

CTC BULLETIN

VOL. XXII, No. 2. August 2006

A Survey of the Ecumenical Scenario in Asia: Prospects and Challenges

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It has become an oft-quoted statement these days that “the ecumenical movement faces a complex situation at all levels – global, regional, and national”. At the same time, in more eloquent stories, we hear about the expansion and growth of Christianity and the shift of the centre of gravity of the Christian world towards the South – to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Philip Jenkins, in his book *“The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity”*¹, describes how Christianity is expanding very well in the global South. He predicts that Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but that the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American. This global perspective should make us think carefully before asserting “what Christians believe” or “how the church is changing.” In this context, the WCC General Secretary, Dr. Sam Kobia, asks ‘what kind of Christianity this will be’ if Christianity is shifting its centre of gravity from the North to the South? The ‘informal sector’ of Christianity is becoming more important as evidenced by the proliferation of mega-churches and non-denominational congregations. Moreover, in Northern countries, there seems to be an increased interest in spirituality, which is often sought outside of religious structures.² The fact is that the ecumenical movement is not in a position to address these issues due to various reasons. Asia is not an exception to this trend and reality.

Several concerns have been expressed and various reasons have been pointed out while trying to understand the declining trends of ecumenical movement since the end of last century. These include increasing denominationalism, resistance to responding to the call to wider fellowship, a tendency to affirm particular ecclesiastical and confessional identities, efforts to strengthen confessional identities to strengthen institutional and organisational profile, proliferation of ecumenical organisations and structures, decrease in membership of mainline Protestant churches in the North, lack of vision and commitment of leaders to promote ecumenism, lack of interest in ecumenical formation among younger generation, etc. The lack of commitment to strengthening ecumenical fellowship at all levels and negative attitudes or disinterest among church leaders at national, regional and global levels have also been pointed out as reasons for the general decline of ecumenism in recent times. According to the former WCC General Secretary, Dr. Konrad Raiser, “in most churches ecumenism no longer seems to have the quality of a vision which mobilises people to

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² Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

transcend inherited traditions and to engage in acts of renewal. The younger generation which, in the early stages of the ecumenical movement, was its main protagonist, is less and less attracted by the search for visible institutional forms of church unity and co-operation. While there is a spiritual quest, the concern for 'Being Church' cannot easily be communicated, particularly through the secular media. Simultaneously, church leaders defending the commitment to ecumenical fellowship find themselves confronted with conservative and fundamentalist positions that identify ecumenism with tendencies that weaken the foundations of culture and religion. For many, even the term "ecumenism" provokes suspicion and rejection."³ He observes that the "complex situation full of uncertainties" that marks the ecumenical movement is also reflected in a lack of coherence and overall integration at its organisational level."

While these trends are global phenomena, it is pertinent to undertake self-examination of current Asian scenario.

Asia's Ecumenical Impulse

The Asian contribution to the ecumenical movement has been widely recognised. In terms of contributions that provided new insights and impetus toward developing theological thinking, missiological and ecclesiological understanding and new directions for socio-political involvement, one must acknowledge what Asian churches and the Asian ecumenical movement have been rendering for almost a century. Asian church leaders have provided profound leadership in the global ecumenical movement. However, when discussions have been going on these days about the nature of ecumenism and the future of the ecumenical movement, Asian contributions to such debate have been minimal or not visible and irrelevant. It is in this context that I am trying to make an attempt to link this discussion on the current Asian ecumenical scenario at the regional and national levels with the early ecumenical initiatives in Asia and the contributions of Asians to the global ecumenical movement.

When the Edinburgh Mission Conference - considered the watershed of ecumenical history - met in 1910, two Asian voices implored the Western churches to recognise three calls as those towards which the Churches of Asia must press. These goals were defined as "partnership in mission, autonomy in government, and unity in life". The voices of the two young Asian church leaders - V. S. Azariah of India and C. Y. Cheng of China - were among the seventeen Asian participants in the Edinburgh conference who came from what were then called the "younger churches". Their plea at the Edinburgh Conference went beyond the immediate purpose for which the conference was called. As D. T. Niles, the first CCA General Secretary, said, "Azariah's famous word, 'send us friends', was intended to convey what is now a truism but which at that time was revolution - that it is the Churches of Asia which themselves must decide the nature of their relationships and the forms of their organisation."

³ Samuel Kobia, "Changing global context and the challenge to 21st century Ecumenism", in *Reformed World*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2005).

Although the Western missionary and ecumenical historians recorded that Western missionary movement in the 19th century was the originator of the modern ecumenical movement, Asian Church historians such as the late Dr. T. V. Philip, argued on various occasions that this claim is only partially true. Philip stated:

“The Western historians cite as evidence for their contention the missionary conferences in the mission fields and in the West which led to the great World Missionary Conference in 1910 at Edinburgh, which is considered to be the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. It must be noted that the missionary conferences in the mission field were concerned with co-operation in mission for the sake of evangelistic efficiency, and not with unity as such. The real impetus for Christian unity came from Asian Christians, who under the inspiration of the national movement took the initiative for Christian unity and for the building up of indigenous churches. In fact, it was the protest of the Asian Christians against Western denominationalism and missionary paternalism which led to church unity discussions in some of the missionary conferences. The Asians not only initiated ecumenical ventures in Asia, but also contributed, through the missionary movement, to the ecumenical developments in the West.”⁴

Philip categorically argues that the ecumenical movement in Asia was born in the context of opposition against Western colonialism in Asia. From the middle of the 19th century, when nationalistic spirit arose in several parts of Asia (especially in India and China), Christianity came to be suspected as having a de-nationalising influence and the acceptance of Christianity perceived as the surrender to colonialism. The growth of nationalism had its impact on the life of the churches. Indigenous movements within the churches sprang up. Native Christian leaders who were under the nationalistic movements echoed their voices to liberate the churches from their colonial connections and influences. There were efforts to build up indigenous and independent churches in India in as early as the 1850s. An Indian Pastor, Lal Behari, started a movement against excessive missionary influences in Indian churches. In an effort to recast Christianity into a nationalist mould, Arumanayagam *alias* Sattampillai, a towering and versatile personality in the Shannar community of Prakasapuram, in Tirunelveli District in Tamil Nadu who was critical of British missionaries in that area, established a Hindu Christian Church of Lord Jesus at Prakashapuram in 1857. This church was later known as *Nattu Sabha* or indigenous Church. In Bengal, a group of Christians, under the leadership of Kali Charan Bannerji, formed the Chrsito Samaj in 1887 with an aim to forming a United Indian Church, thus eliminating Western denominationalism. Bannerji was also active in the Indian nationalist mass movement – the Indian National Congress. Although the efforts of Indian Christians did not materialise due to the opposition of the missionaries, T.V. Philip says, “The ecumenical movement in India was born under the influence of Indian nationalism at the initiative of Indian Christians. Similarly the political and national developments in China – the Opium War and the Unequal Treaties, the Boxer Rebellion, the 4th Movement of Peking Students, and the growth of nationalism – are essential background in the development of ecumenism in China”.⁵ In a nutshell, we can understand Philip’s argument that the ecumenical movement

⁴ T.V. Philip, *Ecumenism in Asia* (India: ISPCK& CSS), 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*

in Asia received its inspiration from the national movements and thus was part of the historical process in Asia. It came as a movement of liberation, the liberation of the churches from the ecclesiastical, cultural and theological colonialism of the West and it aimed at the manifestation of a truly Indian or Chinese or Japanese Christianity. However, it did not succeed at that time mainly because of the opposition from the missionaries. It is true that the ecumenical spirit did not completely die out. The spirit of this earlier ecumenical impulse continued in Asia.

When the International Missionary Council met at Tambaram in India in 1938 (its first meeting in Asia), the negotiation for church union in India was in mid-stream, the policy of autonomy for the Churches of Asia was finding general acceptance, and mission was becoming a shared enterprise between churches all over the world. It was at Tambaram that an organisational step for the ecumenical life of the Churches of Asia was conceived. In Tambaram, the Churches of Asia met one another in strength for the first time on their own Asian soil. In fact, it should not be forgotten that in 1907 the WSCF held a World Conference in Tokyo, Japan at which overwhelming majority of the delegates came from Asia and in 1933 an Asian Conference of WSCF was held in Java, Indonesia. On those two occasions the real ecumenical conversation was the contribution of a number of outstanding individuals rather than of churches and of churches expressing a common mind. This situation remained true for the next two decades. In the twenties and early thirties, at the Lausanne, Jerusalem and Stockholm conferences, at the WSCF and YMCA meetings of that period, Asian leaders such as K.T. Paul, S.K. Dutta, V.S. Azariah, T.T. Lew, T.Z. Koo, David Yui, Toyohko Kagawa, were among the impressive and challenging speakers. According to W.A. Visser't Hooft, the first General Secretary of WCC, "there was not yet a real encounter between Asian Christianity and the ecumenical movement as a whole."⁶ At the Tambaram Conference, churches in Asia were given the opportunity to realise their need for one another and also their need to forge procedures whereby they could begin a common life together in Asia. D.T. Niles said of the Asian churches' discovery of their identity: "One result of mission was that the Churches, which were the result of mission, had their eyes turned towards the countries from whence these missions came. At Tambaram, in a dramatic way, the Churches of Asia discovered their lands, the lands to which they were sent in mission by their Lord." The basic principle of ecumenism, which aims to bring about a common ground of harmony and unity amidst diversity that could eliminate the tragedy of triumphal and judgmental attitudes that exist between denominations, was the need of the hour in Asia during that period. That was the time of the missionary era in which triumphal and judgmental attitudes between denominations were planted by missionaries in various Asian countries. That was the time that western Christian missions in Asia started feeling a sense of alienation due to various factors, mainly political.

In spite of what T.V. Philip said, that 'the real impetus for ecumenism came from Asia', in all its fairness, it must also be acknowledged that the concrete steps of twentieth century ecumenical developments in Asia were mainly due to influences from the West after the formation of the IMC in 1910 and the work of its continuation committee under the leadership of the great lay Methodist evangelist and ecumenist John R. Mott. The IMC

⁶ W.A. Visser't Hooft, "The Asian Churches in the Ecumenical Movement", John R. Mott Memorial Lectures (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1959).

Conference in Tambaram marked a further development in the Asian ecumenical movement and played a significant role in shaping the idea of the formation of an Asian ecumenical movement in the future. As a result of the work of John R. Mott and of IMC, the National Missionary Councils/Councils of Churches were organised in different parts of Asia. These councils played a significant role in bringing together the churches, missionary societies, and other Christian institutions for mutual co-operation. It is the national councils that provided, to a large extent, a forum for co-operation and ecumenical experience in many countries in Asia. It is the missionary movement in Asia that helped the formation of such councils at an early stage as the missionaries played the role of "midwives of the Asian Church" in most contexts. As Hans-Ruedi Weber, who made the first attempt to write the history of 'Asia and the Ecumenical Movement' in 1961 observes: "Whatever missionaries, their activities and institutions did, they certainly functioned as midwives at the birth of Christian churches all over Asia."⁷

Today, when we look back or assess the current situation when it is compared with the contributions of such ecumenical bodies in the past, we will be able to understand the existing realities better.

The Church in Asia

An official document on 'Ecclesia in Asia,'⁸ the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, addressed the subject of Jesus Christ the Saviour and his mission of love and service. It starts with an introductory statement, 'The Marvel of God's Plan in Asia': The Church in Asia sings the praises of the God of Salvation (Ps 68:20) for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil, through men and women of the continent. It was in fact in Asia that God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning. He guided the patriarchs (Gen. 12) and called Moses to lead his people to freedom (Ex. 3:10). He spoke to his chosen people through many prophets, judges, kings and valiant women of faith. In "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Saviour, who took flesh as an Asian! Exulting in the goodness of the continent's peoples, cultures, and religious vitality, and conscious at the same time of the unique gift of faith which she has received for the good of all, the Church in Asia cannot cease to proclaim: "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures for ever" (Ps 118:1). Because Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the dead in the Holy Land, that small portion of Western Asia became a land of promise and hope for all mankind. Jesus knew and loved this land. He made his own the history, the sufferings and hopes of the people. He loved its people and embraced their Jewish traditions and heritage. God, in fact, had long before chosen this people and revealed himself to them in preparation for the Saviour's coming. And from this land, through the preaching of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church went forth to make "disciples of all nations".

Christianity, inspired by the Asian Jesus, his disciples and the evangelists, was reintroduced to many parts of Asia by western missionaries; hence it acquired a western image over the

⁷ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Asia and the Ecumenical Movement 1895-1961* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966).

⁸ John Paul II, "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* of the Holy Father John Paul II", Catholic Bishops Conference of Malaysia-Singapore- Brunei, November, 1999.

centuries, which still continues. The west introduced Christianity in many forms and varieties. It was in different templates when they brought and introduced it here. Later, history recorded about a great concern against western denominationalism and missionary paternalism that was precipitated among Asian Christians during the missionary era. Asian Christianity has a remarkable variety and this is, of course, due to various missionary activities that had taken place in Asia over the centuries. Subsequently, Asia's image of Christianity has been by and large identified with western colonialism. The arrival of Vasco da Gamma from Portugal in 1498 marked the beginning of the Western colonial era in Asia and the beginning of Western cultural influences on Asia. In the process of western colonial expansion, Christianity took the form of the missionary movement; the period of European colonialism and the western missionary movement coincided. This is what famous Indian historian, scholar and diplomat K. M. Panicker, in his book '*Asia and Western Dominance*,' describes as the 'Vasco da Gama period'. Panicker described in his famous survey of the Vasco da Gama epoch of Asian history how da Gama's four ships arrived on May 27, 1498, at the Port of Calicut, on the South-West coast of India. "The captain general's ship flew on its mast a flag on which was painted a large cross of Christ and also carried cannon, symbols of the new power entering the East".⁹ Hans-Ruedi Weber commented about this that "no Christian can be proud of this combination of the cross and cannon, but it's a fact that the spiritual and earthly powers symbolised by the two have together fundamentally changed the course of Asian history".¹⁰ The Portuguese ships were subsequently followed by English, Dutch, French, and Spanish. As colonial rulers and Christian missions, whether Catholic or Protestant, interwove their relations, Christianity – a western religion – was viewed as a means for western powers to establish their political control over Asia. The history of Christianity during that period was incorporated with the history of western missionary expansion which resulted in loss of its self identity. Panicker made his observations on the causes of the failure of Christian missions in Asia, feeling that, in the first place, the missionary brought with them an attitude of moral superiority and a belief in their own exclusive righteousness. Second, the association of Christian missionary work with aggressive imperialism introduced political complications. National sentiment could not fail to look upon missionary activity as inimical to the country's interests. That diplomatic pressure, extra-territoriality and sometimes support of gun-boats had been resorted to in the interests of foreign missionaries could not be easily forgotten. Third, the sense of European superiority which the missionaries perhaps unconsciously inculcated also produced its reaction. Fourth, the wide variety of Christian sects, each proclaiming the errors of others, handicapped missionary work. In conclusion of his observations, Panicker said; "with the disappearance of European dominance Christianity assumed its natural position as one of the religions of Asia and missionaries ceased to have any special or privileged position."¹¹

Fifty years after Panicker made this observation, Edmund Chia, a former Secretary of the Inter-religious Affairs Office of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, says: "the notion of foreignness is one of the most conscious characteristics of the Asian Church and so

⁹ K. M. Panicker, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959).

¹⁰ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Panicker, *op. cit.*

features in its theology".¹² In this connection he quotes a document of FABC theological consultation on Evangelisation in Asia: "As a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. The lingering image survives in its traditional ecclesiastical structures and economic dependence on the West. This gives grounds for suspicion. The church is even sometimes seen as an obstacle or threat to national integration and to religious and cultural identity. Alignments between the Church and socio-political elites often legitimise and preserve the socio-political *status quo* and do not succeed in obviating this image. The Church remains in its life-style, in its institutional structure, in its worship, and in its western trained leadership and its theology". 'While the Roman Catholic Church as well as Protestant Churches still emphasise the need for an Asian Christian identity, something needs to be done at the institutional level of the church to correct that which is not really significant for Asian churches', argues K. M. George, Asia's prominent Orthodox theologian. He says: "We see an obvious hiatus between the theological understanding of identity and the ecclesiastical-institutional reality of our churches. This is an impediment to realising the potential of Asian ecumenism."¹³

Even after the missionary era ended, to a great extent in most Asian countries, Asian churches remain very much under the influence of denominational identities and in that way they tend to relate with their western counterparts rather than relating and engaging with their sister churches at the local or national level. This is yet another reason for not promoting or nurturing ecumenism at the local level. Hans-Reudi Weber who made the first attempt to write the history of 'Asia and the Ecumenical Movement' in 1961 commented: "For almost a century Methodists in Ceylon knew more about Methodism in Britain than about Anglican fellow Christians in their own country, let alone about Presbyterians in China or Japan. This was true of all other confessions in other Asian countries. The confessional link from the western mother church to her daughters in Asia proved to be much stronger than the links of Christians on the spot who together face the challenge of the Asian revolution."¹⁴ Although the western missionary era has ended, the denominational or confessional links between various Asian denominations and their former mission boards and churches in Europe and North America are still stronger in terms of their ongoing relations, funding and programmatic involvement. Ultimately, this is only hindering ecumenism at national or local contexts as local churches and denominations tend to relate with their overseas mission counterparts rather than working together with churches belonging to other confessional families. In this context, engaging the local churches in common ecumenical mission is a great task yet to be achieved in Asia.

Early Ecumenical Initiatives in Asian Contexts

While presenting his report to the Bangkok Assembly of EACC, recollecting certain earlier ecumenical initiatives in Asia, D.T. Niles reported that "in 1949 was taken the first concrete

¹² Edmund Chia, "Theology of Dialogue: Vision of the Catholic Church in Asia", in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XX, No.1, April 2004.

¹³ K. M. George, "Ecumenism in Asia: Some Theological Considerations", a paper presented at the Asia Regional Group Meeting of WCC, November 2004.

¹⁴ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *op. cit.*

step to make effective what had been felt to be necessary at the Tambaram Conference in 1939". At the Tambaram IMC meeting in 1938, the question of a Far Eastern office of the IMC was considered. But it did not materialise as the Second World War intervened. When the committee met after the war in 1946, it considered a proposal from the Chinese and Indian National Christian Councils regarding the formation of an East Asia Regional Committee of the IMC to promote fellowship among the Christians in East Asia, to promote a sense of responsibility for Christian witness, to deepen the unity of the churches in the area and to bring to the life of the World Church the distinctive contribution of the churches in East Asia. When the proposal came at the IMC meeting in Whitby, Canada, it was reported that the Asian delegates at that meeting were not favourable to such a proposal.¹⁵ However, the proposal was again considered at a conference of some Asian church leaders in 1949 in Bangkok, which was convened by a joint committee of the IMC and the WCC. Instead of accepting the proposal for a Far Eastern Office, the Conference recommended the appointment of an East Asia Secretary with an understanding "not to build up an office, but rather to serve as an ecumenical ambassador among the Asian churches, interpreting them to one another, fostering mutual service and effective witness, strengthening the bond between the churches in Asia and the Church Universal".¹⁶ This led to the appointment of Dr. Rajah Manickam as the joint East Asia secretary of the IMC and WCC and he worked in that capacity for five years. The work and travels of Dr. Rajah Manickam were to create in the Churches of East Asia as a comprehensible unit.

While analysing the reasons why most of the Asian delegates to Whitby (1947) and Bangkok (1949) refused to accept the proposal for the establishment of an East Asia secretariat, we can understand the several factors that contributed to the decision to create an East Asia Christian Conference in 1957. T.V. Philip proffers various reasons: (1) The Second World War and the political events of the post-war period in Asia had a tremendous influence on the missionary thinking. (2) Western dominance was coming to an end in Asia and Africa. (3) Along with the political independence of the countries formerly under colonial rule, there was also the revival of ancient religions in these countries. (4) In several cases, the political independence of these countries from colonial rule had helped the 'younger churches' to gain independence from the control from missionary societies. For example, during the preceding century, the most massive efforts of Protestant mission were in China. Yet, within a few years of the establishment of Communist rule in China, western mission was criticised not only by the Communists but also by the Chinese Christians as well. (5) The Bandung Conference (1955) of non-aligned nations clearly showed the direction in which independent nations were moving. In such circumstances, it was repeatedly asked whether there was a place for any western mission in Asia. The emerging social and political changes at that time forced the missionary movement to rethink its mission strategy in Asia; the same thinking also influenced Asian Churches.

The other development was the 1954 consultation in Hong Kong organised by the United Presbyterian Church of USA, in which some Asian church leaders also attended along with representatives of mission boards in Asia. An Asian Council on Ecumenical Mission (ACEM) was founded at that consultation. The purpose of the Asian Council on Ecumenical

¹⁵ T.V. Philip, *op. cit.*, 144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Mission was a “shock to many in the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council”. The reason for such a frustration of WCC leadership at that time was on the grounds that such an organisational set-up would lead to the development of regional blocks and thus would weaken the global ecumenical movement. T.V. Philip writes of such a fear that the officers of the newly formed WCC were eager to safeguard and strengthen the unity of the organisation at the world level and therefore were suspicious of any regional development.

In 1956, the WCC and IMC jointly convened a meeting in Bangkok which reviewed the implications and possibilities of all these developments. Those who organised the ACEM were criticised for organising an ecumenical agency in Asia without proper consultation with the WCC. The formation of the ACEM created a crisis in ecumenical relations. A consultation organised by WCC and IMC recommended to call together a representative conference of member churches of WCC and member councils of IMC in the area. The conference met in March 1957 at Prapat, Indonesia, gathering member churches of WCC and member councils of IMC in East Asia. With the theme, “The Common Evangelical Tasks of the Churches in East Asia”, the Prapat Conference saw churches and missions as instruments of evangelism and the main ecumenical task was to discover the means of bringing the crying needs of Asia and the resources from abroad together. The conference recommended that an East Asia Christian Conference be constituted as an organ of continuing co-operation among churches and Christian Councils in East Asia within the framework of IMC and WCC. Here we can understand the reasons for providing equal membership status for churches and national councils in CCA, which is not common in other Regional Ecumenical Organisations. It took two years of preparatory work before the launching of EACC in its first Assembly. Two years later (in 1959), EACC was founded in Kuala Lumpur. The functions and programmes of EACC were greatly influenced initially by those of IMC and WCC. A committee structure similar to that of WCC was also adopted with staff members paid by and were accountable to IMC and WCC until 1964.

The report presented by D.T. Niles under the title ‘Ideas and Services’ at the EACC Assembly 1968 held in Bangkok summarises that three impulses went into the making of the East Asia Christian conference: “the impulse created by the Churches coming together in each country, the impulse resulting from the Churches of the region finding one another, and the impulse born of the awareness that the discharge of the Churches’ mission. But there was also a fourth impulse, created by the tides of secular history which made it increasingly difficult for the churches of East Asia to find relevance in those movements which had their motivations and power structures in the West. Self-government and independence for the nations of Asia demanded that the churches in these countries fully recognise the actual secular context within which they had to live.”¹⁷

We can note that the determining concept during the formation of EACC was expressed in the words, “life together”. It implied the core function of EACC as an instrument of the Churches for doing things together. It can also be a means whereby the churches help one another. “But co-operation is not the same as life together. Life together demands that the

¹⁷ D. T. Niles, “Ideas and Vision”, Report to EACC General Assembly, 1968.

churches in East Asia accept that they belong to one another and are increasingly more willing to live a shared life”.

The identity and function of CCA in its relation to WCC has been raised from the very beginning of the formation of EACC. D.T Niles stated: “When the EACC was planned at Prapat, one decision taken was that it would not be or become a regional council of the World Council of Churches. Not only was it essential that the World Council be always a direct association of churches, but it was also necessary that the EACC should be open in its membership to churches which either could not or did not want to belong to the World Council. This was the reason which lay behind the decision to call ourselves a Conference rather than a council. But for the choice of the word “Conference”, there was also another reason. It was the desire not to project an image of the EACC as an organisation or institution.”¹⁸

The Relevance of the Enduring Vision of CCA

The enduring vision and abiding mandates of CCA were declared at the launching: “Believing that the purpose of God for the churches in East Asia is life together in a common obedience to Him for the doing of His will in the world, the EACC is hereby constituted as an organ of continuing co-operation among the churches and National Christian Councils in East Asia within the frame work of the wider ecumenical movement.” In the revised constitution of CCA an additional part was added to the purpose: “The CCA is committed to the equal participation of women, men, youth, clergy and laity in church and society.” Almost half a century since the CCA was constituted, the launching declaration that still exists as its “purpose” has defined the basis on which it was founded and the vision towards which its whole life and work moves. The salient points and constitutive elements of this vision are clear.¹⁹ First, it is of and for life of the mission of the church in Asia that is not its own but one that is of God and is therefore grounded in acknowledgement of and engagement in a common obedience of witness to God’s mission. Third, the CCA is servant of this vision of the church and exists as an organ and a forum of continuing co-operation among churches and national Christian bodies. Fourth, in its service within the framework of the wider ecumenical movement. And fifth, in its effort to manifest common obedience and life together, it is to seek to bring about equal participation of women, men, youth, clergy and lay in church and society.

The document prepared at the time of the last restructuring of CCA in 2000, “Towards New Thrusts and a New Structure for the CCA”²⁰ reaffirmed this vision, which has laid down and developed objectives that embody its abiding mandates. On the one hand, these abiding mandates provide openness and responsiveness to the changing and specific issues and challenges in the life of the church and of society in Asia. The issue of the unity of the church and of providing a vehicle by which this unity is manifested through joint action among them is clearly spelt out. A second dimension of its mandate is the task of helping to enable and equip the churches and Christian bodies in the region in their life and in their

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Christian Conference of Asia 11th General Assembly Report (Hong Kong: CCA, 2000).

²⁰ “Towards New Thrusts and New Structure for the CCA”, 11th General Assembly Document, 2000.

various ministries. It is also to help in the development of more effective Christian responses to changing situations and issues in the life of church and society in Asia. A third dimension given the mandate to undertake the task of providing a vehicle for the development and engagement of churches in ecumenical mission and witness. It also needs to act as an instrument to help in providing constructive and critical analytical insight into crucial Asian issues and developing ways by which the churches in co-operation with each other and with others in society can express responsibility. Its mandates also involve regional and contextual tasks to encourage, facilitate and develop Asian contributions to Christian thought. More specifically, it is to develop and promote relationships with peoples of other faith in Asia and engage in dialogue with them. CCA's purpose is to continue as a regional ecumenical body rooted in the life, the culture, the economic, social and political realities of Asia, and the spiritual and theological gifts of the Churches in Asia is another prime mandate.

CCA has been trying to respond faithfully to this enduring vision from time to time. In order to be relevant contextually and timely amidst changing realities, CCA has reviewed its programmes and structures from time to time. From the first assembly in 1959 in Kuala Lumpur until the 11th Assembly in Tomohon, Indonesia in 2000, some kind of revision of its programmes and structures took place during the Assembly. The exception for such an attempt for any revision of its existing programme was in the last Assembly in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

As Dr. Feliciano V. Carino, former General Secretary of CCA (1995-2000), in his report to the 11th General Assembly of CCA said: "the challenges and imperatives that emerge from the changing conditions and transformations in Asian life are enormous. They are fertile ground for ecumenical engagement and work. If indeed we are at a turning point in Asian history, we should know that such turning points always bring heavy burdens of challenge and responsibility to us".²¹ As we face the challenges that impinge upon the life and witness of the church and the ecumenical movement at all levels, CCA also feels the need and imperative for a greater clarity in its current programmes and priorities. On many occasions a major concern was echoed on the need for developing a sense of ownership of CCA by its member constituencies. The 11th Assembly discussed the need for such a shared ownership of its programmes, activities, and structures by its member churches and councils. A joint programme area committee meeting held in Bangkok in 2001 also affirmed the need for "creating a sense of ownership of the CCA among the member churches and councils". This means above all that programme and structure must be geared to what it means for CCA "to grow together" with its members in Asia.

Ecumenism in Action in Asia

Ten years after the formation of EACC, D.T. Niles wrote: "soon after Prapat it became clear that apart from the question of resources, there was also the problem of locality. We have no Switzerland in Asia." He was also of the opinion that "an ecumenical organisation should not come to mean an extra load of work for the Churches and Councils. Some extra work

²¹ Feliciano V. Carino, General Secretary's Report, Christian Conference of Asia 11th General Assembly Report, CCA Publications, Hong Kong, 2000.

there will be, but the main result must be to help the Churches and Councils in their own life and work: to broaden their knowledge, to lift their sights, and to deepen their experience."²²

The significant contributions of the Asian ecumenical body manifested in various ways and fields over the past decades. Whether it was addressing the question of "mission and evangelism" or human rights; leadership development or ecumenical formation; theological issues or Christian participation in people's struggles, the CCA provided new insights and impetus. The Asia Mission Conferences were platforms to bring together Asian Churches and non-Asian Church representatives to discuss Asian missiological issues contextually. By the end of the 20th century, the CCA had contributed significantly towards the development and promotion of an Asian theological agenda. CCA provided platforms and opportunities for Asian Christian thinkers and theologians to explore the implications of people-centred theology, focusing on areas of Christology and ecclesiology, interpreting salvation in terms of liberation and humanisation. The launching of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS) in 1997, under the leadership of Feliciano V. Carino, was a landmark. Through CCA, the URM network mobilised a variety of Christian groups across Asia which were actively involved in people's struggle for human rights, justice and peace. CCA was very much in the forefront of human rights causes in the 1980s when several Asian countries were under authoritarian military rule. CCA supported churches and national ecumenical bodies in their struggle against human rights violations. When severe problems cropped up at a time when CCA could not use its name or platform to speak out on sensitive political issues, it was able to form the Asian Human Rights Commission and Asian Legal Resource Centre as part of CCA International Affairs, which was then initiated and headed by Clement John, a Pakistani lawyer who was International Affairs Secretary of CCA at that time. The Youth programme of CCA helped mould many young people in different Asian countries in the area of ecumenical formation. The Asian Ecumenical Course, started in 1975, became an annual event, making a major contribution to ecumenical formation for several years. The CCA played a vital role in establishing and strengthening relations between churches in former 'closed door' societies and socialist countries like Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The people-to-people exchange programmes organised by CCA helped many people from these countries and systematic efforts by CCA brought churches in these countries to the mainstream of Asian ecumenical movement. Asian Ecumenical Exchange programmes of CCA provided opportunities for a number of Asian church leaders to be involved in exchange programmes, exposure, study, research and the sharing of expertise. However, the question before us is what is the status and effectiveness of some of these programmes in today's Asian context?

Ecumenical Councils in Asia

In common parlance, a 'Council of Churches' is an association of separated and autonomous Christian churches within a defined geographic area, through which its members seek to manifest their fellowship with one another, engage in common activities of witness and service, and advance towards the goal of visible unity. The councils are crucial expressions and instruments of the modern ecumenical movement. While councils are not the unity for

²² D. T. Niles, *op. cit.*

which Christ prayed or of which Paul writes, they are a major step beyond the competitive, antagonistic separation that has marked so much of Christian history.²³

We have noted that the Edinburgh Conference gave considerable impetus to the founding of missionary councils in colonised countries and regions. It created a Continuation Committee – an International Missionary Council (IMC) – of which John R. Mott was elected as chair. In that capacity, he visited churches in the region to promote the regional ministry and regional movement, which evolved later into National Missionary Councils and National Christian Councils. Some of the early national ecumenical councils, which were the direct result of that strategy, were formed in Asia, e.g. the National Council in India, Burma, Ceylon (1914), National Council in Korea (1924), etc. Of course, when we talk about history, tradition and continuity, we need to include the present councils in Pakistan and Bangladesh as part of these early initiatives. During his travel in 1912-1913, Mott visited and organised meetings of Christian leaders, students and missionaries in several places in India, Burma, Ceylon, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Japan, and Korea which sowed the seeds of forming provincial and regional councils in several Asian countries. In 1910 there were two national councils through which limited co-operation was possible. By 1928 (the year of the first great meeting of IMC), there were twenty-three councils formed in various parts of the world. The same period witnessed significant changes in the self-understanding and terminology of those councils. For example, in 1922, the National Missionary Council in India became the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon, a designation that reflected the increased role played by local Christians themselves instead of the missionaries.

It has been a common trend in every continent that churches show only limited support and commitment to national or regional ecumenical councils. In many places councils are facing hard times, especially shrinking financial resources which affect their day-to-day work. Asia is no exception to this trend. In Asia today, we have 16 NCCs starting with the oldest ones in India (1914), Myanmar (1914/1949), Sri Lanka (1914), Pakistan (1914/1948), Bangladesh (1914/ 1949), Korea (1924), the Philippines (1929/1949/1963), Indonesia (1950), Malaysia (1947), Singapore (1948/1961/1974), Australia (1948/1960/1994), Taiwan (1966/ 1991), Japan (1948), Hong Kong (1954), and Cambodia (1998), with the most recent formed in Nepal (1999). We can see the strengths and weaknesses of these councils in terms of their commitment, performance, functions, financial situations, sense of ownership by member churches, programmes, visions and new initiatives, staff capacities, leadership – the list can go on with many other indicators. Among these Asian NCCs, the NCC Singapore is affiliated with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of WCC, but has not maintained an official relationship with WCC for some time. Since CCA was expelled from Singapore, the NCC Singapore stopped its contacts and relations with the CCA. At the same time, some member churches of the NCC Singapore are members of WCC (the Methodist Church in Singapore, Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Orthodox Syrian Church - through their parent churches in India). In other countries (like East Timor, Thailand and Laos) where WCC and CCA member churches exist, NCCs have not been formed yet for various reasons. In East Timor, a joint committee with representatives of various denominations (mainly IPTL, Assemblies of God, and Bethel Pentecostal Church) has been formed as an

²³ Diane Kessler & Michael Kinnamon, *Council of Churches and Ecumenical Vision* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000).

initial step to setting up a national ecumenical body. In Thailand, Christians remain a tiny minority with the Church of Christ (CCT) as the main protestant church in the country; the CCT and Roman Catholic Church have a joint committee. In Laos, the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) is the largest church. LEC is a member of CCA and its application for WCC membership has been accepted and it will be admitted officially into the fellowship at the next Central Committee meeting of WCC in September 2006. The Roman Catholic Church is the second largest church in Laos. In Vietnam, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECV) is the largest protestant church in the country. ECV is neither a member of CCA nor of WCC. However, ECV has been in direct contact with CCA and WCC for several years, even when the church was not officially recognised by the Vietnamese government. In New Zealand, the national ecumenical body has become defunct. The Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand (CCANZ) no longer exists, the member churches having decided to close CCANZ as of the end of 2005. A strategic thinking group has been set up to help the churches consider options for a new national ecumenical body. Churches in Vietnam, Mongolia and Bhutan are not members of WCC or CCA and no national ecumenical body exists in these countries. In terms of membership, the two largest national ecumenical bodies in Asia are NCC India and CCI in Indonesia. CCI has about 80 member churches and NCCI has 29 member churches. Other NCCs (like NCC Philippines, NCCK, NCCJ and Myanmar Council of Churches) have almost the same number of member churches. In terms of financial sustainability, the NCC Japan, NCC Korea, NCC Taiwan, Hong Kong Christian Council and the Council of Churches in Malaysia are in the same situation as they generate their entire financial support from member churches and are not dependent on foreign donor agencies. NCC India is also in a similar situation - it has its own financial resources and member churches are rich enough to contribute to its work. However, to a certain extent, for some time NCCI has been depending on foreign funds. CCI is not financially stable either, although some member churches have some means to contribute. The NCCs in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Myanmar depend on foreign financial support as well as from their member constituencies. NCC Philippines has been making tremendous efforts and sustained progress towards making NCCP a financially independent national ecumenical body with supports from its member churches. The Nepal Christian Council and Kampuchea Christian Council have to depend on ecumenical partners from the West for financial support. This is a major problem for some of the Asian NCCs: an end to overseas funding will affect the functioning of several NCCs in Asia and will ultimately affect the visibility of the council in the society where it exists.

In terms of programmatic involvement of NCCs, not all are on an equal footing. There are variations in terms of staff capacity, programmes and routine activities. Certain councils function only in a nominal way. In terms of addressing issues and urgent priorities in the country, churches normally look for national ecumenical bodies which represent the entire Christian community or the entire Protestant community. However, NCCs have a lethargic approach in terms of addressing social and political realities. In certain circumstances the NCCs and churches are not in a position to raise their collective voices or concerns publicly as they live in a minority situation (e.g. in Bangladesh, Cambodia) as well as socially and politically controlled situations (e.g. in Myanmar). Several NCCs face leadership problems and second- or third-line leadership has not been developed.

Due to a lack of human and financial resources, some councils are struggling to implement their programmes. Certain councils are privileged of human resources available from their constituencies. For some, financial resources are easily available through their own sources within the country or through the generous support of partners from the ecumenical family, but they may lack vision, proper leadership and adequate stewardship, which are potential reasons for us to lose our credibility and integrity as a church body or an ecumenical body in Asia.

The reality is that most of the national ecumenical bodies are not representing the entire Christian communities in their respective countries since the majority Roman Catholic Church or the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are not official members of such councils. In Asia, the NCC Australia and NCC Taiwan have membership of the Roman Catholic Church. In all other countries, the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the respective national ecumenical body. In certain countries the relationship between NCCs and evangelical fellowships have been developed and this is mainly issues-based. For example, NCC Sri Lanka has good relations and collaboration with the Evangelical Alliance in Sri Lanka mainly because of such issues as the parliament-piloted Anti-Conversion Bill, aimed against Christians in the country. Or, they come together whenever they need to address issues such as attacks against minorities by the Buddhist fundamentalist groups, or to speak up on conflict and reconciliation issues. Similarly, collaboration and programmatic involvements exist between several national ecumenical bodies and the Bishops Conferences of the Roman Catholic Church in countries like India (NCCI-CBCI on Christian Marriage Act.); Pakistan (NCCP and CJP of CBCP on Blasphemy Laws, attack against Christian minorities, study on Christian Marriage Act); Bangladesh (NCCB and Ecumenical Relations Commission of CBCB on study and advocacy related to Christian Marriage Act); Indonesia (CCI and CBCI on various issues such as New Education Bill, Interfaith Dialogue, and other political issues from time to time); Myanmar (MCC and CBCM on Faith and Order, minority issues); Malaysia (CCM is part of the Christian Federation of Malaysia which is a confederation of three Christian national bodies including the Catholic Bishops Conference in Malaysia and the National Evangelical Fellowship and they co-operate and work together on a number of issues that affect the life and witness of Christians in the Islamic majority country). NCCs in Sri Lanka, Korea, the Philippines and Japan have always been in the forefront in denouncing militarisation and they have tried to build up peace movements in these countries. NCC Korea has played a key role in promoting peace, reconciliation and unification in the divided Korean peninsula. NCC India has played a significant role in promoting peace and reconciliation in conflict-affected Christian majority areas of North East India where the Naga, Kuki and Zomi tribal groups were involved in fighting against each other for ethnic reasons, killing more than 2000 people, the victims being mostly Christians. NCC Sri Lanka, Myanmar Council of Churches and PGI Indonesia were involved in promoting inter-religious co-operation and dialogue in their respective societies. The Council of Churches in Malaysia has also been involved in inter-faith related issues in Malaysian society. In other words, several of these national ecumenical bodies have been bringing their expertise to the wider ecumenical movement regionally as well as globally.

Despite the fact that these national ecumenical bodies have been playing significant roles in their respective countries, the trend is that several of these councils are struggling to escape from the ecumenical fatigue and institutional paralysis currently affecting them.

Prospects and Challenges

As the phrase described in the opening of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times", in the life span of any organisation and movement, there are times experienced with the best part and the worst part. When I tried to lead you through a historical survey of the ecumenical movement in Asia, you may have seen the metamorphosis of ecumenism in Asia. However, I am not trying to paint a rosy picture of the situation as it will not be a healthy practice or signal for us if we want to assess the work realistically and help revitalise the ecumenical movement in Asia. Here, we need to undertake a collective task of analysing and assessing the current scenario of the Asian ecumenical movement. It is indeed a fact that, like other parts of the world, the ecumenical movement in Asia is in a state of general decline in many ways. There may be various factors and reasons for this. In my own assessment, the decline we are experiencing now is due to factors such as leadership crisis, the proliferation of ecumenical organisations at national and regional levels, the increasing denominationalism, lack of ecumenical formation in the younger generation in churches, lack of capacity building efforts, lack of vision and theological thinking. Unlike in the past, the leadership of churches and ecumenical bodies in several Asian countries is not always interested in responding to or addressing the crucial issues in their situations. Secular NGOs or other organisations are more professional in their approaches, hence, they get more attention. At the end of the day, the public witness of mainline national ecumenical bodies remains at a low ebb. The other problem we face is the multiplicity of ecumenical organisations addressing the same concerns in almost the same constituencies in Asia; we experience a lack of coherence and co-ordination in our ecumenical work.

The multiplicity of denominations and freelance missionary evangelism is another major threat to Asian churches and Asian ecumenism. Countries like Cambodia, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia are missionary battlefields now. Mainline denominations in several other Asian countries face threat from aggressive missionary evangelism by overseas missionaries and churches. These groups of missionaries are only sowing the seeds of division and helping local churches to shift their membership from one denomination to another. For example, Christians in Bangladesh are a microscopic minority- their total number may be only around 400,000. Despite that, there are 46 denominations competing with each other in the country, some 150,000 Protestants divided into 45 protestant denominations. The statistics from Cambodia and Nepal may be even more frightening.

When we talk about the Asian ecumenical movement, we normally have in mind only the CCA and NCC constituencies in Asia. This means that we do not include a large group of Christians in Asia who are not members of these ecumenical bodies. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, the Christians in China are not considered as part of this ecumenical movement. Without the participation of this large group of Christians, how can we revitalise the ecumenical movement in Asia? The fastest growing Christian church and the largest protestant churches are in Asia. Korea has been a

remarkable success story for churches, with Christian numbers said to be swelling since the 1970s. Some of the largest mega churches in the world are in South Korea. Estimates of the number of Chinese Christians today range anywhere from 20 to 40 million. According to official statistics of the Chinese government, 20 million people (1.6 percent of the total population) worship in government-registered churches. But this figure is a very low and conservative estimate. Some other statistics say that about 8 percent of the Chinese population (about 100 million people in China) are Christians, which involves mostly the members of the underground churches in the country. The China Christian Council (CCC), the only member church of WCC in China, has about 17 million members. However, Chinese Christians are not considered part of the Asian ecumenical movement as they are not members of CCA. David Aikman, former Beijing Bureau Chief of *Time* Magazine who wrote the book *Jesus in Beijing* (which deals with questions on how Christianity is transforming China) says, within the next thirty years, one third of China's population could be Christian, making China one of the largest Christian nations in the world. Can we afford to exclude the church and Christians in China when we talk about the Asian ecumenical movement? If we really want to include them as part of the ecumenical movement in Asia, we need to find a way to engage the church in China to bring them to the mainstream of the Asian ecumenical movement. The leaders of the ecumenical movement in Asia take this as a challenge for our future constructive engagement.

The question of relations with the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelicals and Pentecostals is another issue where we need to pay more attention at the local, national and regional levels. Every time we talk about relations with the Roman Catholic Church, we quote the example of the CCA-FABC joint meetings, mainly the AMCU and CCA-FABC relations committee meetings. The Asia Mission Conference in 1989 resolved to strive towards a more representative expression of Asian ecumenism and to explore the possibility of working towards Catholic membership in the CCA or an ecumenical structure where the Roman Catholic Church would be a full and active member, but no progress has been made until now. We are satisfied with the annual or biannual meetings or just certain nominal participation of staff members of both bodies in each other's programmes once in a while. I would say that this has become a ritual, as both parties are not taking any concrete steps towards promoting ecumenism at the local or national levels. We have seen the collaboration between certain NCCs and the Catholic Bishops Conferences and you might have noticed that those collaborations are normally issues-based. The fact is that we need to have a crucial issue in our countries and a common enemy to counter for the NCCs and the Roman Catholic Churches to come together and work together as Protestants and Catholics while we proclaim our public witness. The situation of our relations with the Evangelicals and Pentecostals is the same, as we are not trying to be ecumenically inclusive and, at the same time, institutionally protective with our attitudes and approaches. We need to observe and understand that Evangelical and Pentecostal bodies are increasingly opening up and are building South to South partnerships, although their ecumenical relations are very minimal. However, engaging them in ecumenical dialogues is not impossible and there are many examples from other parts of the world where ecumenical bodies can successfully engage the Pentecostal groups, e.g. Latin America. Two years back, I was part of a discussion between the WCC General Secretary Dr. Sam Kobia and the head of a large Pentecostal Church in Korea. During the discussion, Rev. David Cho demonstrated openness and a willingness to engage in ecumenical dialogue and interactions with the

global ecumenical body. His church is already a member of NCC Korea. We could not imagine such a situation of a Pentecostal Church becoming a member of a National Christian Council. What we really lack in our Asian setting is a sincere effort towards ecumenical dialogue with others. Ecumenical dialogue is a challenge and a call to conversion for the whole Church, especially for the church in Asia where people expect a clearer sign of unity from Christians. In a continent where the number of Christians is profoundly small, division makes Christian witness still more difficult and, in such a situation, ecumenical dialogue should be a permanent and constant effort to overcome difficulties. There are leaders in the Evangelical and Pentecostal groups who think that they are challenged, enriched through their ecumenical interaction or engagement. What we need to understand is that ecumenical bodies should demonstrate a genuine openness and willingness to make changes in style and culture if we really want to develop meaningful relations with these churches and bring them to the mainstream of the Asian ecumenical movement.

We are all aware of the fact that the modern ecumenical movement started as a youth movement. Many young people were instrumental in shaping ecumenical organisations such as the SCMs, WSCF, YMCA and WCC. But, where are the youth in the ecumenical movement these days? Compared to western countries, we can be proud of the fact that there are more young people in our churches. Though these young people actively participate in their local congregations, beyond that their presence and participation is still limited. They have confined themselves to the rural or town parishes and are not getting the opportunities for wider exposure which normally might help them to become the next in line ecumenical leaders. As a person who has been responsible for organising ecumenical programmes in various Asian countries continuously for the past 13 years, I can share with you a number of stories illustrating how difficult it is to convince church leaders of the need for sending young people for meetings or training. Many churches and ecumenical bodies in Asia have not been engaged in an effort to identify and promote young people and encourage them to use their talents for the ecumenical movement. The churches and ecumenical bodies are not taking seriously the ecumenical formation of young people. Ultimately, this is affecting the future of churches and the ecumenical movement at the national level. There are several NCCs in Asia that have problems recruiting committed and able staff members. Even the CCA has been struggling for the past several years to get a Youth Secretary with the basic criteria required for this job. Unless and until we make a systematic effort to build up the ranks of second- or third-line leadership in our churches and ecumenical bodies, we will not be able to revitalise the ecumenical movement in Asia. Moreover, the ecumenical formation of all groups of people in the church must be considered a priority as part of the struggle to overcome the divisions between Christians which are sinful and scandalous and challenge the credibility of the church and her mission. As a process of learning, ecumenical formation is concerned with engaging the experience, knowledge, skills, talents and ecumenical memory of the Christian community for mutual enrichment. As the study guidelines set by the Joint Working Group (1993) between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches observes, "the process of ecumenical formation has to be under girded by, and should indeed be an expression of, ecumenical spirituality." This process will help churches realise that ecumenism is not simply an 'option' for the churches.

In today's ecumenical movement, the lay people have only a minimal role to play. One of the roots of the 20th century ecumenical movement was the ecumenical lay movements founded in the 19th century. The pioneers of the missionary emphasis in the ecumenical movement - John R. Mott, himself a layman and leader in worldwide ecumenical movements - called for "liberating the lay forces of Christianity" in order to participate in the missionary task of the church. The ecumenical movement always called for the need for a rediscovery of the role of the laity of the Church. In order to strengthen the Asian ecumenical movement, we need to make a serious attempt to rediscover the role of laity. Ecumenical formation of laity in the churches in Asia also needs to be treated with some urgent priority.

Another major challenge the Asian ecumenical movement needs to address is the issue of religious pluralism, or, to see ecumenism and its practical application in the context of religious pluralism. Asia has some of the major religions and majority of the people belong to these religions. It is a known reality that most churches in Asia have not been able to come to terms with other religions in their midst. Here, we need to frankly admit our failures in equipping Christians to come to terms with people of other faiths. The early Asian ecumenical leaders were conscious of their theological responsibilities and missiological tasks and tried from time to time to set the directions for the ecumenical movement and urged the churches to make contributions to the entire ecumenical movement from the distinctive character of Asia. For example, in one of the EACC Conferences it was said that: "We have inherited the 'great tradition' of the Gospel from those who brought the Gospel to Asia, but we believe that Christ has more of His truth to reveal to us, as we seek to understand His work among men in their several Asian cultures, different religions and their involvement in the contemporary Asian revolution. In the past, we have been too tied to inherited traditional conceptual forms of confession to make such ventures... When we make absolute the written confessions of the churches of another culture or age, we become incapable of discovering the new depths of truth God can reveal to us Christ amidst Asian life".²⁴ The problem we face now is our traditional missiological interpretations which we inherited from the missionary era. As Ninan Koshy says, "part of the missionary failure was in not understanding the dynamics of Asian reaction and its religious dimension".²⁵ We should not commit that mistake as Asian churches in this century.

There are other factors that hinder ecumenism and ecumenical movement in Asia, not only theological or confessional factors alone. While delivering the John R. Mott memorial lecture at the inaugural assembly of the EACC, Visert Hooft said that there is a close connection between social and cultural factors in the life and witness of churches. "Churches imprisoned in cultural or social patterns can hardly be ecumenical. On the other hand, churches which stand on their own feet naturally seek to establish fellowship with each other. The ecumenical movement is in a very real sense a movement of liberation and every move leading to the liberation of the Church creates new ecumenical opportunities."²⁶

²⁴ "Confessing the Faith in Asia Today", EACC Consultation Report (Hong Kong, October 26-November 3, 1966), 10.

²⁵ Ninan Koshy, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, Vol. I (Hong Kong: CCA, 2004), 19.

²⁶ "A Decisive Hour for the Christian Mission", in *The East Asian Christian Conference 1959 and the John R. Mott Memorial Lectures* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959).

Towards a Revitalised Ecumenical Movement in Asia

Hans-Ruedi Weber who made the first attempt to write the history of 'Asia and the Ecumenical Movement' in 1961 states: "The ecumenical movement is first of all a pilgrimage towards the living Lord of all, a movement of submission to God, of prayer and worship. This is a conviction arising out of the total Asian ecumenical history. Many of Christ's Asian ambassadors have in the first place been men and women of prayer, remaining in an exemplary way in the presence of the living Lord. Ecumenical meetings in Asia often began with an hour or day of silent meditation".²⁷ But, what we lack now is this spiritual motivation in our ecumenical journey. In this situation, the Asian churches need to demonstrate both the right and the duty to call upon all the churches and the ecumenical movement as a whole to pursue a grand strategy of spiritual awakening in their ecumenical odyssey. Now that there are several ecumenical actors and players in Asia, their presence and actions may be seen as a blessing or a hindrance. We have yet to assess it while we undertake the task of revitalising the Asian ecumenical movement. A new way of working together by all ecumenical actors, denominational and confessional bodies, engaged in their mission in Asia has to be found. As Asian church leaders gathered here at this consultation jointly organised by CCA and WCC, we need to soon make the effort to find ways in which all members of the ecumenical family can come together to seriously reflect on this. The need for revitalising the ecumenical movement in Asia and regaining the ecumenical vision of Asian churches should be a priority of all those who are concerned with the common witness and future of the ecumenical movement in Asia. As D.T. Niles said:

"We need progressively to find ways in which the confessional movements and the organs of the ecumenical movement do not just remain the parallel lines of a railway track, but like rivers that move towards a point of confluence. Temples are usually set up where waters meet. The place of confluence is the place of pilgrimage".

²⁷ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *op. cit.*, 294.