

Synthesis Report from the South East Asian Consultation

Our Affirmation

Our churches, National Councils of Churches, the Christian Conference of Asia may be signs of the presence and unity of the body of Christ in Asia – but “how are we faring together? Are we really on the same track?”

Thus the Christian Conference of Asia-Faith, Mission and Unity (CCA-FMU) held this consultation on “Churches and Seminaries: Appraising Our Ecumenical Vision for Today’s World” at Shalom UCCP Center in Manila, Philippines on 25-29 November 2008, bringing together twenty-two representatives of NCCs and churches and their related seminaries from the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia.

The Rev. Dr. Everett L. Mendoza (theologian of the UCCP) reminded the group in a keynote address that Jesus’ basic command is discipleship: “deny the self, take up the cross and follow me”. The way to God’s righteousness is the way of the cross. To take up the cross means to enter a life that society and the authorities would consider outside the mainstream, alien and dangerous. It means rejecting emperor-worship, obeying God instead of human beings. However, he said, when the church historically enjoyed imperial sponsorship, unprecedented freedom to propagate the gospel turned to intolerance of other faiths and a license to persecute non-Christians. Today, however, he said, the realities in Asia are historic moments which challenge the church to renew its answer to Jesus’ call to discipleship.

Reading the Ecumenical Situations in South East Asia — as Churches & Councils

Expressions of ecumenism in South East Asia include occasional joint or interdenominational worship/services – e.g. Week of Prayer for Christian Unity or at Easter; but also joint advocacy for justice and peace issues. While there is respect for each other’s baptism and there have been opportunities of sharing the Holy Communion, often times we are still divided at the Lord’s Table. The following came out of the sharing:

NCCP¹: Ecumenism through cooperation of member churches as well as with civil society and the Catholic Church in advocacy for justice and peace, human dignity. NCCP has a regular ecumenical formation program, e.g. through the Vacation Church School and Basic Ecumenical Course Regional councils help to propagate ecumenism at local/grassroots level.

CCI/PGI²: Ecumenism is not uniformity or institutional unity but walking together, learning together in a never-ending learning process; ecumenism in action and together with people of other faiths. Ecumenism is living in (*menein*) one home (*oikos*), which is this world. Islam

¹ National Council of Churches in the Philippines

² Communion of Churches in Indonesia/Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia

does not separate religion from politics, so Christians also have political parties just like the Muslims.

MCC³: Ecumenism is for unity of churches through mutual fellowship, mutual understanding, mutual acceptance and cooperation in common concerns. The Buddhist concept of separation of religion and politics has also influenced the churches – nothing to do with politics or the state. Unity of churches must also deal with the plurality of ethnic groups in Myanmar.

CCT⁴: Ecumenism includes quest for Christian unity, reconciliation and wholeness – which is our mandate as Christians and which we do out of faithfulness to Christ. The concept of separation of religion and politics has also kept the churches from political involvements.

FABC⁵: Ecumenism is becoming ‘communion of communities’ – including dialogue with other faiths, with culture and with the poor. Ecumenical relationship includes advocacy for justice and peace.

CCA⁶: The inception of the ecumenical vision in Asia was closely related to the struggle for nation-building and independence from colonization. It was a critique of the missionary movement that came with colonization. Ecumenical vision is much bigger than the institutionalized ecumenical organizations. Much needed shifts are: (a) from competition to cooperation of churches; (b) from condemnation to dialogue with other religions; (c) from isolation to collaboration with civil society and people’s movements; (d) from disintegration to integrity of all of God’s creation. Being ecumenical means embracing the world that God created, loved and entrusted to us – with its many challenges. Ecumenism includes movement to Christian unity + unity of humankind + interconnectedness of humankind and creation so we can live truly as God’s household.

Reading the Ecumenical Situations in South East Asia – as Seminaries

Indonesia: Many seminaries and Bible schools are denominationally oriented, while some are interdenominational. They have organized their respective theological associations. Persetia, the association of mainline churches’ seminaries (including evangelical and Pentecostal churches), does programs for faculty and students across denominations and intends to incorporate inputs on ecumenism in such programs. Recognizing that having a common vision is not easy, the group realized the need to create a good climate of mutual learning and listening, while celebrating the differences and learning to work together.

Myanmar: Most seminaries are church-based and run by their conventions or ethnic associations. Mission is to help upgrade theological institutions and promote relevant theological education that will equip people for mission and ministry. ATEM, the national theological association, is an ecumenical endeavor. ATEM has identified the gaps between

³ Myanmar Council of Churches

⁴ Church of Christ in Thailand

⁵ Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences

⁶ Christian Conference of Asia

church and seminary on the nature of spirituality, between academic teaching and the need for contextual theologizing, and between Christian life and being citizens of a country. There is a need to materialize ecumenical spirit and action at the grassroots and to redefine ecumenism and remove it from the monopoly of Protestant churches.

Thailand: There is good cooperation between Catholic and Protestant seminaries – e.g. practice of praying together for Christian unity, holding retreats and seminars together, exchange or sharing of faculty. There is still a need to move from competition to cooperation of churches, from criticism to dialogue with other groups, from isolation to cooperation with NGOs for life issues. Seminaries need to work together to develop curriculum, share teaching resources, listen to and learn from one another in respect and acceptance, and use cyberspace to build bridges.

Philippines: This was the first time for seminary representatives of the Philippines to meet in a consultation like this. Many seminaries have existed for 100 years while there are many younger seminaries as well. Theology students often reflect the factions in their sending churches and the wider society. Living the ecumenical spirit is through justice and peace, ending of religious prejudice and bigotry, involvement in eco-justice, affirming abundant life for all especially the poor and marginalized. We need to nurture the attitude of appreciating ecumenical learning.

Sharing our Visions

(a) Indonesia

Some national events in Indonesia that are indicative of new realities struggling to emerge from the old:

1. Economic growth—the last four years have posted a dramatic increase in economic development. A wider and equal distribution of income (including church workers) has been noted;
2. Regional autonomy – people and governments of respective regions are motivated to develop their relationship including intensifying campaigns against groups who are exploiting the natural resources;
3. Direct relationship between the president, governors and members of the regional and national parliament;
4. Increasing trend of church leaders involving in practical politics—church pastors are now joining politics as candidates for position in the regional and national parliament;
5. Natural and social disasters that took the lives of many innocent people—e.g. the Bali bombings and several consecutive tsunamis;
6. Church growth (in numbers) in local and national levels;
7. Terrorism espoused by radical and hard line groups;
8. Environmental destruction including illegal logging, exploitation of mining sites and water pollution;
9. Financial crisis.

How are these points related to Asian and global developments?

1. Increase in migrant workers from one country to another in South East Asia;
2. Increase of economic participation not just in Asia but in global market as well;
3. Increase of radicals and fundamentalist movements.

We dream of a country, which, in the next 50 years will be conducive to the full development of human beings and creation:

1. A civil society where justice rolls and prosperity is enjoyed by the people;
2. A country (and world) where one can live and enjoy security (no jobless people);
3. A better environment where natural resources are used for the benefit of the people and not against them;
4. A country and world where human rights are fully respected;
5. A country and world where people of different faith and social statuses can live together in harmony.

Nature and shape of the ecumenical enterprise:

National Context

1. formulating and sounding our prophetic voice towards the government and power holders;
2. comprehensive cooperation among the churches and people of different faiths;
3. involvement in programming and addressing social, political, economic and cultural problems of the country;
4. giving place to all Christian denominations in ecumenical gatherings, parades, and journey.

Asian Region

1. CCA becomes the center of thought and ideas, including contextual theology, developing and disseminating those thoughts and ideas through workshops, seminars and publications;
2. Developing a team of scholars especially in churches and seminaries;
3. More concrete operation of churches to handle the needs of migrant workers.

Global Context

1. Pooling of resources in developing and strengthening cooperation of churches in developed and developing countries;
2. Communion for as many churches and Christians are supposed to develop together – a meeting point in the center of dialogue for all Christians and people of different faiths to identify and handle problems;
3. An open place together for appreciation concerning these problems.

(b) Myanmar

Even though the Burmese people are sitting together and talking about the government and the country, we don't see any positive response. Oppressive military government continues with its oppression, arresting its opponents and putting them in prison. The people are waiting for the coming elections in 2010 with some doubt. Economy in Myanmar is

sanctioned by the United States and European Union. So export and import are very limited and are mainly coming from the boundaries of Thailand and China. Famine in the western part of the country is prevalent, threatening the lives of the people. On the cultural aspect, ethnic minorities still exist. Discriminative differentiation between Buddhists and non-Buddhists also exists.

Myanmar is naturally rich with crops, minerals and natural resources. Precious metals and stones like gold, silver, ruby and jade abound in our mountains and forests. But these do not feed the people. The mining industry only makes the rich people richer. So we envision a country in the future where people can equally partake of its natural wealth.

In relation to the new vision, we have enough theological and ecumenical resources because of our established seminaries. I think that would be our major contribution to the future – resources in the ecumenical-theological training.

For the ecumenical enterprise, our target will be to re-build our nation together. We're looking forward to a peaceful election in 2010. We cannot see the outcome yet, but again, church people are optimistic that things will be better after the elections.

(c) Thailand

In Thailand there is economic crisis due to the recent political unrest, which brought almost everything to a standstill. Many of our youth have moved from the rural areas to the capital to find jobs, usually ending up doing hard labor. Others come to the cities to pursue their studies. As many Christian youth leave their churches behind, only the old ones are left in the local churches. The youth may still practice Christianity and attend worship at other denominations, where they may not feel welcomed or find different teachings. If only we can teach the concept of ecumenism to the local churches, we can readily address this concern faced by many of our youth – so when they move anywhere they can attend other churches yet remain faithful to their church of origin.

We should also teach church members to respect our culture; that we can keep our cultural heritage without compromising our Christian faith. Christians can join Thai festivals without losing Christianity. For example, some church leaders prohibit their members from celebrating the water festival every November because of its alleged connection with Buddhism.

On the political aspect, even though the Church of Christ in Thailand cannot join any political events, Christians as individuals can join the struggles of any cause-oriented groups. As Christians, we should cooperate with people who are concerned and show compassion to the marginalized, the poor, the widow, the imprisoned, and the like.

The present political events in Thailand have direct relation to Asian and global development. The present case of global economic recession which started in the U.S. is in one way or another affecting the Asian countries.

The shape of ecumenism should not be permanent. It should go with the changing times. The church cannot always be on a micro-level. To be effective, it must be working on a macro perspective. We should have more dialogues to talk about ecumenical spirit. Seminaries should also incorporate more ecumenical based subjects in their curriculum. Also we need to strengthen discussions on contemporary theology because of its suitability to our situation today.

(d) Philippines

We would like to start the Philippine report with a confession. We need to humbly confess that we have failed to provide a better life for our people. We failed to be a beacon or source of light. Despite our being a Christian country, the Philippines remains to be corrupt. The church, whose business is to be prophetic, has become profit-oriented, if not a maintenance-church. We also need to confess that apart from the need to do mission, there are realities that need to be addressed:

1. Crisis of orientation – there is now an economic and political interplay in our midst (e.g. Bangsamoro autonomy, the Cordillera independence, the indigenous people's continuous cry for political identity, etc.);
2. So much brokenness and violence around us - in the academe, in the self, in the family and even brokenness in the church;
3. Economic globalization (and its unholy trinity: legalization, privatization and liberalization) which adds more agony to the already existing aches and pains of the Filipino people.

Despite these, we have never lost our faith. We still believe that the church can become agent of transformation and new way of life. This keeps us in our struggle and inspires us to work ecumenically. We don't simply accept the history that we learn. We have also to be critical of the interpretation of that history. We also need to have this critical look at the Bible. We need to deconstruct and reconstruct.

The crisis of capitalism or the bankruptcy of the capitalist system is not only experienced globally or regionally, but also locally – as in the Philippines. I think most of the South East Asian countries are affected by this crisis. But we see this also as a hope because this will open our minds to new possibilities and paradigms.

Vision means providing the landscape for, say, 50 years from now. We can start by envisioning or affirming alternatives. Many people say there are no alternatives to globalization. But the Philippine group feels that there are already small steps undertaken. There are already grass root experiences and encounters that can respond to economic globalization. We simply need to enhance and promote these life-enhancing values. We dream of a world where we have food to eat, water to drink, vegetables to partake, land to share, fresh air to breathe, and a will to restore God's Eden. We dream of a civilization with a heart, a new heaven and a new earth, an empowered community motivated by conscience and led by the Spirit of God. We dream of a collective society where people share, profits are shared, where farmers have lands to till. We dream of a transformed people grounded in hope, rooted in faith, motivated by love, and led by the Spirit. Our dream is a very simple

dream. If we could walk under the trees, step on the grass, know that we have our own individual responsibilities in enhancing the sustainability of life.

We need to bring the seminary to where the people are, rather than to simply wait for the people to come our seminaries. We also need to be more self-reliant and not dependent on foreign funding. We also dream and affirm the importance of ecumenical bodies but they must focus more on the grassroots. We feel the need to nurture a continuing dialogue. We need to tell the stories of the saints in our time rather than just only telling the stories of saints in the past.

Our specific recommendation to NCCP and CCA is this: since we have 24 theological institutions under the NCCP member churches, we seek the assistance of NCCP and CCA in our effort to establish a theological association, like that of Indonesia and Myanmar.