumenical movement emerged. The international center, called the World Council of Churches, was established in 1948. Its main office is in Geneva, Switzerland. Members are from many Protestant and Eastern Orthodox groups. The ecumenical movement has touched many young people as it is ideal for those who desire a spirit of unity. Many young people gathered in “Taize”, a community in France. The founder of the Taize community was a Protestant servant of God (minister). Even today the Taize community draws a lot of people, especially young adults, to pray for unity and oneness in the body of Christ. Activities and liturgy are not specific to any denomination.

Biblical Foundation for Affirming our Ecumenical Vision

John 17:21 says “so that they may all be one” as Jesus is one with the Father. Jesus’ prayer helps us understand the will of God and the humility of Jesus that the Father is one with the Son. Paul prayed for himself and the church that they may be “of the same mind, with the

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same love, united in heart, thinking one thing” (Phil 2:2). While we have different theological perspectives and doctrinal convictions in which we may not agree, instead of focusing on those differences, we focus on what we hold in common in terms of our faith.

1. We believe in the Holy Trinity – the Father who is the Creator, the Son who is the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit who is the Advocate.
2. We believe in one holy catholic church, of which Jesus is the head, and we believe in the communion of saints.
3. We believe in the final judgment that all the living and dead will be judged together.
4. We believe in eternal life.
5. We accept the three universal creeds which are the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed and Athanasian Creed.

Proposed and Current Practices for Affirming an Ecumenical Vision in Thailand

I propose these practical approaches as well as share current practices in promoting ecumenism in Thailand:

1. Praying together for Christian Unity

This ecumenical prayer movement is practiced by different groups and on different occasions. For instance, the Women’s Catholic group has joined with other Catholic and Protestant groups in taking part in the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle which is held annually in January. Prayer groups have gathered together for special occasions for the country, e.g. recently, for the auspicious celebration of the 80th birthday of the King of Thailand. In 2008 we joined together in a memorial ceremony commemorating the life of HRM Kanlayanee Wattana, royal princess and sister of the King of Thailand, who passed away.

I would like to promote prayer events with different groups emphasizing different aspects of prayer. Currently there are Taize prayer groups meeting on a regular basis from among Protestant and Catholic seminaries. Gathering together in prayer helps us to draw nearer to God and to build unity.

2. Changing from Competition to Cooperation

I have observed that most of the conflicts among denominations are due to competitiveness. For example, conflicts sometimes arise from overstepping the boundaries of other missions and some Christian groups are aggressively evangelizing others. It has been reported that members of one church have seized new believers from another church, which caused ill feelings and is very destructive to the church as a whole. We do not have to compete with others or minimize others because there is a more important mission for us to do. Majority of Thai people do not yet know Jesus Christ and need to receive salvation through His blood. There is still a cry for help heard all over Thailand. We need to cooperate with each other. We must work together to proclaim Jesus since we, Catholics and Protestants, are serving the same Lord. With a mere 1% Christian population in Thailand, there is more than enough mission for all denominations to do.

Currently there are some ministries in which we serve cooperatively, such as the Christmas Outreach on the BTS (sky train system) and at big shopping malls during the Christmas season. With other Protestant seminaries, we sponsor an annual 40-day Prayer & Fasting for Thailand during this time as well.

3. Stopping Criticism, Beginning Dialogue

Conflicts, resulting from our prejudices toward other groups or blaming others, should be eliminated or prevented. We ought to share and exchange our opinions, share our problems, especially those that we hold in common as Christians. We are a minority religion in our country. The image most Thais have about Christianity in Thailand is that it is a western religion. Our conversation should center on how we can help people to understand that Christianity originated in Asia and Jesus is an Asian. We also need to realize that we are working in a more complicated society with various means of communication and many diverse cultures, languages and faiths. It is very important that we discuss harmoniously to find a way for God to shine through us, as denomination, seminary or church. Each is sent as missionary/ambassador to give God the glory. Currently, on an annual basis, the faculty members of Protestant and Catholic seminaries in Bangkok gather to dialogue about a particular doctrine of faith in order to understand and learn from one another.

4. Moving from Isolation to Cooperation

Currently in Thailand we have many different “NGO” groups. The causes these organizations represent are diverse – e.g., democracy, environment, global warming, consumer rights, etc. Christians are a minority in this country. The lack of cohesion among Christians works to our disadvantage. If we work together, we can make a difference by having more social bargaining power. For instance, we can be influential in creating federal laws concerning morality – i.e. morality to guide the society and even to lead the community to live the way Jesus taught us.

We can cooperatively work together to preserve God’s creation. The concept of *oikoumene*, “the inhabited world”, means the world is not only for humans but for all God’s creation. Ecumenism is seen in the sense of the relationship between men and women or the harmony of humanity with God’s creation. The idea of ecumenism is not only looking at the unity of humanity but the unity of creation as a whole. That means we, having been entrusted with God’s creation, also need to be concerned with the way we care for animals and the environment, which is a part of God’s creation.

5. Developing Curriculum and Sharing Teaching Resources

This is the age of alliance. In the 21st century, we are more open about faith and there is less fear of different faiths. We should be less concerned about our differences as Christians and more concerned about the real evils that threaten society, like poverty, materialism and consumerism. The ecumenical movement encourages young people to move in the same direction towards God, centering in Christ. Priests and pastors, who are the servants of God, should have a role and responsibility in renewing the spirituality of the society. We

have to challenge the younger generation. The leaders of both Catholic and Protestant churches should be able to work together in the common spirit of Christ.

Developing curriculum can be done together on aspects we hold in common, such as on the Apostles' Creed, morality, roles of men and women, preservation of the environment, the treatment of minority peoples, understanding different cultures, dealing with HIV/AIDS or Bible instruction in the community. Academic seminars need to be held on problematic topics. Currently, we are sharing our resources by inviting each other's faculty. At the Bangkok Institute of Theology, I have invited a priest friend to teach in my church history class about the history of the Catholic Church in Thailand. Our seminary president has invited a priest to share about catholic liturgy in the worship and liturgy class that he teaches. This is a practical way in which we can work together by sharing resources.

6. Listening to and Learning from One Another: Way to Build Respect and Acceptance

In September 2006, I joined an ecumenical dialogue, which is part of Roman Catholic-Protestant colloquium in Asia where Catholic Bishops and representatives from many Protestant groups participated. In a meeting session, we shared our experiences and agreed that we would find that we were not so different if we were open and listened to each other. For instance, a Pentecostal pastor confessed that he just discovered that the Presbyterians also have the Holy Spirit. A minister from India also confessed that Pentecostal Churches also believe in the Father and the Son. A Catholic lay woman told us that she discovered from her daughter's friend who was Methodist that Protestants also believe in the Holy Trinity. An evangelical minister from Bangladesh said he just realized that Catholics also believe in Jesus Christ, not just the Virgin Mary and the saints. And there were a lot more similarities. From that dialogue, many of us said that it was disappointing that in the past, whenever we had dialogue with others, Protestants refused to listen, criticizing others, and trying to convert others to their church.

7. Ecumenical Retreats to Build Understanding and Unity

Since 2004 the Church of Christ in Thailand and the Catholic Church have sponsored an annual camp for seminarians and faculty. This camp has given an opportunity for students in their final year of study to meet, get to know, and learn from one another. It is a time to learn from each other about different topics such as the Bible from a Catholic and Protestant perspective, Catholic mass and Protestant worship, communion, the role of Mary, etc. There is a time for open expression of opinions during an open floor time. It is an opportunity to build and share friendship. The time spent together at this ecumenical retreat produces fruit in the heart of our young pastors and priests. The time together has great value for their future ministry. Those who have attended the retreat have gained new eyes to see, open minds to understand, and receptive hearts to cooperate with and help their brothers and sisters in Christ.

8. Using Cyber Space to Build Bridges

In this century we can't deny the profound effect that cyber space, i.e. the use of the internet, has on the world. Ecumenical websites are a very important tool through which both

Protestant and Catholic Christians can minister. Courses can be taught through the internet, similar to participating in a seminar with a lecturer. Some subjects covered are the Bible, evangelism, forming and leading a cell group. Through websites, many can access information about the courses that are offered at Catholic and Protestant seminaries, library resources such as theological journals, use of a seminary's facilities for conferences, retreats and events. It was through my involvement with a secular website, Pantip, www.pantip.com, in 2001, that I began to meet those who had questions about religion and faith in Jesus. This developed into an opportunity for me to be a regular advisor for this website, spending time replying to questions coming from other believers. This opportunity led to meeting other Protestant and Catholic believers. Later, I became a regular contributor and advisor on the Catholic website, at www.newmana.com. Since 2004, I have been a regular contributor to the Catholic publication, *Issara Magazine*, which means Freedom.

I have found that God has given me many opportunities to minister to my Catholic colleagues, brothers and sisters in Christ. It was through this initial experience with this website, that I became more aware and actively involved in promoting ecumenism. I also encourage my students to visit these websites to better understand how the world thinks so that they might know how to respond as a Christian minister.

Conclusion

The idea of contemporary ecumenism is the gathering of Christians from different groups, denominations and different theological persuasions to be reconciled in the Holy Trinity. We need to dialogue in order to promote understanding and cooperation so that we may become more one in Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Even though we have different liturgies and practices in how we experience the intimacy of God, and even though we may have different understandings about Jesus and the movement of the Holy Spirit, we still have many things in common in which we can work cooperatively because we are serving the same Christ. We need to consider what we have in common first and begin from there. We will discover that the most important aspect we have in common is the person of Jesus Christ, who is the center of our lives and mission, and for whom we serve as "priests and pastors". As a seminary we have a key role in promoting a spirit of ecumenism, as we educate and train future church leaders of our nation. As we educate and model this spirit, it is my hope that our students will carry this spirit with them as they serve and lead, working alongside their fellow ministers and priests, instead of working against them. And through these, we might be one as the Father and Son are one.