



Christian Conference of Asia

Prophetic Echoes

A Journey of Advocacy and Action

Statements • Letters • Communiqués
2015–2023





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Foreword

‘Prophetic Echoes: A Journey of Advocacy and Action’

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy”.
(Proverbs 31:8-9)

Advocacy is a sacred duty and a call to embody the essence of a merciful God who desires the prevalence of peace with justice, and the dignity and rights of all God’s creation. In a world often marked by division, discord, hatred, and polarisation, the prophetic voice declares God’s message and points people towards God’s call to reconnect and recommit. The prophetic voice is more than advice, it is the epitome of the ability to tune into how the divine spirit expects us to respond and communicate in times of crisis.

Advocacy is the embodiment of the Church’s prophetic diakonia. In Asia’s diverse mosaic of cultures, faiths, and governance systems, advocacy becomes a vital tool to address multifaceted challenges to human dignity. Advocacy bridges the divide between transnational concerns and local realities, standing as a channel for those whose voices are often unheard. The objectives of such advocacy are two-fold. Firstly, it empowers the Asian churches to become beacons of prophetic witness during moments of crisis, human suffering, and societal fracture. Secondly, the advocacy actions, especially in the forms of statements and letters, seek to unite the Asian churches in a collective voice that transcends national and regional boundaries. In addressing emerging issues, such statements, letters, and communiques harness the power of unity and express unwavering support for human rights and dignity, for the welfare of everyone.

The CCA has consistently demonstrated its mission of advocacy and accompaniment in different ways. The compilation of public statements, communiques, and letters of solidarity spanning the

years 2015 to 2023 bears witness to the commitment of Asian churches through the CCA to stand against injustice, uplift the oppressed, and echo the transformative message of love and hope. Public Statements on different thematic issues included in this volume manifest the CCA's commitment to dignity, sustainability, and transformation. The Communiqués that are prepared by the participants of different programmes organised by the CCA amplify regional concerns and engage in the global conversation that aims to shape norms, actions, and policies. These are echoes of CCA's public witness actions.

The CCA has been a vital conduit in this regard, bringing the voices and concerns of Asian churches to the international stage. The accompanying pages serve as a record of the CCA's prophetic interventions as well as a reminder of the fact that the pursuit of justice, compassion, and solidarity is not confined to any one corner of the world, but is a shared and universal mission. It is hoped that this compilation inspires us to continue raising our voices, as the Asian Church, to advocate for justice, and to walk in accompaniment and solidarity, in our common quest to realise God's vision for a just and compassionate world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mathews George Chunakara', with a horizontal line underneath.

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA

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2015

2015 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

CCA expresses concern over revision to 'Guidelines for US-Japan Defence Cooperation'

8 June 2015

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) shares the concerns expressed by the North and South Korean church leaders about the revisions to the "Guidelines for US-Japan Defence Cooperation" which will be a threat to peace and security in East Asia.

The General Secretary of the CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, commented, "The anxiety expressed by the leaders of the North and South Korean churches in a joint statement issued on 8 June 2015, is valid in Asia's emerging geopolitical context." He stated, "As the US-Japan bilateral defence cooperation makes new provisions, the peace and security in Asia is threatened, especially in contexts of Japan revising its defence posture as well as the Japanese government's decision to reinterpret a constitutional provision which allows Japanese participation in collective self-defence."

The CCA General Secretary added, "The churches and the ecumenical movement in Asia will have to closely monitor the evolution of the US-Japan alliance and its geopolitical implications in East Asia while being engaged in churches' mission of moving beyond conflicts and working towards peace with justice and reconciliation."

At a joint meeting of the leaders of the Korean Christian Federation (KCF) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North) and the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) in the Republic of Korea (South) held in the People's Republic of China last week, the two churches stated their position calling for urgent action to immediately abolish the revisions to the "Guidelines for US-Japan Defence Cooperation" which threatened peace in Asia, the US

Government to abandon its plans for expanding military supremacy, and the Japanese government to abide by its Peace Constitution and stop the move for increasing militarisation.

The church leaders also expressed their apprehension, saying that the 'US-Japan agreement surely insults those Asians, especially Koreans, who suffered under the Japanese Occupation' and that the 'peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula will be jeopardised, and the extremely unstable state of affairs between the South and North (North and South) will persist'.

CCA raises concern about attacks on nuns and Christians in India

9 July 2015

The Christian Conference of Asia is shocked at the news of the rape of a 47-year-old nun from Kerala, who belonged to the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, on 19 June 2015 by two unidentified men in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India. It was equally shocking to hear that she was discovered the next morning gagged and tied to her bed at the medical centre in which she serves. The medical centre 'Khrist Sahay Kendra' (Christ Help Centre) has been functioning in the area for the last 60 years. Earlier on 15 March 2015, a 71-year-old nun of the Religious of Jesus and Mary (RJM) was gang-raped in Ranaghat, West Bengal, India.

It is the opinion of church leaders that the frequent attacks and the failure of the authorities to book the culprits show that these are planned attempts to intimidate, threaten, and humiliate missionaries through the rape of helpless and vulnerable nuns. This is seen not as an isolated incident but as part of the orchestrated violence targeting Christians, which began with attacks on Christians, then churches, and now as sexual violence on nuns.

We, the Christian Conference of Asia representing 101 member churches and seventeen councils of churches across twenty-one countries in Asia, express our deep sorrow and concern over the increasing sexual attacks on nuns and Christian missionaries, priests, churches, and Christian institutions in India. The CCA and the global community are deeply concerned about the growing violence

against Christians and other minorities. The growing trend of using rape of defenceless and vulnerable women and girls, including nuns, as a means of manifesting religious and communal intolerance is cowardly and unbecoming of a nation that is renowned for its rich traditions and cultural heritage of tolerance and peace.

Though the Indian government had enacted strong legislation after the fatal gang-rape of a student in New Delhi in December 2012, the continuing reports of gender-based violence against women and girls, including nuns and women and girls with disabilities, expose the wide gap between good policies and poor implementation, and lack of police accountability.

We join hands with the churches in India in condemning these acts of brutality and violence against religious minorities in India. We assure all concerned that Christianity and Christian missionaries in India have a long history of service in the fields of health and education, and have contributed considerably to nation-building in the true biblical spirit of love and compassion for all. Let us not forget the sacrifices of 'women religious' who have left home and family to work among people in remote areas despite risks to themselves. Incidents of violence against women and religious minorities, raise serious concerns over the security and safety of minorities in India and tarnishes the image of the country.

We, therefore, urge the Indian government to provide adequate security for the religious minorities and to safeguard their rights, to consider rapes and violence against women based on religion and attacks on women and children in general as serious violations of their human rights, to take special interest to arrest the culprits involved in these crimes, and to ensure police accountability. These measures will go a long way in inspiring confidence in Christians and other minorities and will assure them that they are valued as citizens of India.

General Secretary's Address on the occasion marking the centenary of the 1915 Armenian genocide

18 July 2015

His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, ecclesiastical and ecumenical leaders from around the globe, distinguished guests, and friends.

It is a great honour and privilege for me to participate in this historic and unique event of remembering the martyrs of the Armenian genocide, organised by the Armenian Apostolic Church of the Holy See of Cilicia. I bring you greetings on behalf of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), which covers a vast geographical region, starting from Iran in West Asia to Japan in East Asia; from Nepal in the North of Asia to New Zealand in the South. In several of CCA's member countries, the Armenian Diaspora has existed for several centuries, of course with their Christian faith and churches. This clearly shows that the presence of Armenians in various Asian countries has not been the result of their plight due to the Armenian genocide, but that they have been living in Asia for several centuries.

The presence of Armenians in Asian countries has been evident in several places in Asia, for example, in several major cities in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Afghanistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and China. Some of the reminders of the centuries-old Armenian presence in Asia and the bygone era are still evident. There are even streets named after Armenia in certain Asian cities— Armenian street in Singapore, Madras, and Kolkata in India; centuries-old historic Armenian Church buildings in Madras, Kolkata, Dhaka, Rangoon, and Singapore. The best-known Armenian institution in India is the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy established in the 18th century in Kolkata. These are significant legacies of the Armenians in South and South-East Asia. As we know, Armenians have a strong presence and roots, especially in the West Asian countries. The participation of the Armenian Church in CCA is more actively taking place now through the Armenian Church in Iran, of the Holy See of Cilicia. Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian, the Primate of the Armenian Church in Iran, is in the current leadership of CCA and has been serving as a valued member of the General Committee and Executive Committee of CCA. The relationship between the Holy See of Cilicia and CCA existed even before the Armenian churches from Iran or Australia became members of CCA. I remember the visit of His Holiness Catholicos Aram I to CCA headquarters in 1997 and also the subsequent visits of His Holiness to CCA member churches and councils in Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan.

As you know, the Asian churches and the Asian ecumenical movement have been part of various expressions of global

ecumenical solidarity with the Armenian people all over the world. The most recent of such expressions was during the 14th General Assembly of CCA, which was held in Jakarta, Indonesia, in May this year. The participants of the Assembly paid homage to the martyrs of the Armenian genocide and prayed for the departed souls during a session of the CCA Assembly. A statement on the Centenary of the Armenian genocide also was adopted by the Assembly.

As a representative of the CCA and the Asian ecumenical movement at this historic and unique event, I convey to you the message that Asian churches and the Asian ecumenical movement will continue to be in solidarity with all Armenians around the world who still bear the pain of the brutality experienced by their ancestors. As you continue your struggle for reclaiming justice, human rights, and your lost dignity, we will accompany you in your ongoing struggle and continue to uphold you in our prayers.

May God Almighty's divine blessings continue to be with all Armenians.

Statement on Hiroshima Day: "A time for remembrance and prayer"

6 August 2015

The 70th anniversary of Hiroshima Day was observed on 6 August 2015 in Hiroshima's peace park, near the epicentre of the 1945 attack. More than 55,000 people stood in silence at 8:15 AM, marking the moment when the atom bomb exploded over the city, thrusting the world into the nuclear age. Dozens of doves were later released as a symbol of peace.

As we pause to remember and recall the horrors and sufferings of that day and the subsequent bombing in Nagasaki, we cannot but think of the million-plus Japanese survivors classified as "*hibakusha*," or atomic bomb survivors, in the post-war years. Only about 183,000 are still alive. Many are still fighting illnesses and injuries traced to the bombings seven decades ago. Time has not eased the burden. Decades after the bombings, survivors can be diagnosed with cancer and other illnesses linked to radiation.

Tsutomu Yamaguchi, an employee of the Mitsubishi Heavy Industry, was on a business trip to Hiroshima and sleeping comfortably in a

guesthouse that fateful day when the atomic bomb fell, barely 2 km away from the epicentre of the blast. His skin was badly burnt, his palms were blistered, his hair was singed and his hearing lost, but miraculously he survived. He spent the night in a relief camp and after basic medical treatment limped back 180 miles to his hometown to join his wife and children. On August 9, the second atomic bomb struck the quiet town of Nagasaki. But Yamaguchi survived once again, perhaps to tell the story to the generations to come. Atomic blast survivors are called *hibakusha* in Japanese. But there are very few who are *niju hibakusha* (double survivors). Yamaguchi was one of those. But the best of him came out when he was invited to deliver a speech on nuclear non-proliferation in the United Nations, where he talked about disarmament but emphasised a philosophy of malice or grudge towards none, despite the fact that he was suffering from incurable gastric cancer. He died on 4 January 2010.

The greatest risk the world faced was from forgetting Hiroshima, said Mikiso Iwasa, Chairman of the Japan confederation of atom bomb sufferers' organisations. A survivor himself, Mr Iwasa said, "The fact that the world is still bristling with 15,000 nuclear weapons, means that anyone in the world could become a *hibakusha* (survivor of the bomb) at any time."

On Hiroshima Day let the lives of the survivors and the painful memories and sufferings of the innocent victims of the first atomic bomb, deter us from war and the deadly effects of nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Let us choose life, not death...

Statement: "Prayers for peace in the Korean peninsula"

21 August 2015

The Christian Conference of Asia is saddened to hear that tensions have escalated between South Korea and North Korea, following an exchange of fire across their borders, prompting the evacuation of residents nearby. It is reportedly the first major armed clash between the two countries, in five years.

At the beginning of the year 2015, leaders of both Koreas had "announced openly that they would open a new era for

reconciliation and reunification as they were celebrating the 70th anniversary of liberation”, kindling hope and excitement among the people. Writing on behalf of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK), Rev. Shin Seung Min, Director of the Reconciliation and Unification Department said, “In reality, we are moving from the cold war to a hot war.”

The Reunification Committee of the NCCCK called for an emergency meeting and decided to demand that “both Koreas resolve the present crisis with peaceful means.”

The Committee said that one of the immediate actions for South Korea would be “to stop the broadcast, especially as the North had already expressed their willingness to a peaceful approach as long as South Korea stops broadcasts against North Korea.” Rev. Shin Seung Min requests our prayers at this time of crisis.

CCA requests all member churches and councils, the members of the Executive Committee, and all ecumenical friends and partners to join us in praying for lasting peace and reconciliation, for the protection of the citizens of both Koreas, especially for those who live in the affected areas, and for our sisters and brothers who are untiringly working for reconciliation and reunification.

*“In my distress I called upon the Lord and cried to my God for help;
He heard my voice out of His temple. And my cry for help before
Him came into His ears.” (Psalm 18:6)*

May our prayers rise before Him as incense; and the lifting up of our hands as the evening sacrifice.

**Statement on the International Day of Charity–2015:
“...But the greatest of them all is love”
5 September 2015**

*“And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the
greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)*

The International Day of Charity was established by the United Nations, with the objective of sensitising and mobilising people, NGOs, and stakeholders all around the world to help others through volunteer and philanthropic activities. It coincides with the

anniversary of the death of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her work to overcome poverty. Upon receiving the prize, she famously gave the money that came with it to some of the poorest people in India.

At a time when the need for humanitarian assistance has never been higher and when there are more refugees and displaced people than at any time since the end of the Second World War, charities play an increasingly vital role in meeting human needs.

The International Day of Charity reminds us that the motivation and reason for the church to be involved in the service of humanity is none other than Jesus Christ Himself, and the desire to bear witness to His love. Jesus Christ was Mother Teresa's inspiration and strength in her tireless work for the poor and the outcast. Her life's witness of love derived from what Christ taught. In the service of charity, Mother Teresa sought not merely to provide humanitarian relief or to change social structures. As she clearly stated in her Nobel Lecture: "We are not just social workers. We may be doing social work in the eyes of the people, but we are really contemplatives in the heart of the world, for we are touching the body of Christ twenty-four hours" (December 1979).

The Christian concept of charity envisages integral human development. It goes beyond the philanthropic aspect of helping one's neighbour, and manifests a truer sense of care and compassion, communicating authentic love to the poor and suffering, since it stems not from excess or an expectation of return, but from the very sacrifice of self. Dealing with human beings means grappling with actual persons, who always need something more than mere technical assistance or philanthropic care.

May Mother Teresa's life and example continue to challenge all of us to be faithful to our Christian values and be committed to always defending and promoting life.

Statement on the International Day of Peace–2015: "Partnerships for peace– dignity for all"

21 September 2015

Days ahead of this year's International Day of Peace observed across the world on 21 September, the UN Secretary-General had

called for Peace and for laying down of arms for a 24-hour ceasefire, saying “Let’s make this International Day of Peace a day without violence, and a day of forgiveness. If, for one day, we can live in a world without aggression and hostility, we can imagine how much more is possible.”

In this nuclear age, lasting Peace on earth is of primary importance for the preservation of human civilisation and the survival of mankind; for the material well-being, development and progress of countries, and for the full implementation of the rights and fundamental human freedoms. Expressing the will and the aspirations of all to eradicate war from the life of mankind and, above all, to avert a worldwide nuclear catastrophe, the UN General Assembly had adopted a Declaration on the Rights of People to Peace about three decades ago.

The Declaration adopted in 1984 holds that the peoples of our planet have a sacred right to peace and that it is the fundamental obligation and sacred duty of each state to preserve and promote the implementation of this right to peace. It also emphasised that the policies of states be directed towards the elimination of the threat of war, particularly nuclear war, the renunciation of the use of force in international relations, and the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means to ensure the right of people to peace.

Though awareness and campaigns for peace and the culture of peace have increased during the 30-plus years after the adoption of the Right to Peace, we have a long way to go, because all that is happening around us is evidence enough that all is not well with the human rights and dignity of the average human being all over the world.

There are many stories to tell—stories soaked with violence, the violation of human dignity, and the destruction of creation. Many continue to reel from the impact of civil war; and ethnic and religious animosity has marred the façade of our nations, leaving ugly scars. Thousands are dead, displaced, homeless, and have been made refugees within their own homeland and abroad. The refugee and migrant crisis speaks volumes of the plight of ordinary citizens who are running away from armed conflict, torture, and injustice. Women and children often bear the brunt of such conflicts—many women are abused, trafficked, and killed; children are separated

from their parents, orphaned, recruited as soldiers, or abused. Thousands of children die each day from inadequate nutrition as a result of political and economic decisions that favour a few. Large-scale indiscriminate violence has become the rule rather than the exception of the day. The world looks on helplessly as each day of violence and injustice seamlessly blends into the other.

Peace, as mentioned earlier, is in serious deficit.

The theme of this year's commemoration is 'Partnerships for Peace – Dignity for All', which aims to highlight the importance of all segments of society working together to strive for peace. It is a call to churches to give our best to the promotion of peace and the preservation of human rights and dignity in our own contexts. The United Nations has recognised faith-based organisations as one of the thousands of partnerships that support it in achieving its goals.

Let us rise to our responsibility and calling to establish peace with justice and security in the Household of God— *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (Amos 5:24)

Statement on the International Day of the Girl Child–2015: “The power of the adolescent girl”

11 October 2015

The International Day of the Girl Child (Day of the Girl) is celebrated annually on 11 October to highlight issues concerning the gender inequality faced by young girls. This year's theme is 'The Power of the Adolescent Girl: Vision for 2030'. There are nearly 600 million girls aged 10 to 19 in the world today, each with limitless individual potential; however, they are disappearing from public awareness and the international development agenda.

The International Day of the Girl Child encourages us to reflect on and celebrate the power and potential of adolescent girls and inspires us to renew our commitment to empowering girls. It is time to move beyond awareness-raising and to support adolescent girls as they shape the present and become leaders of the future. It is time to consolidate good practice and focus on actions that will pave the way for a better and more equitable future for adolescent girls.

Throughout the world, adolescent girls are at risk of disappearing from the international development agenda and public awareness. Despite progress in many areas, adolescent girls are in danger of disappearing because of the lack of education, exposure to preventable diseases, or harmful sociocultural practices like child marriage and so on. They are disappearing from a lack of investment in policies, interventions, and services tailored to their specific needs and concerns.

We, as Asian churches and councils and ecumenical organisations, are called to recognise, respect, and develop the limitless potential of adolescent girls by encouraging and advocating targeted investments in affordable and accessible education, adequate healthcare, and all-round development of the girl child. We are encouraged to recognise the difference that the empowerment of adolescent girls will make to the well-being of family, society, and world.

Upholding and preserving the rights and dignity of children, especially the girl child, has been a priority of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) for many years. The CCA is committed to raising awareness and advocacy on issues like overcoming violence in any form against women and children, which includes migration, trafficking, and forced labour; and to empowering the youth through leadership training and other capacity-building initiatives. Let us use this opportunity to highlight the importance of social, economic, and political investment in adolescent girls, both today and in the future.

Statement on the abuse of blasphemy law in Pakistan

16 December 2015

The CCA family is shocked and saddened to learn of yet another tragic and brutal incident of harassment and murder under the blasphemy law. We are dismayed to hear that the young Christian couple accused of desecrating the Holy Quran, was beaten, and then burnt to death by a mob in a small Pakistani village in Punjab province. As per news reports, though the couple had locked themselves in a room, the mob broke open the door, beat them up, and pulled their bodies to a nearby kiln where they were burnt.

It is of some comfort to know that the local police have arrested forty-five people in connection with the attack and that a case had been filed under multiple sections of Pakistan's Penal Code, including murder and attacking police officials.

Christians and the global community are concerned about the safety and protection of religious minorities in Pakistan. Coming at a time when Asia Bibi's appeal is pending in the Supreme Court, such incidents of mob violence are more worrying than ever.

While expressing our solidarity with the churches in Pakistan, we join Christian communities, leaders, and human rights activists around the world in voicing our strong concern against the continuing abuse and exploitation of the blasphemy law to oppress religious minorities. We believe that the situation is more alarming when people take the law into their own hands and make it difficult for vulnerable communities to live a normal life in their own countries.

We appeal for a revision of not only the blasphemy law but all such laws that discriminate and punish people on the basis of religion, and for facilitating an atmosphere where democratic institutions can remain just and fair and function without fear or favour.

We, the Churches of Asia, will continue to uphold you in our prayers. We affirm that building communities of love, justice, and peace is the hallmark of Christianity and this will always be the foundation on which our church stands. We believe that the core values of all religions are love, justice, peace, reconciliation, equality, and human dignity; and that it is this commonality of core values that religious leaders must endeavour to promote.

We pray for forgiveness and understanding in a situation where the emotions of people are fanned by religious sentiments. Let us reach out in peace and strengthen common religious concerns for justice and peace for all, rather than emphasise differences that divide and fragment the world.

In this regard, Rt. Rev. Samuel Azariah, President Bishop, Church of Pakistan, called for a meeting of all the religious heads of the various Christian denominations in Lahore along with a few leading Muslim Clerics to jointly address this issue. He planned to have a press conference and a public meeting on Sunday, "condemning the misuse of the law and demanding that exemplary punishment be given to the false accusers."

2015 Programme Communiqués

CCA 14th General Assembly – Pre-Assembly Women’s Forum Statement on **‘Equal and fuller participation of women, children, and gender minorities in the household of God’** *17–20 May 2015 | Bandung, Indonesia*

We, sisters and brothers, as one in Christ, gathered together at the Pre-Assembly Women’s Forum, representing thirteen countries, twenty-six member churches, councils, and ecumenical partners, in Bandung, Indonesia from 17–20 May 2015. After the fatal earthquake in Nepal and India, we, the participants of the Pre-Assembly Women’s Forum, express our deep sorrow, prayers, and support for the victims.

We celebrated our diversity of nationality, caste, class, age, sex, race, ethnicity, language, denomination, and gender identities. We shared our reflections on the need to *Live Together in the Household of God*.

Being aware of the patriarchal connotation of the word ‘household’, we would like to reclaim the Household of God as an equal and mutual space with sharing of power, affirming human dignity, and living in harmony with nature.

In Asia, many people are subjugated to sexual, economic, cultural, and political discrimination and gender-based oppression. We affirm that the liberation of women, children, and gender minorities from the shackles of oppression, violence, war, and terror is the liberation of all humanity. Gender justice is a pertinent call for the manifestation of the ‘Household of God’ in the midst of rampant economic globalisation, escalating religious fundamentalism, and ecological degradation at a global level.

- Today, increasing global capitalism, imperialism, and privatisation is creating a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Many people in Asia are vulnerable to extreme poverty. The feminisation of poverty has increased gender-

based violence and threatens the very existence of women and children in all spheres of life. The inhumane and harsh working conditions of women labourers damage their dignity and integrity. National governments fail to provide and implement policies to alleviate poverty, welfare policies, and adequate legal protection for female and child workers.

- In Asia, a large number of workers, especially women and children, are forced to migrate to other countries due to extreme poverty and limited opportunities for survival in their homelands. The rampant increase in human trafficking forces those vulnerable women and children into prostitution, sex industries, labour trafficking, and other forms of modern-day slavery.
- Home, a place of love for different forms of family, has increasingly become a place of domestic violence, including marital rape, incest, and other kinds of sexual and psychological abuse. The Domestic Violence Prevention Acts in many countries are not enforced due to political, religious, and cultural reasons. The prevalence of child marriages further complicates the issue.
- The lack of equal gender participation in political and religious spaces is a significant issue in Asian societies. It must be acknowledged that churches in Asia unfortunately have had a hand in perpetuating gender-based discrimination and violence in many forms. The sacred texts are often interpreted to oppress and marginalise women and children in church and society. This leads to limited opportunities for women in leadership and decision-making spheres, and for the acknowledgement of their contributions in church and society.
- Gender identity and sexual orientation are not biologically given but are self-determined, culturally constituted, and politically manifested. The needs and rights of such minorities have been neglected and they are subjugated to discrimination and exclusion.
- Conflict and war threaten life in many Asian countries. People are being forced to flee their homelands due to political, religious, ethnic, and military persecution and conflicts. The

plight of these stateless, landless, and displaced refugees needs to be addressed by churches in Asia.

- People living with HIV and AIDS are stigmatised and discriminated against. Their access to health services is inadequate. The need of the hour is prevention and not condemnation.
- Human greed, capitalism, consumerism, and natural and man-made disasters have led to an ecological crisis. The worst victims of these are indigenous people, especially women and children. A holistic perspective of nature and mother earth is essential for the sustenance and maintenance of the integrity of creation.
- The realisation of gender justice and equality in the Household of God demands full and creative participation of women and children in social, economic, cultural, religious, and political spaces.

We recommend that the churches and its ecumenical bodies take revolutionary actions of transformation:

- To practice a zero-tolerance approach for overcoming violence against women, children, and marginalised groups in Church and society and develop and reinforce existing policies to prevent violence against women and children in the Church.
- To commit to gender mainstreaming and sensitisation in the churches and wider communities in order to create space for women leadership formation and decision-making participation.
- To reclaim the liberating message of the Bible and integrate contextual, feminist, post-colonial theology and spirituality in the everyday life of faith communities to ensure justice, equality, and fullness of life for women and children.
- To provide platforms to critically address the norms and ethos of masculinity in order to dismantle the patriarchy.
- To build an inclusive community, the Church needs to initiate and develop dialogue on the rights and dignity of gender minorities (LGBTQI) and their participation in the Church and society.

- To engage in interreligious dialogue to promote gender justice.
- To facilitate programmes of trauma recovery, healing memories of pain, and protection for victims/survivors of human rights violations, conflicts and wars, and of natural disasters.
- To analyse and overcome the root causes of human trafficking and forced migration. The Church should journey with the victims/survivors in the empowerment process for liberation and restoration.
- To ensure that churches acquire competency to provide services to people living with HIV and AIDS and engage in advocacy at all levels.
- To develop programmes to tackle extreme poverty at the grassroots to ensure the fullness of life.
- To promote eco-justice perspectives and practices towards the nurturing and caring of our mother earth.
- To take ownership of CCA's programmes and allocate a budget for the Gender Justice programme and promote gender auditing.

CCA 14th General Assembly – Pre-Assembly Youth Forum's Statement: "In the Household of God" (Song)

17–20 May 2015 | Bandung, Indonesia

Lyrics: Sora Enomoto

Music: Mak-Chi-Lap, Paul

In the Household of God, people are crucified,
 In the Household of God, people are crying,
 In the Household of God, nature is mourning.

Open our eyes so that we can see what you see,
 Open our ears so that we can listen what you listen,
 Let's be in solidarity with our people,
 With their memories and with their hope.

In the Household of God, people are rejoicing,
 In the Household of God, people are celebrating,
 In the Household of God, whole creation is singing.

CCA 14th General Assembly – Pre-Assembly Asian Ecumenical Course (AEC) Statement

17–20 May 2015 | Jakarta, Indonesia

The voice of St. Paul the Apostle still echoes loud and appears to be most appealing to 21st-century society, through his words, “He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the Household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone.” (Ephesians 2:17–20)

We, the youth from fourteen countries, representing different churches and national councils, enriched by our own cultures and realities, met together for the two-week-long Asia Ecumenical Course, with the theme of the 14th General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia, ‘Living Together in the Household of God’ in Jakarta, Indonesia, from 16–26 May 2015.

Here we were brought face-to-face with the existential realities persistent in the world, marred by voices and echoes of people and nature who are often ‘sinned against’—the groaning earth, the suffering, oppressed, and marginalised brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering because of the injustice and inequality that prevails in the world, in terms of impoverishment, unemployment, environmental degradation, human rights violation, lack of education, discrimination, migration, and terrorism.

The course enlightened us to realise our responsibility as the beacons of that great light in the brokenness of the world. We were empowered to take up the challenge in the renewal of the Church and society by fulfilling our prophetic role to be agents of justice, peace, and reconciliation. We are also in acceptance of our inability, inaction, and apathy to the situation of the marginalised, and our silent support to oppressors.

The course helped us broaden our horizons and instilled in us a vigour and spirit of pursuing the spirit of humanness, oneness, and

amity amongst us by removing the parochialism that divides us. It invigorated significant dimensions in realising the power in unity among brethren, which is a decisive force that pervades the notion of uniformity, it being the rule of the universe.

The Trinitarian God puts before us the model for 'unity in diversity'. The strength when sisters and brothers coexist in peace and justice in an egalitarian society is the manifestation of the divine. Finding unity amidst the distinctiveness of life instilled the thought that being united confers the strength to be agents of 'Missio Dei' by becoming co-sufferers and co-sojourners in the pain and afflictions of our fellow beings and attributing to them a life of dignity and worth from the womb to the tomb.

2016

2016 Executive Committee's Statement CCA Executive Committee's Statement of concern over religious intolerance and violence in Asia

22 July 2016

The Executive Committee of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) conveys its concern over the problems of intolerance, hatred, and religious fundamentalism, which lead to religious persecution and the commission of acts of violence and heinous crimes that bring about untold suffering to people of all faiths, including religious minorities, in Asia. Innocent victims include civilians in general and minorities, women, and children in particular. Religious intolerance and religiously inspired violence are escalating in Asia. Unfortunately, many governments turn a blind eye to the problem. Religious intolerance refers to not respecting the basic human rights of other people to hold religious beliefs different to one's own. Montesquieu wrote, "Religious wars are not caused by the fact that there is more than one religion, but by the spirit of intolerance...the spread of which can only be regarded as the total eclipse of human reason."

Blind religious fundamentalism is a serious menace to democracy, peace, and security in Asia. Terrorist acts of violence are committed in the name of religion. Sectarian and extremist violence, its direct or indirect connections with religion, and blatant terrorism cause growing alarm in the region, which is a threat to interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence. Religion is used to silence voices of reason and compassion. Religious fundamentalism—be it Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim—thrives in backward societies, where semi-literate and illiterate people who are poor and have low levels of social consciousness are inculcated with religious intolerance, bias, and hatred. Religiously motivated hate speech, oppression, violence, and attacks by the rich and the poor against people and communities based upon their religious identity have increased with impunity in the region, because of which religious minorities

live in fear and insecurity. Blasphemy laws, in particular, marginalise religious minorities. Freedom of faith comes under mounting pressure. There are many instances during which terrorism and violence have taken place in Asia, where there is a spate of attacks against innocent civilians, including Christians. Recent trends indicate that in India, Myanmar, Pakistan, and other parts of Asia, fanatic religious fundamentalists spread a reactionary political ideology that patronises communal polarisation and violence. Targeted killings of violent extremists have attacked many victims, including Christian minorities. In Bangladesh, a terrorist attack killed 22 persons. In Pakistan, religiously inspired terrorism has spread throughout the country and a suicide bomber killed over 70 persons and injured more than 300 in Lahore on Easter Sunday. A Pakistani social media celebrity was a victim of honour killing by her brother. In Myanmar, Rohingyas are faced with religious intolerance and outbreaks of violence. In the Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf group took hostage foreigners, executed a Canadian, kidnapped Indonesian fishermen, killed Philippine soldiers, and engaged in a firefight with Philippine security forces. In Sri Lanka where a thirty-year civil war has ended, all victims and survivors await justice and a political solution. In Syria, the Supreme Leader of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II survived a suicide bomber attack. Intolerance is growing.

Lamenting the perversion of faith expressed in atrocities committed in the name of religion, CCA is concerned about the plight of religious minorities in Asia and expresses its profound grief at the loss of life and limbs from these acts of violence. Condemning terrorism in any form as criminal and indefensible, CCA condemns all violent attacks and any religious justification for such violent attacks against civilians, including religious and other minorities. CCA challenges religious leaders and communities to reflect, self-examine, and challenge interpretations that promote violence against people of other faiths.

CCA recognises the inherent God-given dignity of each person of all faiths and cultures, follows the example of Jesus to be instruments of peace and justice in Asia, and is encouraged by the churches and the ecumenical movement for their steadfast prophetic advocacy of human rights and peace. Expressing its solidarity and continually

praying for all victims of religiously justified violence in any form, CCA asserts its pledge to nurture life and promote the community, as well as foster love, compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Encouraging the understanding and use of pacific settlement of disputes as a high priority in its ecumenical witness to counter discrimination and oppression and to break the cycle of violence, CCA calls on all religious and ethnic groups to support and encourage peace, reconciliation, and religious harmony at all levels of society and appeals to people from different faith traditions to live together and to protect one another amid our multicultural and multi-religious reality.

CCA continues to be concerned about violence in Asia and rejects attempts to divide people from different religious traditions. The Executive Committee of the Christian Conference of Asia, meeting in Medan, Sumatra, Indonesia:

- calls for the urgent and imperative promotion of interfaith relations, interreligious dialogue, and practical cooperation on matters related to justice, peace, and the welfare of communities;
- exhorts governments to uphold the rights of minority religious groups and to take all the necessary measures to provide adequate safety and security mechanisms to protect religious and other minorities and to not be deterred by the violent acts that religious extremists perpetrate;
- encourages the churches in Asia in their witness for human rights, justice, and peace through interfaith efforts to promote peace, reconciliation, and overcoming violence; and,
- implores the international community to act collectively to stop terrorist attacks and religiously motivated violence.

2016 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

CCA dismayed at suicide bomb attack in Lahore, Pakistan

28 March 2016

To,

The National Council of Churches in Pakistan, the Church of Pakistan,
and the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan

Respected church and ecumenical leaders in Pakistan,

We are deeply shocked and saddened to receive the news of a suicide bomber killing more than seventy people and injuring more than 300 others at Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park in Lahore on Easter Sunday. We learnt from some of you that the deadly suicide attack on Easter evening caused untold suffering for many people, as several families from predominantly Christian settlements in Youhanabad and Bahar Colony areas were spending time with their children in public parks after Easter services in churches.

It is unfortunate that sectarian violence and blatant terrorism continuously take place in Pakistani society due to widespread religious hatred. Such cowardly actions, in fact, destroy the very core of the social fabric and communal harmony in the country. The recent attack on innocent people, affecting mostly women and children, is a heinous crime. The increasing trend of attacks against innocent people raises questions about the security measures by the government to protect the lives of its citizens. It is our sincere appeal to the government of Pakistan to not allow these savage and inhumane actions to overrun the lives of people who have every right to live in peace, security, and freedom of movement.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) is concerned with the plight of the minority Christians in Pakistan, who are constantly faced with deadly attacks, the perpetrators of which continue with impunity.

In fact, we are also reminded now of the suicide attacks carried out in 2013 at All Saints Church in Peshawar's Kohati Gate area, killing eighty and wounding hundreds, as well as other suicide bombings at two churches in the Youhanabad area in March 2015. These incidents are clear indications of the vulnerable situations in which Christians in Pakistan are forced to live. While we express our solidarity with you all at this time of grief and ordeal, we send our deepest condolences to those families and friends whose loved ones were killed and injured during the blast. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people and communities affected by this tragedy. Please convey our profound sorrow and condolences to the bereaved families and the injured.

The CCA also hastens to assure the people of Pakistan that Christians are nurtured on the best practices of peace and harmony, and the values of fairness, justice, and unconditional love. We urge all member churches and councils of CCA to pray for the comfort and solace of numerous victims, irrespective of their religion or faith.

**General Secretary's Statement condemning
the police firing against farmers in Kidapawan,
Mindanao, in the Philippines**

6 April 2016

"Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter." (Proverbs 24:11)

It is with great distress that the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has been receiving disturbing news about the violent response and firing of bullets by police on 6,000 farmers in Kidapawan, North Cotabato, a southern island of Mindanao, on 1 April. It is unfortunate that the legitimate rights of poor farmers, who are demanding appropriate action by the government to provide assistance to the sustenance of farmers in the drought-ravaged area, are being ignored. We understand from reliable sources that at least three persons were killed and hundreds of people were wounded while the police opened fire against the protesting farmers, who were

insisting on a dialogue with the Governor of the province, and for 15,000 sacks of rice that were previously promised to them.

It was during the firing against the protesters that the farmers sought refuge in Scottswood Methodist Centre and took sanctuary in the Methodist Church compound. We are deeply disappointed that the Governor's office has threatened Methodist Bishop Ciriaco Francisco for harbouring protesters and the United Methodist Church with legal action in the form of revoking their legal permit.

The Christian Conference of Asia extends solidarity and prayers to the members and leadership of the United Methodist Church in their continuing protection of some 3,000 farmers and tribal leaders, who were faced with bullets fired on them by the Philippine National Police on 1 April 2016.

While CCA condemns this violent response to the protesting farmers, we applaud the efforts of the United Methodist Church in their perseverance in sheltering the farmers and tribal leaders as they continue their struggle for rightful sustenance. It is a known fact that the *lumad* farmers in the area have been continuously faced with discrimination and persecution. There is no justification for violent oppression as a response to the legitimate demands of farmers for their right to food and livelihood.

On behalf of the CCA, I convey our prayerful regards to Bishop Ciriaco Francisco and express our solidarity with the United Methodist Church at this time of their travails. We join hands with those who are struggling for basic human rights and justice, and urge the government and provincial authorities to provide adequate provisions and security to the farmers, who are legitimately registering their concerns. We pray and hope that peace with justice will prevail in the area and rights and dignities of the persecuted farmers involved in the struggle will be upheld. We appreciate the commitment of those who are demonstrating the values of the love of Jesus Christ and the biblical spirit of compassion, as has been shown by the United Methodist Church in sheltering the wounded and unprotected: "Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter." (Proverbs 24:11)

CCA condemns suicide bombing targeting Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II

20 June 2016

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) condemned the suicide bomber attack in the Church of St. Gabriel in the Al Wusta district, Qamishli, north-eastern Syria, during celebrations for the Orthodox Pentecost and the commemorations of the 1915 Genocide, which was being led by Patriarch His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II.

While expressing the CCA's concerns about the suicide bomber attack targeting the Supreme Leader of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East, Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II, the General Secretary of CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, stated, "The CCA is deeply saddened by this unfortunate event and we share the concern of all those peace-loving people and communities in Asia and around the world as we pray for the blessed life and continued leadership of the Patriarch, who works for sustained peace in the Middle East region."

The CCA General Secretary added, "The ongoing violence by terrorist groups against the minority Christian communities in Syria and other parts of the Middle East is a serious concern. It is unfortunate that a series of five suicide bomber attacks against the Assyrian minorities in Syria have taken place in the last six months. Terrorist attacks against any religious or cultural minority are deplorable, and the international community should act collectively to stop the ongoing terrorist attacks in the Middle East."

"It is unfortunate that a large number of Christians in the homelands where Christianity was born and rooted have already left their ancestral homes and lands as they are unable to survive because of their faith and religious identity," said Dr Mathews George Chunakara.

The members of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East are widely scattered in various Asian countries and they include CCA member constituencies in India, Iran, Australia, and New Zealand.

The CCA appeals to its member churches and councils to offer special prayers for peace in Syria and in other countries in the Middle East regions.

CCA congratulates Magsaysay Award winner, Bezwada Wilson

29 July 2016

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) congratulated Bezwada Wilson, an ardent campaigner working against manual scavenging, who is being honoured with the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award 2016. Wilson has been the National Convenor of the Safai Karmachari Andolan, and working to eradicate manual scavenging during the past three decades.

The General Secretary of the CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, congratulated Bezwada Wilson and said, “The recognition of Wilson will be morale boosting for the selfless work of Wilson and Safai Karmachari Andolan activists who have been struggling to uphold the rights and dignity of a large number of Dalit manual scavengers living in vulnerable conditions.”

The Magsaysay Award Committee was impressed with the work of Wilson which focussed on ensuring the inalienable rights and dignity of hundreds of thousands of Dalits engaged in manual scavenging. Manual scavenging is the work of removing, by hand, human excrement from dry latrines and carrying, on the head, the baskets of excrement to designated disposal sites. A hereditary occupation, manual scavenging involved 180,000 Dalit households cleaning the 790,000 public and private dry latrines across India. 98 percent of scavengers are meagrely paid women and girls. While the Indian Constitution and other laws in India prohibit dry latrines and the employment of manual scavengers, these have not been strictly enforced since the government itself is the biggest violator.

Bezwada Wilson, a member of the Church of South India, was born to a Dalit family in Kolar Gold Fields in Karnataka, a state of India. Although his family had been engaged in manual scavenging for generations, he was spared labour and was the first in his family to pursue a higher education. Treated as an outcast in school and

acutely aware of his family's lot, Wilson became a crusader in eradicating manual scavenging.

Wilson has been working for the self-emancipation of Dalit manual scavengers for the past three decades. He stresses that manual scavenging is not a sectarian problem: "You are addressing all members of society because no human being should be subjected to this inhuman practice."

The CCA General Secretary also added, "The issue of manual scavenging in India and the need for ecumenical advocacy was highlighted during the Public Issues discussion at the last CCA General Assembly in May 2015, by Rev. Dr Y. Moses. The strategic programme plan of the CCA for the next five years adopted by the Executive and Programme Committees of the CCA already includes advocacy initiatives at the international level by the CCA in collaboration with Dalit organisations working in India, and a national consultation, already scheduled to take place in December 2016, will focus on ecumenical advocacy on abolition of manual scavenging in India."

Message on World Humanitarian Day–2016: "The world needs a bold vision for 'One Humanity'"

18 August 2016

Humanity has experienced tremendous crises in recent times that warrant the attention and unified action of all those who are concerned with the dignity, welfare, peace, and security of all human beings. All those who are mindful of the growing outrage and its consequences of the number of people forced to leave their homes have mounted since the end of the Second World War. Despite advancements in many areas, especially in science, technology, transportation, and communication in a globalised and digitalised world, humanity faces barbarity in many forms. Crises and chaos erupt every moment. Millions of people fall victim to inhumane actions and struggle to survive. Terrorist acts of violence, armed conflicts, nuclear disasters, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods, and other human-made and natural disasters often dislocate and displace people in many parts

of the world. In several countries, ethnic and religious minorities fall prey to religious intolerance, conflict, and violence. Many become undocumented migrants, as well as refugees and asylum seekers, and often, innocent people, end up in the hands of human traffickers. Over 130 million people around the world live in crisis and need humanitarian assistance to just survive.

It is in this context that the World Humanitarian Day (WHD), held on 19 August each year, is very significant; dedicated to humanitarians worldwide, it seeks to increase public understanding of humanitarian assistance activities. The theme of WHD–2016, ‘One Humanity’, will help in reflecting upon and promoting the plight of millions of people who live in vulnerable situations. It is also a reminder to help the 130 million people around the world who need humanitarian assistance to survive. The reflections on the theme ‘One Humanity’ remind us of how our shared experiences bind us across divides and create a common responsibility and commitment for the less fortunate and most vulnerable in our midst.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) expresses its solidarity with all those who are working together for those who are at risk of being left behind. The CCA reminds its constituencies to be mindful of the plight of millions of people and remember them, offer prayers, and participate in solidarity actions as they are forced to live in inhumane situations amidst dire needs of basic amenities for their survival.

The CCA values the initiatives of the international community under the leadership of the United Nations to pay recognition to the diligent efforts of selfless humanitarian workers around the world who face adversities. The WHD also gives an opportunity to be concerned about the international humanitarian aid workers and the risky situations in which they serve humanity in crisis. During the last two decades, approximately 4,000 humanitarian workers have been victims of serious attacks, of which over a third were killed.

The CCA believes that the faith communities need to come forward to extend solidarity and support to the common desire for change expressed by the world leaders in order to ensure a clear and bold

vision that will inspire and transport the people and communities to reach the bold vision and goal of 'One Humanity'. The CCA urges people of all faiths to pursue our common goal of promoting human dignity. An ancient Indian Vedic adage reminds us of this goal of our common humanity more eloquently: *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam* (the whole world is one family). The vision for one humanity calls for a situation in which "each one shall sit under their vine and under their fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid" (Micah 4:4). The world today needs such situations that lead to a more just and humane world.

**Statement on the Philippines peace process:
"Let there be sustained peace with justice"**

30 August 2016

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has been following the outcome of the recent negotiations of the peace process in the Philippines with great joy. The CCA congratulates the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the rebel insurgents' political wing, the National Democratic Front (NDF), for the unprecedented initiative in agreeing to implement a unilateral and indefinite ceasefire, which is a remarkable achievement of the recent peace process mediated by Norway. The spirit of the intention and aspirations for genuine peace should be upheld. It is our sincere prayer and hope that the six agreements reached between the GRP and NDF, including the reaffirmation of previous agreements, the release and amnesty of political prisoners, and a call by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) for a unilateral ceasefire indefinitely by the New People's Army (NPA), will lead to more meaningful negotiations for lasting peace in the country.

The CCA believes that peace is not merely the absence of war or physical violence perpetrated by the warring groups. Peace ensures a situation of the prevalence of justice, where "mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Psalm 85:10). Peace is the condition where justice reigns and where everyone lives in security. Social injustice and marginalisation of millions of poverty-stricken people are the root causes of the armed conflicts and insurgency in the Philippines since the 1960s.

Hence, the crux of the peace talks are issues of social justice directly involving land reform, national industrialisation, labour welfare, national sovereignty, and the rights to life and dignity.

The CCA recognises the role of churches and the ecumenical movement in the Philippines over the years in witnessing and accompanying the oppressed and marginalised sectors of Philippine society, including the peasants, workers, indigenous peoples, students, women, and migrant labourers in their struggle for a just and peaceful society. The CCA looks forward to the GRP and the NDF panels meeting again in October 2016 for the second round of peace talks and sends best wishes for both parties to reach a successful political settlement and resolve the longstanding armed conflict.

While appreciating the genuine interests shown by the GRP and the NDF to work together for lasting peace, CCA is concerned about the rapid rise of extrajudicial executions committed by security forces and death squads. It is unfortunate that extrajudicial killings that victimise both drug traffickers and drug users take place in the country almost on a daily basis. It is alarming that over 1,700 Filipinos were summarily killed during the past two months ever since the new President came to power. As the Ecumenical Bishops' Forum in the Philippines stated: "There is a need for deeper analysis of why the drug problem is thriving and who benefits from this. There is also a need for the present administration to examine the correctness of its approach in eliminating this menace."

It is our firm conviction that every government must give equal importance to the lives of each of its citizens, whether they are social activists or drug users. The God-given life of every individual is precious. Firmly believing in the sanctity of each human life, as we are all created in the image and likeness of God, the CCA strongly condemns the use of political killings by the security forces and death squads, and as such, the CCA is opposed to both extrajudicial killings and the death penalty. As Prophet Isaiah reminds us: "Then justice will dwell in the wilderness and righteousness in the fertile field. The fruit of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever" (Isaiah 32:16–17). Let there be sustained peace with justice in the Philippines.

Statement on World AIDS Day–2016

30 November 2016

Today, on 1 December 2016, as the world observes World AIDS Day, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) remembers the 35 million people who have died from AIDS-related illnesses globally and stands in solidarity with people who continue to live with HIV and AIDS. The CCA urges all its member churches and councils to pray for the 78 million HIV and AIDS-affected people.

As the world commits to ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030, as part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, let the churches in Asia be engaged more vigorously to combat HIV and AIDS, and empower all affected people to have proper treatment, care, support, and services. The right to health belongs to everyone, everywhere.

While the world battles to combat the AIDS epidemic, we must take note that the number of new HIV infections is not declining among adults, with young women particularly at risk of becoming infected with HIV. This is a reminder that we must not stop now; in fact, now is the time to move forward to ensure that all children start their lives free from HIV, that young people grow up and stay free from HIV, and that treatment becomes more accessible so that we can accomplish an AIDS-free world together.

As part of the body of Christ, and part of the suffering (1 Corinthians 12:26), the CCA affirms to take action to break the silence, share love, and provide healing to the ‘brothers and sisters living with HIV’ (BROSLIH) and ‘Key Affected Populations’ (KAP). The CCA is committed to dedicating its efforts to creating a common platform for action in Asian churches, and seeks collaboration and cooperation with other faith communities as a large number of people need healing communities which cater to everyone without prejudice.

An end to the AIDS epidemic will also guide the world in addressing the critical linkages between health, development, injustice, inequality, poverty, and conflict. Together, we can put an end to the epidemic, if everyone, without exception, plays their role in the collective protection against HIV and AIDS.

2016 Programme Communiqués

Communique of the Asia Regional Consultation on ‘Criminalisation of Human Trafficking and Its Impact on Women and Children: Towards an Ecumenical Advocacy’

14–17 November 2016 | Chiang Mai, Thailand

We, about forty representing member churches, national ecumenical councils, and other organisations across Asia gathered together in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 14 to 17 November 2016 for the Asia Regional Consultation on the theme ‘*Criminalisation of Human Trafficking and Its Impact on Women and Children: Towards an Ecumenical Advocacy*’, organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

During the three days of deliberations at the consultation, participants heard about the vulnerable situations of trafficked persons in various contexts in Asia, with analyses and presentations by experts, social and human rights activists, as well as country situations presented by representatives from different countries. The participants were also enriched by the biblical and theological perspectives shared, which helped analyse and deepen the role of Christians in protecting the rights and dignity of people who are vulnerable to trafficking.

Among the particular challenges faced by Asian countries with regard to human trafficking, the extreme and inhumane situations of trafficked persons became evident, in which human life is reduced to a mere object, a commodity.

Asia has emerged as a key source of origin, transit and destination point for global trafficking of women and children and therefore, the participants affirm the value of this initiative by the CCA and pray that similar efforts will be carried out at all levels to support and encourage the Churches to accompany in their effort to empower all sectors in society, especially women, to combat human trafficking in Asia and across the globe.

Human Trafficking: A Result of Disregard for Human Dignity

Human trafficking is a crime fuelled by global poverty, inadequate education and opportunity, ethnic discrimination and societal inequity between men and women; and by the demand for cheap labour and sexual exploitation. Poverty, illiteracy, globalisation, gender bias, patriarchy, a lack of positive media role, a lack of maintenance of law and order, the lacuna in legal matters (Prevention of Immoral Trafficking Act), and a lack of advocacy have increased the vulnerability of women, transgender persons, young adults, boys, and girls as victims of human trafficking. It is a crime that transcends cultures, class, and geography.

Poverty is made worse by greed, working for personal interests which abandons responsibility towards other people, and lack of compassion contributes to the worsening living conditions throughout the Asian continent.

Trafficking in persons denies the sacred worth of God's children and destroys the fabric of our communities. Victims endure psychological trauma, physical injury, economic hardship, and stigmatisation that can create lifelong scars and barriers for full participation in one's community. Human trafficking is a result of disregard for human dignity.

As mentioned in the Bible, "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed." (Isaiah 1:17) The broad composition of the Christian faith faces challenges to side with the oppressed, the victims of human trafficking. These conditions of poverty make people vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in different forms. The types of human trafficking range from a broad spectrum, some committed with unimaginable cruelty. Women and children, in particular, face this vulnerability.

The participants of this consultation deplore all forms of the commercialisation and exploitation of sex, with their consequent degradation of human personality. To lose freedom and be sold by someone else for sexual purposes is a form of slavery. They also denounce this strongly and support the abused and their right to freedom.

Call for Urgent Action

The participants of the consultation call for:

- Stricter global enforcement of laws prohibiting sexual exploitation and use of children by adults and encourage efforts to hold perpetrators legally and financially responsible;
- Concrete measures to address the problem as a community with human dignity based on Christ's calling being the centre and inspiration in serving others;
- Churches to maximise resources and exert more effort in combatting human trafficking and other harsh living conditions;
- The church community to come together in solidarity to fight against the inhuman and cruel act of human trafficking.

The participants appeal that:

- The Church community, especially women, join hands in organising various fora on human trafficking. This is a significant way to educate our constituency on the realities of human trafficking and its impact, especially on women and children;
- Maximise Biblico-theological resources that uphold human dignity and worth as people created in God's own image;
- Advocate for the passage of laws against traffickers; call for strict global enforcement of laws prohibiting sexual exploitation and use of children by adults and hold perpetrators legally responsible;
- Partner with women advocacy organisations, the United Nations, and other local law enforcement agencies dealing with human trafficking;
- Organise church bodies and interfaith movements on local, national, regional and global levels in order to establish alliances to fight human trafficking;
- Address the root causes of human trafficking to be able to work for a justice system that restores victims and punishes perpetrators, and also work to change the country and global economic structures and policies that create the conditions in which human trafficking thrives.

2017

2017 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

CCA applauds Muslims for protecting Christians over blasphemy charge in Pakistan

12 January 2017

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) expressed its deep appreciation to a group of Muslims who came forward to thwart mob-instigated violence against Christians after torn pages of the Quran were found on a street in Lahore, Pakistan.

Some Muslims attempted to use the local mosque's loudspeakers to announce the burning of Christian houses in the area, however, a group of Muslim community leaders helped prevent the spread of fire in Kamahan, a predominantly Christian colony.

A Christian evangelist, Babu Shahbaz, was arrested on 28 December 2016 in Kamahan village, Lahore. He is accused of committing blasphemy, as the Quranic pages scattered in the street bore his name.

Reliable sources from the CCA's networks in Pakistan reported that on 30 December 2016, at Nishtar Colony Police Station (Lahore), FIR No. 1906/16, an offence under Section 295-B, Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) was filed against Babu Shahbaz, after a false allegation and complaint was lodged against Shahbaz. The complainant was a rival shopkeeper who was jealous and wanted the grocery store owned by George Masih, Babu Shahbaz's brother, to be shut down.

The General Secretary of the CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, expressed hope saying, "The joint efforts of the 20-member Committee of Muslims and Christians, which was formed after a public attempt to call for the burning of Christian houses, will

help prevent violence against the minority Christians and reduce religious animosity in the area.”

It is widely known that most blasphemy cases in Pakistan are merely improper applications of the blasphemy law, often used for score-settling, petty property disputes, or to exact revenge, and is one of the root causes of persecution against Christians in Pakistan.

Following the incident, the Christian community of Kamahan in Lahore live in a state of fear and panic.

Mathews George Chunakara added that the CCA appealed to the government of Pakistan to introduce safeguards to stop the ongoing misuse of the blasphemy law in the country and urged its member churches and councils to express support and solidarity by praying for the safety of Shahbaz, his family, and the 600 Christian families residing in Kamahan.

**Statement on International Women’s Day–2017:
“Towards a better life for women amidst
a changing world”**

8 March 2017

Today, International Women’s Day 2017 is being commemorated and focussed on the theme, “Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50–50 by 2030”. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) joins with all those who are working towards the dignity and equality of women in all walks of the contemporary world.

Despite the fact that the world is changing with significant progress and advancements in socio-economic and technological fields, a vast majority of women in the world continue to be denied the opportunities to lead a better life, especially in terms of reaching the goal of income equality, gender justice, dignity, and rights.

An overwhelming majority of women are denied their legitimate right to work in a decent atmosphere. Women are forced to live and work in deplorable conditions in many parts of the world. Asia is not an exemption from this reality; most working women in Asia

are working in the sectors of the informal economy as domestic workers, agricultural labourers, street vendors, working for low wages in garment factories, small-scale industries, construction sites as unskilled workers, and in other low-paid occupations, often without the requisite safety or precautions.

A large number of Asian women are migrant workers beyond the borders of their home countries and face persecution and violence in manifold forms in their daily lives. In many places in Asia, women experience daily threats to their dignity and rights as they are trafficked, physically, sexually, and mentally abused, victimised in conflicts, and face the primitive practice and culture of ‘honour killings’.

Gender equality in women’s workplaces is not recognised as an imperative for their well-being and dignity in most Asian contexts. In the midst of these realities, the observance of International Women’s Day gives the world an opportunity to remind ourselves of the need to uphold the dignity and rights of women at all times. The CCA supports the United Nation’s call for all actors to stress gender equality towards a Planet 50–50 by 2030, by ensuring that the world works together for all women. The CCA believes that it is now more than ever that the ecumenical movement and churches in Asia need to reflect on the inspiring stories of the gospel that reflect and encourage the empowerment of women.

Many churches in Asia are still slow to acknowledge gender concerns as a critical issue within the Church where the contributions of women to the Church and society are not duly recognised or encouraged.

Enhancing women’s leadership and influence is vital to the achievement of democracy, good governance, economic development, environmental sustainability, and peacebuilding in every society and community.

The CCA affirms the full realisation of women’s dignity and rights and urges its member churches and councils to see new paradigms of recognising the ability of women and empowering them to contribute to the creation of a better and peaceful world.

**CCA General Secretary's condolence letter to
Pope Tawadros II on the Palm Sunday church
bombings in Egypt**

11 April 2017

To

His Holiness Pope Tawadros II
Pope of Alexandria and Patriarchate of the See of St Mark
St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral
Abbassia District, Cairo, Egypt

Your Holiness,

It is with great distress that we receive the news about the killing of innocent worshippers gathered on Palm Sunday at the St George Church in Tanta and St Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria. On behalf of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), we extend our deepest sympathies and condolences to Your Holiness and to the Coptic Christians who are once again the target of violence. We beseech our merciful Lord to grant eternal rest to the departed souls, solace to their bereaved families, and healing to the wounded.

As we are appalled by the ongoing sectarian persecution and violence against the minority Christians in the country, we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Egypt. We support every effort of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Egyptian government, and the international community to end the spate of attacks against innocent people and work for communal harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect.

May the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace and be eternal.

**Statement on the illegal arrest and
detention of Bishop Carlos Morales of the
Philippines Independent Church**

15 May 2017

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) expresses deep concern about the illegal arrest and detention of Bishop Carlos Morales of

the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI), who serves in the Diocese of the southern city of Ozamis, in Mindanao.

We understand from sources in CCA's member constituencies in the Philippines that a joint military and police unit arrested Bishop Carols Morales, his wife Maria Teofilina Morales, a companion, and their driver at a checkpoint in the village of Gango on 11 May 2017.

We are saddened to hear that Bishop Morales was handcuffed and detained, despite introducing himself as a Bishop. It is highly unfortunate that he was accorded such maltreatment.

We consider that the arrest and detention of a religious and spiritual leader like Bishop Morales is appalling and a violation of human rights. We urge the authorities in the Philippines to release Bishop Morales immediately.

Statement on the declaration of martial law in Mindanao in the Southern Philippines

25 May 2017

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) expresses its serious concerns on the declaration of martial law in Mindanao, in the Southern Philippines. The Filipino people have a long history of undergoing traumatic experiences given the 14 years of martial law rule under former President Ferdinand Marcos, who was ousted in 1986 by the people's power. During the martial law era, the people of the Philippines witnessed a gross and systematic pattern of flagrant abuses of human rights, including illegal arrests and detention, torture, involuntary disappearances, and summary executions.

The CCA, as a regional ecumenical organisation that has accompanied the struggles of the Filipino people, is following the current political developments in the country and decries President Rodrigo Duterte's declaration of martial law in Mindanao, which subjects the people of the southern Philippines to direct military rule. It was unfortunate to read the statement of President Duterte: "It would not be any different from what President Marcos did. I'd be harsh."

We understand that President Duterte imposed martial law in Mindanao, following clashes between the Maute terrorist Islamist group and government forces, during which civilians were taken hostage and properties were damaged. However, it is pertinent to raise concerns over why martial law was imposed in the entire Mindanao region, when armed clashes took place only in Marawi City, and while the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) simultaneously declared that the situation in Marawi was under control. Civilians are now subjected to curfews, checkpoints, and other restraints on their human rights.

The CCA believes that the use of martial law as a quick fix to the troubles only makes Mindanao more troubled, where people are experiencing the trauma and fear of living under authoritarian rule. The CCA shares the concerns expressed by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines: “Placing the entire island under martial law only sends a chilling effect on the general populace,” and, “The sudden declaration of martial law is bound to make matters worse.”

At this crucial time, it is imperative that the Christians, Muslims, and Lumads (the indigenous peoples of Mindanao) strengthen their solidarity and unite in a concerted stand, especially to meet the challenges of martial law and the possibilities of human rights violations, including warrantless arrests and detention, torture, and political killings.

The CCA is also concerned about the spread of the IS-supported Maute group and their activities. We condemn the Maute terrorist group for taking church people and teachers as hostages, destroying properties, as well as occupying schools, a hospital, and a parish.

The CCA urges President Duterte to lift martial law in Mindanao and address the root causes of the conflicts and violence not only in Mindanao but in the Philippines in general. Complex historical injustices or the historical causes of the problems must be addressed in order to solve the problems in the region.

We believe that the declaration of martial law does not solve fundamental problems. Peace can only be attained in Mindanao when the root causes of the armed conflicts are addressed through diligent efforts.

CCA calls on the United Nations to reiterate Jerusalem's international status

19 December 2017

“The United States of America’s move to veto the motion of the UN Security Council Resolution yesterday, as well as a decision of the US President to shift the US Embassy to Jerusalem, would jeopardise the prospect of peace for Israelis and Palestinians; the US policy now contradicted international law and ignored UN Security Council resolutions,” stated the General Secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Dr Mathews George Chunakara.

While responding to the latest action by the USA to veto the Resolution initiated by Egypt yesterday at the UN Security Council, the CCA General Secretary added that US President Donald Trump’s unprecedented move to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is part of a strategic move for the consolidation of Israel’s settler colonialism and the practice of apartheid, which effectively eliminated publicly the two-state solution.

Mathews George Chunakara further stated that Jerusalem now was a microcosm of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. By excluding Palestinian voices from the Jerusalem debate, the US supported Israel’s position of closing the doors for others and intensifying gross violations of human rights, which impacted the lives of the Palestinians.

The CCA General Secretary said that the CCA reiterated the position of the international ecumenical community: “Jerusalem could become a force of stability and coexistence rather than a source of division and conflict. This could be aided by international encouragement for the special religious and political status of Jerusalem.”

Jews, Christians, and Muslims revere Jerusalem. Hence, the religions of the Abrahamic faiths must have equal access to the holy city. A fully open city was possible with a form of symbolic, shared, or divided sovereignty replacing the imposed barriers and blockades within the city boundaries.

Mathews George Chunakara added that the position of the CCA was: “As Jerusalem is a religiously diverse city in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims have cohabitated for millennia, the UN General Assembly should condemn Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and must reiterate unequivocally the UN position, according to which the status of Jerusalem must be an international city (as it was intended to be), to which the three monotheistic world religions must continue to have free access.”

CCA condemns terrorist attack against Christian worshippers in Quetta, Pakistan

20 December 2017

The attack by two suicide bombers on a packed Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta, capital of Baluchistan province in southwestern Pakistan on Sunday, 17 December 2017, killing at least nine people and wounding up to 56, is the latest incident of organised attacks against Christians in Pakistan. Minority Christian Pakistanis continually experience persecution and attacks from hard-line Islamists. Islamic extremist groups continue to attack innocent Christian minorities in Pakistan. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) condemns in the strongest possible terms the cowardly acts which aim to deter Christians from professing and practising their faith.

CCA urges churches around the world to be in solidarity with the persecuted Christians in Pakistan and offer prayers for the victims and their families. We call on the authorities to continue their commitment to protecting the well-being and rights of religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan.

May the Lord God console and provide strength to the bereaved families and loved ones who bear the suffering of the loss of lives. May the Christian community in Quetta be steadfast in their faith in this time of difficulties. We hope and pray that together, Muslims and Christians continue to be united to respond to such heinous crimes and reinvigorate our interreligious commitment to nurturing tolerance, dialogue, and alliances in order to promote harmony among people of different religions and peace with justice for all.

2017 Programme Communiqués

Communique of the Consultation on ‘Towards the Abolition of Manual Scavenging: An Ecumenical Accompaniment and Advocacy’

24–26 April 2017 | Chennai, India

Manual scavenging is a sin, and a serious violation of human rights and dignity. It is a consequence of the economic and social inequality that increases the vulnerability of Dalits, who constitute the majority of the victims and survivors of manual scavenging.

We, the participants of the Consultation on “Towards the Abolition of Manual Scavenging: An Ecumenical Accompaniment and Advocacy”, organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), in collaboration with the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and the Church of South India (CSI) met at the CSI Centre in Chennai, India from 24–26 April 2017.

The participants were composed of forty-eight representatives nominated from the member churches of the CCA and the NCCI, such as The Mennonite Brethren Church, Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church, Convention of Baptist Churches of the Northern Circars, Salvation Army, United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI), Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI), and the National Service Scheme units in the educational institutions and diaconal department of the CSI. We discussed and analysed matters related to manual scavenging and the vulnerable situation of hundreds of thousands of manual scavengers in India. We have heard several testimonies and stories about the plight of manual scavengers in many parts of India, especially stories and experiences shared by representatives of manual scavengers themselves.

The workshop sessions identified areas of practices of manual scavenging within their vicinity and context, as well as the principles to build upon theological, ideological, missiological and diaconal foundations to respond to abolishing the practices of manual

scavenging in our churches, institutions, neighbourhoods, and the society at large, with the notions of accompanying vulnerable communities with missional and diaconal expressions such as education, healthcare, and skills to support livelihood.

The consultation shared the work and experiences of the Safai Karmachari Aandolon, an Indian human rights organisation, that campaigns for the eradication of manual scavenging. The Safai Karmachari Aandolon highlighted that 95 percent of manual scavengers are women.

Affirmations

We reaffirm our commitment to not serve ‘caste’ but ‘Christ’; and have zero tolerance towards caste discrimination. We reject and publicly campaign against the practice of caste and of manual scavenging, as the practice of manual scavenging is a sin against God and God’s people. We accompany the manual scavengers who live in vulnerable situations. We oppose the practice against human beings inherent in manual scavenging.

The workshop aimed to impact the Church, its institutions and the diaconal ministries towards:

- Community mobilisation in addressing the vital issue of the abolition of manual scavenging;
- Constructive contribution in complementing and appraising the varied initiatives of the State;
- Affirming life of persons involved in manual scavenging, their livelihoods, as well as life situations;
- Networked witness of the Church in public space alongside other players.

We reaffirm that the essential core of the mission mandate is to defend and advocate for human rights, and affirm the life of every human with respect and dignity. The Church needs to intensify its missional interventions by relocating its mission and witness from the centre to the margins of society with needed and relevant strategies. Traditional missional interventions seem to invite the communities of the margins; rather, they should make the margins the centre. As the Church has plentiful infrastructure and human,

material, and financial resources, it would be appropriate for the churches to pool their resources in order to abolish inhuman and un-Christian ideologies, such as casteism, and practices, such as manual scavenging. We invited churches as a potential body to theologically, missiologically, and diakonally accompany marginalised communities, such as the safai karmacharies (manual scavengers). We also urge churches not to be silent when they witness manual scavenging around them and invite them to join the campaign to abolish the inhuman practice. We invite churches to look at the issue of manual scavenging from the UN's Human Rights Framework, instead of a charity framework as a missional intervention.

We remind churches of their call to propagate the gospel of justice, peace and love, inviting churches to expand their missional interventions by joining hands with and accompanying secular liberation movements, such as the Safai Karmachari Aandolon, following Jesus' model of ministries as a faith response to affirm life, dignity, and respect of all created in God's image.

We urge all to follow Jesus' model of looking at the Torah, by standing up for the rights, dignity, and respect of the communities that live in vulnerable situations.

We emphasise the importance of internationalising the issue of manual scavenging with international policy-making bodies, such as the United Nations, with a human rights framework where the CCA is committed to facilitating and accompanying such advocacy initiatives. We also assured the CCA's accompaniment to the movements in their advocacy initiatives.

Call for Action

The participants of the workshop called for the following:

- To acknowledge the practice of manual scavenging as a sin, and to say no to manual scavenging;
- To pledge the abolition of manual scavenging by stopping employments and engagements;
- To suggest to churches and their educational institutions to offer spaces for the children of the manual scavenging communities for educational purposes;
- To provide life and skill enhancement initiatives to the women and children of the manual scavenging communities;

- To promote, campaign and advocate for the 2013 Act in India, and its effective implementation at all levels; and
- To accompany manual scavenging communities towards gaining their lives, respect, and dignity.

We call on the United Nations, national and international ecumenical organisations, as well as churches in Asia to prioritise advocacy efforts for the abolition of manual scavenging.

Communique of the Young Ambassadors of Peace in Asia (YAPA) on ‘The Youth of Asia Calls for Peace with Justice’

29 May–2 June 2017 | Chiang Mai, Thailand

We, the participants of Young Ambassadors of Peace in Asia (YAPA)–2017, from different countries belonging to different faiths, attended the YAPA–2017 training programme, organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) at the CCA Headquarters at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 29 May–2 June 2017. During this time, we were trained in intercultural and interfaith learning as a base for addressing conflict transformation and nurturing our role as peacebuilders in our respective societies across Asia.

Affirmations

- We affirm that peace cannot prevail without justice to attain a dignified existence. Peace is a journey towards a relationship with God, neighbour and the whole creation in transforming and reconciling through interreligious, interfaith, and intra-faith dialogue.
- We emphasise upon celebrating diversity, we acknowledge our own differences, and reaffirm inclusive communities in the household of God.
- We value inner peace, interpersonal peace, peace within communities, and peace with nature as holistic approaches to peacebuilding.
- We emphasise that justice removes obstacles to peace; peace that sustains the co-relation of the whole creation

where equality dwells. Equality resides across gender, class, and every sector in society.

Condemnations

- We condemn all violations of human rights and dignity that deny the celebration of the fullness of life;
- We condemn all human rights abuses in terms of human trafficking, child labour, extrajudicial killings and sexual violence for the benefit of the few in power;
- We condemn discrimination and oppression on the basis of race, caste, class, creed, ethnicity and gender;
- We condemn the misuse of militarisation that denies the rights, security and liberty of the innocent people;
- We condemn religious intolerance and the enforcement of fundamental religious ideologies and practices against the will and consent of others.

Call For Action

As a new generation of activists committed to work for structural transformation that promotes harmony and peace based on justice in Asian communities, we call upon:

- Religious leaders and bodies to bridge the gaps in relationships across religious boundaries to foster peace with justice and religious harmony to uphold our cultural roots and ethnic identities;
- Young people and peace advocates to unlearn concepts that invite exclusions, prejudices and stereotypes, and to relearn notions that inculcate critical thinking to establish an inclusive community;
- Municipalities and corporate organisations to engage in community-based services that enhance the livelihood of the common people;
- The governments to review, revise and contextualise laws based on contemporary perspectives that are beneficial to all members of societies;
- And, every individual who believes in building peace in society to practice reconciliation. This redemptive process is the path towards valuing the good in humanity.

**Statement of the Asia Mission Conference
Pre-Assembly Consultation on
Human Trafficking and Forced Migration:
“A Call for Decent Labour and a Living Wage”**

11 October 2017 | Yangon, Myanmar

We, the participants of the Asia Consultation on Human Trafficking and Forced Migration, gathered around a shared concern at the increased occurrences of forced migration, including trafficking in persons, and their labour and services.

Our region is economically diverse, with migrant-sending, migrant-transit, or migrant-destination countries, and has witnessed historic and contemporary injustices such as the violations of human rights, including that of the freedom of movement.

We lamented the disregard for the human dignity of migrants and the violation of their human rights, and listened to stories of people victimised by forced migration, especially human trafficking. We were moved by Celia Veloso’s testimony about her daughter, Mary Jane Veloso, a victim of trafficking who is imprisoned with a death sentence. The campaign for her demonstrated how in the Philippines, Indonesia, and around the world, united action can offer a reprieve from execution by the Indonesian government.

Forced labour migration, including trafficking and smuggling of persons, is aided and abetted by labour export programmes of migrant-sending governments and the demand for cheap labour by migrant-receiving governments. This leads to the exploitation and commodification of the poor.

Migration is gendered and sexualised. The high number of women, youth, and children trapped in modern-day slavery calls us to address oppressive systems.

Migration is globalised and xenophobically nationalistic, racialised, and ethnicised, heightening racial discrimination and hatred among people. Migrants are criminalised and reduced to the documents that they possess and do not possess.

Migration cannot be isolated from concerns for decent labour and the struggle for a living wage. Decent work requires a living wage, as global public goods, with a safe and secure working environment.

Migrants are people, not documents or the financial contributions that they make.

Looking ahead, we commit to common lines of action, cooperation, and solidarity to help our migrant brothers and sisters. Through service provision, pastoral care, advocacy, and public awareness, we can build on each other's strengths as migrants, migrant-serving institutions, member councils, member churches, and ecumenical bodies.

Our concerns arise out of our faith conviction that all persons are bearers of the divine image and sacred worth.

Forced migration redefines our Christian and ecumenical mission. In the light of the gospel, our faith communities and ecumenical bodies must revisit and re-examine the mission of the church and the way we organise our churches to deliver its ministries and make visible its mission. This requires an ecclesiology that recognises the diversity of God's people, in both their gathered and dispersed nature, resulting, not least, through migration. It requires a Christology that recognises the multi-faith and multi-religious character of Asia and its diaspora and makes for an evangelistic task with dignity and integrity in such situations. Missiology must help us understand how to do mission in a plural and diverse diaspora, and in obedience to God's will for the entire oikoumene.

We arrived in Yangon as strangers to each other, but are now friends and co-workers, connected by our common desire to address forced migration and human trafficking. The shalom we seek for all is none other than the peace the prophets have proclaimed: "They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken" (Micah 4:4). The life we dream for all is none other than what our Lord Jesus has willed: "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). We disperse as a faith community impelled by the call to "Keep loving each other like family. Do not neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:1–2).

Communique of the Asia Mission Conference Pre-Assembly Consultation on People with Disabilities: “Strength in Weaknesses and Quests for Dignity”

9–11 October 2017 | Yangon, Myanmar

We, sixty-three participants including persons with disabilities, met in Yangon from 9–11 October 2017, on the auspicious occasion of the Christian Conference of Asia’s (CCA) 60th Diamond Anniversary on the theme “Journeying Together”. We are grateful to CCA for thoughtfully holding CCA’s Regional Consultation on People with Disabilities: Strength in Weakness and Quests for Dignity. We consist of representatives, including People with Disabilities (PWDs), from the CCA member churches, national councils, their related caregiving institutions and organisations, church leaders, theologians, academicians, professionals, and the families of the PWDs.

There were conversations based on the United Nations and Ecumenical Frameworks with academic and practical knowledge through sharing sessions and story-telling sessions by PWDs, caregivers, and caregiving institutions. We have scanned the religious and societal status of the PWDs from listening to the country reports from thirteen Asian countries. We realised that the context and status of PWDs remain the same everywhere. Stigmatisation and discrimination are in practice and PWDs and their families are pushed to social isolation as they live in shame.

We appreciate churches across the globe for being actively engaging in caring for the PWDs through different diaconal interventions; however, we solicit the churches to be much more proactive in terms of being inclusive, by affirming and practising the interdependency ‘with’ and ‘among’ PWDs. We were challenged by the statement ‘Gospel is Gospel’ ‘for’ all and that has to be communicated with wholeness, without any dichotomy, avoiding labelling our faiths by a generalising theology. We are motivated to preferably brand them as disabled people rather than using ‘people with disabilities’. Their presence, participation, expressions, and experiences are the sources to develop theologies of disabilities and theologies of inclusion.

We were inspired by the prayers, songs sung in sign language and art (by legs) by the participants in this consultation. Hence, we

expect the churches to express their inclusion by adopting similar methodologies that are inclusive.

We were cautioned by the PWD participants to not use PWDs for projects and as objects for fund-raising, and at the same time, called to move from a 'charity' model to an inclusive model of diaconal and ministerial interventions.

We do realise that the Churches are mostly influenced by the ideologies like 'ableism' and 'patriarchy' by observing the Levitical and such laws as imperative. This makes the church have a minimal focus on the ministerial importance of the PWDs by marginalising them.

We were challenged to believe, affirm, and practice inclusivity in all our socio-religious spectrum of our lives. In this context we are made aware of to recognise:

- That the PWDs are 'also' created in the image of God by the same Creator with equal qualities of lives.
- Some biblical passages seem to be 'exclusive' and 'discriminative' toward PWDs, but by adapting disability hermeneutics one could experience the inclusive nature of the same passages.
- The right to worship and to participate in the mission and ministries of the Churches is the fundamental right of every Christian, including PWDs. Therefore, the Church as a body of Christ is yet to learn to practice a 'transparent inclusion,' by creating a physical space for the PWDs, and by becoming an accessible and inclusive church both physically and spiritually.
- The aroma of Asian spirituality is nothing but inclusive, which upholds unity and diversity. Therefore, it is an ecumenical call for the Asian churches to promote inclusive spirituality that affirms dignity and respect 'of' all-'for' all-'with' all, including PWDs.
- All governments are party to upholding the UN Convention of People with Disabilities and therefore, it would be an opportunity for the CCA and the Asian Churches to ecumenically involve in affirming, promoting, and defending the Rights of the PWDs with the Kin-dom values of the Justice, Peace, and Hope.

Therefore, we commit ourselves to:

- reading the Bible with inclusive lenses by adapting disability hermeneutics;
- affirming, defending, and promoting the rights of the people with disabilities spiritually, theologically, ministerially, and diakonally;
- articulating the theologies and missiologies of inclusion;
- promoting disabled-friendly congregations, by inculcating a culture of inclusion and practising fuller accessibility for all;
- encouraging persons with disabilities to actively participate in the ministries of the Church and pursue theological education; and,
- developing disabled-friendly worship resources by joining with the Christian liturgy publishing houses.

We appeal to:

- The CCA and its member churches and councils to practice and promote ‘transparent inclusion’ by becoming inclusive and practising accessibility.
- The CCA to initiate a network of disability ministries of the member churches and councils to inspire and encourage, to open a dedicated disability programme and deliberately have a PWD as a facilitator of the programme team.
- The Asian Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network, to incessantly work on bringing the unheard conversations and stories of emancipation of the PWDs, in Asia to enlighten member churches and councils, as we march towards a society and ecclesia ‘for’ all, ‘by’ all, and ‘with’ all.
- The CCA to act as a ‘ramp’ to emancipate the theological and ministerial knowledge on disability concerns in Asia by ‘wheel-chairing’ disability conversations for cross-learning with ‘hearing aids’, and cross-fertilisation with the help of ‘crutches’.

Statement of the Asia Mission Conference (AMC) on “Journeying Together – Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia”

12–16 October 2017 | Yangon, Myanmar

The decision to adopt a Mission Statement, after discussion and deliberation at the Asia Mission Conference 2017, is a great

act of faith. It boldly and loudly proclaims that the Asia Mission Conference, held in Yangon, Myanmar from 12–16 October 2017, should prophetically and challengingly continue to speak to the churches and to all concerned people all over Asia and beyond; and that from the conference, the AMC should grow into a path-breaking Mission Movement that opens new annals in the history of Mission in Asia.

Having gathered for both the Asia Mission Conference and the celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in Yangon, Myanmar, we, having heard the social, political, economic, religious, and ecological contexts of the churches in Asia, commit ourselves, and call upon all people of God to “Journeying Together: Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia”.

The theme of the Asia Mission Conference–2017, “Journeying Together: Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia” is inspired by the biblical verses illuminated in the Gospel of John:

- “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6)
- “I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37)

The theme is rooted in the Asian context. We are called to be on a journey—a journey together, following our Lord Jesus and witnessing to God’s truth and light in Asia. We begin our journey in Asia, where we experience the risen Lord, and are related to one another in Jesus Christ: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Asia is home to all major world religions. The majority of the people in Asia are poor, often struggling to get by, due to injustice and exploitation. And yet, we live out a message that speaks of the hope that is within us, though articulated imperfectly, and in different ways, and in different languages.

We journey together; ours is not an exclusive path. We walk together towards a common goal, with people of different faiths and with people of no faith. As Christians, we journey with our sisters and brothers in churches who join together in communion with one

another. We journey with our families and with people of many different nations and cultures who walk on the roads, sail on the seas, and fly in the skies, embracing one another and struggling for justice and peace. We journey with the migrants and the excluded as we embrace the stranger (Hebrews 13:2). As religious believers, we journey together with women and men from other religious communities, drawing inspiration from all people who seek the common good amidst the groaning of creation. As we journey on, we know that God will never be far from us, and we will not be overwhelmed nor consumed (Isaiah 43:2).

We seek to bear witness to the truth and light that has been given to us to see and illuminate the way forward. We proclaim our message in a listening way (Matthew 16:13) as we accompany others, bringing good news to the oppressed (Isaiah 61:1–2). We bear witness not as masters but as servants (Luke 17:7–10); we journey not to be served but to serve others (Mark 10:45). We announce the reign of God in a spirit of repentance (Matthew 4:17), embodying the spirituality of the cross and in a way of self-emptying (Philippians 2:5–8). We bear prophetic witness to the truth and light drawing on the Asian heritage, our rich cultural and religious traditions that bore witness to God in Christ, long before the missionary movement of the modern era (Colossians 1:15–20), and that which continues to bear prophetic witness today.

For sixty years, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), together with its member churches, councils, other ecumenical organisations and related communities, has been on a journey bearing prophetic witness to the truth and light in Asia. We are now called to re-envision that witness, as we respond today to the challenges of God's mission, in Jesus Christ who made a paradigm shift in the mission here on earth, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our calling springs from the Asian context, but our message is to the entire world.

Prophetic Accompaniment

We journey together with all humanity, with all creation, as co-journeurs and co-pilgrims on our journey with a sense of oneness, humility, and service. We follow the manner of accompaniment of

Jesus because he has sent us: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). He was sent by the Father. He comes among us in our humanity and accompanies us as one of us, he pitches his tent among us (John 1:14). He comes with a prophetic mission: The Lord God has anointed him with the Spirit and sent him to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim the year acceptable to the Lord (Luke 4:18–19). He gives his life for us. Knowing we are sent, we go to others. We do not wait for them to come to us but we, first, go to them. We journey with them. We live among them and with them. We respectfully listen to them. We learn from them. We are at home with them. We appreciate and understand the value of their language, customs, and culture in order to journey with them, to accompany them in a way that they can join with us. But we do not just follow them wherever they go, merely to conform to their journey. As co-pilgrims, we share with them the light and the truth that they already have in some way, because the Holy Spirit is active and present in the heart of each and every person, and because the true light of the world has enlightened everyone (John 1:9). We do not seek our own status, position, or wealth and do not hesitate to confront unjust powers, but we challenge courageously the unjust structures and unjust powers in our prophetic accompaniment. We give ourselves for the good of the others, the least, the needy, the poor, the marginalised and the outcast (Matthew 25:40).

Affirming the Servanthood

We understand, from the life and ministry of Jesus, that the mission unquestionably affirms the servanthood. Biblical teachings depict various forms of servanthood. For example, the servanthood is suffering (Isaiah 52:13; 53:1–32), being humble and in service (Matthew 20:28), and is sacrificing oneself (Luke 17:7–10). Affirmation of servanthood requires a new understanding of its complex manifestations. It must challenge the hierarchical structure of the society and the church that marginalises people based on their nationality, religion, class, gender, age, ethnicity, and different abilities. Our affirmation must lead us to a new understanding of servanthood as friendship. We are called to be servants to one another, to minister to one another, to befriend one another. St. Paul reminds us to “serve one another in love” and that “the entire

law is summed up in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Galatians 5:13–14).

Without losing sight of the embeddedness of servanthood in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our affirmation disclaims any call to servanthood that denigrates the lives and struggles of victims of violence. It disclaims the model of servanthood that denies the lives and liberation of the downtrodden and that which ignores the vulnerability and the fragility of life in the midst of war, violence, discrimination, and victimisation. Instead, our affirmation echoes the voices and histories of Asian people who have resisted the powers of injustice and find, in their living testimonies, a form of servanthood that is a powerful example and ethic of resistance. Our affirmation brings out the stories of Asian people who have sacrificed their lives for the dignity and liberation of the marginalised and finds in their living testimonies a form of servanthood that is a life-giving praxis. Our affirmation takes us into the everyday Asian realities, where servanthood is a central dimension of people’s practice of solidarity across boundaries.

We affirm the servanthood because it provides a model of leadership that is embedded in humility, perseverance, service, and sacrifice—a leadership that is based on sharing of power with, instead of power over, a leadership that gives life in the midst of dehumanising powers that create injustice and thrive on unjust human structure. Jesus taught us that in His kingdom, the servanthood is deemed a virtue, not a punishment. We are reminded of what Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many”. (Matthew 20:26–27). We affirm the servanthood because it extols the living together as a human community that respects human dignity and the sustainability of all creation.

In our journeying together with humanity and all creation, we affirm servanthood as a way of life that disrupts every form of power that causes injustice and violence against the rights and dignity of human beings and all creation. Jesus exemplified servanthood by redefining power and ministry as the power to share and to

minister to one another (John 13:1–17), by resisting the violence that dehumanises the lives of the marginalised (John 8:2–11), and by empowering the powerless to voice their rights (John 5:1–18). He sacrificed his life as a testimony to the risk of living the life of a servant. In our journeying together with all the peoples of Asia, we affirm servanthood as a web of power and imagination that is centred on life and dignity and liberation and fullness of all life. We affirm servanthood in our witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in Asia today.

Participating in the Reign of God

Journeying together with all humanity, with all creation, we understand the mission as participating in the reign of God. The reign of God was well manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. He began his public ministry announcing: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). The reign of God is here; it is in our midst (Luke 17:21). Yet, the fullness of the reign of God will be revealed in the end of times, “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels” (2 Thessalonians 1:7). The reign will be revealed clearly only when “he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marvelled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

We participate in the reign of God by living a life of prophetic witnessing here and now on the earth. Paul tells us that it is necessary to do God’s will to enter the reign of God (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Galatians 5:21). Jesus reminds us that detaching oneself from the things of this world, doing the will of the Father, and bearing good fruit (Mathew 19:24; 21:31; 21:43) are necessary to enter into the reign of God. We learn from Luke that the poor are blessed because the reign of God is theirs (Luke 6:20), and that we must be prompt and wholehearted in our response to the invitation to the reign of God (Luke 9:60–62). We are reminded of the essentials to enter into the reign of God: the Holy Spirit is the key to entering into God’s reign. Bearing prophetic witness is the key to participating in the reign of God. Living in the Holy Spirit is the key to remaining and participating in His reign. This truth tells us again that there needs to be a fundamental transformation of the

whole person. By the power of the Spirit, we can and must learn to see as God sees, judge as God judges, love as God loves. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God is—what good and acceptable and perfect is.” (Romans 12:2).

Embodying the Spirituality of the Cross

Journeying together with all peoples in Asia, we understand the mission as embodying the spirituality of the cross. The cross is one of the most complex inadequately understood symbols in the history of Christianity. It had been used as a symbol to maintain power over the marginalised. It carried with it a historical burden of violence perpetrated against different religions, too. However, it remains as a symbol of the people’s struggle and liberation. It continues to remain the most powerful symbol of faith that sustains the life and hope of Christian communities in the midst of suffering, violence, and injustice.

The gospel narratives testify to various realisations of the spirituality of the cross. Witnessing the last breath of Jesus on the cross, the women disciples modelled a spirituality of perseverance and faithfulness (Mark 15:40–41). They manifested the amazing spirituality of remaining by, standing, watching, listening, and receiving Jesus’s message spoken from the site of wounds, the site of death (John 19:25–27). Their exceptional courage and unbelievable tenacity in witnessing the death of Jesus from within the site of violence, is interwoven with their testimony of life—“I have seen the Lord!” said Mary Magdalene (John 20:18). In the testimony of the women disciples, through their audacity to imagine life and its possibility in the aftermath of violence and death, we see the embodiment of the spirituality of the cross. It is the spirituality that inspires and strengthens the women and the peoples of Asia to go forward, facing life in the midst of injustice, violence, and death.

Embodying the spirituality of the cross in Asia today is also similar to the journey of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Marked by the trauma of witnessing the death of Jesus, the disciples failed to witness the presence of life in their midst. Jesus’ act of breaking bread, however, re-familiarised them with

the sharing of a meal and the warmth of fellowship. That great act reminded them of the possibility of life in the aftermath of violence. Participating in the act of sharing a meal is a form of embodying the spirituality of the cross in Asia. Practising hospitality towards strangers as an embodiment of the spirituality of the cross is a form of everyday spirituality. It has also become a risky practice because it is embodied in the lives of those who persist against injustice and violence while embracing and offering love to strangers who have often turned out to be enemies.

The spirituality of the cross is embodied in Asia today in the lives of Christians and all people who struggle for healing, justice, and transformation, and for courageously challenging structural injustices. In the aftermath of the cross, the disciples received the breath of resurrection (John 20:19–22). The giving of breath took place at the site of fear and uncertainty. The giving of breath signifies three elements of Jesus' life: the sharing of peace, the sending out (John 20:21) and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. These remind us of the mission as embodying the spirituality of the cross, as the practice of bringing peace to a community that has been overcome by fear and violence; as the sending out of people to serve as witnesses to the breath of life, amidst the power of death; and as the pouring out of healing through the embracing love of the Holy Spirit.

Mission Concerns

1. Groaning of Creation: Our Stewardship and Kinship

The biblical reference to the groaning of creation (Romans 8:22) is becoming all the more relevant to our age of massive destruction to the environment and the fatal endangering of all life on earth. We have now come to recognise the deep interconnections and interdependence between human life and all other forms of life on earth. We also realise that human activity can change the delicate natural ecological balance of our small planet Earth for the worse. Global warming and climate change, obviously related to the excessive emission of carbon from human industrial activity, burning of fossil fuels, and the pervasive consumerist lifestyle are now visibly affecting all parts of the world. Inexorable human greed continues

to destroy forests, pollute rivers, and deplete groundwater and all other non-renewable resources. The United Nations, in spite of its huge efforts to convoke summits of world political leaders and its appeal to voluntary organisations and religions on these crucial issues, does not seem to be effective in checking the mad rush of the world to a fatal end.

While we recognise and appreciate the positive role of many Christians and several churches in Asia making their congregations aware of the gravity of our environmental situation, we urge all churches in Asia to take bold steps to seek collaboration with other religions and all people of goodwill to implement sane environmental policies for the future of humanity. The use of alternative forms of energy, reduction of carbon emissions, greening of the earth, and above all, the constant effort to follow a simple lifestyle, are to be promoted in Asia, as essential Christian values for our age.

2. People on the Move: Embracing the Stranger

People on the move have been a phenomenon in human history. The nature of, and the reasons for, people on the move were varied in biblical history: Abraham, Jacob, the Israelites out of Egypt, the Israelites sent into Babylonian captivity, the dispersion of the Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire, and the missionary journeys of the early Church. Biblical narratives portray the reasons for various forms of migration—due to economic reasons, drought, starvation (Genesis 26:1; Ruth 1:1), war (Jeremiah 14:12). The experiences of being wanderers and being liberated from oppression manifested the very identity of the people of Israel. All these situations continue to threaten the lives of millions of people in the world today. An increasing number of people are forced to leave their ancestral homes or countries in search of a better and safer life. Asia is not an exception to this growing trend.

People on the move are increasing in large numbers today in Asia with different causes and they belong to various categories: war refugees, climate refugees, migrant workers, internally displaced persons due to conflicts and violence, victims of religious and ethnic persecutions, and preys of human trafficking. Welcomed or not, these less-fortunate people end up in other countries and

communities as migrants. They are often strangers in unfamiliar circumstances, facing discrimination, social exclusion, and even rejection. The victims of forced movements and their numbers are increasing in Asia too. Despite the progress of modern transportation and information technologies, in the era of globalisation, the doors of the world are tightened or altogether closed for migrants. Migration inevitably poses a challenge to any society, as norms of justice and hospitality are not followed. We live in societies where the status of strangers has been changed from being a recipient of hospitality to that of a victim of hostility.

The Church, as the body of Christ, is the embodiment of the presence of Jesus, who was incarnated as a stranger to the world (John 1:14), He suffered and died under discrimination and exclusion (John 1:5, 3:19–20, 8:23). God as the Migrant God is clearly evident in the incarnation of Jesus, who had a refugee status in Herod's killing fields, who experienced a marginal status due to his identity of a native of the less-reputed province of Galilee, and of his wandering style of ministry in Palestine.

Realising the fact that Asia has been experiencing disturbing situations of the displacement of people and communities in manifold forms, the mission of the Church is to accept strangers as subjects, as they are people with the same 'likeness and image of God'. We have to host them as messengers from God. The Church needs to be a Church of hospitality and proclaim the good news of the reign of God that is actualised by the compassion of God through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, who demonstrated the inclusive and friendly character of the nature of God's kingdom. As a community of pilgrims of faith, we are called to be concerned about the people on the move and to cross borders to embrace the strangers in our midst.

3. The Excluded and the Marginalised: Accompanying People and Communities

The kingdom, the rule of God, is based on the logic of 'total inclusion'. It cannot, in any way, be on the logic of exclusion. In simple language, God's mission cannot but be universal and all-inclusive. St. Paul writes, "With all wisdom and insight, he has made

known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:9–10). Again, clearly referring to the situation of his time, St. Paul states, “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Most importantly, the risen Lord reveals the ultimate reconciliation of ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’. So God’s Mission (*Missio Dei*) revealed through Jesus Christ cannot but be all-inclusive and we are all called to participate in God’s all-inclusive mission, totally rejecting exclusion on any basis whether it be, caste, colour, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

Asian societies, in reality, are divided. Vast sections of people are marginalised and excluded. Sociological forces alone are not the reasons for such exclusions, but economic impoverisation is also a cause for marginalisation and exclusion, as they are victims of the present dominant model of development. In the present context of extreme marginalisation and exclusion, we are called to be in a mission of accompaniment and inclusion. Our Lord Jesus loved, and related to, the excluded and the marginalised— the lepers, the outcasts, the Samaritans, the tax collectors, non-Jewish people, women, sinners, publicans, etc. Jesus, through his life and mission, manifested an incomparable model of love, concern, solidarity, and accompaniment. Through his statement, “...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40), Jesus is declaring his total oneness with the least—the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the marginalised, and the excluded. So, our participation in God’s mission necessitates our accompaniment and journeying with all those who are marginalised and excluded. We, the churches and the faith communities, have to ask ourselves whether we go in search of, identify ourselves with, and give accompaniment to the marginalised and the excluded among us. This is the unavoidable mission task of the churches and the followers of Jesus, today.

4. Economic Injustice: Prophetic Witnessing

One of the starkest realities of the present world, where we are called to be in mission, is the alarming intensification of inequality.

The very design and principles of our economies have taken us to an extremely unsustainable and unjust point. As inequality is shockingly intensifying in Asia, an inescapable mission imperative for churches and the faith community is to become deeply and systematically aware of the intensification of poverty and inequality. The Church and the followers of Jesus must stand up against, and confront, the powers and practices of injustices. The context in which Amos was called to prophesy was when the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. It should be remembered, “When the poor and the needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I, the Lord, will answer them” (Isaiah 41:17). So, in obedience to the will of God, in the context of increasing impoverishment, the church and the followers of Jesus must work for the establishment of fair and just ‘provisioning’ for all people, and of a just and sustainable society. The Church and faith communities locally regionally, nationally, and transnationally have to unhesitatingly and with unquestionable commitment, take up this mission task.

As the present economic trend of the world witnesses the ascent of money, the world is fast coming under the reign of money. People are falling into the trap of worshipping money and prosperity. The worship of wealth and power deeply impacts values, thinking, ethics, and religion. In such situations we are reminded of Jesus, who undeniably said, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). The faith community in Asia has to wake up and respond to the current realities, become deeply aware of the massive and grave economic and social changes, and guard itself against the worship of ‘mammon’. It is our task in such situations to undauntedly prophesy and stand up against the reign of money that subverts the kingdom values.

The true mission is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes, ‘he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement’ (John 16:8). True to the mission commitment and inspired by the Holy Spirit, the faith community, at this time of intensifying inequality, impoverishment, and injustice, has to dedicate itself to prophetic ministry. The commitment to mission

demands the rejection of the worship of prosperity and power. It demands a courageous stand against all dehumanising forces and unimpeachable solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

At this critical time, the church and the followers of Jesus, as their inalienable mission, are called to be unhesitant prophets, to be courageous upholders of the kingdom values, and to be the undaunted bearers of the spirituality of the cross.

5. Religious Intolerance: Nurturing Interfaith Harmony

Although well-meaning people everywhere had hoped that the 21st century would usher in an age of peace and justice, our world is suffering from mounting violence and conflicts under the banner of religion and culture. The spectre of fundamentalism, with its characteristic exclusivism and aggressiveness, is on the rise in several world religions that were once considered pacifist. War and conflicts are generating massive migrations of populations that challenge the traditional openness and hospitality of human communities. Xenophobia, with a religious tinge, can be the most dangerous sign for the future of our world. We may find some solace in the fact that the member churches of the Christian Conference of Asia and other recognised ecumenical bodies would largely stand by the great biblical virtues of hospitality to the stranger, and love of the enemy. In this context, we call upon all Christians to demonstrate the forgiveness and reconciling power of the cross of Christ, in their relationship with other religions and other faith bodies.

Witnessing to the truth in love and forgiveness is a prophetic and holy task laid upon all those who follow Christ. Resolving old conflicts and healing wounded memories with attention to the principles of justice and the promotion of life in communities is of crucial importance in the ministry of the Church. Local congregations and Christian institutions are called to engage in dialogues of life with neighbouring communities, with mutual respect and openness to learn from the other. The practice of true hospitality by accepting the other, irrespective of religion or faith as God has accepted us in Christ, can help Christians to contribute to the making of a new humanity leading to peaceful coexistence here on earth.

6. Geopolitical Turmoil: Building Peace

We recognise that the Asian continent is diverse, and the core Asian values cover a wide range of factors: vast geographical terrain, rich religious and cultural heritages, ethnic identities, philosophical traditions, diverse customs and social values, economic gamut, and political ideologies. When the world has been witnessing the crumbling of the sacred edifice of the much-acclaimed economic development models, Asia has been considered a region uniquely equipped for a major leap forward in a troubled global situation. Asia has been recognised as a potential force capable of shifting the centre of gravity of global economic and political systems to this continent in the 21st century. However, we view the emerging trends in Asia's geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-strategic situation with a sense of deep concern.

Unfortunately, Asia is a region where most nations deeply distrust their neighbours and where old-style nationalism or religio-nationalism still reigns at its zenith. Nuclear and missile programmes are advancing fast in Asia due to the competition among nations. A growing military-technological alliance between Asian countries and non-Asian nations, and the amassing of sophisticated weapons and advanced military technologies by an increased number of countries in Asia are disturbing signals. External interventions and militarism promoted by foreign powers in Asia have trampling effects on the sovereignty of Asian nations. Asia still holds promises and hopes, but for the promises to be realised and the turmoil to be quashed, strong and sustained efforts for peacebuilding, confidence-building, and dialogue within and across borders of nation-states in Asia are imperative. Asian nations should embrace the long-nurtured Asian values of tolerance, harmony, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence.

Our faith leads us to reflect upon the fundamental Christian values and the theological convictions which affirm that there is no peace without justice. The absence of peace and situations of conflicts in Asia are due to the denial of justice. Justice is not only about rectitude; it is also about giving what is right and just. Our faith reminds us that peace is a condition where God leads nations to settle their conflicts and beat their swords into ploughshares (Micah

4:3). We believe, that ultimately, peace is a condition where “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6). Building peace is an act of engaging in God’s mission and to have peace, means to enjoy God’s gift of the fullness of life, security, and liberty (Ezekiel 34:25–31).

Affirmation of Our Commitment

With indestructible hope, we commit ourselves ‘to journey together, and to partake in the mission of prophetic witness to the truth and light, in Asia.’ Our faith and commitment inspire and strengthen us to be sojourners in God’s mission and to follow the way revealed to us by Jesus Christ.

Our Redeemer Jesus Christ ‘did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of servant’ (Philippians 2:6–7). We sincerely repent that we have not sufficiently humbled and emptied ourselves and that we have refused to be servants. We have not been fully faithful to the redemptive acts of our Lord Jesus Christ and have not submitted ourselves fully to carry out God’s mission in the present world and to embody its spirit. So with hearts full of repentance, we commit ourselves to be genuinely humble and to be truly servants. And to be undaunted prophetic witnesses to the truth and light, in Asia.

God is at work to redeem all that the Parent God has created. God’s ultimate purpose, the divine mystery, that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ is that God is at work ‘to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Ephesians 1:10). The Triune God invites the entire cosmos to the Feast of Life, the fullness of life (John 10:10). We have to be the stewards of the whole creation. We whole-heartedly commit ourselves to participate in God’s redemptive mission for the whole creation. In particular, God unites all humanity in Christ. Jesus Christ prayed, “They all may be one” (John 17:21). So we are called to pray and work for the unity of the whole humanity and uncompromisingly fight against all divisive and disuniting forces. In Mission, we have to embrace the stranger and give hospitality to them.

God's mission in Christ calls us to envision a new humanity based on freedom, justice, and love; and urges us to be in solidarity with those who are denied these, 'the blind, the poor, the oppressed and the captives' and bring 'good news' to them (Luke 4:18–19). We commit ourselves to stand up against all exploitative, oppressive, and dehumanising forces, at this time of intensifying impoverishment, inequality, and exclusion, and to be harbingers of a new humanity and 'a new heaven and a new earth'.

In Mission, God empowers us to be forgiving and to be healing. We commit ourselves to nurture harmony with the brothers and sisters of different faiths, and to build peace in the midst of the conflicts, tensions, and turmoil.

We believe that the Holy Spirit guides and empowers us to participate in God's mission with unquestionable dedication and unchallengeable commitment. We embrace the spirituality of the Cross; and we believe in and look forward to the ushering in of the 'reign of God', the creation of 'new heavens and a new earth'. (Isaiah 65:17); and "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light, those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them." (Isaiah 9:2)

We sincerely pray and ardently hope that there would be genuine repentance, profound re-envisioning of, and unquestionable commitment to the Mission that is entrusted to us by our Lord Jesus.

Sixty years ago at Prapat, we committed ourselves to 'Live Together'; here at Yangon we move forward and commit ourselves to 'Journey Together'. We hope that Yangon will become an unforgettable name in the history of Mission.

We believe that 'our journey together and prophetic witnessing' will inaugurate a new era in Mission.

2018

2018 Executive Committee's Statement

CCA Executive Committee's Statement on the release of detained overseas missionaries in the Philippines

4 July 2018

The Executive Committee of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) meeting at the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, from 1–4 July 2018 expresses its grave concern on the detention of the three peaceful and justice-loving young adult missionaries who are serving in the Philippines and are now not allowed to leave the country.

The members of the CCA Executive Committee heard the plight of the three young missionaries who are members of the Global Mission Fellows programmes of the United Methodist Church—Mr Tawanda Chandiwana (Zimbabwe), Ms Miracle Osman Nkhata (Malawi), and Mr Adam Shaw (United States of America).

In February 2018, all three were taken into police custody and detained at police checkpoints when they were part of an international ecumenical human rights fact-finding mission in General Santos city, which is under martial law. Tawanda Chandiwana's only fault was tardiness in filing the renewal of his visa to continue his stay in the country.

The Executive Committee of the CCA urges the Government of the Philippines to release Tawanda Chandiwana who is still under detention and allow the three missionaries to leave the country.

The CCA Executive Committee learnt from our ecumenical partners in the Philippines and the United Methodist Church that the three missionaries have not been causing any problems to the peace and security of the country. In this situation, the CCA Executive Committee urges the Philippine government to release Tawanda

Chandiwana from detention and all three of them be permitted to leave the country at the earliest.

The CCA believes that reaching out to the victims and survivors of human rights violations by taking part in an international fact-finding mission in any situation is part of the missionary work of these three young missionaries.

The CCA calls on all peace-loving people of goodwill around the world to pray and work for the release of Tawanda and the departure of all three missionaries from the Philippines.

2018 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

Message regarding the earthquake in Taiwan

6 February 2018

Dear Rev. Tan Beng-Chi and Rev. Lyim Hong-Tiong,

It is with great distress that we received the news about the strong earthquake of 6.4 magnitude on the Richter scale that struck Taiwan, with its epicentre just off the east coast of Hualien city and Hualien county. It is with great sadness that we have been following the news during the past two days; about as many as nine people confirmed dead and 260 injured, while several others are still missing. We see the suffering of many people who are affected due to this calamity and we offer our prayers at this time of their distress. Our most sincere condolences to the bereaved family members of those who were killed. As the desperate search for survivors continues, may the Lord God protect and guide all those who are tirelessly involved in difficult tasks. We assure our fervent prayers and extend solidarity to the families of the victims, wounded, and survivors of this natural disaster.

It is heartening to note from the information you have shared with us that the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) has already initiated relief assistance through staff teams deployed from the General Assembly Office, as well as with the assistance of

indigenous churches and communities in four Presbyteries in the affected areas: East Presbytery, Truku Presbytery, Pangcah (Amis) Presbytery, and Bunun Presbytery. While we appreciate the immediate disaster responses initiated by the PCT, as a symbolic gesture of CCA's concern and expression of solidarity, we have arranged the transfer of a token contribution of USD 5,000 from the CCA for PCT's relief work in the earthquake-affected areas. Although this is a very small amount, please consider this as a token of our deep appreciation for PCT's humanitarian assistance to the affected people and communities. This amount will be transferred to PCT's bank account tomorrow. May I request you to kindly send us the details of the bank account of PCT.

We will continue to remember you all in our prayers. May God Almighty strengthen all those who are experiencing the pain and sorrow and PCT members who are tirelessly working for the rescue operations in the affected areas.

Statement on the Inter-Korean Peace Summit

26 April 2018

As North and South Korean leaders are preparing for a historic summit on the southern side of the truce village of Panmunjom on Friday, 27 April 2018, the highest-level encounter during the past 11 years, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) prays for a successful outcome of the summit. It is our fervent prayer and hope that the North and South Korean leaders will work out a suitable solution based on equality, mutual respect, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. It is also our sincere hope that a successful inter-Korean meeting will pave the way for a highly anticipated encounter between the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, and the US President, Donald Trump.

President Trump's support to North and South Korea "to discuss the end of the war" is a significant turning point in international relations and diplomacy. However, sustained efforts to keep the momentum of the new enthusiasm are vital to pursue the spirit of the new initiative. As the two Koreas technically are still at war with each other, the relaxation of tensions between the two Koreas is long overdue.

CCA and its member constituencies in Asia are encouraged that the two Koreas are forging a path towards peace. The CCA unswervingly reiterates its support for the call by the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) to replace the 1953 Armistice Agreement with a Peace Treaty. CCA urges its members and all peace-loving people around the world to pray for the success of the inter-Korean summit, as the leaders of both Koreas are committed to working together this week towards reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in the Peninsula.

CCA condemns attacks on churches in Surabaya, Indonesia

14 May 2018

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) condemned the bomb blasts, including a suicide bombing that targeted three churches in Indonesia's second-largest city, Surabaya, on Sunday, 13 May 2018, in which fourteen people were killed and more than forty people wounded.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara, the General Secretary of the CCA, expressed deep condolences to the victims of families and stated that the attack carried out against worshipping communities during Sunday services was a heinous crime, which was not justifiable by any religion.

Three separate explosions had taken place at Santa Maria Tak Bercela Catholic Church (STMB), Diponegoro Indonesian Christian Church (GKI), and Surabaya Pentecostal Church (GPPS), in and around Surabaya.

While recollecting the reputed history of Indonesia's tradition of nurturing tolerance, harmony, and unity among people and communities, irrespective of religious, ethnic, and cultural divisions or identities, the CCA General Secretary said, "The attacks on churches in Surabaya are deliberate attempts by forces of evil in Indonesia that aim at destroying the country's long-nurtured and cherished values of religious harmony and the foundation of the long-cherished 'Pancasila' principles, which accept religious pluralism and call for unity in diversity."

The CCA General Secretary appreciated the response by the leadership of Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), conveying messages to its member churches and congregations, urging them to stay calm in the face of violence and reminding them that members of the Christian communities must leave the responsibilities of handling the situation to the government.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country which has been considered a tolerant Islamic nation for a long time, has seen a recent resurgence in militancy, religious extremism, and terrorism. However, the current Indonesian government demonstrates its commitment to promoting religious tolerance and combat violence, religious extremism, and terrorism.

CCA urges churches to combat trafficking in persons

30 July 2018

As the United Nations (UN) calls to observe today, 30 July 2018, as World Day against Trafficking in Persons, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) urges its member churches and councils to make every effort to combat human trafficking in their respective situations in Asia.

In recognition of the UN's World Day against Trafficking in Persons, the General Secretary of CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara stated, "Many Asians experience the worst forms of cruelty in the modern slavery of human trafficking. This should be arrested in all possible ways by governments, and systematic advocacy measures should be undertaken to protect the dignity of victims of human trafficking."

The CCA General Secretary added that in terms of the different types of trafficking outlined and identified by the UN, a vast number of people from several Asian countries were experiencing vulnerable situations. Sexual exploitation and forced labour are the most prominent in many Asian countries but the other forms of trafficking that largely prevail include persons trafficked and forced to act as beggars, construction workers, work in the dangerous fishing industry, and people forced into fake marriages.

CCA has been organising Asian regional consultations annually since 2015 in order to sensitise Asian churches to combat human trafficking as part of regional advocacy initiatives and to sensitise Asian churches to combat human trafficking.

The CCA General Secretary said that an inter-regional consultation on human trafficking with a focus on 'Migration, Human Trafficking, and Asian diaspora in the Arabian Gulf region' will be organised by CCA from 11–14 November 2018 in Bangkok, Thailand, which representatives of Asian diaspora churches in the Arabian Gulf countries would also attend.

CCA's Asia Regional Consultation on 'Rights and Dignity of Children: Church's Response' to be held from 16–20 September 2018 in Jakarta, Indonesia, will also have sessions dealing with concerns related to the trafficking of children, added Dr Chunakara.

CCA offers prayers for victims of earthquake in Lombok, Indonesia

6 August 2018

As a powerful earthquake hit the Indonesian island of Lombok, in West Nusa Tenggara, on Sunday, 5 August 2018, the Christian Conference of Asia's (CCA) General Secretary, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, offered prayers for the victims and their families.

At least ninety-one people are now known to have died and hundreds of people have been wounded.

The 6.9 magnitude tremor was triggered underground, after which thousands of houses and buildings were damaged.

Reports confirmed that there have been more than 130 aftershocks since the quake hit on Sunday morning. The earthquake hit on Sunday, which came a week after another quake hit Lombok last week, which killed at least sixteen people.

While expressing profound grief and conveying condolences to the bereaved families of the victims, Dr Mathews George Chunakara appreciated the efforts being made by the Indonesian authorities in helping the affected people and communities in Lombok and the surrounding areas.

“Our thoughts and prayers are with all the people affected by the earthquake,” said the CCA General Secretary.

Several congregations of CCA member churches—Batak Protestant Christian Church (HKBP), Protestant Church in Western Part of Indonesia (GPIB), and other member churches of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) are located on the island of Lombok

Appeal for prayers and solidarity with victims of floods in Kerala, India

19 August 2018

To
CCA Member Churches and Councils
Ecumenical Partners

The state of Kerala in India is currently experiencing a devastating situation due to heavy floods, the unprecedented scale of torrential rains, the overflowing of rivers and lakes, the release of dam waters, and a series of massive landslides. Heavy landslides have made the situation graver as thousands have lost their homes. Hundreds have been killed; hundreds of thousands have been displaced.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) offers condolences to the families of all those who have lost their lives and expresses solidarity with the affected people experiencing extensive damage in their lives due to the disaster. The CCA urges all its member churches, as well as churches and ecumenical organisations around the world to pray for the affected people and communities in Kerala, and come forward to express solidarity and respond urgently to this humanitarian crisis.

Declared the most devastating floods since 1924, the people of Kerala have never faced such a terrifying deluge before. Thousands of people are rendered homeless as houses and roads have collapsed due to floods and landslides. It was reported that thirty-five of the thirty-six dams in the state have been forced open, releasing nearly 700,000 litres of water per second. While the official death toll is close to 400 presently, the figures are still rising; many continue to be missing. More than a million people have been evacuated or

rescued from their homes and a large number of people have left their homes voluntarily to take shelter elsewhere in the homes of friends, relatives, and well-wishers. More than 5,645 relief camps have been set up during the past five days. Rescue operations have been intensified amid frantic calls for help from hundreds of stranded citizens. Hundreds of fishermen in their own boats, the Air Force in helicopters, and the Navy and Coast Guard in special boats are involved in rescue operations with the assistance of thousands of volunteers.

The rescue operations and relief support are being coordinated by the state government through different government agencies and supported by civil society and faith-based organisations in local areas. However, thousands of people are still stranded in far-flung houses in several areas. A respite in rainfall has aided the relief efforts but it will take a major effort to get all the stranded people to safe shelters. Transportation and communication systems in the state are ruined as major roads have been damaged, telephone networks are down, and electricity is cut off in many areas. The main airport in Kerala has been closed, and trains and buses offer limited services.

The devastation of Kerala is causing untold miseries to millions of people in this South Indian state, commonly known as 'God's Own Country'. There is an outpouring of goodwill and support from across the country and the Indian diaspora in several parts of the world. All efforts, private and governmental, need to be stepped up to assist the affected people, especially those who have lost everything. There is a strong urgency to reach out to more communities who are stranded and isolated in the most remote areas. Only timely intervention and assistance will help meet the needs of the affected and reduce the sufferings of the millions of Keralites. All churches in Kerala, including several CCA member churches, are now actively involved in relief operations together with other religious communities, civil society organisations, and volunteers in affected areas. Church buildings, schools, colleges, and hospitals of churches are now converted into temporary shelters for affected people. The impact of the devastation will remain long-term. There is an urgent need to rebuild and rehabilitate the lives of the people and the

communities and restore normalcy for which timely intervention and assistance are needed on a large scale.

Any assistance to support the victims of the floods through CCA member churches in Kerala will be greatly appreciated, and CCA will be able to channel designated funds received for this purpose. Your contributions to this cause may please be sent to the account of CCA.

Letter on the earthquake in Indonesia

30 September 2018

To the members of:

Gereja Kristen Sulawesi Tengah (GKST), Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP), Gereja Kristen Indonesia (GKI), Gereja Toraja, and Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI)

Dear brothers and sisters,

It was with profound grief that we received the news of the devastating earthquake and tsunami, which have befallen the people of Central Sulawesi in Indonesia. With immense sadness, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) expresses its sincere condolences to the families and friends of all who have lost their lives and are experiencing untold suffering from the dreadful earthquake that levelled large parts of the capital city of Palu and the districts around, on 28 September 2018.

As we learn of the extent of this disaster, our thoughts and prayers are with the people and communities in the Central Sulawesi region. We pray to the all-merciful Lord for the quick recovery of the wounded, and for bestowing spiritual accompaniment and aid for all those who have lost their livelihood and shelter. We pray for the strengthening of those who are involved in the rescue operations. As we pray for and sympathise with the people of Central Sulawesi in their struggles, we urge all members of the CCA and churches around the world to pray for the people of Central Sulawesi.

On behalf of the CCA, once again, I express solidarity with the entire people and communities of Central Sulawesi in this hour of immense pain and grief and pray for their fortitude and endurance.

“God, the violence of nature shocks us.
We do not understand why these things happen,
but in the midst of our confusion, we turn towards you,
not away from you.
We ask for your mercy to be with the victims of the earthquake
in Indonesia.
Comfort those who have lost family. Protect and preserve those
still in danger.
Give rescue workers courage and wisdom and direction to stem
the suffering.
God, have mercy! Heal and save. We need your hand to work in
this case, now. In Jesus...”

(Source: Prayer Plain & Simple / Mark and Jill Herringshaw)

Statement on Pakistan’s Supreme Court decision on the acquittal of Ms Asia Bibi from blasphemy death sentence

1 November 2018

It is with profound thanks to God Almighty that the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) welcomes the news that the appeal of Ms Asia Bibi was allowed, and she has been acquitted from all the charges under section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The reversal of the judgement of the high court, as well as the trial court and setting aside Ms Bibi’s conviction in a ruling by Pakistan’s Chief Justice Saqib Nisar, is laudable.

After being sentenced to death in 2010, Ms Asia Bibi has been undergoing an ordeal as she was on death row. It is credible that despite religious extremist groups and mobs clamouring for Ms Asia Bibi’s death sentence, the Supreme Court stood firm on its decision based on facts, not misguided emotions and insinuations, to overturn the blasphemy conviction and the death sentence. We believe that the verdict of acquittal by the Supreme Court marks a major step towards making Pakistan a more tolerant nation. The decision of the Supreme Court is a hopeful sign of the commitment of the judiciary in Pakistan to uphold the independence of the judiciary and the protection of the rights of the marginalised and vulnerable religious minorities in the country.

CCA is concerned about the violence precipitated in Pakistani society in the aftermath of the Supreme Court verdict. It is unfortunate that several parts of the country remain tensed of protests. The majority of schools remain closed, and hospitals are placed on high alert. The railway network in Lahore is suffering disruptions due to protests and the suspension of mobile signals. CCA urges authorities in Pakistan to ensure the security of the acquitted along with her family as well as the lawyers who have been consistently arguing her case in court. It is unfortunate that the blasphemy law supporters and Islamic fundamentalist groups together with miscreants are organising protests on the streets, and pelting stones at police in the main cities of the country.

CCA appreciates the bold steps taken by Prime Minister Imran Khan who addressed the issue directly and unambiguously as well as strongly defended the decision of the Supreme Court. The Prime Minister's unwavering decision to issue a stern warning to religiopolitical hardliners that have been agitating against the verdict to acquit Ms Asia Bibi is commendable.

CCA prays for the safety and security of Ms Asia Bibi, her lawyers, and the judges who made the decision to set free Asia Bibi. CCA beseeches for divine guidance for the Prime Minister and all lawmakers in the country to exercise their authority and respond to the situation in a fair and just manner.

**Statement on the 70th Anniversary
of the adoption of the Universal Declaration
of Human Rights (UDHR): “Reiterating our
commitment to human rights”**

10 December 2018

Today, 10 December 2018, is the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The UDHR is a promise by States to uphold the equality and inherent rights of every human being. Its thirty articles were intended to be brought to life in a wide variety of ways; they are invariable and fundamental principles rooted deeply in cultures and traditions from across the world. The UDHR upholds

the fundamental values which unite all humanity, and which together make up the single most important factor in ensuring rights and dignity. It calls for “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.” Adopted on 10 December 1948, the UDHR became the starting point for the development of modern international human rights law. Over the years, it enabled awareness and interest in human rights among millions of people all over the world. The 70th anniversary of the UDHR is yet another milestone and an occasion to reflect on the significance of human rights. It is also an occasion to assess achievements and the challenges in applying the principles and provisions of the UDHR in a world where serious human rights violations continue to take place.

It is heartening that there have been numerous initiatives and positive achievements in the area of human rights protection during the past seven decades. Those measures include the adoption of many human rights treaties at both the international and regional levels. Yet, people across the world are far from equals. Despite many progressive developments in upholding the values of human rights, to varying degrees, there still exist human rights violations in many parts of the world including in Asia. People suffer due to discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and religion; freedom of expression is curtailed; independence of the judiciary, democratic governance, rule of law, peace, and security are threatened. Experience shows that many such problems in today’s world can be easily averted, if governments respect the economic, social, and cultural rights of their citizens by providing basic needs in life, as they are articulated in article 25 of the UDHR: everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood. All these factors remind us that in the spirit of human solidarity, we have a duty to stand up for the rights of others, as we can all take part in the active creation of the common good.

On this occasion, it is a matter of joy to remember proudly the profound contributions of three most prominent Asians among the drafters of the UDHR: Charles Habib Malik, a Lebanese academic, diplomat, and philosopher; Hansa Jivraj Mehta, an Indian

independence activist and early feminist who was responsible for changing the language of the UDHR from “all men are created equal” to “all human beings”, highlighting the need for gender equality and arguing forcefully, and successfully, for a language which would make clear that women are equal in rights and dignity to men; and Peng Chun Chang, a Chinese academic, philosopher, human rights activist, and diplomat who argued what human rights were in non-Western perspectives and how they could be described in an international document. We remember them and salute their memory.

Since its inception in 1957, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has always been committed to promoting respect for human dignity, human rights, equality, and peace with justice. The UDHR was used as a tool for human rights education and advocacy by CCA through the two ecumenical platforms CCA had initiated and founded in the early 1980s—the Asian Human Rights Commission and the Asia Legal Resource Centre. Both organisations initiated by CCA have become independent and spread their wings over the years; still making significant contributions to protect the rights and dignity of the marginalised and vulnerable people and communities in Asia. While CCA observes and reiterates the importance of human rights, and human dignity at all times and in every context, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR, CCA reaffirms its commitment to uphold human dignity and protect the human rights of all people in the world. We reiterate our recommitment and support to all human rights defenders. We note with great disquiet all who have gone missing, were illegally arrested, detained, tortured, and were victims of extrajudicial killings by security forces with impunity, as a result of their human rights advocacy.

On this fervent occasion of the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the human rights manifesto, we urge the governments in Asia to promote and respect the human rights of all, including people who are migrants, trafficked, refugees, stateless, differently-abled, and of a different gender. In its mission of ecumenical enabling of prophetic diakonia and advocacy, as well as peacebuilding efforts, CCA unfailingly engages in work that promotes dignity, equality, and justice as well as opposes the forces that destroy human dignity and intensifies any form of dehumanisation.

The distinctly Christian perspective on human rights motivates and calls us to advocate for human rights, especially for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. The UDHR, a distinctive instrument, could be used effectively in human rights advocacy and protection. It is in this context that we encourage all sectors of society to join hands to fulfil the promises of the UDHR, especially enabling the people at large for the practical applications of the guidelines and principles enshrined in the human rights manifesto.

2018 Programme Communiqués

Communique of the Leadership Training on “Witness Together in God’s Mission”

20–22 March 2018 | Phnom Penh, Cambodia

We, the participants of the Leadership Training on “Witnessing Together in God’s Mission,” are representatives of churches from all over Cambodia. We are gathered under the auspices of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in cooperation with the Kampuchea Christian Council in KCC headquarters in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from 20–22 March 2018.

On the biblico-theological basis of Isaiah 60:1, we discussed how the Asian Christians are called to arise, shine, and witness together in God’s mission of building the reign of God here and now on earth in terms of social, political, economic, religious, and ecological dimensions. However, the voices of the Christians have been a minority voice and seem inadequate although it has significant effectiveness in some places. As Israel had been called to witness to the entire Gentile world, Asian Christians are now called to arise, shine, and witness to the entire Asian region and the world as well.

All the participants agreed and affirmed the ways in which the churches can arise, shine and witness the glory and light of God in Asia by:

- engaging in interreligious peace and peaceful coexistence of all religions;
- taking a faith stance based on the Bible, to engage in the sharing of wealth and resources with the poor and needy;

- maintaining social equality of all people in Asia and in the world;
- holding the view that all the powers including political powers are God's gifts to human beings to create justice and peace in life together with peoples and other creatures of God; and,
- being in solidarity with the suffering people and the wounded Earth and practising the interconnected of love in 'Ecological Ethics'.

Today, our ecumenical call is not only to "arise for God's Revitalisation" in the midst of Christian communities in Asia but also to proclaim the gospel to all people focusing on wider ecumenism and to build his glorious kingdom here and now in Asia and beyond through His enlightenment. God's enlightenment to see as God sees and to see the social, political, economic, religious, and ecological darkness from the perspective of the poor, the marginalised, and the excluded will lead us to be in solidarity with them and will hopefully transform injustices to justices that gradually enlighten the world. It is God's ongoing revitalisation and restorations of the Asian people, giving new hope, new vision, and empowerment through His Spiritual enlightenment.

The theme of 'Our call to witness together amidst all God's people in Asia' is a glorious call to 'arise and shine' in the light of God from our dark contexts discussed. As it is interconnected with wider ecumenism, it needed time to get through. In the Asian interreligious contexts, the above-mentioned problems such as misunderstandings, religious prejudices, discrimination, violence based on religious groups, blasphemy laws, religious intolerance, religionism, religionisation of politics, and the politicisation of religion have been the darkness that shrouded and covered Asia. Our future theological vision is to remove all these challenges in the light of the dialogical approach, looking for ways to witness together and we, all the participants, agree to affirm:

- building peace and maintain religious harmony by removing religious problems;
- initiating interreligious cooperation by overcoming isolationism and escapism;
- cultivating mutual understanding by removing misunderstandings;

- developing religious tolerance by removing intolerance;
- engaging in mutual enrichment by removing mutual detrimental mentality; and,
- making friendship by removing antagonisms.

Further, we hope that this paradigm will make a Christian a better Christian, a Buddhist a better Buddhist, a Muslim a better Muslim, and Asia a better Asia.

Declaration of the Asian Ecumenical Youth Assembly (AEYA)

6–12 April 2018 | Manado, Indonesia

‘Lord, send your Light and Truth to lead us.’ (Psalm 43:3)

We, the youth leaders of Asia, have gathered from twenty-three countries and around 100 Christian denominations and ecumenical councils for the Asian Ecumenical Youth Assembly (AEYA) from 6 to 12 April 2018 in Manado, Indonesia. We are committed to journeying together as youth from the Christian Conference of Asia’s (CCA) member churches and councils in search of light and truth in Asia’s diverse contexts. We listened to and discussed the current and future challenges in our local contexts. We strongly desire, as a united cohort of young Asian Christians, to have the mindset of Christ and to be his hands and feet (1 Corinthians 12:12–31). We seek God’s light and truth in our world which is increasingly overcome by darkness. Therefore, we want to be advocates of justice and peace in the changing times and the era of globalisation.

Our Affirmation

Peace

We affirm that:

- God creates diversities, such as race, sexualities, and abilities.
- God desires peace on earth (Isaiah 2) within our diversity. All religions bring peace, love, and justice; however, religious fundamentalism and radicalism are causing pain and suffering to people in our member countries, particularly in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Laos, and the Philippines.

- God desires us to unite for good (Romans 8:28); however, we are hurt by the human-made divisions in Asia, particularly in the Korean Peninsula, Myanmar, Philippines, and Bangladesh.

Justice

We affirm that:

- We are created to coexist with all Creation (Isaiah 11:6-9); however, we are exploiting our environment by taking more than we need, not being good stewards of Creation.
- God desires humans to have a holistic life (Mark 2:1-12), free of stigma and discrimination; however, due to our ignorance and apathy, marginalised people, such as people living with HIV and people with disabilities, are still facing stigma and discrimination in our churches and communities. Consequently, there is limited access to care and education. The churches have not been adequately providing space for marginalised individuals to contribute their spiritual gifts.
- We are created as interdependent (Genesis 1) beings; however, there are people who are consumed by their own greed, taking the life out of our neighbour. Consequently, our neighbour, living in socio-economic and financial disadvantages, is forced into migration and human trafficking.
- We are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27); but because of sin entering humanity (Genesis 3), the Church has historically had a distorted understanding of gender and sexuality.
- We recognise that we as a church have sinned against women and LGBTQI+ individuals. They have been excluded, discriminated against and, in some cases, subjected to violence from the church. We recognise that there are a variety of views on gender roles and sexual orientations, and therefore we must respect one another's views. However, we are given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:14-18). As God reconciled us through Jesus, we also seek to be reconciled with those the church has injured.
- God desires the young to be nurtured (Proverbs 22:6); however, the ultimate aim of education in Asian societies has been unnecessary competitiveness, disproportionate wealth accumulation, and self-centred prestige. This culture

has encouraged jealousy, greed and consumerism (1 Timothy 6:9-10). The real purpose of education is to nurture gifts and talents given to us and to transform communities.

Changing Times

Technological advancements are unavoidable, and they are rapidly transforming the economic and social contours of the world in which we live.

We affirm that:

- God creates humans to edify themselves in creativity, and to use available resources for the fullness of life (John 10:10); however, misuse of technology has harmed Creation.
- Social media and digitisation have made the world a smaller place by connecting people and providing them with novel work opportunities; however, it has also created platforms that admire inauthentic virtual images of self-edification and virtual activism without real engagement. It offers the young generation new freedoms but also instability and vulnerabilities. We are susceptible to becoming digital nomads with limited direction on how to use online spaces fruitfully.
- Futuristic technologies, like artificial intelligence, are likely to make inroads into our lives sooner than later. The Churches need to be wisely adaptive to new technology in the changing context.
- Indigenous technology and local wisdom must also be appreciated and supported.
- The concept of 'family' is changing from a traditional understanding to a variety of definitions; consequently, conflicts occur in the church. This has led to the exclusion, discrimination, and isolation of members of the church who do not fulfil the traditional concept, such as single parents, the divorced, and the unmarried.
- Many young people suffer from conditions like depression due to unemployment, cyberbullying, loneliness, social expectation, etc. However, the churches have not adequately addressed mental health issues, contributing to people's self-harm and, in some cases, suicide.

- There are certain communities in Asia facing militarisation issues. It was brought up only in small-group discussions, but we affirm its impact on the lives of young Asians.

Our Response

We call on the CCA's member churches and councils to:

- Celebrate diversities by accepting and respecting religious others, through interreligious dialogues.
- Set aside a prayer day for peace.
- Support peaceful resolutions to conflicts, such as peace talks and peace processes, particularly in the Korean Peninsula, Myanmar, Philippines, and Sri Lanka.
- Proactively engage with marginalised communities and accompany them in their journey to be recognised, listened to, respected, and treated equally, particularly the Dalits and the tribals in India and the Lumads in the Philippines.
- Apologise for actions and inactions that have preserved the mistreatment of women and our LGBTQI+ siblings. We seek to be more hospitable and welcoming church communities, seeking to be reconciled with them. We advocate continued pastoral care for them in their journey towards healing.
- Break physical and attitudinal barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from participating in the life of churches.
- End the stigma and discrimination towards people who are marginalised, including those who are living with HIV, by providing adequate awareness, information, care, and support.
- Discourage using non-biodegradable products, especially single-use plastic, in their meetings and conferences.
- Advocate climate justice by initiating programmes in the local and national contexts.
- Stand with, support and empower families affected by human trafficking (Leviticus 19:34); and advocate the recognition of the human rights of people on the move and their families with governments, nongovernment organisations, and civil society groups.
- Embrace futuristic technology meaningfully in vital development sectors, such as health, education, and agriculture, in collaboration with government.

- Support initiatives for technology to reach the peripheries of our churches, communities, and nations.
- Embrace the changing family values and norms and promote intergenerational dialogues about changing contexts.
- Break the taboo associated with mental health conditions, and re-examine doctrines that have negative implications on this situation.
- Advocate education for all. Education should acknowledge the variety of gifts and respond to holistic development. Education systems should be scientific, homegrown, and responsive to the needs of people. These should contribute to the community and nation-building, and shape a generation of global citizens.

We call on young Asian Christians to:

- Create interfaith friendship, be radical in compassion instead of fundamentalist ideology, and be faithful witnesses, through actual engagement with those who are oppressed due to their religious beliefs, as well as their appearance, mental state, and socio-economic conditions.
- Advocate a holistic, community-based, and preventive approach to health care and access to treatment for people with physical and mental health issues.
- Use digital media sensibly, so we may engage with each other without judgement, hate, hurt and prejudice, and limit the proliferation of fake news.

We call on the CCA to:

- Develop training programmes on Sex, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SSOGIE).
- Organise AEYA at least once in five years.
- Establish youth exchange programmes among its member churches and councils.
- Translate this document into the languages of member countries to the extent possible.

*Are you ready to listen to the voice of silence?
 Are you ready to walk together in the darkness?
 Are you ready to touch the pain of other creatures?
 Are you ready to see broken bodies in Asia?*

*O God, dear friend,
We hear Your voice in the silence,
We walk with You in the darkness,
We touch Your pain in all creatures,
We see Your broken bodies in Asia.*

*We will dance with You in the rhyme of Hope.
We will sing with You in the gesture of Justice.
We will play with You in the land of Peace.*

We thank each other for serving as each other's supporter, opponent, and filter, so we may churn out a statement that we can all be proud of, and that will hopefully shed truth and light on young people everywhere. Above all, our thanks and praise to the Almighty who gave us wisdom, determination, and privilege to participate at the AEYA–2018.

Statement of the Asia Mission Conference (AMC) Follow-Up Programme on “Towards Contextual Interpretations of Asia Mission Statement in the Context of Myanmar”

1 May 2018 | Yangon, Myanmar

We, the participants of the Asia Mission Conference (AMC) Follow-up Programme, are leaders and representatives of churches from all parts of Myanmar, representing our respective churches. For mission in unity and contextual theology in Asia, all the participants agreed and affirmed the ways in which the churches in Myanmar engage in the contextual interpretations of the Asia Mission Statement 2017 and take them as theological hermeneutics in Myanmar by:

- engaging in prophetic witness as a core value of our faith, and to try to be prophets of God and his people with the aims of convincing others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same;
- affirming servanthood as a core value of our faith and to try to be good servants for God and his people with the purpose of convincing others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same;

- participating in the reign (kingdom) of God for justice as a core value of our faith, and to try to be good participants for God and his people and attempt to convince others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same; and,
- embodying the spirituality of the cross as a core value of our faith, and trying to be a good example for God and his people with the aim of convincing others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same.

Today, our ecumenical call is to do contextual theology prophetically in the midst of Christian communities in Asia, but also to proclaim the gospel to all people focusing on wider ecumenism and to build his glorious kingdom here and now in Asia and beyond through His enlightenment, to engage on the social, political, economic, religious, and ecological issues from the perspective of the poor, the marginalised, and the excluded will lead us to be in solidarity with them will hopefully transform injustices to justices that gradually enlighten the world. It is God's ongoing revitalisation and restorations of the Asian people, giving new hope, new vision, and empowerment through His Spiritual enlightenment.

As to the contextualisation of the 'Areas of Mission Concerns,' which deal with present Asian realities, and challenge us to engage in the wider context of ecumenism Asia, some participants expressed their views. Rev. Thawng Ling, a leader from the Mara Evangelical Church in Myanmar said, "The areas of mission concerns are updated and relevant to our real situations, it is our duty to contextualise in Myanmar context." Rev. Patrick Lain Tonge, an Anglican priest, said, "Ecological issues are our urgent need in Myanmar to theologise contextually." As to nurturing interfaith dialogues, Rev. U Myo Chit, a Methodist Minister from the Upper Myanmar Methodist Church, said, "Interfaith dialogue is one of the most important contextual issues in the Myanmar context." The participants were well aware that our theological vision is to reinterpret and contextualise the mission concerns with the aim of going beyond the traditional mission paradigm. In the light of this contextual interpretations, we will be looking for ways to witness together and we, all the participants, agree to affirm:

- to engage in stewardship and kinship as a core value of our faith in the midst of the groaning of creation in Myanmar,

and to commit ourselves as good stewards for God and his people, and to convince others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same;

- to accompany people on the move, the refugees, the internally displaced, the other as a core value of our faith, and treat the excluded and the marginalised as we would like to be treated. We will challenge others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same;
- to accompany people and communities who are excluded and marginalised as the stranger, the refugee, the internally displaced, the other as a core value of our faith, and treat the excluded and the marginalised as we would like to be treated with the purpose of convincing others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same;
- to engage in prophetic witnessing as a core value of our faith and try to stand for economic justice in the light of prophetic witnessing. We will convince others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same;
- is to nurture interfaith harmony in our country and try to practice religious intolerance for peaceful coexistence. We will challenge others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same; and,
- to build peace in the midst of conflicts and geopolitical turmoil as a core value of our faith. We shall try to build peace amid geopolitical turmoil. We will convince others, even leaders in our faith community, to do the same.

Communique of the International Consultation on 'Wider Ecumenism as Prophetic Witness'

7–10 August 2018 | Bangalore, India

We, the participants who attended an international consultation on 'Wider Ecumenism as Prophetic Witness' organised jointly by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Association of Christian Institutions for Social Concerns in Asia (ACISCA), Board of Theological Education of Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC) and the Ecumenical Christian Centre (ECC) and hosted by the ECC from 7 to 10 August 2018 at the Ecumenical Christian Centre in Whitefield Bangalore India, tried to understand the challenges in terms of moving beyond traditional understanding of ecumenism

as ecclesial unity. Wider ecumenism embraces all God's creation in the household of God. We are called to understand that the parameters of ecumenism go wider and embrace all God's creation in the oikoumene. The earth is the Lord's and we are part of God's creation to be prophetic witnesses.

During the deliberations of the consultation we, the 110 participants comprising theologians, missiologists, ecumenical enablers, theological students, social activists, lay and clergy representatives from different ecclesiastical traditions – Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Evangelical in Asia and other parts of the world, analysed and understood the reasons and factors of divisive forces hindering the life-affirming principles and values in our communities and societies. We are aware of the fact that we have been called to speak truth prophetically to powers, and not to bow down to the powers and principalities. However, we often fail to respond to the call for prophetic witnessing.

The biblical understanding affirms ecumenism as the whole inhabited earth. The reinterpretation of oikoumene in the light of the Trinitarian approach will bring a paradigm shift towards a more inclusive, interdependent, and relational ecumenism. Receptive ecumenism turns the question and asks what one's church or religious organisation can learn from the other, with integrity, rather than teaching and imposing on others.

In a world of ecological degradation where unbridled development creates conflict with the surrounding habitat, we are called to prophetically recognise our kinship with all creation. Interreligious relations and dialogue celebrate diversity through action, education, advocacy, and service rather than simply tolerating religious differences. Sharing one's own faith with others is a duty of discipleship. We observe that the theology of wider ecumenism should be further discussed and constantly evaluated in the light of emerging contexts and responding to the call for prophetic witnessing.

We are committed to exploring the possibility of cooperating with other religions for strengthening wider ecumenism in the household of God. Wider ecumenism should always contribute to promoting peace with justice in the spirit of Trinitarian love as a prophetic witness to the whole world. All work to promote wider ecumenism

needs to be contextual as well as religio-culturally, and ecologically sensitive in a spirit of understanding each other's way.

We affirm our belief that Jesus Christ calls us to be engaged in prophetic witnessing in the context of wider ecumenism. We believe that God's work is universal in its impact. Therefore, God cannot be confined to what is taking place within the structures of Christianity although the Church is vital to God's mission in the world. We affirm that to see God at work in a universal sense implies that Christians need to have a humble approach to other religions. In the light of a Cosmocentric approach to wider ecumenism, we acknowledge the revelation of aspects of Truth, Light, and Life in other religions.

We affirm that Christians have to recognise God's image in all religious traditions. The ecumenical question is markedly different in Asia as the context is decisively different from that of many other parts of the world. Christians in Asia cannot be insensitive to the tremendous contributions the other religions are still making to the shaping of Asian culture. There is a need for dialogue with other faiths to understand each other better and learn mutually as love is the essence of the Trinity and in Trinitarian faith, we engage with each other to make prophetic witness to the Truth that Christ teaches us. We affirm that wider ecumenism and the *missio Dei* have deep hermeneutical links and pave the way towards the unity of the entire oikoumene.

Communique of the Asia Regional Consultation on 'Upholding Rights and Dignity of Children' *16–20 September 2018 | Jakarta, Indonesia*

Children are precious gifts of God. Childhood needs special attention and it holds a special place in everyone's life as early childhood is the time that the foundation of life is built. Children need to be physically and mentally healthy, and protected from harm; they should be surrounded by love and care and helped to blossom into their life with dignity. However, the fact remains that millions of children in today's world have no opportunity to develop and grow to their fullest.

We affirm that children are created in the Image of God; they are our present as well as future. Children are in our midst to reveal

God's grand design and plan in our lives. They are signs of the Kingdom of God and heirs of God's new order. Therefore, any discrimination against children is against the will of God, the values of God's kingdom and the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The consultation organised by the Christian Conference of Asia and hosted by the Gereja Protestan di Indonesia Bagian Barat (GPIB) from 16 to 20 September 2018 had objectives to sensitise the Asian churches to be aware of the rights and dignity of children; to address specific concerns and issues related to the rights and dignity of children; enhance the capacity of Asian churches to be engaged in advocacy on the protection and promotion of the rights and dignity of children; and find ways to build networking of Asian churches and ecumenical organisations to uphold the rights and dignity of children.

The issues raised during the deliberations of the consultation included challenges to child protection in a digitalised world; children in conflict situations; situations of child labour; implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and subsequent guidelines in Asia today; ending violence against children; early childhood development; and trafficking and sexual exploitation of children in Asia. The participants shared stories and experiences from different parts of Asia. Millions of children continue to be victims of the most egregious forms of exploitation such as violence, abuse, and neglect. Poverty, sexual exploitation, sale, and trafficking of children for sexual exploitation, pornography, and forced labour have become serious concerns in several Asian countries. Impoverished children who are forced to live in vulnerable situations continue to face many inhuman and degrading experiences. Ethnic, religious, political, and communal conflicts affect millions of Asian children. The impacts of digitalisation in all walks of life affect children negatively despite the many positive gains of technological advancements. Access to basic education, health care and essential factors needed to nurture and develop the talents of the future generation are limited in many situations. These factors continue to affect the protection and security of children, and their right to live with dignity in a secure atmosphere.

The experiences shared by several participants outlined the problems affecting the dignity and rights of children in manifold ways such as an escalation in the number of street children due to

increasing poverty, the break-up of traditional patterns of social and economic life, family disruption, and the inability or unwillingness of the government to respond to the well-being of the people; ethnic and communal conflicts, religious violence, high susceptibility to natural hazards and internal displacements; the prevalence of trafficking of children for slavery and labour in different forms; sexual exploitation including child prostitution, child pornography in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia that have become a safe haven for paedophiles to avoid easy detection of their activities.

We shared during workshop sessions about finding ways to build coalitions and networks for effective advocacy on upholding and protecting children's rights and dignity. The current situation in Asia identified common issues and also possible actions to address various contexts. In this situation, it is our firm conviction that sharing of experiences and resources as well as collaboration on addressing emerging issues help churches in Asia to work together for the dignity and rights of children. The participants propose for actions by churches to continue to develop systematic efforts in upholding the dignity and protecting the rights of children.

Call to Action

The Asia Regional Consultation:

- Urges churches and ecumenical councils in Asia to initiate advocacy to influence governments;
- Requests CCA to initiate and facilitate an Asian ecumenical network on upholding and protecting the dignity and rights of children;
- Encourages churches to develop policies of participation of children as an utmost priority, especially through Christian education programmes;
- Urges churches to be engaged in tactical action with governments, civil society organisations, and faith-based networks and seek professional assistance as well as pool together resources within the churches to deal with the juvenile justice system, issues of sexuality, drug abuse, etc.;
- Recommends Churches in Asia to develop curriculum for Child Protection training, and initiate pilot projects to

understand state legislations of child protection measures and mechanisms;

- Suggests churches initiate training of the trainers for developing and implementing best practices for child protection as well as to form children-friendly organisations and networks with an aim to sensitise churches on issues and international instruments to protect children's rights and dignity;
- Proposes churches in Asia to create awareness among parents and children about the negative impacts of the digitalised world;
- Encourages church initiatives to develop child-friendly/ rights-based programmes in local congregations.

We affirm that the desire for life in all its richness and fullness is the most powerful instinct in human beings. As we believe that human dignity is God's claim on human beings, it is not something created by human declarations. Therefore, human dignity requires human rights for its embodiment, protection, and blossoming of life in all its fullness. Churches in Asia are called to be engaged in participating in God's mission and prophetic witness of upholding and protecting the dignity and rights of children.

Communique of the Asia Regional Consultation on 'Migration, Trafficking in Persons, and the Asian Diaspora'

11–15 November 2018 | Bangkok, Thailand

The participants of the Asia Regional Consultation on 'Migration, Trafficking in Persons and the Asian Diaspora', held at the headquarters of the Church of Christ in Thailand from 11 to 15 November 2018 and organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) with the participation of representatives from churches, national ecumenical councils, ecumenical organisations, theological institutions, and grassroots level migrant-serving organisations adopt and disseminate this communique for further follow-up. More than fifty participants attended the Regional Consultation, including representatives of the Asian diaspora churches and ecumenical organisations from the Arabian Gulf states, such as Abu

Dhabi, Bahrain, Dubai, Kuwait, Sultanate of Oman, Ras Al Khaimah, Saudi Arabia, and Sharjah. This consultation was a follow-up of earlier initiatives and dialogues of CCA about migrant workers and the contemporary challenges.

The deliberations of the Consultation focussed on a wide array of issues related to labour migration and trafficking in persons within and beyond Asia. Special emphasis was given to labour migration in the Arabian Gulf states and the Asian diaspora as well as churches' mission to the Asian diaspora in the Gulf region. The thematic presentations and panel discussions reminded us of the pastoral and social commitments and Christian witness to accompany the migrant workers and the trafficked persons in their struggle as well as to advocate for upholding the dignity and human rights of them. As Paul urges believers to welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us (Romans 15:7), we are then further compelled that, being a faith community in various parts of the world, we need to revisit the theme "hospitality towards stranger" as it is a command of God from God's community. Jesus who lived both as an international and internal migrant teaches the importance of hospitality.

Our Concerns

Human history replete with a saga of migration has now entered the "Global Nomadic Age." About 258 million people all over the world are migrants, which are expected to be 405 million by 2050. There are documented and undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and victims of human trafficking. Of these millions of migrants, women outnumber men except in Asia and Africa forming 48.4 percent. A majority go as domestic workers, which is a sector that is very difficult to regulate, as the provisions of international labour laws do not govern this sector in many countries where they work. This exodus increasingly becomes the cause of abuse and exploitation. In many countries, the domestic workers do not come under the purview of the labour laws, leaving them vulnerable. The flow of migration within a developing nation has thrown up a whole plethora of challenges. The sending countries and the receiving countries both profit from this. Many a time in the current scenario, a clear demarcation between these categories has merged. Many of the former sending countries themselves have become receivers or are now transit points of migration.

It is our firm conviction that Asian governments must uphold their national laws pertaining to the protection of the rights of migrant workers, and also for the prevention of and combatting human trafficking practices, for which reason, we affirm our commitment to campaign for the inclusion of provisions that would protect and uphold the dignity and rights of all migrant workers, especially the domestic workers.

We recognise the immediate need for all governments in the Asia region to ratify and uphold the spirit of the international legal frameworks especially the International Conventions adopted by the United Nations (UN), and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, as well as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) C-189 Domestic Workers Convention. It is with great dismay we note that most Asian countries have not ratified these Conventions thus binding these important international treaties.

After having carefully listened to and analysed the plight of the migrant workers and the trafficked persons in different situations the participants of the Asia Regional Consultation express their concern at the increased cases of exploitation of job seekers by unscrupulous recruiting agencies, urging the governments of both labour exporting and receiving countries to take more drastic actions to stop this menace. The increasing number of suicide cases involving migrant workers, particularly in the Gulf countries, underlines the need for extending counselling services to migrant workers. Sexual abuse of women, especially domestic workers, for which reason women seeking domestic and low-paid jobs should attend pre-departure orientation programmes that provide guidance for safeguarding, promoting, and protecting their dignity and rights.

Proposed Actions

The participants of the Asia Regional Consultation request CCA to facilitate, and strengthen the Asian ecumenical network to protect

the rights of migrant workers at all levels starting from the period of recruitment in the country of origin and in the receiving country as well as returning to the country of origin.

It is important that CCA take initiatives to sensitise member churches about the need to join in solidarity with the global struggle to protect the rights and dignity of migrant workers and to combat human trafficking. The participants appeal to member churches to cooperate closely with stakeholders in the receiving countries to gain access to information and healthcare, and protect the rights of migrant workers. It is also crucial that the churches and national ecumenical councils in Asia recognise, affirm, and uphold all International Conventions and national legislation pertaining to the protection of the rights of migrant workers including domestic workers, and combat human trafficking. Civil society organisations and faith-based groups in Asia should come forward to urge governments in migrant worker-sending countries to designate special staff in respective diplomatic missions with a mandate to address the concerns of the migrant workers. A network of collaboration between the churches in Asia and migrant worker service centres in order to learn about models of best practices be initiated.

The need for a renewal and resourcing of healing ministries to serve the needs of traumatised migrant workers and trafficked persons must be considered as a priority. Churches in Asia should not forget their commitment to articulate a “Theology of the Human Family” and remember the ecumenical affirmation that “the Church is a sign of the coming unity of the whole human family”.

The migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf must be encouraged to initiate ‘Save and Invest’ schemes that will help them build a more secure future for themselves and their loved ones upon return after their overseas work.

As the representatives of Asian diaspora, we urge CCA to help provide an umbrella organisation or an ecumenical platform for the Asian diaspora churches in the Arabian Gulf region initiate a ‘Asian Diaspora Church Arabian Gulf Regional Council,’ to help integrate and unify the work of the different Asian diaspora churches.

2019

2019 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

Statement regarding the bombing of Mount Carmel Cathedral in the Philippines

28 January 2019

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) condemns the bombing that took place inside and outside the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral in Barangay Walled City, Jolo, in the Sulu province of Southern Philippines on Sunday morning, which killed more than twenty faithful and wounded about eighty. Such an act of violence against the worshippers and insolence at a sacred place is an utter disregard for human life and people's rights to live in peace.

The CCA is saddened by the reports of fatalities. We pray for the families in grief and the speedy recovery of the injured. We express solidarity with the church community in the Apostolic Vicariate of Jolo.

We call on the authorities in the Philippines to bring the perpetrators to justice.

With the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the CCA appeals to Christians in the region to be in unity with all peace-loving Muslims and indigenous communities and work together against violent extremism.

We wish and pray that the Jolo blasts will not derail the quest for peace in Mindanao.

May all our religions of peace enlighten us in our pursuit of an optimistic future for the people of Mindanao.

May God deliver us from evil and lead us to peace.

Statement on International Women’s Day–2019: “The world needs a transformative shift to ensure gender parity”

8 March 2019

International Women’s Day is an occasion every year on 8 March to appreciate, recognise, celebrate, reflect, inspire, and convey the message to people and communities across the world to be mindful of the urgent need for the participation of women and men in all walks of life with equality.

The theme of International Women’s Day–2019, ‘Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change’, once again reminds us of innovative ways in which the world can advance gender equality. The goal of achieving a world where gender equality is ensured at all levels requires constant struggle not only by women but by both women and men. Although women all over the world participate in socio-economic and political activities, their contributions are not recognised. The empowerment of women is the need of the hour in every society and in all aspects of life. Despite the fact that innovation and technological advancement provide unprecedented opportunities for people, our world continues to face a growing gender divide, as women continue to face gender inequality in many areas. A growing trend of continuing disproportionate roles of women and men in society hampers gender equality and the establishment of more inclusive systems. In order to overcome such divisions and reach the goal of quality at all levels, the world needs a transformative shift, especially in removing structural barriers at every level of society.

The observance of International Women’s Day is a unique opportunity for all those who are concerned to convey the message of hope to the world that gender parity in all walks of life is a paramount target of humanity. Faith-based organisations have a major role in achieving the goal of shaping the future of societies and inclusive communities with gender equality.

CCA General Secretary denounces shooting at mosques in New Zealand

15 March 2019

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has denounced the shooting of worshippers in the Al Noor mosque and the Linwood masjid in Christchurch, New Zealand, in which forty-nine people have been reported dead, and twenty injured.

The shooting occurred today at 13:40 (New Zealand Standard Time) during the Friday afternoon prayer.

Responding to the tragic incident in New Zealand, the General Secretary of CCA, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, stated, “No matter what faith we adhere to or ethnicity we belong to, everybody should be able to live in an atmosphere where peace and security are prevailed and sustained; any act of violence must be prevented with all possible efforts.”

“We send our heartfelt support to all those who have been affected; we offer prayers to Almighty God for the victims and their families and reach out through our grief and distress to our Islamic brothers and sisters in New Zealand,” said Dr Mathews George Chunakara.

The CCA General Secretary further added that CCA shared the sentiments of Rev. Nicola Teague Grundy, Vice President of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, who said, “To single out one group of people as a focus of an act of hatred affects us all. There is no place ever for this type of attack on people, and we stand by all people, no matter what their faith. All people should be able to worship and live in a place of safety.”

Recalling the prophetic affirmation that “Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken,” (Micah 4:4) the CCA General Secretary urged, “Let us pray fervently that God will take those killed into His merciful arms and grant them eternal rest. Let there be peace in the hearts of all those who are shattered by this awful tragedy that has destroyed a rather peaceful setting in a religiously tolerant country like New Zealand.”

The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, called the incident ‘one of New Zealand’s darkest days’.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison described the incident as a ‘right-wing extremist attack’ and said one suspect was Australian-born.

Statement condemning the devastating bomb blasts in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday

21 April 2019

It is with great shock that we received the news of the terrorist attacks against three churches holding Easter services, and three hotels in Sri Lanka on Sunday 21 April 2019 killing 215 people and wounding more than 450.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) condemns these horrific acts of violence which devastated hundreds of Sri Lankans on holy Easter Sunday. We share the grief of the families and the dear ones of those killed; we pray for the victims and their families.

The CCA believes that these heinous acts of terrorism are incompatible with the values of any religious teachings or moral values of a civilised society. Violent attacks such as these are aimed at undermining the unity and religious tolerance of the people of any nation which will only push to a situation of anarchy and negation of the rule of law. The international community has the responsibility to make every effort to combat the scourge of terrorism and ensure peace and security in the world.

We urge the authorities in Sri Lanka to take strict actions against the perpetrators.

During this critical time in Sri Lanka, our thoughts are with the bereaved families and prayers with the injured. We stand in solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka especially the Christians who live amidst terror and fear. Let us pray to the Lord, Prince of Peace, for the victims of the terrorist attacks who are Sri Lankans as well as foreign nationals. May the divine grace transform the hearts of the perpetrators and grant the people of Sri Lanka God’s abundant blessings to lead a peaceful coexistence in their communities.

Message of solidarity on the earthquake in the Philippines

23 April 2019

To

The member churches of the CCA in the Philippines

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) and its member churches

It is with great distress that we received the news about the 6.3 magnitude earthquake that struck the town of Bodega in Luzon, the northern Philippines, yesterday.

On behalf of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), I express our deepest sympathy and sincere condolences over the loss of life, the displacement of families, and the widespread damage to property and infrastructure in the Luzon region.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of the Philippines, especially with the grieving families of the victims and all those affected by this calamity. We are praying for the consolation of all who grieve the loss of their loved ones, and the healing of the injured.

The CCA expresses solidarity with the people of the Philippines in this tragic situation. We are confident that the strength and resilience of the Filipino people will carry them through this critical time.

The CCA urges its member churches across Asia to support the affected people and communities with human and material resources, so as to provide moral, social, psychological, and humanitarian aid.

May our Lord Jesus Christ bestow upon his suffering people in the Philippines relief and solace during this time of crisis. Let us be reminded of the divine assurance that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains fall into the midst of the sea.” (Psalm 46:1–2).

CCA condemns police harassment against clergy in the Philippines

27 June 2019

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) condemned the continued operations by the military and the police in the hinterlands of Mindoro province and other parts of the Philippines as a result of the Oplan Kapatagan (Operation Plan Stability) ‘all-out war policy’ of the government.

Police intimidation of a district superintendent and an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church in the Philippines is the most recent incident reported of the high-handedness of the police against the pastors, which has been happening in several parts of the country.

Expressing CCA’s solidarity on behalf of the Asian churches with the churches in the Philippines that are often targeted by the police and military in the country, the CCA General Secretary, Dr Mathews George Chunakara stated, “CCA condemns the unlawful acts of the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (PNP/AFP) against ordained clergy and faithful in the churches who are providing pastoral care and support to people who face difficult situations.”

Rev. Glofie G. Baluntong, superintendent of the Oriental Mindoro-Romblon-Marinduque district, and Rev. Wilfredo Yasay, pastor of Good News United Methodist Church in Roxas, were reportedly intimidated by a group of the Philippine National Police at the church on 17 June 2019.

Several members of the police and military forces conducted a search operation at the United Methodist Church in Barangay Dangay, Roxas, Oriental Mindoro, despite not producing a search warrant, and ordered the clergy to surrender their guests to the police so that they would not be held as accomplices.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara further stated, “The reported incident in Dangay United Methodist Church causes fear and anxiety among the pastors and members of the congregations. The police action of barging into the sanctuary of the Church and its

premises, flaunting their rifles, and harassing the pastors are clear examples of a lack of respect for the sanctity of the Church and Christian witness.”

“The authorities should respect the pastoral ministry of the pastors and churches who are mandated to be with the victims of violence, the poor, and the deprived,” urged the CCA General Secretary.

The pastors of Dangay Church were accused of housing certain members of Karapatan, an NGO alliance of individuals and organisations working for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Philippines.

The United Methodist Church Southwest Philippines and the Philippines Central Conferences declared their position that all congregations of the United Methodist churches in their respective jurisdictions serve as a sanctuary for the victims of both natural and human-made calamities, regardless of who they are.

The government’s declaration of an ‘all-out war’ has often resulted in abuse of power against communities and even churches that support human rights defenders.

CCA General Secretary condemns the Philippine government’s act of ‘red-tagging’ the National Council of Churches in the Philippines

10 November 2019

“Indiscriminately labelling the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) as part of some ‘front organisation’ of local ‘Communist Terrorist Groups’ (CTG) is a reprobate act by the Department of National Defence (DND) of the Armed Forces in the Philippines (AFP), and such actions will only create fear among the NCCP staff and their families,” stated the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) General Secretary, Dr Mathews George Chunakara.

At a public hearing in the Lower House of the Congress of the Philippines, the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ (AFP) Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence labelled the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) as a ‘Communist Terrorist Group’ front.

The General Secretary of the CCA condemns in the strongest possible terms this accusation against its member council as a direct act of red-baiting, which puts to risk the lives and limbs of NCCP staff members, officers, their loved ones, and friends.

Mathews George Chunakara said that the allegations of ‘front organisations’ supposedly collaborating with the CTG and funding them were part of an ‘all-out war’ strategy of the government. The ongoing raids, illegal arrests, and vilification of those members of the people’s organisations that are critical of governments are part of a systematic military strategy to silence the critics of the government’s policies.

“The NCCP, an active member of the CCA comprised of several CCA member churches in the Philippines, has been consistently involved in human rights advocacy as part of its commitment to prophetic witness; especially since the martial law declaration almost half a century ago. The allegations levelled against the NCCP and the propaganda tactic of ‘red-tagging’ is deplorable,” said the head of the CCA. He also urged the Philippine government and its military to rethink its ‘all-out war’ strategy, and stop the branding of ecumenical organisations such as the NCCP or any other church-related bodies as ‘communists’.

‘Red-tagging’ has often been directed towards individuals and organisations critical of the Philippine government, by which they are labelled as ‘communists’ or ‘terrorists’ regardless of their actual faith or affiliations. Human rights advocates and civil society organisations have increasingly been branded in the Philippines as supporters of the communist insurgency.

The United Nations Human Rights Council in 2018 reported that “at least eighty recognised human rights defenders, indigenous peoples’ representatives, and representatives of community-based organisations” were labelled by the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte as ‘terrorists’ since they expressed concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in the country.

The CCA General Secretary also called on both the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front (NDF) to resume the stalled peace talks.

Mathews George Chunakara further commented that instead of labelling religious organisations such as the NCCP as ‘communist fronts’, the Philippine government must address the root causes of armed conflict, and the AFP must stop using military approaches which may further aggravate conflicts. The CCA maintains its proposition that only principled dialogue leads to a negotiated peace, which advances social, economic, political, and cultural transformation of society; this is imperative for the resolution of the underlying causes of any armed hostility.

Message on World AIDS Day–2019: “Communities make the difference”

1 December 2019

HIV is a multidimensional issue with social, political, and economic aspects impacting the strength and sustainability of people living with HIV (PLHIV) and key populations around the world. Despite the many advances we witness in combatting the spread of HIV and AIDS in the world, we still stand amidst a turbulent, yet transformational time. There were 37.9 million people living with HIV at the end of 2018 and 5.9 million were from Asia and the Pacific with 310,000 new infections detected. Globally, the number of affected persons is decreasing, but in Asia, the numbers are increasing; particularly in the Philippines, Pakistan, and Malaysia.

The theme of World AIDS Day–2019, ‘Communities make the difference’, in this context is significant. Over the past decades, communities have been playing important roles in combatting the menace of the epidemic at international, regional, national, and local levels.

In Asia, faith communities have been active in various ways to address the spread of HIV and AIDS. During the past several years they stepped up responses to tackling stigma and discrimination, and they are becoming a distinctive force in the eradication of the epidemic. Churches in Asia also are contributing immensely to combat HIV and AIDS. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), which started its special advocacy initiatives to address the concerns of HIV and AIDS since 1992, has been at the forefront of mobilising other faith communities for united action to combat HIV and AIDS.

The efforts made by CCA over the years proved that churches can and will always be potent forces of effective advocacy that can contribute to transformation in the respective communities.

World AIDS Day is yet another occasion for churches in Asia to reaffirm their commitments and renewed role in combatting the spread of the epidemic.

The CCA, on this World AIDS Day, calls on all churches and ecumenical councils as well as other related organisations in Asia to recommit themselves to foster their efforts in communities to combat HIV and AIDS.

We urge all member churches and councils of CCA to reiterate our prophetic role and become prominent voices in advocating for greater awareness, ensuring the dignity and rights of PLHIVs; promoting access to adequate healthcare; strengthening collaborations with other faiths, civil society organisations and governments especially influencing policies and legislation; and building communities of hope that the integrity and dignity of all God's creation are valued and protected.

2019 Programme Communiques

Communique of the International Consultation on “Statelessness and Human Trafficking in Asia: Prevention, Reduction, and Protection”

21–23 May 2019 | Chiang Mai, Thailand

We, the participants of an international consultation on ‘Statelessness and Human Trafficking in Asia’ organised by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) held at the headquarters of the CCA from 21–23 May 2019, adopt this communique to share with the wider constituencies of CCA and WCC.

At a time of increasing movements of people across the globe, the issues of statelessness and human trafficking have become urgent priorities for humanity to address. Statelessness and human

trafficking are closely interlinked. A stateless person is “a person who is not considered a national by any State under the operation of its law.” The 1954 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons identifies who a stateless person is, promotes the acquisition of legal identity for those persons, and ensures that stateless persons enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms without discrimination. Despite the provisions of international law relating to the acquisition, loss, or denial of citizenship, millions of people around the world are stateless and they are denied their right to a nationality. There are a variety of reasons for statelessness including ethnic, civil, and political conflicts, trafficking in persons, and the transfer of territory, marriage laws, discrimination, religious persecution, forced displacement, and lack of birth registration. Human trafficking, a form of modern-day slavery, is the trade of humans for the purpose of forced labour, commercial sexual exploitation, or other improper purpose. People without identity papers or passports are easily falling prey to human traffickers.

While human trafficking takes place at national, regional, and global levels on its own, it can also be a ‘by-product’ of statelessness which can lead to further violations of human rights. The International Labour Organisation estimates that women and girls represent the largest share of forced labour victims with 11.4 million trafficked victims (55 percent) compared to 9.5 million (45 percent) men. Human trafficking is the third largest international crime industry and it reportedly generates a profit of USD 32 billion every year. Of that number, USD 15.5 billion is made in industrialised countries. The trafficked people are treated like ‘commodities’, often forced to do dirty, dangerous, and degrading work. They are forced to work in construction industries, fishing, and agricultural jobs, sex workers, and even forced into marriage without the individual’s consent; children find themselves in a variety of jobs, including carpet weaving, brick making, and forced begging. A large number of these trafficked people are stateless.

The right to a nationality is a fundamental human right that has been stipulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 15). This right is founded on the existence of a genuine and effective link between an individual and a State. It is an agreed principle that questions of nationality fall within the domestic jurisdiction of

each State. However, the applicability of a State's internal decisions can be limited by the similar actions of other States and by the International Law.

During the course of deliberations in the consultation, we learnt that of the 10 million stateless persons worldwide, 45 per cent of them live in Asia, 75 per cent of whom belong to different minority groups: sea gypsies in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia; minorities and hill tribes of various ethnic groups in Thailand; Rohingyas fleeing from the Rakhine state in their homeland in Myanmar; the Karen ethnic tribe on the Thai-Myanmar border; Indonesians in the southern Philippines; Filipinos in Sabah, Malaysia; Tamils in West Malaysia; undocumented people in Brunei; four million people excluded from the National Registration of Citizenship (NRC) in Assam, India; and the Khmer Krom in Vietnam and Cambodia. One of the principal constraints on State discretion to grant or deny nationality is the proscription against racial discrimination. This principle is reflected in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and in many other instruments. However, in Asia, the negation of this principle is more evident in several situations.

The development and implementation of effective legislation and policies by governments are necessary to address situations where people can be trafficked as a result of extreme poverty, ethnic violence, civil war, political repression, natural disasters, climate change, being migrant workers, sexual exploitation, and women forced into marriages to which they have not consented. The effectiveness of this must include an evidence-based monitoring process.

We recognise the necessity for all governments in the Asian region to ratify and adopt the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Person and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. However, in the interest of immediate action toward the issue of statelessness, these governments need to uphold their existing national laws in conjunction with the eradication of statelessness in their respective area.

Lagging behind, the churches in Asia in general have neither adequately understood nor responded to this humanitarian crisis.

Hence, there is a need for churches to move forward. Ecumenical partnerships grow together in grace by sharing the blessing of God that enriches everyone's life. The Christian mission is to work together with the wider ecumenical movement in human rights, including the rights of stateless and trafficked people that have deep theological underpinnings, especially in relation to "love one another" (John 15:17), to love one's neighbour as oneself (Leviticus 19:18), and to "do justice" (Micah 6:8). The mission of the church is to welcome and look after people who are suffering. The stateless and trafficked people are like the Hebrew people who were exiled in Babylon, weeping: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat and there we wept when we remember Zion" (Psalm 137). We are all created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), including stateless and trafficked people; hence, all of us are endowed with human dignity. We are reminded of what God of Justice spoke to the Hebrew people and declared: "Do not oppress an immigrant. You know what it is like to be an immigrant, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9).

We are reminded of our responsibility to engage in effective advocacy to protect the rights of the stateless people. Our advocacy initiatives should aim at ensuring that the principle of non-discrimination relating to nationality in the constitutions and in laws through administrative and judicial decisions be enshrined. The lawmakers in every State in Asia need to be urged to adopt appropriate measures, both internally and in cooperation with other States, to ensure that each stateless person has a right to nationality. The churches in Asia have a responsibility to learn about and disseminate basic principles of pertinent international laws with respect to the basic right of every person to a nationality. They should also have the responsibility to reach out to civil society organisations and other faith-based organisations that can empower stateless people to work with governmental agencies to gain citizenship. Churches and ecumenical councils in Asia should come forward to form an active and sustainable regional network focussed on the eradication of statelessness and human trafficking, particularly for minority groups residing in Asia.

It is our considered opinion that churches in Asia should demonstrate their commitment in addressing pastoral concerns of

stateless and trafficked people and offer the provision of develop skills training, employment opportunities, and legal assistance, as well as opportunities to facilitate knowledge about the importance of birth certificates, marriage certificates, and death registration documents issued by churches that are a form of protection to ensure the fulfilment of their rights. It is also imperative for the ministry of the Church in Asia to raise awareness of these issues among members across Asian churches and develop effective strategies to protect the rights and dignity of all God's people. We believe that developing effective working relationships through interchurch cooperation with governments, government agencies, UN agencies, and civil society groups are essential parameters for developing and sustaining effective advocacy. We affirm the role of the Church in its prophetic witness as a central tenet of participating in God's mission. Therefore, churches need to take an active role in the promotion and protection of the dignity and rights of every person who is journeying together with us as our co-pilgrims for justice and peace. We recall the assurances given to us that "You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19). With this spirit of togetherness, we urge our ecumenical family in Asia to journey together in God's pilgrimage of justice and peace with our co-pilgrims.

**Communique of the Ninth Congress of Asian
Theologians (CATS)–IX on 'Reconciliation,
Renewal, and Restoration: Divine Indicative and
Human Imperative'**

5–10 August 2019 | Medan, Indonesia

We, the 130 participants of the Ninth Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS–IX), from various theological institutions and churches in Asia, gathered together at the Gereja Bethel Indonesia (GBI)–Medan Plaza in Medan, Indonesia from 5 to 10 August 2019, to reflect on the theme, 'Reconciliation, Renewal, and Restoration: Divine Indicative and Human Imperative'. The three subthemes 'Restoration: Towards the Harmony of Creation', 'Renewal: Towards the Fullness of Life', and 'Restoration: Towards Affirming the Will of

God' also formed the foci of the main thematic presentations and discussions at CATS–IX.

The participants acknowledge and express their sincere gratitude to the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) for organising and facilitating the CATS–IX, and to the Gereja Bethel Indonesia (GBI) for the warm welcome and hospitality that they extended.

We, the participants of CATS–IX, recognise that under the guidance and presence of the Triune God, we are endeavouring to reflect and theologise the divine indicative and human imperative; especially in relation to reconciliation, renewal, and restoration in the contemporary Asian context.

Reconciliation, Renewal, and Restoration: Divine Indicative and Human Imperative

We believe that reconciliation is the objective act of God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19). Reconciliation, renewal, and restoration are inseparably interconnected in the Trinity. The Triune God is constantly active in reconciling, renewing, and restoring God's creation. God's act of reconciliation simultaneously brings renewal and restoration.

While reconciliation, renewal, and restoration are often discussed in depth at theological platforms across Asia, Asia's deep and complex realities must form the undergirding of Christian theology. We need to discern our mission today in emerging Asian contexts characterised by multiple issues within social, political, and cultural realities, such as poverty and the deprivation of human rights, the growth of religious nationalism, the marginalisation of ethnic and religious minorities in several Asian countries, the technological divide in developing countries, and the environmental degradation in many Asian countries.

We recognise that our world today is fragmented by the scars of deep divisions and alienations, and we are called to listen to the divine indicative that challenges us to partake in God's mission of healing wounds and restoring creation. We believe that the cosmic Christ represents theocentric knowledge, and the work of the cosmic Christ is to bring together all those who have been scattered and have fallen from divine grace.

Affirming that the divine indicative was manifested from the beginning of creation, we believe God is reconciling, renewing, and restoring the creation. God purifies us in our pilgrimage and leads us towards the Kingdom's values. We believe that the Church is called to restore. This task of restoration cannot take place outside the realities of a particular locus and context, and our context is the diverse realities of Asia. The work of restoration must be in accordance with the will of God. The task of the Church in Asia is to discern the will of God and read the signs of the times within the context of Asian realities. It is in this context that the Asian ecumenical theological construction needs to be engaged, in a process of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration towards harmony among communities, churches, and other faiths, and with the entire creation in the light of Divine Indicative and Human Imperative.

We affirm the necessity of renewal in the areas of culture, identity, and dignity of peoples towards the fullness of life in the midst of all adversities in Asia, with the intention of liberating Asian communities from the grips and intrusion of all destructive forces. We affirm the necessity of restoring peace in Asia by advocating social, political, economic, religious, and ecological justice, and resisting any and all oppressive and destructive forces.

First and foremost, we acknowledge that we Christians are a divided community. Our differences have kept us from each other. Therefore, we have failed to seriously and unitedly address many problems. We repent, for our division has weakened our witness and mission.

We repent for our ignorance and arrogance, because at times we identified and aligned ourselves with the dominant forces of powers and principalities, and we did not recognise our neighbours of other faiths as our co-pilgrims.

We are conscious of the shortfall of our sins of omission and commission, where there has been injustice, exploitation, and indifference to the voices of the weak and the marginalised. We are convinced that the work of the suffering servant in love and humility is necessary for the healing of the wounds and that the harmony

in God's household affirmed by Christ's resurrection is what brings fullness of life. Our task as Jesus Christ's chosen disciples is not to be marked by any 'fullness' in our privileged positions but by our 'emptiness' like that of the Roman guard who is able to discern the profound truth of Jesus' self-giving love unto death.

Our Commitment to Witnessing to the Gospel

We commit ourselves to strive for a better Asia and stand united as One Body of Christ, witnessing to the Gospel.

We commit ourselves to pursue the path of multidimensional reconciliation, renewal, and restoration, which will enable us to engage in our common mission in the pluralistic contexts of Asia. We commit ourselves to respond to the theological challenges in a changing Asia, by standing and advocating for the rights of minorities, for the healing of broken relationships, for restoring the dignities of the marginalised, the oppressed, the excluded, the victimised, the stateless, and the trafficked people in Asia—the vulnerable in our societies.

We commit ourselves to the harmony of creation, by advocating for eco-justice in the midst of drastic climate change through so-called development projects and prioritising the ethics of sustainability in developing Asian countries. We commit to resisting every negative impact of Asia's social, economic, political, religious, and cultural life by neo-colonialisation, and express solidarity with people who non-violently resist the exploitation of their lands and natural resources in Asian countries.

In order to promote theological, ecumenical, and missiological imperatives in Asia in the journey towards reconciliation, renewal, and restoration of harmony in God's Oikos, we recommend that theological education in Asia be contextual and bridge the gap between theological institutions and the people at the grassroots. What needs to emerge are creative and innovative Asian theological effectuations: from exclusivity to inclusivity; from static binary concepts to dynamic dialogical interplay; from ideological systematisation to a cultural systematisation of theology; from the world of empty concepts to a world of practical life and mission; and from theocentricity to theo-praxis.

Communique of the Asia Regional Consultation on “Child Rights Protection and Advocacy to Combat Sexual Abuse and Exploitation”

13–16 October 2019 | Chiang Mai, Thailand

The need to recognise the dignity and rights of children has slowly become a central concern in children’s issues around the globe, especially in Asia. A majority of children coming before the law (as child witnesses, victims, and those in conflict with the law) are from deprived and marginalised communities. Their circumstances, coupled with a lack of knowledge and information about the dignity and rights of children, have put children in vulnerable positions across Asia, exposing them to sexual abuse and exploitation.

Transnational child sex offenders seek access to children in the region through voluntary and professional engagement in schools, orphanages, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It adds that technology and high levels of tourism are among the factors that shape children’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation in the Southeast Asian region. According to the global network of organisations working to end the sexual exploitation of children, “The forms and modus operandi of exploitation evolves as technology evolves.” The Economist’s Intelligence Unit says in its latest *Out of the Shadows Index* that children would be better protected against online sexual abuse if there was engagement with the industry. It notes that only three of the fourteen middle- and lower-income countries across Asia that were assessed ‘have an industry mobile telecommunications association that includes preventing sexual violence against children in its annual report or code of conduct as a clear priority in its scope of work’.

Violence against children was not a development priority until 1989 when the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The 194 UN member countries that signed up to the treaty are bound by international law, and the UN’s Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors its implementation. However, the elimination of sexual violence against children was not a prominent feature until the UN adopted its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which underpins the global development agenda for 2015–30.

It was in this timely context that the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) convened an Asia Regional Consultation on Child Rights Protection and Advocacy to Combat Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 13–16 October 2019. Participants from Bangladesh, Philippines, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Pakistan, and representatives from the World Council of Churches, UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Offices, ECPAT International, and World Vision International attended the consultation.

We, the participants, affirm the Gospel of Matthew in 19:14—“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.” Jesus’ words of welcome and hospitality to children before his disciples echoes even today. Jesus upholds the place of children in the family and in society. To them belongs the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus was defying the status quo of the time that ignored and disregarded the value and dignity of children. By inviting little children to come to him, he was calling on adults that surround children to protect them. Children bear the image of God; they are entitled to God’s grace and all rights afforded to adults. Jesus’ words continue to challenge us today.

During the consultation, the participating countries shared facts and figures that depicted a horrible picture of children falling victim to sexual abuse and exploitation. We acknowledge that sexual violence against children is a gross violation of their rights, especially since there is an immediate impact as well as lifelong scars on the survivors.

Globally, there are one billion children between the ages of one and seventeen, who have experienced violence, with rape making up most of the cases of sexual abuse. In the Philippines, a child or woman is raped every fifty-three minutes while government data in India presents an even more disturbing reality of child sexual abuse happening every fifteen minutes. The official figures in other Asian countries, such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka, also disclose the same gravity.

Sexual abuse and exploitation take many forms—rape, incest, sexual harassment, child marriage, prostitution, and child pornography, among others.

Many children are lured into commercial sexual exploitation due to their vulnerable socio-economic background, extreme poverty, and lack of access to essential social services. This heart-wrenching reality is alarmingly high in tourist destination countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Worse, sexual predators have taken advantage of the advances in technology to access and prey on children easily.

We recognise that the dignity and rights of children as guaranteed by international and regional conventions and national laws have not been implemented to the fullest. Access to justice plays a vital role in recognising the dignity and rights of children when they are in contact with the law, particularly their right to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation. Children are inevitably in a vulnerable position in an era where Asian countries are pushing the development of their economy and infrastructure. Children's rights are not viewed as important enough to be safeguarded parallel to a nation's development.

The consultation deliberated the common struggle in each country to raise awareness in children of their value and rights. Efforts to give children a voice to raise their concerns in a safe environment must be continuous. Only then can they feel empowered to express their hopes and expectations for policies that impact their right to be heard. The consultation also discussed the difficult task of changing the mindsets of stakeholders in the criminal justice system (police, prosecutors, judges, advocates, social workers, etc.). This change is crucial to create a system that prioritises the interest of the child. We remember that the CRC is celebrating its 30th anniversary as we stay vigilant to combat any new manifestations of child sexual abuse and exploitation with the advances in technology. The CRC is the only international human rights treaty to give NGOs a direct role in overseeing its implementation.

We heard how child sex offenders in Southeast Asia are most likely to be nationals of the countries of the region. But there is also evidence that suggests foreign offenders from a range of countries are as likely to engage in sexual exploitation of children. It was also noted with dismay that transnational sex offenders find access to children in this region through voluntary and professional engagement in schools, orphanages, and NGOs.

Our Concerns

The new area of concern in the Asian context is the sexual exploitation of children in the travel and tourism sectors. New groups of children have become potential victims. They are refugees, deemed stateless, or children of those who entered a country illegally for economic reasons, or who were escaping religious/political persecution. There is also the disquieting but slowly increasing scenario of children sexually abusing younger children. The Out of the Shadows Index also highlighted that although both boys and girls are victims of sexual exploitation, nine of the fourteen countries surveyed in Asia do not cover boys under their child rape laws, and only three collect data about the sexual abuse of boys.

We acknowledge that governments and civil society need to change how they address the sexual exploitation of children radically. Instead of focusing on the perpetrators, the frameworks, mechanisms, and tools for protecting children must be victim-centred.

Best Practices in the Region

There are several noteworthy best practices in the region.

- The churches in India have thousands of educational institutions providing formal education at the tertiary, technical, and elementary level, and this is often free. They also run centres for abandoned, neglected, and orphaned children, including the children of parents with leprosy or who are HIV-positive, who are under the care of a church. Additionally, there are church organisations and youth movements that help raise awareness, provide support, and advocate to prevent the sexual exploitation of children.
- The churches in the Philippines have activities for protecting children's rights and combatting sexual abuse and exploitation. The programmes include ministry among children that focuses on an annual family gathering for bonding with children, orientations on child protection, retreats on biblical characters that relate to protecting children's rights and ministering to street children. They also establish links with government agencies on education and health policies.
- The best practices among the churches in Indonesia include a child protection policy that governs childcare in the

church, family, and community, initiated by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (CCI), which encourages member churches to adopt or come up with a policy for a child-friendly church so that victims feel safe to report any abuse by church members/affiliates or their families. This involves the training of church leaders, Sunday School teachers and parents, and setting up safe houses for child survivors of violence and abuse.

- Strong laws and best practices alone are insufficient because marginalised segments of society, especially children, will always fall between the cracks in the system. It is acknowledged that we need to approach the situation of children and advocate for their rights from an angle that is not solely a problem of Christians but of the entire community. We need to pool resources together irrespective of faiths or ideologies. There are more than 5.7 billion people in the world who follow a religion. Of these, Christians form the largest religious community at 2.8 billion. Churches have influenced and fostered interfaith dialogue in the past. Churches must set priorities for their communities and also offer networks for better care of children and protection of their rights. We believe that if the church takes leadership in ending the exploitation of children through volunteering and mission efforts, it will send a strong signal across the entire sector.

Proposed Actions

- National and regional ecumenical councils should come up with a child protection policy for their staff. They should also encourage member churches to adopt child rights policies. Individual churches may have projects or activities that require specific attention, for example, an afterschool care or tuition centre that caters for all children in the neighbourhood of the church. All CCA members must be encouraged to implement programmes for educating children and youths of their right to safety and dignity under the CRC. They must be taught the difference between ‘good’ touch and ‘bad’ touch and of the potential online sexual abuse and exploitation they may face over their mobile devices. Churches must also initiate programmes for raising awareness among parents, Sunday

School teachers, and church/community leaders of their responsibility to provide a safe environment for children and youths both in a physical space and online.

- Churches must be diligent in vetting anyone who will have contact with children in their programmes. All volunteers, local or foreign, must have a safe-conduct endorsement from their church or a community leader before they can come into contact with children and youths.
- CCA members must also have mechanisms in place for addressing complaints/allegations of sexual abuse or exploitation. Survivors of any abuse must be offered counselling services.
- We urge churches to refrain from posting images of children who have been victims of sexual abuse and violence.
- Churches should urge their governments to ratify international conventions for the protection of children's rights, especially since children with refugee and stateless status may be denied access to national child protection systems, including education and healthcare services.
- Churches should lobby for the telecommunications industry to make a statement in each company's annual report expressing their commitment to preventing sexual violence against children and monitor the implementation of their codes of conduct.
- Churches should lobby for lawmakers to enact legislation that allows for the prosecution of citizens who sexually exploit children and youth in other jurisdictions.
- We urge churches to forge networks or partnerships with other faith groups and non-religious NGOs so that they can share resources to combat sexual violence against all girls and boys, and to ensure legal systems are child-friendly.

Communique of the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly on 'Arise, Be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation'

21–27 November 2019 | Hsinchu, Taiwan

Introduction

Organised by the Christian Conference of Asia and hosted by the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, more than 250 Asian Christian women

gathered at the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA) under the theme of 'Arise, Be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation', and engaged in worship, biblical reflections, and deliberations on emerging issues in the Asian context. The women gathered from different confessional traditions, denominations, and cultures, and from various countries and regions in Asia and beyond. They met at the Presbyterian Bible College in Hsinchu City, Taiwan, from 21–27 November 2019.

At this critical time in our history, when the whole of God's creation is groaning due to irresponsible human action, greed, and continuing discrimination, violence, and exploitation of women and children, the participants of AEWA committed themselves to be advocates and catalysts to bring holistic transformation to our world, communities, and churches.

Context

Critically reflecting and analysing the continuing marginalisation of the poor, the nexus between market capitalism and the depletion of the earth's sustaining resources which especially exploits women and indigenous peoples, the first Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA) affirms that without repenting from the sin of greed and without reconciling and doing justice to God's creation, the world community, women, and the marginalised communities, in particular, will not experience justice and peace in today's world.

We, the participants, are of one voice in saying a firm NO to a culture of violence and exploitation of the earth's resources. We affirm that we stand together in solidarity towards realising justice and peace at this kairos moment of our planet earth. The AEWA provided space for us to recommit to God that women's nurturing and sustaining roles are crucial and our voices must be heard for the liberation of the whole earth. Women as nurturers and sustainers of life, therefore, reaffirm and deepen our participation in God's mission of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration of creation. We affirm the coherence of one ecumenical movement, the need for interfaith collaboration for justice and peace, and work for an inclusive community of all, affirming the dignity of God's creation.

Theological Foundations

God is the source of life. All things, the universe, and humanity proceed from the Word of God. In God's image and likeness, women and men have been created. To be made in God's image and likeness means, among other things, being called to cooperate with God in the care of God's creation. No creation dominates others.

God created us in diversity with regard to race, sexuality, and abilities. God created us in integral relationships, but because of sin entering humanity (Genesis 3), the church has historically had a distorted understanding of gender and sexuality. We as a church have sinned against women, HIV carriers, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, and the wider creation. They have been excluded, discriminated against, and, in some cases, subjected to violence from the church. It is also our responsibility to take care of our creation, but we have failed, demonstrating our self-centredness and lack of care for future generations.

Injustice is a sin and is found in the form of poverty, human trafficking, exploitation, sexual violence, racism, religious intolerance, and persecution. Abuse, rape, sexual assault, exploitation, and treating women as commodities mean hurting the body of God and disrupting the web of life.

The broken body of God can be restored if we partner with God in God's mission of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration (2 Corinthians 5:19). The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross reconciled God and humanity. The cross powerfully reminds the world to reflect again upon the image of God. God's love brings hope for justice and peace and the integrity of creation.

We, both women and men, have a God-given responsibility to be the instruments of transformation with God's divine guidance. We cannot fulfil God's call by ourselves alone. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to become partners in God's mission of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration of every situation and context. We are called to awaken (Isaiah 32:9) from our complacency, greed, consumerism, and disrespect to others, especially to those who are different from us. We are called to be renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Affirmations and Our Responses

As Asian ecumenical women, we celebrate the fact that:

- we are created in God's image and called to witness to the deep love of God we experience in Christ Jesus;
- the Holy Spirit blesses us with gifts and calls us to participate in God's mission in the world; and,
- the ecumenical, intergenerational, and interfaith communities enrich our journey of faith and empower each other.

As Asian ecumenical women, we affirm that:

- God's mission includes reconciliation, renewal, and restoration of the whole Creation, including the human family; and,
- we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be change agents, apostles, prophets, and reconcilers everywhere.

As Asian ecumenical women, we confess that:

- we have not been good stewards of God's creation;
- we have not loved those who are different from us; and,
- our fear and insecurities have, at times, prevented us from being advocates for justice and peace.

Christ, have mercy.

We affirm that God's transformative action in the world gives us the courage to resist evil, the strength to do no harm, and the hope to make God's world safe for all generations. As a community of women woven together by the Risen, Crucified Christ, we affirm these common dreams:

- We dream of a world free from any form of discrimination and exploitation.
- We dream of a world without walls and wars.
- We dream and work for a world in which all people, creatures, and the earth will flourish.
- We stand in solidarity with all those who experience violence and abuse.
- We stand in solidarity with women who experience inequality in churches, workplaces, and families.

- We stand in solidarity with all those affected by climate change including the earth and all creatures.

We pray for peace. We pray for God’s wisdom, grace, and power, as we act to find solutions to the challenges that face our world.

Our Response

We call on the churches, ecumenical councils, and related organisations to:

- reconcile and restore the broken relationships between women and men to be equal partners in all levels of the churches and organisations;
- expand support systems for women who have been abused and sexually assaulted;
- promote programmes to prevent sexual violence in the church, society, and community;
- welcome diversity and prevent discrimination against people who are LGBTQI+;
- promote empowerment programmes with women, especially young people and people with disabilities;
- equip and strengthen Asian ecumenical women leaders in churches for effective responses and advocacy in Asia;
- create a safe space for people living with HIV and AIDS;
- stand in solidarity with, and learn from the wisdom and spiritualities of, indigenous people; and,
- create networks supporting migrant workers.

We, the participants of AEWA urge Asian ecumenical women’s organisations to:

- commit themselves to work together for upholding the rights and dignity of all women;
- initiate common actions to strengthen the ecumenical movement, avoid fragmentation of the ecumenical movement and duplication of programmes and actions to work for the common goal of supporting and accompanying women in Asia;
- promote the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) by mobilising churches, women, men, youth, and indigenous people, for collaborative advocacy;

- recruit and mentor other women in Asia;
- use inclusive language in our prayers and worship; and
- build networks of mutual witness to action in addressing our stated issues.

Our journey continues from the AEWA Assembly, we return home as AEWA in Action.

*Holy Spirit, Giver of life, sustain us, protect us, and send us to build God's kin-dom of peace and justice, of freedom and equality, of care and compassion.
In the name of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Communique of the Asia Regional Consultation on 'Evangelism and Missional Witness in a Multi-Religious Asia'

29 November–5 December 2019 | Chiang Mai, Thailand

We, the participants representing various churches and ecumenical networks in Asia, gathered under the auspices of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), at the headquarters of the CCA in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 29 November to 5 December 2019 to reflect on the theme Evangelism and Missional Witness in a Multi-religious Asia. Thematic presentations and sharing of specific contexts from local perspectives helped us to analyse and understand the emerging trends related to evangelism and missional witness in Asia. The deliberations enabled us to recognise the spectrum of understandings and practices in evangelism and mission in Asia.

'Inherited Mission' and its Challenges for Asia

Missionaries to Asia not only engaged in propagating the gospel as part of evangelisation but also responded to the social needs of people. Many institutions of education, health care, and social services in Asia are the legacy of the missionary enterprises in the nineteenth century.

Christ was born in Asia and Christianity originated in Asia. The first disciples of Jesus had turned to the East to propagate the Lord's

‘great commission’ (Matthew 28:18–20), and subsequently, the gospel spread to other parts of the world. However, the legacy of Christianity and Christian mission in Asia had been tainted with colonialism and imperialism. Consequently, the Church has been perceived as a foreign religion ‘imported’ by the missionaries who were aligned with the colonisers. The attitude of moral superiority adopted by overseas missionaries alienated people belonging to other Asian religions.

Churches in Asia have indigenous forms of worship, liturgical traditions, and theologies that are grounded in Asia’s cultural roots: from vernacular hymns based on indigenous musical accompaniment, the adaptation of folk arts to convey the gospel message and biblical stories, church buildings that fuse indigenous architecture, church calendars that coincide with local traditions, to the articulation of theology and hermeneutical methods which are based on Asian realities, culture, and traditions. Yet, the Asian churches often contend with rehashing the credal formulas and theological exegeses developed in the West, and thus Christianity in Asia is still portrayed as an exclusive religion of the West.

Contextual Challenges of a Multi-religious Asia

The Church in Asia faces myriad challenges. In response to the signs of our times, the greatest challenge is to explore how evangelism can best portray the good news to people in the pluralistically diverse context of Asia. We acknowledge that inequality exists in all spheres of life in church and society: between the haves and the have-nots, educated and uneducated; and class, caste, and ethnic differences within churches in the same country.

Known historically as a continent fostering religious tolerance and harmony, today, several Asian countries are embroiled in growing intolerance and fundamentalism. As a result, unprecedented levels of persecution against religious minorities continue to threaten the relatively peaceable social fabric of Asia. We confess that several Christian groups carry out their mission with a fundamentalist approach. The religious intolerance and extremism we experience in some cases are responses to the aggressive missionary evangelism and exclusive triumphalism that Christian identity and witness exhibit while being engaged in evangelism.

Keeping in mind how the missionary enterprises in the past enjoyed colonial patronage, we recognise the need to avoid any link between State and religion in the present times, given the emerging trend of politicisation of religion and the religionisation of politics.

Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. Policies of governments impact the freedom to profess and propagate one's faith. Although freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed, in reality, Christians in several Asian countries experience severe restrictions on their freedom to worship and in the propagation of the gospel. Anti-conversion laws introduced by governments in several Asian countries curtail the freedom of religion of Christians and other minorities. In such a milieu, we admit that the methodologies and strategies of certain groups in the arena of evangelism aggravate situations due to their lack of cultural sensitivity and respect towards other faiths. Unknowingly, our engagement through aggressive evangelism adds to the tensions and frictions in multi-religious contexts.

Being aware that what we preach within the Church and what is practised in our daily lives can have a greater impact on society, we admit that our lives as Christians have not always been in keeping with the teachings of Christ. It is also a fact that the passion for evangelisation is declining today because Christians and their missional involvement are not reflecting the imperatives of the gospel. Seminaries fail to emphasise missiology as an integral part of theology; they do not adequately clarify that evangelisation is not about disturbing the peace with our neighbours of other faiths, and rather is recognising our plural contexts alongside the emphasis on why we as Christians choose to follow Christ.

New missionary movements of the contemporary era pose various challenges to authentic Christian witness. The tendency of new-age churches to entertain youth instead of mentoring and engaging them in meaningful ministries that make them understand the values of the fullness of life is a serious limitation. Such tendencies are inculcating a different worldview among young Christians and causing them to lose their meaningful participation in churches.

In an age of connectivity, our lack of attention to local congregation-based ministries has also added to intergenerational gaps and the

breakdown of local neighbourhood community models of ministry. The meteoric rise of prosperity theology and its popularity in attracting people to churches and Christian groups which propagate and interpret the gospel with a prosperity perspective is a crucial challenge we face in Asia today. The experiences we face in Asia through an 'intra-proselytisation' among different Christian churches are not helpful in our common witness to Christ.

Emerging Mission in Asia

The ways in which the gospel is preached and reaches people in diverse contexts remind us of the need for diverse approaches to evangelism and mission. We recognise the need for a common understanding, especially in our usage of language and vocabulary when we engage in evangelism and missional witness in Asia. We believe that in the midst of complex pluralistic and multicultural contexts in Asia, our missional witness should aim at liberating humanity from the forces of dehumanisation. Evangelism and Missional witness of the Church should be a means of reciprocation to the gift of shalom and the liberation received from God. During the deliberations of the consultation, we were reminded of two thousand years of the Church's mission in Asia and the waves of evangelisation at different stages of our history and pilgrimage. We were peaceable of our tasks and challenges of evangelisation today, and we heard from several participants who shared their respective local situations and experiences of extreme suffering and alienation. We are moved by the sharing of those who are living in refugee camps and their experiences of resistance in the face of daunting economic, social, and political hardships. Their courage and determination to be engaged in mission and evangelism amidst adversities of pain and agony, and their faith and hope in Christ who liberates and sustains inspired us to strengthen our own faith and deepen our witness to be in solidarity with the oppressed and suffering people: the lost, the last, and the least.

The focus of evangelisation is to change lives and propagate the values and teachings of Jesus Christ. We believe that the message of the gospel can transform our lives and help others also to live like Jesus with the promise of God's abiding love, care, and presence with us amidst all the diverse contexts of Asia. The participation of

laity, women, and young people in the Christian witness needs to be ensured in churches' engagement in evangelisation and missional witness. The churches in Asia should make deliberate attempts to ensure ample time for deepening reflection on specific areas and priorities within the work of evangelisation. We acknowledge that the quality of discipleship should be the primary focus of evangelisation rather than increasing membership in congregations. We affirm the need to go back to building genuine relationships as Jesus did. We recognise that our missional witness compels us to build committed loving relationships like Christ did in all areas of life. We are reminded of the need to recommit ourselves to be mindful of the importance of prayer in the task of evangelisation because when we share the gospel, it is God who ultimately works in the heart of the people.

Evangelism and missional witness in a multi-religious Asia must empower, transform, and liberate. It must express solidarity in all aspects of life to transform lives and communities. It must always be based on the language of love and solidarity that is bound to Kingdom values.

We do mission towards establishing the Kingdom of God which is a just and compassionate social order where love, justice, and peace prevail. We affirm that wherever the Kingdom of God is present, it gives meaning to life and binds us together in unity, despite our diversities. In order to actualise the Kingdom of God that promises fullness of life for all, we need sensitive theological education and formation, honest interfaith dialogue, evangelical volunteerism, advocacy alongside civil society initiatives, and good relations with the State. Multicultural education must be the frame of missional witness and evangelism that would address the gap created by fundamentalism and radicalism, and bridge cultural and theological boundaries among Christians and those of other faiths.

We must open ourselves to engage in radical religious hospitality as both givers and receivers with those of other faiths. While presenting Christ suitable to the Asian culture and context, we need to be mindful not to fall into Western moulds but let the gospel be rooted in the cultural heritage of Asia and its spiritual values.

We must practice a ‘wider ecumenism’ that goes beyond the scope of Christian denominational ecumenism. We need to recognise the values of other religions, cultures, and traditions. In the course of evangelisation in Asia in a multi-faith context, our engagements in evangelisation and our participation in God’s mission have often failed to recognise the adherents of other religions. We need to be mindful of this and seek new ways of understanding the faiths of others in our midst in order to relate with them constructively. Our methodologies and strategies of Christian evangelism must address our multi-religious contexts and share the essence of Gospel values in a convincing and relevant manner. The value and spirit of ecumenism, the ethos of the oneness of all God’s creation, gives us space for contextual dialogue among religions, cultures, races, languages, genders, and traditions across Asia. Such a wider ecumenism recognises pluralism and acknowledges that the Christian witness in a religiously pluralistic Asia is complex, contextual, and encompasses all of humanity and creation. It is in this context that we are called to anchor our faith, and bear witness to Christ in a multi-religious Asia.

2020

2020 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

CCA extends solidarity and prayers to the people of Australia

10 January 2020

To
CCA Member Churches in Australia
National Council of Churches in Australia

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is with great anxiety and grief that the world received the news and images of the catastrophic bushfires that continue to ravage colossal loss in Australia during the last few months. It was indeed painful to know about the massive destruction in which at least twenty-five people have died and more than 10 million hectares of bush, forest, and parks have been burnt, more than 2,000 homes have been destroyed, and more than one billion animals killed as the fires have worsened.

As the people of Australia are struggling to be relieved from the horror and trauma of their ordeal, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) expresses deep sympathy and mourns the loss of precious lives, the displacement of families, and the widespread damage to infrastructure in affected areas.

The CCA and several of its member churches have been praying for all Australian people, especially for those who have suffered, who mourn, and for those who are fearful and anxious about their lives and security. We pray that all people who have been affected by the fires be comforted, and all those who have voluntarily stepped up and joined relief operation services continue to be encouraged.

We are thankful to God for the extraordinary kindness shown by the Australian churches and other member churches of the

National Council of Churches in Australia, who have been tirelessly and unceasingly working to help mitigate the devastation. We hear stories of generous support and hospitality that have been shown to both humans and wildlife. The resolve and outpouring of love from Australian churches in the form of personal and pastoral care, especially in guiding families and communities in hope are greatly appreciated by the world's ecclesiastical and ecumenical communities.

At this time of the traumatic experiences of the Australian people, we join the churches in Australia and pray with them:

“All things look to you, O Lord, to give them their food in due season. Look in Mercy on your people, and hear our prayer for those whose lives and possessions are threatened by fire. Give protection and wisdom to fire fighters and other emergency service personnel. Encourage our generosity to those who suffer loss. In your mercy, restore creation and heal our land. So guide and bless your people, that we may enjoy the fruits of the earth and give you thanks with grateful hearts, through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(Prepared by the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne)

The CCA also prays for the necessary guidance and wisdom for the rehabilitation efforts in the days ahead.

May you find solace and reassurance in the promise of our Lord who strengthens us, “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)

Statement of concern regarding the ongoing natural disasters in Asia—Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines

17 January 2020

It is with great distress and concern that the world has received the news of massive natural disasters in different Asian countries in recent days—the Australian bushfires, the Indonesian flash floods, and the volcanic eruptions in the Philippines.

Australia is being ravaged by the worst wildfires seen in decades. Painful stories about the frightening destructions have been reported, in which at least twenty-eight people have died, around 2,000 homes destroyed, over 10 million hectares of land burnt down, and nearly a billion animals killed. The ongoing fires are worsening and seem to be exacerbated by persistent heat and drought. While state authorities and rescue volunteer groups have been struggling to contain the massive blazes, even with assistance from other countries, the damning factor seems to be the climate crisis which has made the bushfires—an otherwise commonplace annual occurrence—go from bad to worse.

The flash floods that struck Greater Jakarta, Banten, and West Java in Indonesia on New Year's Day have been creating devastation. Flash floods triggered by heavy rainfall have submerged three districts and six sub-districts. Aside from flooding, the sudden downpour also caused landslides. The rising waters have already claimed sixty lives and displaced 175,000 people. The Indonesian Forum for the Environment has reported that two small islands in South Sumatra have disappeared as a result of rising sea levels driven by climate change, while four other islands are on the brink of vanishing.

Climate change-driven rising sea levels, caused by the warming of the earth and melting of glaciers, particularly threaten archipelagic countries like Indonesia, where millions of people are spread across 17,000 islands and currently live in low-lying coastal areas. A tropical country like Indonesia is more susceptible to the effects of global warming, especially in South Sumatra, where the locals depend excessively on coal, oil, and natural gas, thus contributing to emissions of greenhouse gases.

In the Philippines, Taal, an active volcano in the middle of a lake around 70 km south of its capital city, Manila, has been spewing smoke and ash since 12 January 2020. The government has ordered about half a million people to evacuate from within a 17 km radius of the volcano. The volcano has been continually belching ash, pebbles, and steam columns. While lives have been saved, farmers and fisher folk—those with extremely climate-sensitive occupations—have lost their means of livelihood, as crops and dwellings are shrouded in a cover of ash. Volcanologists fear that a violent eruption may

lead to lava flows into the surrounding lake, the release of toxic gases, and a possible volcanic tsunami or earthquake.

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), and the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), as well as the member churches of these ecumenical councils—most of which are also CCA members—have already initiated several efforts towards disaster mitigation. Churches have opened their doors and are providing relief assistance to those who have fled danger zones.

The CCA expresses sympathy to the people in Australia, Indonesia and the Philippines, and appeals to churches and people of goodwill around the world to pray for all affected communities and to donate to the relief efforts of churches and councils in the affected areas. Let us extend compassion, love, care, and hope to the survivors of the bushfires in Australia, the flash floods in Indonesia, and the volcanic eruption in the Philippines. These ongoing natural disasters and their effects remind us of our Christian duty of working together in times of crises and pooling together our efforts and resources not only to help the victims, but also to mitigate such unforeseen happenings.

As such events become more and more commonplace as a consequence of the climate crisis and its worst effects, our prayers must be supplemented with concrete actions. The climate emergency and its subsequent suffering will only intensify if communities and their governments fail to heed the apocalyptic predictions and do not take sufficient measures to mitigate the potentially irreversible damage to the planet. The voices of the Asian churches must rise as a clarion call for people from all walks of life to join together in averting the state of climate emergency that the world is headed towards.

“Most merciful and compassionate God,
You are our comfort and strength in times of sudden disaster,
crisis, or chaos.
Surround us now with your grace and peace through storm
or earthquake, fire or flood.

By your Spirit, lift up those who have fallen, sustain those who work to rescue or rebuild, and fill us with the hope of your new creation; through You, our rock and redeemer. Giver of Life and Love, hear our prayers.”

(Author Unknown)

Message on International Women’s Day–2020: “Towards upholding rights and dignity of women in an ‘equal and enabled’ world”

7 March 2020

International Women’s Day (IWD) is an occasion to celebrate the collective acts of courage and perseverance of women in their determination to achieve equality and transform society. Ending prejudice against women is a prerequisite for securing their fundamental rights. This year’s IWD theme, *An Equal World is an Enabled World: Each for Equal*, and the UN Women’s theme, *I am Generation Equality: Realising Women’s Rights*, bring back the focus on the shared responsibility that all have in forging empowerment and equality.

The year 2020 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which was passed at the Fourth World Conference on Women. The focus of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 5, ‘to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’, has indeed gained momentum in the gender-specific contextualisation of the work in non-governmental and faith-based organisations among others.

The economic transformation in several countries from subsistence-based agricultural economies to knowledge-based economies has aided in recognising the value of the potential and contribution of women in manifold areas. However, there persists a latent reluctance in recognising the capability of women as forces in decisively influencing the development and direction of future generations. Encouragingly, the past years have seen Asian women taking the lead in intergenerational campaigns against hegemony, discrimination, and unjust and oppressive regimes, for socio-

economic, political, religious, and cultural equality through their engagement in activism at all levels for a better future for the entire creation.

The theme of the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA) organised and facilitated by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in 2019 appropriately captured this global mood, sensitising and motivating Asian women to 'Arise, Be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation'. In several Asian countries, the Church has also prophetically stood alongside women in their quest for equality. However, a recent worrying trend is the rise of religious fundamentalism, which impedes the progress of women by snatching away their rights and dignity in many parts of Asia. While acknowledging the robust legal mechanisms and policies in several countries, what must be recognised is that weak enforcement mechanisms fuel impunity and erode the gains earned in the path of upholding the dignity and rights of women.

Asian women have always been motivated to work for renewal and restoration within the ambit of 'Generation Equality'. As the world observes International Women's Day, the CCA joins many like-minded groups and people's movements around the world, and renews its commitment to uphold the rights and dignity of women. CCA exhorts its member churches and councils to continue to acknowledge and accept the value and ethos of equality in the leadership of both women and men at all levels. The CCA reiterates the gospel message of equality and renews the vision of Jesus in every aspect of its working.

Pastoral Letter to all CCA member churches and councils: "Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed..."

13 March 2020

To

The member churches and councils of CCA

The world is facing an unprecedented situation today due to the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The outbreak of

COVID-19 is a loud wake-up call for all countries on our planet. The proliferation of COVID-19, as well as other major epidemics such as SARS, Ebola, Nipah, and MERS since the beginning of this century, have shattered several myths about threats arising from new pathogens and diseases that escalate as epidemics. The eruption of these epidemics has proved that such diseases are no longer limited only to densely-populated poor countries and that wealthy, developed countries are not immune to them. Dependence on higher levels of living standards and apparently well-developed healthcare systems alone cannot be our sole solution to overcome new pathogens and epidemic-prone diseases.

The emergence of new diseases and the spread of virulent strains are a result of systemic practices and actions by which we exploit the planet and destroy God's creation. The rapid spreading of viruses and institutional delays in global responses have proved that even sophisticated healthcare systems are not sufficiently equipped to mitigate the damage caused. The spread of COVID-19 has exposed the inadequacy and lack of proper healthcare management mechanisms and has pushed humanity to the brink of vulnerability.

The gravity of the multiplication of COVID-19 and its impacts on many countries are unimaginable and have not yet been properly quantified. A large number of people around the globe are extremely susceptible. In the span of a few months since the end of December 2019, the total number of confirmed cases has now surpassed 121,000 people in 120 countries worldwide, with over 4,377 deaths reported so far. As of now, people in twenty-five countries and regions in Asia have been affected by this deadly virus. The crucial conditions which we are currently collectively undergoing are also a reminder for humankind to reflect on the fragility of human life and the ultimate vulnerability of the entire cosmos! Our world needs prayers, cure, and healing especially in times of this crisis.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), in this context, has decided to focus on the theme, 'God, Heal Us as We are Vulnerable' for Asia Sunday–2020. We have prepared a special liturgy for Asia Sunday–2020. All member churches and councils of CCA as well as the ecumenical partners and churches around the world are encouraged to use this special liturgy in the coming days for their

prayers as well as when Asia Sunday will be observed this year on 24 May. As we continue to have faith and trust in God's love for humankind and divine power to heal, let us continue to pray for health, recovery, and healing. May God hear our prayers, and heal all those who are suffering at times of vulnerability: "Heal us, O Lord, and we shall be healed, save us, and we shall be saved, for you are our praise." (Jeremiah 17:14)

Statement on increasing acts of racism and stigmatisation during the COVID-19 pandemic

13 April 2020

After a spike in the outbreak of novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, racism has reared its ugly head. The COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019 has led to an increase in acts of xenophobia, discrimination, violence, and racism around the world. While several cases of verbal abuse and physical assault have been witnessed against people of Chinese and Asian ethnic origin in Europe, the United States, and Australia, cases of racism against Africans in China are also on the rise.

Incidents of bias and discrimination have been reported in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, home to a large African student population. Many students from Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, and other Sub-Saharan African countries have chosen Guangzhou as their destination for higher education. Institutionally sanctioned racism has resulted in the eviction of African people, entry restrictions in certain areas, and cancellation of their visas. This is clear evidence of blatant xenophobia and racism.

Such discrimination has been meted out against Africans not just because of their race and ethnicity, but also because of the irrational and baseless assumptions that they may be carriers of the dreaded COVID-19 virus. Overnight evictions from tenements have left young students homeless and fending for themselves on the streets in the midst of a global pandemic. Travel restrictions prevent these students from returning to their home countries.

Such knee-jerk reactions to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in China reveal deeply ingrained biases. Though Guangzhou is the

epicentre of acts of hatred against Africans because of the colour of their skin, stigmatisation against Africans has occurred in Beijing and other Chinese cities as well. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) is alarmed at the atrocious treatment that Africans have been subjected to in China in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CCA condemns all acts of stigmatisation, discrimination, and racism wherever they exist, especially during the pandemic. The CCA expresses its concern about the maltreatment and harassment of Africans in the time of the pandemic, who instead should be treated with dignity, respect, and care in these difficult times. The CCA calls for a complete halt to the inhumane treatment of Africans in China.

The CCA reiterates and unwaveringly upholds its principle of non-discrimination and equality, according to which no one shall be subjected to bigotry or prejudice because of their colour, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, religion, social, economic, or any other status. The CCA looks forward to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reviewing the progress China is making in overcoming racial discrimination against Africans and nationals of other countries. We believe that each person, despite differences, reflects the image and likeness of God. Hence, based on our profound faith in God, we continue our advocacy for justice, equality, and peace in the time of this global pandemic.

Appeal for Prayers and Solidarity with those affected by Cyclone Amphan

22 May 2020

The Bay of Bengal region in South Asia experienced a catastrophic natural disaster, Cyclone Amphan, which ravaged many cities and districts along the east coast of India, particularly the states of West Bengal and Odisha, and the Sunderban delta region in Bangladesh. The powerful cyclone, which has been the worst experienced in decades, has killed 84 people so far while several thousands have been displaced. Infrastructure and property worth millions along with irreplaceable and invaluable natural resources have been destroyed. Cyclone Amphan has left a trail of destruction in its wake.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) offers condolences to the bereaved families and expresses solidarity with all people and

communities who have experienced extensive damage to lives and livelihoods. The CCA urges all its member churches, as well as churches and ecumenical organisations around the world to uphold those affected in prayers, express solidarity, and respond urgently to this humanitarian crisis.

The regions have also suffered devastating impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown situations imposed in the region greatly affected the evacuation measures. Though the region has mechanisms in place to respond to such disasters (as the climate in the region is prone to frequent cyclones), the state's resources were stretched and diverted towards relief for COVID-19, thus making disaster management and response an even greater challenge than usual. Quarantine facilities were hastily turned into relief and evacuation centres. Social distancing norms currently in place have meant that mass evacuations have been even more challenging, with the full capacity of shelters being underutilised. The cyclone has greatly exacerbated the plight of 58 million people living in the region who are some of the most vulnerable communities in South Asia: poor fishing communities in the Sunderbans and over a million Rohingya refugees living in crowded camps in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh.

Rehabilitation concerns are serious and cannot be underestimated. The devastation has been termed a 'bigger disaster than COVID-19'. The rising of sea levels can send water barrelling inland, decimating communities and villages. Flooding of several hundreds of square kilometres of low-lying areas by the highly saline seawater has rendered tracts of land infertile, making economic recovery an even greater challenge. Relief operations are hampered since the level of impact has not been fully assessed, but it is clear that widespread destruction has occurred. The cyclonic devastation of the region is causing untold miseries to millions of people who have already been grappling with the health crisis and economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The recovery phase and rebuilding efforts must combine disaster risk reduction, enhanced public health infrastructure, and adaptation to climate change.

Our thoughts and prayers are with all the people in the affected areas who suffering from the devastating cyclone Amphan,

especially through the tragic loss of life and the immense material devastation. On behalf of the CCA, I urge all member churches and councils of CCA to pray for the victims and their families and extend support to all who are engaged in the much-needed work of relief, recovery, and rebuilding.

Solidarity Message on occasion of PROK's Pilgrimage of Healing and Unification in the Korean Peninsula

9 June 2020

The division of Korea into North and South continues as one of the most painful remnants of Cold War politics. The Korean War, which began across the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950 and ended with the Armistice on 27 June 1953, left Korea devastated and cruelly divided. Although 67 years have passed since the Armistice was signed, technically both Koreas are still at war with each other. The year 2020 is the 70th year of the start of the Korean War and it reminds us of distressing political and ideological conflagrations in international relations that revolved around it. The still simmering tension on the Korean peninsula is a residue of international power games that stretch back to the troubled 1950s. The long history of the Korean War and its aftermath have proved that wars and military conflicts bring nothing but fear, enmity, destruction, and suffering.

As peace continues to be at stake in the Korean peninsula, especially when tensions rise and the geopolitical dynamics change, the new initiative undertaken by the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) to intensify the renewed commitment towards a pilgrimage of healing and unification is a valuable additional impetus to intensifying the wider ecumenical efforts towards Korean unification. The ceremonial function PROK is organising in the context of the 70th memorial of the Korean War with the participation of 500 representatives across the country, and scheduled to take place on 20 June 2020 is commendable. As PROK envisages its vision to recognise once again that “the people are subject and initiators of a peaceful process of healing and unification,” it is reaffirming the vision of peace and unification

and asserting the fact that the subject of the Korean unification process is rooted in the aspirations of the people themselves. It is heartening to know that the ceremonial event to be held under the auspices of the PROK in Cheorwon along the Civilian Control Line and the DMZ will proclaim a peace statement and reaffirm the Korean people's commitment to reunification of the divided Korean peninsula. This is in fact, another commitment to walking together with everyone in the ecumenical family on a pilgrimage of healing, reconciliation, and unification.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) gives thanks to God, for all that has been accomplished thus far to accompany and be in solidarity with the people of the Korean peninsula through various efforts by different actors and players in the ecumenical family. Over the years, the CCA has been journeying together with the Korean churches as a prime partner and faithful witness in their search for peace with justice, reconciliation, and reunification of the Korean peninsula. Jesus, in His kenosis, was acquainted with our infirmities, yet Jesus reconciled us to God through his suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus came to liberate all people and make them one. He himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14). On behalf of CCA, I wish every success for fruitful deliberations of PROK's ceremonial event in Cheorwon to proclaim a peace statement and to reaffirm the Korean people's commitment to the peaceful unification of their divided ancestral land. May God Almighty continue to accompany and strengthen all of us in our journeying together.

Message on “Racism and inequality anywhere in the world are threats to humanity”

16 June 2020

The atrocities perpetrated against African Americans and other marginalised communities of colour in the United States of America by police who continue to act with seeming impunity are alarming and of ongoing concern. The recent murders of two African Americans—George Floyd in Minneapolis and Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta—by the police have spurred subsequent reactions through

massive protest movements across the country. The protests and the unrest are clear manifestations of frustration. The killings became the focus around which the American public was galvanised to pour out their outcry against social inequality, police brutality, racism, white privilege, rising fascism, callous political and economic elites, and inept governance.

The brutal murders of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks are unfortunately not isolated incidents, and such acts should be condemned. Viewing the graphic video of the unjustified brute force by the police killing both George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks, people all over the world now see the inhumane, degrading, and cruel manner in which the police treat African Americans who face widespread and systemic racism on a daily basis in the US.

The whole world awakens to struggle against the colonial legacy of slavery and ongoing racial discrimination. Structural racism is a fact of life everywhere in the world, and angry citizens across the world protest against the legacy of brutal colonialism and racism. They denounce the unconstitutional misuse of the military for tear-gassing and violently dispersing peaceful protesters engaged in the exercise of their constitutional rights.

The complaints are that police often unfairly pull over people of colour, especially African Americans, for no other reason than because they “fit the description” by virtue of the colour of their skin. For the same offence, African Americans receive stiffer sentences than other Americans; thus mass incarcerations of African Americans continue as a form of modern slavery.

Economic oppression and political repression have no place in a democracy. Such virulent bigotry is contrary to any sense of human decency. To solve a problem, we must first recognise that a problem exists. The noble words in the US Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution shine a bright light on the rest of the world. However, it is unfortunate that the basic recognition of and respect for the human dignity of African Americans have not been attained yet in the “Land of the Free” and the “Home of the Brave”.

Those who strike against people because of their colour are striking against God who created all human beings in the image of God. We

need to recognise the divine presence in each and every one God created and respect their dignity and integrity regardless of colour, ethnicity, national origin, or social status.

The leadership in the United States must heed the calls of the people to restrain police powers, especially in relation to the use of force. At the same time, the destructive methods of protesters also need to be stopped. The public must keep a level head while continuing to voice their opposition to the abuse and misuse of power and violence. It is heartening that the United Nations Human Rights Council will hold an urgent debate on allegations of “systemic racism, police brutality, and violence against peaceful protests” in the US on Wednesday, 17 June 2020, in response to a request from African countries. This disorienting dilemma is a teaching moment for all those who are concerned about humanity. “Race” is a social construct. Everyone belongs to one race: the human race. Let us all respect each and every one in this world, and celebrate our diverse ethnicities, colours, national origins, languages, and other differences. Let us hope that change is imminent.

Statement on Anti-Terrorism Act in the Philippines

20 July 2020

The Philippines’ new ‘Anti-Terrorism Act’ which took effect on Saturday, 18 July 2020, and will be implemented later this month, undermines basic freedoms and human rights as it gives overreaching powers to the Philippines government and paves the way for large-scale violations of human rights. The new law will criminalise acts that incite terrorism “by means of speeches, proclamations, writings, emblems, banners, or other representations.” It also bestowed the President with the power to create an Anti-Terrorism Council that could tag individuals and groups as terrorists, allow authorities to detain suspected terrorists without charge for up to twenty-four days, and permit the government to conduct ninety days of surveillance and wiretaps.

When President Rodrigo Duterte affixed his signature on the fast-tracked Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 earlier this month, it was amidst wide criticism for giving overreaching powers to the Philippines government for human rights violations in the country, and also at

a time when the people have been worried about the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the Act's ambiguous definition of terrorism, the government will have sweeping authority to curtail freedoms. Security forces will not be obliged to present suspects before a judge to determine whether physical or psychological torture has been inflicted on them.

Although President Duterte defended the law, stating that law-abiding citizens 'have nothing to fear' as the law only zeroes in on terrorists, past experience makes it evident that human rights defenders, church workers, civil liberties lawyers, environmentalists, workers, urban poor, peasants, indigenous people, fisherfolk, activists of women, students, peace movements, and journalists could fall victim to this draconian law. While the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) of the Philippines assured the protection of civil liberties, all those concerned with the situation in the country have denounced the new law as a tool that could be potentially abused for the suppression of political opponents and nonviolent dissidents as well as the smothering of the freedom of speech.

Local and international human rights groups have expressed their concern that the legislation could be abused to target the administration's opponents, using the presidentially-appointed Anti-Terrorism Council that could designate anyone suspected a 'terrorist'. The law bestows upon security forces sweeping powers to go after targets (some even without judicial approval). Legal experts in the country have already warned that its overly broad articles could allow for discriminatory enforcement, privacy infringements, and the suppression of peaceful dissent. This is because the law has been crafted with such imprecise and vague language that there is no certitude as to what acts the law actually proscribes. There are now at least six petitions against the law filed before the Supreme Court. This law only points toward the downward spiral of the human rights situation in the Philippines.

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Report on the 'Human Rights Situation in the Philippines' (UNHRC 44th Session, 30 June–20 July 2020) has expressed concern about the danger posed by the Anti-Terrorism Act. It observed: "Worrying new laws and amendments have been proposed with the stated aim of

strengthening public order and countering terrorism, which risks eroding constitutional and other legal protections...The proposed 2020 Anti-Terrorism Act, slated to replace the already-problematic Human Security Act, dilutes human rights safeguards, broadens the definition of terrorism, and expands the period of detention without warrant from three to 14 days, extendable by another ten days. The vague definitions in the Anti-Terrorism Act may violate the principle of legality.”

At the 44th Session, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated, “The recent passage of the new Anti-Terrorism Act heightens our concerns about the blurring of important distinctions between criticism, criminality, and terrorism. The law could have a further chilling effect on human rights and humanitarian work, hindering support to vulnerable and marginalised communities.”

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) is concerned about how the contentious Anti-Terrorism Act bill was fast-tracked and approved in both Houses of the Philippine Congress while the entire country’s attention was focussed on the rampant spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CCA denounces all human rights violations, decries injustice, and calls upon governments and autonomous institutions to protect the defenceless and safeguard human lives. It is the CCA’s firm conviction that the state which terrorises people with extrajudicial killings maligns human rights defenders as terrorists.

The dark days of martial law in the Philippines, during which tens of thousands of innocent people were tortured and summarily killed, as well as the thousands of human rights violations under subsequent administrations in the country can never be forgotten. It is well known that President Duterte is not shy in expressing his admiration for Ferdinand Marcos, who was notorious for ruling the country under martial law from 1972–1986. In the face of this awareness, CCA expresses its concern about a possible return to the use of repressive force and human rights violations, reminiscent of the dark history of martial law in the country.

Over the decades, different administrations have labelled nuns, pastors, priests, bishops, church workers, trade unionists, and student leaders as ‘communist rebels and terrorists’, while security and paramilitary forces have tortured and even murdered many

of them. Church workers as well as the staff members of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) and regional ecumenical councils have been under surveillance for weeks on end. The CCA denounces the government's dastardly act in a bid to stifle the voices and conscience of the people. The CCA calls for the immediate repeal of the Philippines Anti-Terrorism Act.

The CCA stands in solidarity with the peace-loving and progressive Filipino people in opposing the Anti-Terror Act. The CCA condemns the alarming law as a menace to the fundamental rights of the Filipino people. The CCA calls upon its member churches and councils to pray for the safety of the Filipino people, as they face an uncertain future.

Message of comfort and solidarity on explosion in Beirut, Lebanon

5 August 2020

It is with great distress that the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) received the news of the massive explosion that rocked Beirut on Tuesday, 4 August 2020, flattening much of the city's port, damaging buildings across the Lebanese capital, and killing more than 100 people and leaving 4,000 injured, while many still feared to be trapped under the rubble. We share the grief of the Lebanese people and uphold the victims and families in our prayers. During this critical time in Lebanon, our thoughts are with the affected people and we stand in solidarity with those who are experiencing this painful situation and living amidst fear and deep anxiety.

We understand that although the cause of the blast was not immediately known, preliminary investigations have revealed that the explosion was not a premeditated act, but was caused due to the ignition of 2,750 metric tonnes of ammonium nitrate, a highly explosive chemical used in the manufacturing of fertilisers and bombs. The chemical stockpile, accumulated through confiscation, had been stored in the Beirut port warehouse for over six years without any safety measures, thus endangering the safety of the people residing in the port's vicinity.

The explosion that rocked Beirut comes at an unpropitious time. Although Lebanon has confirmed only 5,062 cases of COVID-19

and 65 virus-related deaths, the pandemic-related restrictions have further exacerbated the country's deep and long-running financial crisis. Before the COVID-19 lockdown, the Lebanese government was also dealing with anti-government protests against the country's ruling political class and endemic corruption. The economy has been in a free fall for about a year, and as the Lebanese currency has plummeted, food prices have soared. Beirut's main port, now completely damaged, was vital for the import of much of Lebanon's food stocks, grains, and fuel. This has spurred fears of widespread food insecurity in the short term, as all the grain stored at the port has been destroyed.

CCA prays for the victims and their families at this time of their bereavement. As the entire country faces extremely tragic and painful moments, we urge all member churches and councils of the CCA to pray for the comfort and solace of the numerous victims and their families. The impact of the explosion has revealed to the world the vulnerable situation in which the citizens of Lebanon are forced to now live. Even after the shock of the explosion fades away, the impact will be hard to fathom. Let us pray and hope that the people of Lebanon will overcome the grave crisis they are experiencing.

While this message of comfort and solidarity is conveyed to the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and its member churches, the Christian Conference of Asia joins the MECC in their prayer:

*"Beirut is devastated
Beirut is facing a tragedy
Let's stand together
Let's rescue the wounded and those who lost their homes
Let's pray for the victims
O God, have mercy on our beloved Lebanon and on its
heartbroken people.
Do not hide Your face from us!"*

Statement on Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Christians in India

13 August 2020

The Indian caste system is probably the longest-surviving system of dehumanisation in the world. The segmentation among the

various castes is so rigid that no one can change from one caste to another caste. It is expected that a person born in a particular caste remains permanently confined to it until death. In addition to this segmentation, the caste system defines the nature of the occupation to be allotted to each caste. The Dalits in India have been at the bottom of this totem pole for centuries in all spheres of their lives—social, economic, and political. Owing to the entrenched and socially sanctioned nature of the caste hierarchy and its prior validation through religion, those unfortunate enough to be born in the lower castes do not even have the option of qualifying for national minority status under Indian law. This is despite the fact that they are by and large not allowed in many places to join in rituals along with the upper castes even today in India as their presence is considered polluting.

When India became a Republic in 1950, a commitment was made to secure justice, equality, liberty, and dignity for all Indian citizens. However, the Dalit Christians have been discriminated against and marginalised as the special protection of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) was given only to the Scheduled Castes within the Hindu religion. The affirmative benefits and the fundamental rights constitutionally guaranteed for the Scheduled Castes in India have been denied to the Dalit communities that converted to Christianity and Islam. This privilege of special protection was extended in 1956 to the Dalits who converted to the Sikh religion and in 1990 to those who converted to Buddhism. Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims continue to be kept outside of this constitutionally guaranteed programme of affirmative action.

Dalit Christians have a unique history of faith experiences because of their caste identity. They embraced Christianity as a faith affirmation against caste-based slavery and these experiences vary according to regional contexts. It is not only common knowledge but also borne out of numerous extensive research studies that the Dalits are unfortunately still identified first by their caste by a large section of Indian society. As the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) recently observed, all other identities of the Dalits, arising from their religious, regional, linguistic, and other affiliations are secondary identities that do nothing to displace the severity of the caste-based discrimination and violence that they suffer. It

appears that reservation laws in India are designed not to assure equal status to its minorities but to penalise national minorities that do not accept political assimilation at the bottom. Christians, Muslims, non-Hindu Dalits, etc., are not entitled to the affirmative action quota and education opportunities especially for professional courses or for government jobs.

As a result of decades of struggle and advocacy initiatives at various levels by the Dalit Christians, a Writ Petition (180/2004) was finally filed in the Supreme Court of India by the Centre for Public Interest Litigation challenging the Presidential (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. The Writ Petition is also looking for justice from the apex court to allow and extend the Scheduled Caste status to Christians of Scheduled Caste origin for availing special privilege in education, getting scholarships, employment opportunities, welfare measures, affirmative actions, right to contest in the reserved constituencies from local administrative bodies, the panchayats, as well as State Legislative Assemblies all the way up to the national parliament. It is also expected to avail the legal remedy/protection under Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention) of Atrocities Act of 1989, which was amended in the year 2018.

The Supreme Court of India agreed on 7 January 2020 to examine the plea that Dalit Christians or Christians of Scheduled Castes origin should enjoy the same quota benefits reserved for Scheduled Castes. This is an encouragement for all those who have been advocating the rights and dignity of Dalit Christians. It is also a positive sign of hope that the Chief Justice of India has issued notice to the central government that reservations for government jobs and admissions in educational institutions should be made 'religion-neutral'. These measures will be necessary for helping the Dalit Christians overcome centuries of discrimination and oppression they have been facing. The Constitution of India through its Articles 25 to 28 guarantees freedom of religion for all Indian citizens. However, freedom of religion has been denied to millions of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims who continue to suffer social stigma and the horrors of untouchability.

As the Dalit Christians in India have been continuing their struggle for justice over the past 70 years, the Christian Conference of

Asia (CCA) supports their ongoing advocacy efforts to repeal the Presidential Order 1950, paragraph 3, and includes the Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in the Scheduled Caste list.

The CCA joins with NCC India and all CCA member churches in India to share their hope, “The Supreme Court of India will act on a monumental opportunity now to render justice to millions of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims who continue to suffer from social stigma and the horrors of untouchability.”

The CCA affirms that Scheduled Caste status for Dalit Christians in India is the need of the hour.

**Message on World Alzheimer’s Day–2020:
“Our world needs more dementia-friendly
communities”**

21 September 2020

Alzheimer’s is the most common cause of dementia, which is a specific disease characterised by a progressive decline in cognitive function. Every year on 21 September, ‘World Alzheimer’s Day’ is observed around the globe. This is an occasion for the international campaign initiated by Alzheimer’s Disease International (ADI) to raise awareness about the growing problems and the stigma surrounding Alzheimer’s and dementia.

The theme of this year’s World Alzheimer’s month campaign is “Let’s talk about dementia”.

Dementia is a general term for a decline in mental ability affecting memory, other cognitive abilities, and behaviour that interferes significantly with a person’s ability to maintain their activities of daily living. Although age is the strongest known risk factor for dementia, it is not merely ageing as such; a progressive disorder that causes the degeneration of brain cells. The most common cause of progressive dementia among older adults could be due to several other disorders. Alzheimer’s disease is one of those disorders.

Dementia, with its devastating impact on patients and their families, has been growing all over the world. It has been estimated that 35.6 million people are living with dementia worldwide—58

percent live in low- and middle-income countries, and by 2050 this figure is projected to reach 71 percent of the total number of those affected. East and South Asia will see a doubling in the growth rates of dementia in the next 20 years. In most developed countries, over 70 percent of people with dementia live in special homes or community care centres, with much of the care provided through services rendered by the governments. In low-income countries, due to a lack of facilities for services, informal caregivers such as family members, relatives, friends, and neighbours provide care to persons with dementia. It was reported that women contribute to 71 percent of the global hours of informal care for dementia-affected people, with the highest proportion in low-income countries, with 58 percent of the world's population of dementia. Taking care of dementia-affected people is particularly stressful because of the changes in the person's cognition and abilities, as well as behavioural and emotional changes. The caregiver also undergoes strain and stress due to the hectic workload at home or at work places.

Most countries in Asia, which account for the lion's share of dementia prevalence, have not formulated public health policies directly targeting the burden of dementia. Thus, informal caregivers such as family members, relatives, friends, and neighbours bear the brunt of the burden of taking care of medical and social support. It is a hard reality and a painful experience for caregivers to watch the health of their loved ones decline. During such situations, the caregivers and other family members need strength and courage and protection from discouragement.

People living with dementia and their caregivers have equal rights and dignity. However, society often stigmatises and alienates them. Their families are even affected as stereotypes and misinformation spread in society, as many believe that dementia is incurable, or dismiss symptoms as just a normal part of ageing. Labelling and negative words are often used to describe the sufferer's condition, resulting in social rejection, internalised shame, and isolation. Now that the COVID-19 outbreak has created a situation of poorly prepared and overburdened health care systems, routine services and support to people living with chronic dementia are severely compromised. Lockdowns, restrictions, and other containment

measures are intensifying the social exclusion of people living with dementia.

As the world observes World Alzheimer's Day on 21 September, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls upon its constituencies to recognise the value of caring for people living with dementia and their families, as well as for caregivers who are nursing and accompanying them. The essential factors needed for winning the battle against dementia depend on our willingness and commitment to create awareness among individuals and communities. Systems and arrangements for empowering people to offer care and support for people with dementia as well as for their carers need to be developed at all levels in society. Most Asian governments have not yet integrated dementia care into their primary health care systems, especially in countries where primary health care is underdeveloped and screening programmes for cognitive decline cannot be implemented. It is important that all Asian governments must introduce policies of national health care with a priority for people with dementia.

On this day of the observance of World Alzheimer's Day, the CCA reminds churches in Asia about their role in creating awareness among individuals, congregations, and communities. In the context of the increasing number of people living with dementia, our world needs more dementia-friendly communities. The CCA urges Asian churches to encourage their local congregations to initiate Alzheimer's caregiver support groups. One of the first places many families and individuals often turn to for help is their nearby faith community, so it is important that faith-based organisations at local levels be motivated and encouraged to extend help to persons living with Alzheimer's. The Church, as a community of faith, hope, and love, has to be an inclusive community where they will find peace, support, and safety. Let us, as the Psalmist prayed, beseech God for His grace: "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone" (Psalms 71:9). Let us be reminded of God's assurances that "I am your God and will take care of you until you are old and your hair is grey. I made you and will care for you; I will give you help and rescue you" (Isaiah 46:4).

**Statement on World Mental Health Day–2020:
“Let us comfort them, and give them gladness for
sorrow”**

9 October 2020

Mental health is one of the most overlooked areas in public health. Mental illness is not different from physical illness, as the two are inseparable. Mental illness affects the brain and causes disturbances in thinking, behaviour, energy, or emotion, which makes it difficult to cope with the ordinary demands of life. The reasons for the complicated cause of such illnesses include genetics, altered brain chemistry, brain structure, trauma, and other health problems such as heart disease. The two most common mental health conditions are ‘anxiety disorders’ and ‘mood disorders’. Various studies show that more than 18 percent of adults each year struggle with some type of anxiety disorder, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder (panic attacks), generalised anxiety disorder, and specific phobias.

About 10 percent of the adult population each year are afflicted with mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder. Mental illnesses affect 19 percent of the adult population, 46 percent of teenagers, and 13 percent of children each year. More than 1 billion people in the world live with some form of mental disorder. In low- and middle-income countries, 75 percent of those with a mental illness will never receive any medical attention. Despite the increasing prevalence of mental health issues, we continue to ignore the seriousness and relegate them to the lowest of priorities.

People struggling with their mental health are everywhere in our communities—among family members, our next-door neighbours, in workplaces, and in congregations. However, only half of those affected receive treatment. This is often due to the stigma attached to mental health. If the mental illness is not treated on time, it adds more problems to already-existing ones in families and contributes to higher medical expenses, poorer performance at school and work, fewer employment opportunities, and increased risk of death by suicide.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe mental agony to billions of people around the world since early this year. A huge spike in anxiety, fear, isolation, uncertainty, and emotional distress has been reported, as almost all countries are affected by the pandemic. With the disruption of health services around the world, attention to mental health, which even before the pandemic was underserved and neglected, has now been greatly diminished.

This year's theme is 'Mental Health for All', which is especially prescient given the impact COVID-19 has had on all our lives. On the occasion of World Mental Health Day–2020, which is observed on 10 October each year, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls upon churches in Asia to make mental health issues a priority of their healing ministry.

Mental health had already suffered chronic under-investment with regard to promotion, prevention, and care for many years before the pandemic. It is time to change the status quo. Global perspectives on medical health and well-being are calling for a shift to community-based approaches to address the needs of those with mental ill-health. Unless all stakeholders commit to greater investment in mental health, the health, social, and economic consequences will be far-reaching.

Asian societies often discriminate against and stereotype those with mental health issues, thus preventing those affected from seeking help. Despite the increasing rates of death by suicide among the young and the elderly, some countries continue to criminalise suicide. Additionally, a lack of coordination among the work of different sectors also prevents holistic support from being offered. Asian churches must now devote attention to mental health as a major ministry priority.

As the Church is aware of the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit (Mark 12:30), ample attention must be given to the mental well-being of the faithful in addition to catering to their spiritual nourishment. A radical re-understanding of mental health is needed within the Church and society. Though mental health issues are themselves complex, the response is simple and boils down to basic actions of care, compassion, and understanding.

Churches can assist by maintaining resources for support and ways to cope with the illness, talking about mental illness from the pulpit so that it is no longer considered a taboo, and generating regular awareness about mental health and mental illnesses. Churches must show their commitment towards being a caring community and accompany those who are affected by mental health issues, as well as their relatives and friends.

This year's World Mental Health Day, on 10 October, comes at a time when our daily lives have changed considerably as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The past months have brought many challenges: for healthcare workers—providing care in difficult circumstances, going to work fearful of bringing COVID-19 home with them; for students—adapting to taking classes from home, with little contact with teachers and friends, and anxious about their futures; for workers whose livelihoods are threatened; for the vast number of people caught in poverty or in fragile humanitarian settings with extremely limited protection from COVID-19; and for people with mental health conditions, many experiencing even greater social isolation than before. Given past experience with emergencies, it is expected that the need for mental health and psychosocial support will substantially increase in the coming months and years.

On the occasion of World Mental Health Day–2020, the CCA calls upon all member churches and councils to review the conversations happening around mental health in their own contexts and increase awareness among individuals, congregations, and communities.

The CCA urges Asian churches to invest more greatly in their mental health ministry, especially in these vulnerable times caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The clergy and lay leaders of Christian communities must be the 'first responders' in addressing mental health issues, armed with information, training, and tools for counselling, to become instruments through whom God can declare: "I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow" (Jeremiah 31:13).

Mental health is a human right; it is time that the mental health of everyone is ensured. High-quality and accessible primary health

care is the foundation for universal health coverage and is urgently required as the world grapples with the current health emergency. We, therefore, need to make mental health a reality for all—for everyone, everywhere.

**Statement on World Food Day–2020:
“Give us this day our daily bread...”**

15 October 2020

As the world begins to come to terms with the grave and serious impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, immediate concerns have centred on hunger, malnutrition, and the prevailing situation of food insecurity in many parts of the world, especially due to the disruptions in the global food supply chains. Although significant technological progress has been made in terms of boosting agricultural productivity, global food systems continue to remain disproportionate. The World Food Programme estimated that about 135 million people would experience life-threatening famine at the start of this year, and because of the pandemic, the figure is predicted to rise to 265 million by the end of 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened to push people who were already food-insecure into greater vulnerability. Owing to the chain of adverse events set in motion by the pandemic, millions of people are facing a loss of employment and regular income. The lockdowns that were imposed at various times ended up restricting the mobility of people, and this in turn has affected the ability of people to procure food. On the supply side, as labour halted, food production, distribution, and sales have been decimated. Amid starvation and hunger, there were reports from different places that farmers had to dump large amounts of food because markets had become unreachable.

The theme of World Food Day–2020, ‘*Grow, Nourish, Sustain. Together*’, highlights the necessity of joint and collaborative actions to mitigate food insecurity in the future. It is a call for global solidarity in the effort to recover from the COVID-19 crisis and to make food systems more resilient and robust so that they can withstand increasing volatility and climate shocks, deliver

affordable, sustainable, and healthy diets for all, and ensure decent livelihoods and food for all.

The design of the post-COVID-19 crisis recovery must focus on preserving access to safe and nutritious food, especially for poor and vulnerable communities that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic's economic shocks. The construction of the recovery design is a fitting opportunity to address key challenges that cause imbalances, such as extreme hunger, obesity, environmental degradation, loss of agro-biological diversity, food loss and waste, as well as lack of security for food chain workers.

The most sustainable interventions to combat food insecurity are those that focus on the preservation of the earth's natural resources, public health, and the climate. For Asia in particular, community-led sustainable agriculture can pave the way for reform and herald a paradigm shift in countering food insecurity. Governments need to be more vigilant and prepared for facing any eventualities including pandemics like the one that currently rages. Farmers must be supported to set up food preservation facilities, while also helping them by subsidising farm inputs and incentivising local communities to establish food grain banks. Such steps taken on time will prevent a crisis from blowing out of proportion in the future. Governments and civil society organisations must listen to the voice of small-scale farmers.

Simultaneously, it is the responsibility of consumers to be mindful of their patterns of consumption and modify those practices or behaviours that are potentially damaging to the environment, such as procuring food that is unsustainably produced or is not cost-effective. Redefining consumption patterns will play a decisive role in mitigating food insecurity.

World Food Day reminds everyone on this planet of the importance of the meaning of the theme 'Grow, Nourish, Sustain. Together'. The right to food requires advocacy just as much as any other human rights issue. For churches, the issue of food security must include conversations on redistribution and equality in the wider context of justice. A focal point of the Church's ministry for ensuring the food security of the marginalised should be the promotion of

community-led agriculture that upholds the rights of farmers and defends the dignity of their labour.

The Church's actions for food security must also merge with the call of care for creation. On the production side, this means advocating for the promotion of indigenous agricultural practices that are respectful of ecology and the production of symbiotic crops and harvesting methods in place of harmful practices that destroy the environment. When it comes to consumption, people should be encouraged to purchase food that is produced without excessive use of fertilisers and chemicals.

World Food Day also reminds us of the prayer—"Give us this day our daily bread", in a world where the bread is grown together, shared in fellowship, and sustains and nourishes all, without discrimination and deprivation. We are reminded of God's assurance that: "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food." (Genesis 1:29)

Let us help each other on our planet to grow, nourish, and sustain—together.

Statement on armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh region

15 October 2020

It is with great distress that we follow the escalation of the military conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, the border region claimed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The heavy fighting that has been going on along the border since late September 2020 is the most serious escalation since 2016. It is very unfortunate that due to the increased militarisation and frequent ceasefire violations, the conflict has intensified. Various reports confirm that more than 300 soldiers and civilians have been killed, with hundreds more wounded on both sides. Although the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General and the UN Security Council have called for an end to hostilities, Armenia and Azerbaijan have rejected pressure to hold talks. Instead, they have pledged to continue fighting and have further escalated tensions by switching from cross-border shelling to the use of longer-range artillery and other heavy weaponry.

The disputed territory, home to 150,000 people, has been under an uneasy ceasefire since the war in 1991–1994, which claimed over 30,000 lives. The recent use of artillery and ammunition is a grave violation of the humanitarian ceasefire that was agreed upon between the two countries. Recently, the two former Soviet states accused each other of unprovoked military attacks. Both countries are currently suffering the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 50,000–60,000 cases reported in each country.

The Nagorno-Karabakh region became a hotspot for international tensions ever since the Christian-majority area, consisting of 95 percent Armenian ethnic people, was placed under Azerbaijani control in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Although Nagorno-Karabakh was an Armenian ethnic-majority region, the Soviets gave control over the area to Azerbaijan authorities. The Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh made several calls to be transferred to Armenian authority control in the following decades. But it was only as the Soviet Union began to collapse in the late 1980s that Nagorno-Karabakh's regional parliament officially voted to become part of Armenia, and subsequently, the war of 1991–1994 brought the region under the control of Armenia. The current conflict is fuelled by Azerbaijan's intention to reclaim authority of the region and its neighbouring territories, while Armenia claims that it is defending the interests of the local people who are ethnic Armenians.

Efforts for reconciliation have been undertaken since the 1990s by the Minsk Group, which operates under the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). To date, no diplomatic negotiations or mediations have proved to be fruitful and the conflict still persists between the two countries. Although the UN and several countries have called for an immediate end to the armed hostilities, neither country is willing to hold talks. If the situation persists, the violence threatens to destabilise the entire South Caucasus region and could deteriorate into a war with no end in sight, with increasing interference from other countries.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) denounces in the strongest terms the armed conflict currently underway in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict only exacerbates the vulnerability of civilians and threatens to push

them into greater insecurity. The CCA is appalled by the continuing escalation of violence and the damage to lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure.

The CCA, following the gospel call to be peacemakers and reconcilers, condemns all armed conflicts and appeals for peace, especially amidst such troubling times. The Scriptural mandate is to bring an end to all forms of violence throughout the world and to eliminate any actions or practices that threaten the lives of people. The post-conflict legacy in the Nagorno-Karabakh region is bound to leave generational trauma for those who have been dragged into it.

The CCA supports the call for a ceasefire and yearns for the success of the peace negotiations initiated by the Minsk Group. The CCA also prays for the healing of all people in Armenia and Azerbaijan as they grapple with grave insecurity during these times.

Statement on World Children’s Day

19 November 2020

The theme of World Children’s Day–2020, *“Investing in our future means investing in our children”*, is yet another opportunity for all stakeholders involved in the well-being of children to promote awareness about existing challenges they face and commit to collaborative action in order to improve children’s welfare.

Children’s rights are human rights. Though the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted in 1989, guarantees and sets minimum standards for the protection of children in all capacities, the journey towards the full implementation of children’s rights is nowhere near its conclusion, given that not every child receives the opportunity to live to their fullest potential. In fact, conditions have now exponentially worsened for children in this regard.

Vast disparities exist between the ideal and the reality in the lives of millions of children. Access to education and healthcare remains elusive while many children continue to face discrimination, violence, exploitation, and abuse on a daily basis, and many

others are displaced, abandoned, unaccompanied, detained, and homeless. A significant number of others are victims of grave human rights violations and find that their fundamental rights are denied.

Studies by the World Health Organisation reveal that an estimated 249 million (that is, 43 percent) of children under the age of five in low- and middle-income countries are at an elevated risk of poor development due to extreme poverty and stunting. Nearly half of the world's children are not receiving the nurturing care they need and this is a clear indication of the collective failure of global society to invest in the future generations of our world.

One of the most devastating impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is the manner in which it has robbed millions of children around the world of their childhood. Too many childhoods have been cut short and too many children have been forced to grow up more quickly as they face the direct brunt of containment measures and lockdowns, the closure of schools, and the increased economic stress on their families/caregivers. As other issues are prioritised, the fundamental rights of children are wholly ignored. Although children have been spared the worst physical health effects of the virus, the deterioration of their psychological, mental, and emotional health cannot be neglected. It is important to note that the pandemic's effects are worse for some groups of children in contrast to others who are somewhat better off.

With the increasing trend of digitalisation and online modes of learning, an “education generation gap” is being forged and will be the cause of greater inequality. The socialisation process of children has also become unrecognisable. While some children face immense social alienation and are confined to their homes with minimal contact with the outside world, other children are spending enormous amounts of time online, which is leading to the formation of superficial connections rather than deep and meaningful longstanding relationships. Children are being exposed to the artificial online world and are constructing for themselves a distorted and detached sense of reality. The spike in cyberbullying and online exploitation is also worrying.

It is in light of this that the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls for renewed approaches towards investing in our future generations.

It is important to continually and affirmatively contribute to the status and well-being of children. God has revealed God’s heart for children; thus, our attitudes should reflect God’s attitude and our actions should reflect God’s imperative.

The CCA encourages churches and related bodies to strengthen their pastoral services and accompaniment to children and their families by supporting any needs they may have, and weaving safety nets for children and their families throughout their communities—this includes the elimination of any barriers that might prevent children from accessing their education and catering to their mental well-being, among others.

The CCA underscores the necessity of safety, security, and stability in the lives of children while mitigating social alienation and protecting them from violence, exploitation, and abuse in all forms.

The CCA supports the rallying call of UNICEF—“Do not let children be the hidden victims of the COVID-19 pandemic,” and appeals for the care and guidance of families, the establishment of stronger collaborations among all involved in the well-being of children, and advocates that all children be taken care of, with no one left behind. It is only by investing all forms of resources (be they spiritual, pastoral, financial, material, emotional, or intangible) in the well-being of children can we begin to imagine and ensure a sustainable and equitable post-COVID-19 world.

Statement on World AIDS Day–2020

30 November 2020

The theme of World AIDS Day–2020, “Global Solidarity and Shared Responsibility”, is a reminder for us that each and every one of us has the responsibility of achieving the target of an AIDS-free society. Although significant progress has been made in the global HIV response, the COVID-19 pandemic now poses a grave threat and adds more challenges. COVID-19 has put HIV responses, such as prevention, testing, treatment, and care services on hold, especially in countries where healthcare systems are already weak.

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to decimate communities and countries worldwide, we cannot neglect HIV and AIDS—an

epidemic that has been with us for almost four decades and which still affects millions of people. The escalating number of HIV and AIDS cases in Asia is a matter of serious concern. Many countries in the region have punitive and stigmatising laws that prevent key affected populations from accessing services and this only worsens the problem by reinforcing the stigma attached to HIV.

As we observe World AIDS Day this year, let us take time to reflect upon our actions as churches and faith communities and resolve to strengthen our efforts at becoming an inclusive and safe community. This is also an opportunity to augment and strengthen our healthcare systems, the faults of which have been exposed by the COVID-19 crisis.

The current pandemic has made HIV communities more vulnerable as services become limited. The World Health Organisation has stated, “Any slowing down in provision of these [HIV] services will leave many vulnerable populations at greater risk of HIV infection and AIDS-related deaths.”

COVID-19 has worsened the lives of people in general, but it has hit the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest, specifically people living with HIV, women, and key affected populations. Thus, it is a matter of fundamental importance to intensify our advocacy of the cause of eliminating stigma and discrimination, and to deepen our solidarity with those affected, putting people at the centre. We also need to more strongly articulate our demand for a more grounded response and for an approach that is human rights- and gender-based.

As churches, we find ourselves at a crucial time, one which calls upon us to amplify our response, which must cater to the current contexts posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we express our support in calling all stakeholders involved to ensure uninterrupted essential HIV services, allocate sufficient resources for HIV programmes and make them more resilient and sustainable, as well as to support and empower frontline healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Christian Conference of Asia, together with its member churches, councils, and ecumenical partners, will continue to be

at the forefront of the movement for the right to life and health. Together, let us end AIDS and, by demanding global solidarity and shared responsibility, ensure that no one is left behind.

Statement on International Day of Persons with Disabilities–2020

2 December 2020

Developing a system in a society where the rights and dignity of people with disabilities are respected, upheld, and valued is a sign of understanding disability inclusion as a much-needed concern. In order to understand disability inclusion as a priority, adequate measures need to be initiated and promoted among people of all walks of life in our communities so as to recognise the rights of people with disabilities and raise awareness of disability inclusion. The International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD), observed every year on 3 December, is an opportunity to promote consciousness among people in every sector of our communities.

The theme of the IDPD this year, “Building Back Better: towards a disability-inclusive, accessible, and sustainable post-COVID-19 world,” is pertinent in the context of any advocacy measures carried out to promote the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities and with a view of taking action for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society and development.

The global crisis of COVID-19 is deepening pre-existing inequalities and exposing the extent of exclusion, highlighting that work on disability inclusion remains crucial. Concrete actions are needed to ensure that people with disabilities can continue to access healthcare services and all other basic amenities in life, especially public health information that they may require, particularly at this time of the COVID-19 outbreak. Even in “normal” circumstances of the pre-COVID-19 period, systemic barriers prevented persons with disabilities from accessing healthcare, education, and employment, and impeded their fuller participation in the community.

An integrated approach is required to ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind, as they may be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 because of various challenges. These include

the difficulties in the implementation of basic hygiene measures, the need to touch things to obtain information, the need for additional support, their pre-existing conditions, disruptions of the services that they rely on, and limited access to health information and healthcare.

The Church is called to be an inclusive community expected to facilitate and engage its members in creative listening and responding to the needs and struggles of people with disabilities. The Church is the place where all people feel recognised and valued as being made in the image of God. The Church must remain a caring community, which recognises upholds, and values the fact that God's provision is revealed for all those who are created in God's image. Members of the Church are expected to understand and support each other and invite people into a community characterised by love, mutuality, independence, and respect for the rights and dignity of everyone.

As we observe the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, we need to consider the shifts in the true meaning of accessibility and inclusiveness in this new normal. Church services with physical participation of members are not shifted to online modes; diaconal ministries are hindered or totally stopped because of restrictions on meetings for worship and on the movements of people. In times such as these, we must not forget that persons with disabilities are a key priority in our ministry, and we must enable people and communities to create and establish a more inclusive and accessible world. We must use digital technologies to enable persons with disabilities and to strengthen their capacities in every aspect. We must reach out and support persons with disabilities so as to secure the God-given mandate that affirms the fullness of life for all.

Statement on International Migrants Day–2020

17 December 2020

The observance of International Migrants Day–2020 is yet another opportunity to appreciate the value of migrants, the oft-invisible groups of people in our midst. The number of migrants is increasing today on a scale never before seen. More and more people tend

to move beyond their borders, and they are ending up living and working in a country other than the one in which they were born. While many people opt for migration out of choice, many others migrate out of forced circumstances. According to the International Organisation for Migration and the World Migration Report–2020, there are over a billion migrants in the world today, and more than 270 million of them crossed international borders in 2019 alone.

The theme of International Migrants Day–2020 is ‘Reimagining Human Mobility’, reminding us of the contexts in which the migrants of the world live and work today. During the lockdown of almost every country in this world due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the services rendered by the migrant workers were unparalleled in human history, Migrants have disproportionately become the victims of COVID-19 as they have had to face job losses and social discrimination. Millions of migrants are stranded without income or shelter, unable to return home due to COVID-19-related mobility restrictions; they also face increased risks of trafficking and exploitation. Despite their having to work under extremely difficult situations, the migrants and the migrant labourers have kept the world running during the lockdown, especially in the health, transportation, and food services sectors. In the face of adverse situations, they have continued to care for the sick and elderly and have kept essential goods and services moving. Lamentably, many migrants have made the ultimate sacrifice, losing their lives in the fight against COVID-19.

Ever since the novel coronavirus began impacting the world, heartrending instances of the suffering of migrants came into the spotlight. Regardless of whether they were international migrants or internal migrants, such workers were disproportionately affected given their inadequate and crowded living conditions. All their income sources dried up due to shutdowns. They had only limited access to healthcare and basic services. They had to experience greater vulnerability under increasingly exploitative labour systems. Restrictions on travel and mobility and the closure of borders impacted all migrants around the world, pushing them into enormous physical, psychological, and economic vulnerability. Their misery was further exacerbated by their exclusion from

normative government assistance, their invisibility in the workforce, and deepening social inequality. The life situations of migrant labourers stranded in the Arabian Gulf, the mass exodus of migrant workers from urban cities to rural hometowns in India, the terrible circumstances of Indonesian and Filipino migrant domestic workers in affluent countries, the plight of Myanmarese migrant agricultural labourers in Thailand and Malaysia, and the numerous migrants fleeing to escape persecution, violence, and racism were seen throughout Asia.

As the world finally begins to come to terms with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the destruction left in its wake, let us not forget the migrant workers. The current migration situation requires deeper obligations and firm commitments from the entire international community. Responding to these issues of migration demands cross-border collaboration and cooperation. Although the global community has made significant gains in responding and catering to the rights, welfare, and protection of migrants, both voluntary and forced, under the 2018 Global Compact for Migration and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, a crucial concern now is that lack of adequate measures to make a qualitative difference in migrants' life situations and working conditions that might persist. The welfare of the most vulnerable in our societies cannot be treated as a mere afterthought. The pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to renege on the commitments made to promote and protect the rights of migrants.

The observance of International Migrants Day every year on 18 December is an occasion to remind us that all migrants are integral members of our societies and they are entitled to equal protection of their human rights and human dignity. It is also an occasion to remind us about the challenges and difficulties of migration, as well as of the much-needed cooperation and collective action. The migrants who live in any society and contribute through their skills and knowledge help build stronger communities. Our societies often forget the value of migrants and their immeasurable contributions.

On this International Migrants Day–2020, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) reaffirms its commitment to uphold the dignity and worth of all migrant workers. The CCA calls upon all its member

constituencies to commit themselves fully to the cause of upholding the rights and dignity of migrant labourers within and outside their communities. The CCA advocates for increased communication, cooperation, and collaboration between churches in sending and receiving countries, and Asian churches in the diaspora, to cater to the needs of migrant workers who may be stranded or trapped in detrimental circumstances. We are called to dismantle our prejudices and value the migrants and migrant workers in our communities. We are called to recognise the migrants who are strangers in our societies not simply because of their work or their capacity to enhance productivity, but because of their inherent fundamental dignity and rights to safety and welfare. Although it is a slow process, the world is now moving towards global recovery from the pandemic, which now provides an opportunity to reimagine human mobility as well as to build more inclusive and resilient societies. However, the worth and value of migrants in shaping a post-COVID-19 world and their capacities to contribute towards the revival of the economies of both the sending and receiving countries need to be recognised. The churches in Asia cannot be mere spectators at this critical juncture of history.

Let us see the image of Christ in the migrant workers, welcoming the stranger (Matthew 25:45), and providing a concrete and dignified response to this humanitarian challenge. In fulfilment of our prophetic witness, let us abandon the culture of comfort and exclusion that too often renders us insensitive or indifferent to the plight and cries of those in our midst. Overcoming the barriers of physical and spiritual distance, let us remember that migrants are not strangers: they are neighbours, deserving of compassion in the face of gross violations and obvious injustices. This Advent season, the Church in Asia is called to be the 'welcoming inn', offering warmth, refuge, hospitality, and love.

2021

2021 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

CCA–WCC joint pastoral letter on the situation in Myanmar

3 February 2021

To

The members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) member churches in Myanmar, and the Myanmar Council of Churches

Dear brothers and sisters,

The World Councils of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) observe with alarm and great sadness the recent developments in Myanmar, which resulted in a sharp reversal of years of reforms for the democratic enfranchisement of Myanmar's people. It is with profound concern that we follow the current developments in your country, especially the abrupt resumption of military rule, overturning the outcome of elections on 8 November 2020, as well as the detention of key political and pro-democracy representatives and the escalation of the national situation to the state of emergency. We pray that the recent developments will not lead to an escalation of violence and suffering in your country.

We urge a swift and peaceful return to the path of democracy and appeal for the human rights and freedoms—including the freedom of religion and belief—of all Myanmar's people to be fully respected and protected.

We hold the churches and communities of Myanmar in prayer and solidarity, as you seek to provide counsel and comfort to your people in this time of deep anxiety and uncertainty for the future. We pray that the one who has given us “a new birth into a living

hope” (1 Peter 1:3) will sustain and strengthen you in your efforts to be prophetic witnesses at a time such as this. We pray that you will be strengthened and supported in your ministry and witness peace, justice, and human dignity. It is our fervent prayer and hope that all parties involved engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue which will lead to lasting peace and reconciliation in Myanmar.

In a spirit of solidarity, we offer you the assurance of our continued prayers and support. May God Almighty help us to be courageous and take refuge in the words from the second letter to the Thessalonians: “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us, and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts, and strengthen them in every good work and word.” (2 Thessalonians 2:16, 17).

CCA–WCC joint statement on situation in Myanmar *4 March 2021*

It is with great distress and concern that the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) follow the disturbing trend of continued lethal actions against the people by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw), which overthrew the country’s democratically elected government on 1 February 2021. The death toll of civilians taking part in protests is increasing as troops and police open fire at demonstrators; at least thirty-eight people were reported to be killed as the army unleashed a lethal campaign to suppress protests that have swept the country for more than a month.

The brutal actions against civilians protesting against the military takeover and the killings perpetrated by the military indicate that the generals are returning to the same tactics they had used to crush people’s dissent during decades of military dictatorship in Myanmar. In cities such as Yangon, Mandalay, Dawei, Myeik, and Bago, citizens have been peacefully protesting against the military action through civil disobedience movements but have been confronted by the armed forces, who have used lethal force to contain the uprising with tear gas, water cannons, live ammunition, and stun grenades. In order to clamp down on what is essentially

a people's movement, the security forces have systematically targeted, detained, and arrested several political officials, activists, students, medical professionals, and even religious minority leaders. In Lashio city, four Kachin Baptist ministers were among ten people arrested at a church where protesters fleeing the state-sanctioned violence had taken shelter. The large-scale participation of civilians in demonstrations in towns and cities across the country underscores the broad rejection of the military, which controlled the country for half a century before democratic norms were restored in 2011.

The WCC and CCA condemn the declaration of the army generals that the November 2020 election, won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) with an overwhelming majority, was null and void. The democratically elected civilian government reflects the aspiration of the people. The will of the people and the outcome of the elections have to be respected and democratic processes must be restored. As we believe that the rule of law and democracy must be the cardinal parameters for ensuring peace with justice, we firmly denounce the military coup which has now returned full power to the generals.

The citizens of Myanmar possess the right to assemble peacefully and express their demands for the restoration of democracy. The fundamental rights of people must be respected, and hence the military authorities must immediately halt all use of force against civilians. While emphasising the need for the restoration of the democratically elected civilian government and democratic processes in Myanmar, we urge the military leaders to refrain from repressive actions against the civilians; respect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, and also to pursue dialogue with the democratically elected representatives of the people of Myanmar. We call on the Myanmar military leaders to cease the illegal detention of the President of Myanmar Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Union Election Commission Chairman U Hla Thein, leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD), other civil society leaders, and media personnel. We believe that democracy has proven to be the only effective political system capable of protecting and upholding the dignity and rights of people as well as ensuring legitimate governance.

The WCC and CCA call upon all its member churches and councils, related ecumenical organisations, and members of the wider international community and people of goodwill, by any and all means possible, to support the restoration of democracy in the conflict-ridden country. We mourn the loss of life and we stand in solidarity with the peaceful and courageous people of Myanmar who seek democracy and human rights in their country. During this period of great trial, we pray for the entire people of Myanmar and for peace and justice to prevail throughout the country. In this Lenten season, the WCC and CCA uphold and affirm the sanctity of life and the dignity of all human beings. May peace and a spirit of reconciliation return to Myanmar.

“Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13:11)

**Statement on International Women’s Day–2021
on “Women in Leadership:
Achieving an Equal Future in a COVID-19 World”**

8 March 2021

Around the world, we now see greater participation of women from all walks of life. The leadership of women who serve, care, and provide leadership during the COVID-19 crisis—as healthcare workers, innovators, community organisers, and even as leaders of some nations— in combatting the pandemic is admirable. The crisis situation that has paralysed the world during the past one year has underscored both the exemplary role and contributions of women in serving humanity in every context. Women leaders and women’s organisations have proved that they are skilful and knowledgeable and can contribute efficiently to COVID-19 responses and recovery efforts. Today, their contributions and leadership are more accepted and recognised than ever before. However, women continue to remain underrepresented in leadership positions in almost all sectors, including churches and faith-based organisations.

Each year, International Women’s Day (IWD) serves as an opportunity to recognise and appreciate the contribution and leadership of women and how they have shaped societies, communities and

the world. The theme of International Women’s Day (IWD)—2021, ‘Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a COVID-19 World’, is very significant in the contemporary context. The focus of this theme hails the remarkable contributions of women in shaping a more equal future and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is also in line with the significance of the theme of the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, “Women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”.

The leadership of women should be recognised as “transformational” given its role in developing and inspiring change for the good of all. Qualities of empathy, authentic communication, and teamwork, coupled with resilience, respect, and enthusiasm are the hallmarks of the leadership of women. Such leadership promotes cooperation and collaboration rather than command and control, benefitting not a select few but society as a whole.

In the quest for ensuring gender equality, representation is critical. The leadership of women in all situations today is urgent and necessary; no significant or meaningful progress can be made if women who constitute more than half the population of the world are not wholly engaged in change processes, especially in decision-making. It is only through the equal and immediate participation of women that we can all benefit from the experience and insights of all of humanity. The experiences in many contexts in today’s world prove that the leadership of women is critical for building inclusive and robust societies in order to effectively address common challenges, such as the current global COVID-19 pandemic. In many countries, women have led the way with rapid and successful responses to flatten the curve. However, the unique challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic now need renewed leadership, partnerships, and mobilisation, with women placed at the centre of the recovery efforts.

Just as the women of the early church—Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus’ mother, Julia, and the sister of Nerus—were commended in Romans 16 for their transformational leadership, guidance, and hard labour grounded in faith during tumultuous and uncertain times, so do we remember and uphold all the women who with their gifts and service have paved the way

for a more equal and inclusive future. As we begin to rebuild in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, let us empower and promote women to be leaders and change-makers at all levels of decision-making, from the international level to the grassroots.

International Women's Day is a reminder for us all to augment the voices of women and to recognise the leadership of women. On this International Women's Day, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls upon its member churches and councils to recognise the gifts of women and enhance their leadership and decision-making capacities. The CCA also encourages all its member constituencies to put in place those practices and systems that enable women to demonstrate their leadership. Gender equality has always been a core tenet of the ecumenical movement, and CCA has been committed to upholding the value of gender equality. The CCA will continue to strengthen its efforts towards advocating for and achieving gender equality in its constituencies.

Statement denouncing extrajudicial killings and arrests in Southern Tagalog, in the Philippines

12 March 2021

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) strongly condemns the killings of nine social workers and human rights activists on 7 March 2021 by the Philippines National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines in a series of raids against suspected communist insurgents in Calabarzon province in the Southern Tagalog region. The continuous spate of extrajudicial killings and arrests carried out by the PNP and the military as part of the counterinsurgency measures are perpetrated against unarmed human rights activists, further violating the fundamental human rights of all Filipino people.

It is unfortunate that the extrajudicial killings were carried out after President Rodrigo Duterte asked the military and police in a recent statement, to "Kill all communists and don't mind human rights." The murdered activists were community organisers, union leaders, and human rights activists who belonged to legal organisations. Several of them were killed when they were in their own homes. The search operations conducted by the police forces include tactics of

evidence planting and suppression because they were covered by search warrants to justify their actions as legitimate operations.

The CCA denounces all human rights violations, decries injustice, and calls upon the Philippine government to protect and safeguard human lives. The right to life is a fundamental right because, without it, the enjoyment of other rights is not possible. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person” (Article 3). As a minimum standard, the right to life imposes upon states the duty to abstain from the arbitrary killing of individuals under their jurisdiction. These standards have proved invaluable to organisations and individuals defending human rights. The extrajudicial executions, understood as killings “committed, condoned, or acquiesced in by governments,” certainly constitute violations of the right to life.

It is the CCA’s firm conviction that the states which terrorise people through extrajudicial killings are guilty of arbitrary deprivation of their citizens’ right to life. States should take measures not only to prevent and punish deprivation of life but also to prevent arbitrary killing by their own security forces. The deprivation of life by the authorities of the state is a matter of the utmost gravity. Therefore, the state must take adequate action to enforce laws that strictly control and limit the circumstances in which a person may be deprived of his or her life by the state and its security forces.

The killing of nine social and human rights activists and the arrest of six other community workers in the Southern Tagalog region is most brutal and an assault on human rights. While expressing grief and solidarity with the families and communities of the victims, the CCA reiterates its commitment to accompany the Filipino people in their struggles. The CCA calls upon the Philippine government to stop the killings, safeguard the right to life of all its citizens, and uphold the fundamental human rights of all its citizens.

CCA–WCC Joint Statement on the continuing deterioration of the situation in Myanmar

31 March 2021

The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) are gravely concerned over the ongoing violence and

the brutal attacks by military and security forces against peaceful protesters who oppose the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021. The opposition to the coup is supported by a large section of people across the country who lived in freedom in a relatively peaceful situation for a decade. People from all walks of life such as civil servants, students, and the working class as well as religious leaders, including Buddhist monks, became part of nationwide protests and a mass campaign of civil disobedience ensued against the junta. It is unfortunate that security forces have responded with mass arrests and at times lethal force. The civilian death toll in the military's crackdown on protesters passed 520 as of today.

The excessive and disproportionate force by Myanmar's military against civilians is a matter of grave concern. The present crisis situation in Myanmar has grave implications not only within the country but also for its neighbours. The ongoing brutal crackdown by the military displaced hundreds of thousands of people internally. Nearly three thousand people have been arbitrarily arrested, with many people being subjected to enforced disappearance. As the army continued its airstrikes villagers were hiding in the jungle and many people fled to neighbouring Thailand and India. The air assaults on Karen state are reported to be the most significant attack for years in the region controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU). It is widely believed that the Myanmar military is re-intensifying ethnic conflicts to keep its illegal hold on power. In this situation, the WCC and the CCA as well as their member churches across the world express profound dismay.

The people of Myanmar need help from the international community to overcome their painful situation. The WCC and CCA call on the Myanmar military leaders to desist from lethal force against demonstrators. The international community needs to act urgently with constructive actions to ratchet up pressure on the Myanmar military to disengage and withdraw from barbarous acts. We believe that it is absolutely essential to release all prisoners and respect the results of the elections, and make possible a democratic transition in the country.

We call on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to promptly act

and to hold the military regime accountable for protecting the dignity and human rights of the people of Myanmar. ASEAN's continuing efforts to engage with all relevant parties in Myanmar are the need of the hour. We urge the ASEAN community to push for the restoration of civilian government and take the initiative for the conducting of observer-monitored, unfettered elections within a determined period of time.

Echoing the call from the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, nations must gather for an emergency international summit on a virtual platform and follow it up with robust, coordinated action to remedy the situation. We also appeal to countries and companies that facilitate the Myanmar military in their acquisition of arms to stop their support, in a context where live ammunition is being used with brutality against unarmed people.

During this Passion Week, we call on churches worldwide, to pray and advocate for the churches and people of Myanmar, who are being terrorised with violence and death: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31:8–9)

Let us uphold them in our prayers, and affirm the sanctity of life and the dignity of all God's people. May international solidarity, with prayer and action, be the sign of hope, inspired by the risen Christ, to liberate the people of Myanmar from oppression and pain.

Statement on World Health Day–2021 on "Building a fairer, healthier world"

7 April 2021

The global COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the necessity of prioritising equitable healthcare and access to affordable high-quality services with strong commitments from all stakeholders. The vulnerable and the marginalised communities are still being left behind in testing, treatment, and even vaccination during this global pandemic. Given that over 50 percent of the world's population has no access to social protection or adequate healthcare, the impacts

are estimated to be manifold. Fragile health systems characterised, for the most part, by a lack of basic medical care facilities together with under-resourced hospitals are a common trend in Asia.

The theme of World Health Day–2021, “Building a fairer, healthier world”, is a timely one, and helps to address health concerns in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As COVID-19 vaccines begin to be rolled out gradually, there are alarming disparities in access to them across the world. Although the scientific development of the vaccine in record time is a great achievement, it remains to be seen if global political will and moral commitment would supplement the science in bringing about the end of the pandemic.

Contemporary issues regarding vaccine nationalism and vaccine distribution serve as a snapshot of global inequality and are representative of all the forces that prevent the realisation of equality, fairness, and justice. As the World Health Organisation (WHO) observes, “International collaboration among scientists was critical to vaccine development, but now weak cooperation between nations is a major barrier to achieving worldwide vaccination at the scale needed to end the pandemic.” Several developed countries continue to hoard vaccines, buying up scarce supplies of doses, and in some cases, even preventing the export of vaccines to other countries.

Asian countries are now at a crossroads and are experiencing a critical window of opportunity for public vaccination. The availability of vaccines for import, scepticism towards vaccines themselves, and the general trust in vaccination across Asia have hindered the outreach of COVID-19 vaccines to a large extent. In many countries, access to vaccines, especially for marginalised communities, will remain a challenge simply given the sheer population that requires vaccination. A continuing lack of global solidarity and equity in access to COVID-19 vaccines will undermine efforts towards disease control and further derail the project of achieving a pandemic-free world. It is important for the region to ensure that everyone has the knowledge, information, and access to advanced research and development of these vaccines locally.

There is a great role that churches can play in building trust towards a healthier world, particularly in responding to the pandemic.

The myths and misconceptions surrounding pandemic responses, especially vaccinations, must be urgently and emphatically addressed by the church. The trust that communities have towards faith leaders can play an important role in restoring health, healing, and wholeness as we recover from this pandemic. The church is also responsible for providing and amplifying correct information from the right medical authorities during the pandemic. We must also equip ourselves with relevant information and theological reflections on our social and moral obligations to each other in order to eliminate the fear, hesitancy, and misinformation regarding vaccines.

Church-owned healthcare institutions and services also need to shine a light on and reach out to, underserved populations—the poorest of the poor, the rural communities, the socially marginalised, and those in fragile or conflict-prone areas—striving for their inclusion in vaccination and immunisation campaigns.

There are different models of health and healing ministries supported and sponsored by Asian churches. However, considering the growing need in different places, churches in Asia should promote health-seeking behaviour and take on more responsibilities in their mission and witness health and healing. Churches in Asia must be equipped further in shaping Christian witness to contribute to “building a fairer, healthier world”.

CCA–WCC Joint Pastoral Letter to Member Churches and Councils in India on surge of COVID-19

5 May 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

For more than a year now, we have been affected by the outbreak of COVID-19; and the impact of the outbreak poses enormous challenges to the entire human population.

It is with great concern that we follow the situation of the uncontrolled spread of fierce new COVID-19 waves and significant surges in infections in the past few weeks in several South Asian

countries, especially in India. We stand with you in solidarity and prayer in the midst of the suffering and loss of thousands of lives in India.

We grieve with you before God, for the loss of so many family members, friends, pastors, teachers, and healthcare workers who have been taken by this pandemic. We also share the pain of those who are sick and suffering. It is our hope and prayer that during this period of crisis, God Almighty will continue to accompany you, and uphold each other as they struggle for healing and recovery.

We thank God and are grateful for the churches in India as well as various institutions and their leadership for being a beacon of hope amidst when COVID-19-affected people are fraught without effective ways to break the chain of transmission. The witness of Indian churches and the unconditional service of congregations to people, without discrimination, are greatly valued. We particularly lift up and pray for the health care personnel, hospitals, clinics, and community health initiatives of the churches which are being overwhelmed and stretched to their limits, serving and caring for the flood of sick and suffering people. Your accompaniment of affected people and communities, and support to vulnerable people to sustain their livelihoods and resource mobilisation efforts during this unprecedented crisis are highly appreciated.

Your Christian sisters and brothers throughout the global ecumenical fellowship will join you in observing and promoting Friday 7 May 2021, as a Day of Praying and Fasting for the healing of India, called for by the three leading church bodies in India—the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, the National Council of Churches in India, and the Evangelical Fellowship of India.

We are also encouraging the members of the global ecumenical fellowship- individuals, communities and institutions- to mobilise resources and to extend support for the work of the churches in India in accompanying and healing the coronavirus-affected people and communities in India. We hope the resources and prayers we offer will assist you in your journey.

As Prophet Hosea expresses an emotion attributed to God, “My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred” (Hosea 11:8), we also

experience a feeling now as we are surrounded by so many brothers and sisters who are suffering due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a situation like this, where we all live amidst fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, may our faith and spiritual values sustain us to live with hope in God's abundant mercies, love, care, and protection.

Statement on World Refugee Day–2021 on “Refugees in Asia: Are they forgotten entities?”

20 June 2021

The number of refugees worldwide increases for the ninth year in a row as more and more people continue to be displaced. More than two-thirds of people worldwide who fled their homes and crossed the borders of their country of origin due to conflict, violence, or persecution are from just five countries, including Afghanistan with 2.6 million, and Myanmar with 1.1 million. There are 26 million refugees globally and over half of these refugees are under the age of eighteen. More than 4.4 million refugees are located in different countries in the Asia-Pacific region and additionally, another 2.3 million are stateless persons.

Refugees who are on the move in vulnerable situations are particularly exposed to the health impacts of COVID-19. Many Rohingya refugees live or work in crowded or unsanitary conditions where COVID-19 can easily spread, especially in refugee camps and shelters in Bangladesh, India, and along the Myanmar-Thailand border. Their access to health may be compromised, particularly when they are undocumented or excluded. They also often lack access to other basic services—from housing to water to sanitation, from nutritious food to social services, education, and financial resources. The provision of aid services in several refugee camps has been significantly reduced, which has made the work of camp-based organisations more difficult and increased the hardships and vulnerabilities of the refugee community.

World Refugee Day, which falls on 20 June each year, shines the spotlight on these most vulnerable people. The theme of World Refugee Day–2021, ‘Together we heal, learn, and shine’, can be interpreted to focus on the reconciliation of refugees and the redress of their grievances, given that human rights violations are

the ultimate result of the oppression of refugees. Volatile political situations in Asia today, such as the military coup in Myanmar in February earlier this year, are indicators that forced displacement will continue—at a rate faster than solutions can be found. The direct human suffering alone engendered by forcible dislocation must demand the sustained attention and response of the international community.

On the occasion of World Refugee Day–2021, we uphold and remember the fragile and conflict-affected settings in which refugees in Asia are forced to survive. Tragedy after tragedy has befallen refugees in Asia in these past few years—with forced displacements of the Rohingya; the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan, the decision to shut down refugee camps along the Myanmar-Thailand border, the Indian federal government’s order directing the four north-eastern Indian states to deport the refugees arriving from Myanmar expeditiously; and the massive fire that broke out at the largest refugee camp in Asia in Cox Bazaar, Bangladesh.

About 85 percent of refugees in the world are being hosted in developing countries. This means that countries with minimal resources are hosting the majority of refugees. The majority of refugees in the Asia-Pacific region come from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Myanmar’s refugees make up the eighth-largest refugee population in the world. Myanmar is also the top refugee-producing country within Southeast Asia and has been a source country for refugees for decades. Although Asian countries have traditionally hosted large refugee populations over several decades, the benevolence of some of these countries has not been recognised. International mechanisms have not been used to compensate these Asian countries for the enormous costs involved in settling and rehabilitating refugees. Precisely due to this reason, certain countries in Asia are now wary of accepting refugees, and often turn them away right at their borders. The rights of protection for people at risk of persecution in their country of origin are established through international conventions, but these are often blatantly deprioritised or disregarded in the Asian context.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the key legal documents that outline the rights of refugees, as well as

the legal obligations of States to protect them. The core principle is nonrefoulement, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where the returning refugee will face serious threats to life or freedom. This is now considered a rule of customary international law. It is indeed unfortunate that most countries in South and South-East Asia have signed neither the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol. However, countries such as India, Pakistan, Iran, Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia host refugees.

Refugees are usually resilient in their ability to experience and overcome hardships. While we acknowledge their strength and courage to flee and escape from conflict and persecution, we must build empathy and understanding for their plight. We must not allow them to remain forgotten entities in our midst. No one wants to remain a refugee forever.

On World Refugee Day–2021, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) reaffirms its commitment to ‘welcome the stranger’. Every human being is created in the image of God and is therefore entitled to their inherent dignity and respect. We are called to assist the refugees as a fundamental Christian duty stemming from the model of Jesus Christ, who himself was a migrant and a child of refugees. The CCA calls upon all its member churches and councils to fully commit themselves to honour the intrinsic dignity and human rights of refugees, especially those that urgently and immediately require aid and assistance. God’s purpose for the world must be fulfilled in the diakonia and various outreach missions of churches, to create conditions for the fulfilment and flourishing of ‘life in fullness’ (John 10:10), a life that refugees long and hope for.

Our role as communities of faith must be to lead the transition from a culture of rejection and exclusion to a culture of acceptance and inclusion. We must strive to overturn the negative narratives surrounding refugees in public spaces in Asia by campaigning and advocating for them, humanising them, and highlighting their lived experiences. Developing lasting solutions that are tailored to the contexts of refugees requires more concerted efforts aimed at pressurising concerned Asian governments and at campaigning for a climate of respect for human rights. It is only when the dignity

and lives of refugees are protected that their human rights will be affirmed; then we can truly begin to ‘together heal, learn, and shine’. Let us remember the refugees in our midst and see to it that they are not forgotten entities.

Statement submitted to UN ECOSOC High Level Segment, 2021 Session

13–16 July 2021

The Christian Conference of Asia submits this statement at a time when the unprecedented and compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are threatening to derail the already-sluggish progress being made towards the achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) as per the 2030 Agenda, in the Asia-Pacific region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has manifested the fragility and vulnerability of our world. The current pandemic has spurred a humanitarian crisis and runs the risk of long-term setbacks to socioeconomic improvements in the developing world. Without resolute and concerted efforts by developed countries, the United Nations, and other international bodies, most gains from the work towards SDGs in recent years are likely to be quickly undone.

SDG 3—good health and wellbeing—is foremost in our minds given the immense suffering of people across the globe. Distressing projections show the end of the pandemic being pushed further away. Issues surrounding vaccine nationalism and vaccine distribution are a snapshot of global inequality, representing the forces that sabotage equality, fairness, redress, and justice. Alarming disparities in access mar the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines. These differences are heightened in Asia, greatly impacted by limited availability of vaccines for import, scepticism towards vaccines, and weak infrastructure posing logistical challenges for vaccine distribution. With the crippling of health systems, the pandemic’s impacts will reverberate for years to come.

These times necessitate the prioritising of access to equitable and affordable high-quality health services with strong commitments from all stakeholders, especially governments. It is important to

ensure stronger cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity among the United Nations' member states to equitably share knowledge, information, and resources. A continuing lack of solidarity and equity in the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines will undermine efforts towards disease control and further hamper a pandemic-free world.

As a faith-based organisation representing 45 million Christians in Asia, the Christian Conference of Asia submits the following recommendations to the 2021 ECOSOC High-Level Segment for the United Nations' member states:

- Uphold and prioritise prior commitments made to fully realise SDG 3 by ensuring that health as a human right is protected for all, especially the most marginalised and vulnerable;
- Act collectively and collaboratively to boost vaccine access throughout the world by resisting from hoarding and engaging in sharing; and,
- Engage with affected people and communities, civil society and faith-based organisations to leverage potentials and resources for pandemic recovery.

In keeping with the spirit of stronger partnerships across borders, the Christian Conference of Asia will continue to encourage its 100 member churches and councils to amplify trust and information, promote health-seeking behaviour, and restore health, healing, and wholeness for all.

Statement on World Day Against Trafficking in Persons on “Victims’ Voices Lead the Way”

30 July 2021

Trafficking in persons, or human trafficking, which is nothing but a terrible form of modern-day slavery, continues to remain one of the most grievous assaults on fundamental human rights and human dignity. Every year, thousands of women, children, and men fall into the lure of traffickers—through coercion, abduction, fraud or deception, and abuse of power—in their own countries or abroad. Almost every country in the world is affected by human trafficking, whether as a country of origin, transit, or destination for victims. Human trafficking dehumanises people and corrupts their identity

as being made in the image of God, turning them instead into commodities and objects.

Given the scale of human suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a legitimate fear and concern regarding the rise in extreme, absolute, and unrelenting poverty, which is expected to push those who are susceptible to trafficking into even more vulnerability. As the COVID-19 crisis continues to cast a long shadow over global recovery and rehabilitation, with many millions of women, men, and children in the world out of work or school and without social support or protection, traffickers may be able to expand their operations with impunity and exploit the powerlessness of the disadvantaged. Thus, urgent and targeted action is required to stop human trafficking.

The theme of this year's World Day against Trafficking in Persons (30 July 2021) is 'Victims' Voices Lead the Way', placing great importance on listening to and learning from survivors of human trafficking. The theme calls for us to empower survivors as key actors in the fight against human trafficking. Survivors play crucial roles in designing different measures to prevent the heinous crime, identifying networks and perpetrators, rescuing other victims, and supporting meaningful rehabilitation.

Given the complex and mostly invisible nature of human trafficking, most victims have been met with misunderstanding or ignorance when they have attempted to get help; at times even facing victimisation or punishment for crimes that their traffickers forced them to commit. They may also face traumatic legal proceedings, which force them to recount the horrific experiences they have undergone, and may also face stigmatisation or receive inadequate support. Thus, learning from victims' experiences and turning their suggestions into concrete actions will lead to a more victim-centred and effective approach in combatting human trafficking.

On the occasion of the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls upon its member churches and councils in Asia to maximise their efforts and strengthen responses against human trafficking in society by bringing visibility

to this crime, shedding light on trafficking patterns and flows, and mitigating factors that make people vulnerable to being trafficked.

By leveraging international relationships and networks, the CCA encourages Asian churches to collaborate and develop solutions capable of addressing root causes and risk factors, protecting the impoverished and marginalised, and better supporting victims. Such systemic solutions can benefit from cross-border partnerships with the support of other stakeholders in the fight against trafficking—such as civil society organisations and businesses that can address supply chain integrity and support fair-trade practices to stop trafficking, bonded labour, illegal recruiting, and exploitation. Additionally, Asian churches can contribute to the ongoing efforts of addressing poverty, underdevelopment, and lack of opportunities, all of which economically disempower people and make them vulnerable to trafficking. By tackling structural inequalities and advocating for empowerment, churches must continue to provide hope and strive for an inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Churches must also continue to honour and amplify the voices of survivors as part of effective and comprehensive anti-trafficking strategies that advance prosecution, protection, and prevention efforts. The responses of churches to trafficking must be survivor-led and trauma-informed. Churches can also partner with survivor-led organisations and advocate on behalf of survivors for stronger legislation against trafficking. Survivors possess first-hand knowledge of all that is needed to improve anti-trafficking responses, and thus it is vital to listen to the lived experiences of survivors for stronger action against trafficking.

Reiterating this year's theme of World Day against Trafficking in Persons, let us too clear the way for the leadership of survivors through whom God can work despite their tragedies in the fight against trafficking. Let us hear the cries of our fellow beings who continue to be oppressed and exploited because of human trafficking; let the Asian churches continue to pray for the protection and deliverance of all victims of trafficking around the world, while also answering God's call for justice and true compassion in our work.

Statement on World Mental Health Day–2021 on “Mental Healthcare for All: Let’s Make It a Reality”

10 October 2021

Mental health and mental illnesses continue to be a major concern all over the world. About one billion people in the world today have a mental disorder. Depression is a major cause for intensifying the burden of this disease. A person can experience poor mental health and not be diagnosed with a mental illness. Likewise, a person diagnosed with a mental illness can experience periods of physical, mental, and social well-being. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being, determining how we handle stress and adverse life situations, relate to others, and make choices. It is estimated that at least five percent of adults in the world suffer from depression, and increasing numbers of people affected with long-term mental disorders such as schizophrenia tend to die earlier than the normal population. One in every 100 deaths happens by suicide, mainly among young people.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on people’s mental health and this pandemic has disrupted or halted critical mental health services in most countries worldwide while the demand for mental health is increasing. A survey conducted by the World Health Organisation in 130 countries reveals the devastating impact of COVID-19 on access to mental health services. Spikes in heavy psychosocial burdens, anxieties around virus transmission, the psychological impact of lockdowns and involuntary self-isolation, loss of employment, financial worries, and social alienation have collectively contributed to increasing levels of mental health problems during this pandemic.

The theme of World Mental Health Day–2021, “Mental health care for all: let’s make it a reality”, is very relevant in the current context. The gravity of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that the increasing trend of people’s mental ill-health cannot be overlooked, especially in the Asian context where adequate attention has not yet been given to address the concern of mental ill-health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for the expansion of equitable infrastructure for mental healthcare, with

emphasis on accessibility to everyone in need. Tele-counselling, e-mental health services, online consultations, and other digital communication tools can prove effective in reaching out to those in need. In the context of the ongoing pandemic, mental healthcare must address COVID-19-related stresses such as exposure to the virus, infected family members, loss of loved ones, and physical and emotional vulnerability.

Although the problem of mental ill-health has seen a visible increase in our times, we should not forget that people at all times in history have had to face such problems. Psalm 88 is sometimes taken as a passage that speaks very closely to the experience of depression. The psalmist expressed the feelings of being cut off and forgotten by God and then laments: “You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief.” (Psalm 88:6-9).

The Church has an important role in addressing mental health within the community. Misconceptions around mental health and the stigma that is attached by the Church and its leaders are not uncommon. A greater understanding of the holistic nature of mental health is needed for the Church in Asia in order to provide vital psychosocial support and care for those with mental illnesses and their families. The Church can also play an instrumental role in providing references to those in distress and be the bridge between the community and the service providers. Promoting correct knowledge and the right information remain key factors in creating a safe environment for mental well-being and recovery from mental illnesses.

The experiences of the adherents of all religions point to the fact that spirituality more broadly can be beneficial for recovery and well-being and that people need to be cautious of their spiritual and religious needs addressed within the medical and care sectors. However, there is a need for spiritual resources that allow people to embrace medical science and prevent the danger of “over-spiritualising” problems.

The Church in Asia needs to design creative programmes to help people understand and respond to mental health issues and envision

programmes that will help congregations to realise the urgent need for initiating and engaging members in the mental health ministry.

On the occasion of World Mental Health Day, the CCA urges its member churches and councils to address mental health in an effective and efficient manner by providing and facilitating mental healthcare for all and make it a reality.

Statement on World Children’s Day–2021 on “A Better Future for Every Child”

19 November 2021

The theme of World Children’s Day–2021, ‘A Better Future for Every Child’, is a reminder to bring back the focus on children. Millions of children are denied the opportunity to access basic amenities in their lives. Such consequences will reverberate for years to come, threatening child rights.

UNICEF estimates that more than 168 million children have lost a full year of education because of school closures due to the COVID-19 lockdown, while data from UNESCO shows that education has been significantly disrupted for over 800 million students worldwide, who lost two-thirds of an academic year on average. Poverty will also be a critical concern, as estimations of global growth by the IMF showed a contraction of 6.5 percentage points of GDP in 2021 compared to pre-COVID-19 projections, with an acute impact on low-income households who may then have to compromise on the education, health, and nutrition of children.

However, in the face of such challenges, stronger and more resilient recovery is still possible. Such times are calling upon us to develop, prepare, and implement clear recovery plans to minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the several dimensions of children’s growth and development—plans that are not just technical or practical approaches to resolving the pandemic’s challenges, but that represent a promise and pledge made by the current adult generation to the upcoming generations to invest in their health, education, and overall well-being.

Vaccinations are now being gradually rolled out for children and young people. This is inspiring some governments to reopen schools

and educational institutions—a hopeful sign that the education and socialisation processes of children are being restored. Church-managed schools, educational institutions, and related agencies must continue to monitor and be vigilant about the physiological and psychological needs of children as they begin to return to school, paying close attention and extending full support as they re-adjust to daily life amidst strict protocols. As COVID-19 disrupted comforting and familiar life patterns such as going to school, socialising with peers and playing outdoors, the lockdown deprived them of such important experiences, leading to an overall decline in mental and cognitive well-being. Additionally, churches must also build trust and encouragement in vaccines, as vaccine hesitancy has a profound impact on the ability of society as a whole to overcome COVID-19.

Another key area that requires immediate action is the climate emergency—a crisis that will also have the most significant ramifications on children’s lives. Children are vulnerable to the changes in the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the food they eat, and are susceptible to life-threatening situations due to climate change and food insecurity.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls upon all member churches and councils to ensure that God’s nurturing love and concern are reflected in all attitudes and actions within children’s ministries. Churches and related organisations must strengthen and fine-tune their pastoral ministry and service to children and their families in this period of transition to normalcy. Care must also be taken to support and affirm children’s rights to self-expression and participation by listening to, and taking into account, their experiences, feelings, and stories through Sunday School and children’s fellowships.

World Children’s Day–2021, observed every year on 20 November, is a reminder for us to take significant actions towards building a safer world and better future for our children. This is not a time for adults to work by themselves—we must not only invite, and listen to, children and adolescents, but also integrate their opinions and life experiences into such decision-making processes for collaborative action. Let us provide spaces and opportunities for children and

adolescents to voice their concerns and work together towards the common goal of 'A Better Future for Every Child'.

Statement on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women–2021

25 November 2021

Violence against women and girls remains one of the most widespread and chronic human rights violations. Most often, it goes largely unreported given the persistent stigma and shame attached to such occurrences. Violence against women and girls occurs in physical, sexual, and psychological forms at any point in a woman's life, and often has devastating and long-term impacts, remaining a significant barrier to the full realisation of the dignity and rights of women. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is observed each year on 25 November 2021 and marks the beginning of 16 days of activism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened such risks for violence. The sudden losses of livelihoods and the entrapment of millions of people in poverty have created an environment that is ripe for toxic gender stereotypes and harmful social norms to thrive. This has even led to what is called the 'shadow pandemic' of gender-based violence. United Nations (UN) Women has estimated that 11 million girls may not return to school because of COVID-19, thus increasing their susceptibility to child, early, or forced marriage. About 47 million more women and girls have become vulnerable to extreme poverty, which further derails the progress towards full equality. The most marginalised women, such as those with disabilities or chronic illnesses, or those who are refugees or trapped in humanitarian and crisis situations, are at disproportionate risk and face even more significant challenges.

The theme of the year is 'Orange the World: End Violence against Women Now!'. The colour orange represents a brighter and transformed future which is free of violence against women and girls. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls upon its member churches and councils to break the silence, speak out, and most importantly, read the Bible through an 'orange lens' throughout the upcoming 16 days.

In the face of the pervasiveness of violence against women and girls today, which, as per UN reports, has not declined over the past decade, we are tasked with interpreting and challenging texts in the Bible that appear to support violence. There is an urgent need in our Asian Christian communities to revisit and reinvestigate episodes of violence—physical, sexual, and psychological—against women in the Bible. If we ignore or consciously refuse to engage with the issues of gender-based violence in the Bible by taking neutral or aperspectival stances, we may run the risk of reinforcing or buttressing such problematic power dynamics. Gender inequality is often understood to be intrinsic to structures, institutions, and human relationships. However, this can be challenged through the ‘transformative’ empowerment of women, and one way to accomplish this is through reading the Bible through an ‘orange’ lens.

Additionally, in church ministries that cater to women, the focus must be on victim-centred services that place the well-being of women at the heart of pastoral care and counselling. It is understood that perpetrators of violence may use myriad methods or resources to exert power and control over their victims—including the distorted, misused, or twisted use of religious scriptures, beliefs, and practices to accomplish these objectives—and blame the victim for the abuse that is happening. Survivors themselves may fall back on such misinterpretations of the Bible and internalise the blame or abuse that occurs against them. At times, even those in charge of providing care for survivors of violence may employ the scripture to minimise, deny, or even condone such abuse. It would not be possible to eliminate or even reduce violence against women unless the violent behaviour of the perpetrator is addressed as well.

On this International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the CCA reaffirms its own commitments to accompany its member churches and councils in concerted efforts to fully eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. The CCA also encourages its member churches and councils to identify and call out signs and symptoms of gender-based violence in their communities by understanding the dynamics of abuse and prioritising the safety and well-being of all women and girls, and also realising that reporting instances of gender-based violence is

not an attack on religion itself. In fact, the church is one of the first places that survivors of violence reach out to in order to get help.

Asian churches must become ‘first responders’ in the efforts to combat all forms of gender-based violence. Together, let us ‘Orange the World’.

Statement on World AIDS Day–2021 on “End Inequalities. End AIDS. End Pandemics.”

30 November 2021

The observance of World AIDS Day on 1 December 2021 which focuses on the theme “End Inequalities. End AIDS. End pandemics.” is an urgent call for everyone to address the inequalities that drive HIV and AIDS, and other pandemics.

HIV is not only a health issue, it also bears economic, social, and cultural implications, and, in all these aspects, inequalities are very much evident. In order for us to achieve the goal of getting the prevalence rate to zero level by 2030, there must be a conscious effort to arrest the spread of HIV and to holistically address the problem. Systemic discrimination in the form of economic, social, cultural, and legal inequalities must be ended as a matter of urgency if we are to end AIDS and other pandemics. Structural inequalities coupled with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic prove to be the major barrier to achieving the goal of ending AIDS by 2030. Without bold action against inequalities, the world risks missing the target to end AIDS by 2030, alongside the objective of ending the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic and spiralling social and economic crises.

Tackling inequalities pertaining to HIV will not only address HIV concerns themselves but will also contribute to finding solutions to the broader societal issues of public health, economic security, and social well-being. It will advance the human rights of all people and can better prepare societies to overcome COVID-19 and other epidemics as well as support economic recovery and stability. Fulfilling the promise to tackle inequalities will save millions of lives and will benefit society as a whole.

Ending inequalities is a major task and requires transformative change. This is where the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls

upon our churches to be transformative forces and to be at the forefront of protecting the rights of everyone, especially the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised communities. We encourage Asian churches to advocate for a conducive and stigma-free society where all, regardless of their status, suffering, illness, or disability, enjoy the realisation of their rights and dignity of life. This can be done through the redevelopment or reformulation of life-affirming and life-liberating positive theologies as well.

We call upon Asian churches to walk hand-in-hand with all stakeholders and revive national and regional networks to commit to action, promote inclusive social and economic growth, and eliminate discriminatory laws, policies, and practices in order to ensure equal opportunities and reduce inequalities.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) together with its member councils and churches expresses its solidarity with all who demand action to end inequalities, end AIDS, and end all other pandemics that thrive on inequalities around the world. In this context, we echo God's words: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Let this World AIDS Day observance be a reminder for us that inequalities affect us all, no matter who we are or where we are from, and that these inequalities continue to prevent us from achieving just and peaceful societies.

Statement on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD)–2021 on “Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities towards an inclusive, accessible, and sustainable post-COVID-19 world”

2 December 2021

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities falls on 3 December each year. In a world where the challenges for persons with disabilities continue to increase, we must acknowledge harsh realities such as the limitations related to restrictions of movement, interaction, and physical support. As we reflect on the theme of this year's IDPD, "Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, accessible, and sustainable post-

COVID-19 world”, we are reminded once again of the need to be concerned about people with disabilities in our midst.

Almost 60 percent of the world’s 650 million persons with disabilities live in Asia and the Pacific according to United Nations (UN) estimates. This translates into some 400 million persons with disabilities in our region who need to be empowered to fully realise their dignity and rights. Poverty and marginalisation characterise the situation of the majority of persons with disabilities in the region. In countries that are experiencing fast-paced globalisation, which brings with it tougher competition and higher levels of stress, the number of persons with psychosocial disabilities is on the rise. Conflicts and natural disasters have also contributed to the increase. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), one of the five regional commissions of the UN, considers persons with disabilities to be “among the poorest of the poor and the most marginalised in the society”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the spotlight on the various challenges in access to treatment, care, and support services for persons with disabilities. They continue to face barriers to their participation as equal members of society. Even online systems of interaction, or virtual spaces, continue to be inaccessible to many of them. In the post-COVID-19 world, there is a need to systematise all forms of interactive methods to include persons with disabilities. Additionally, healthcare facilities must incorporate service home-delivery systems. Preventive measures also require to be accessible at homes and places of residence.

It must be said that in many contexts, Asian churches also have not adequately recognised persons with disabilities in their congregations or communities. They continue to face isolation from friends and family members, as well as other members of their communities. Such exclusion even isolates them from active involvement and leadership in the spiritual life of the Church, which should be a caring and inclusive community. Persons with disabilities are unable to even physically enter church buildings or church-related institutions in most Asian countries because many church buildings lack disability-friendly infrastructure.

On this day, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) encourages its member councils and churches to be mindful of and concerned about the special needs of people with disabilities. It is the responsibility of churches and members of each congregation to uphold the dignity and rights of persons with disabilities and recognise them as children of God as well as to work for the implementation of rights-based approaches in services for them. With the leadership and participation of persons with disabilities in our congregations and communities, Asian churches are called to mobilise, sensitise, be engaged with, listen to, and learn from the experiences of persons with disabilities as well as from their creativity, which should be used to advocate for their rights, to create more inclusive environments, and thus to ensure the full participation of people with disabilities in the journey towards an inclusive, accessible, and sustainable post-COVID-19 world.

Statement on Human Rights Day—2021 on “Equality—Reducing Inequalities, Advancing Human Rights”

9 December 2021

The focus of Human Rights Day this year is “Equality”, with the clear call of “Reducing Inequalities, Advancing Human Rights”. This year’s theme places emphasis on inequality as the fundamental or foundational issue in society, with ramifications that go beyond simply the financial or the economic aspect now pervading the world’s social order. Human Rights Day, which is observed on 10 December each year, gives us the opportunity to reiterate our attention on the issues that truly matter—the principles of equality and non-discrimination as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948.

The cardinal principle of human rights, as stipulated in Article 1 of the UDHR which pertains to equality, states this simple and undeniable truth: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. However, this affirmation is not fully realised, even today. We see an attempt to embody this in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—rooted in a human rights-based approach—which calls for global cooperation

to eradicate deep-rooted and systemic discrimination through multi-pronged strategies and quantifiable targets. The human rights standard of equality holds up the vision of a free, just, and peaceful world, setting the bar for how individuals and institutions should treat other people.

A rights-based approach involves three fundamental concepts—equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination. Thus, any situation that contravenes these three ideals is a human rights violation. This includes abject poverty, the concentration of wealth, food insecurity, health crises, ecological degradation, social conflicts, and gender and racial discrimination, among others. The United Nation’s SDGs treat each of these inequalities as separate issues, while also recognising their inherent interlinkages. This provides all stakeholders—be they countries, international organisations, or even churches—the ideal framework for cooperation and partnerships, with opportunities for each to come in and participate to the best of their capacities.

As we soon approach the two-year mark of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we reflect on the many ways in which existing inequalities have been exacerbated, deepened, and worsened. However, the question is, why does such inequality exist? Although the world may be healthier and wealthier on the whole as compared to times past, the extremes experienced today are crushing. Poverty has worsened, with millions of people now trapped in cycles of debt. Structural and systemic flaws have widened the gap between the rich and the poor. Vaccine injustice continues to prevail through unfair vaccine distribution and hoarding that goes against international legal and human rights norms. On both local and global levels, inequality gets perpetuated in manifold ways.

On this Human Rights Day, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls upon its member churches and councils to be the moral compass of the world today and demonstrate radical commitment to loving and serving one another. It is our spiritual obligation to sustain attention on inequality as an immediate crisis rather than a crisis to be eliminated across 10-, 15-, or 30-year windows. The most important law given to us by Jesus, which is “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”, is inextricably linked to each principle

of the UDHR, affirming the freedom and equality of each human being. Being made in God’s own image, we know that each person possesses an intrinsic God-given dignity and that no one has more of God’s image than anyone else. We must thus direct our attention and resources to serve the least among us, empowering them and protecting them—and this dedication to the uplift of the marginalised and disadvantaged must serve as a barometer of the effectiveness of our diaconal mission in reducing all forms of inequalities that exist today.

Statement on International Migrants Day–2021 on “Harnessing the Potential of Human Mobility”

17 December 2021

On this International Migrants Day, we uphold the great contributions made by migrants in their respective communities across the world. The theme of this year’s International Migrants Day, “Harnessing the Potential of Human Mobility”, reminds the world about the significance of global mobility and the role of people on the move with their knowledge, skills, and manifold contributions that enable the creation of stronger and resilient communities. In today’s rapidly changing world, where national boundaries are becoming less consequential, international migration remains an important issue. Even though people have moved and settled beyond borders since time immemorial, migration has never reached the magnitude and extent seen in recent times. As per United Nations (UN) estimates, international migration comprises a little over 3 percent of the world’s population. But its impact is far greater than this percentage seems to suggest. Contemporary migration manifests itself in all corners of the globe and transforms entire societies as a consequence of a constant stream of people leaving and/or entering. International migration touches the lives of both migrant and nonmigrant populations, with intense economic, social, and cultural changes.

The annual theme of International Migrants Day–2021, “Harnessing the Potential of Human Mobility”, is reflective of a global optimism about the role and impact of migration, specifically international migration, in development. Migration is realised as a powerful driver of sustainable development for migrants and their communities in

countries of origin, transit, and destination. The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development recognises the positive contribution of migrants to sustainable development and expresses the need for international cooperation towards achieving safe, orderly, and regular migration (target 10.7). Several international organisations are keen to point out the huge potential of international migration for development. Optimism also colours the opinion on the role of transnational communities in development, which also receives attention from state and multilateral institutions. However, migration does not automatically lead to development. To truly “harness the potential of human mobility”, it is vital to reflect upon some key challenges that affect migrant populations or transnational populations and proactively engage with any vulnerabilities.

Migrants may be unable to fulfil their full potential due to constraints in countries and communities of origin, transit, and destination. When people are forced to move, whether due to natural or human-made crises, migration occurs irregularly and in a more insecure manner. In these situations, migrants often risk their lives and can be exposed to vulnerability, exploitation, and abuse. Individuals who migrate to escape crisis or fragile contexts are also far more likely to face destitution upon arrival or in transit. Migrants working in the informal sector are often without protection, which renders them easy targets for exploitation. Other limiting factors include mobility restrictions, lack of access to decent work and basic services, including health and education, and migration-intensified vulnerabilities, including social exclusion, xenophobia, racism, and discrimination. When migrants are unable to access basic services and social protection systems in destination countries, their potential to make a positive contribution to society is hampered.

On this International Migrants Day, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) recognises and upholds the substantial contributions that migrants make. The CCA reiterates the importance of its accompaniment to protect the safety, dignity, human rights, and fundamental freedoms of all migrants. Migration, being a transboundary issue, must be understood as a continuum, spanning across countries and requiring policy interventions that cannot be adequately addressed by any single stakeholder.

While recognising the fact that the Church stands on the side of all who work to defend the right of people to live with dignity, the CCA encourages all member constituencies to commit to addressing the needs and capacities of migrants in sending, transit, and receiving countries through increased communication, cooperation, and collaboration between churches in Asia and the Asian diaspora. Churches must provide safe spaces for the positive self-identification of migrants and offer a network of support and security in the face of other challenges. Asian churches must always be aware of the geopolitical situations that perpetuate disparities or inequalities causing forced departures. Migrants must also be recognised as the “moving body of Christ” in conjunction with the universality or catholicity of the Church, rather than being viewed through theological narratives that simply focus on the “recognition of the other”. The cardinal message of the gospel enjoins us to be mindful of God’s mercy, and that the acceptance of others is intertwined with encountering and accepting of God himself. Welcoming others means welcoming God in person. The gospel of mercy inspires and encourages us to follow the ways of renewing and transforming God’s divine plan for all of humanity. Together, let us stand on the side of all who work to defend each person’s right to live with dignity, and overcome all barriers; let us journey towards the full realisation of the potential of migration and human mobility.

2021 Programme Communiqués

Recommendations from the Asia Regional Consultation on ‘Upholding the Dignity and Rights of Children in a ‘New Normal’ Era’

30 April 2021

- Realising the *right to life* for all children to the maximum extent of survival and development: children’s health, safety, and lives must be prioritised when lockdown measures are relaxed and public spaces (including churches and schools) are reopened.

- Fulfilling the *right to education* for all children by accelerating innovative educational programmes: churches must reach and support the most vulnerable children experiencing learning loss, such as children from poor families with no access to education/technology, children with disabilities, adolescent girls who are at risk of early/forced marriages and take up the role of caregivers, children from marginalised ethnicities, castes, or language groups, and children in violent/conflict situations.
- Supporting the *right to self-expression and participation*: as full members of the body of Christ, children must be considered an integral part of the community entitled to fundamental rights of expression and have the right to be heard. Their experiences, feelings, and stories expressed through their evolving capacities and potentials must be listened to and accounted for through the creation of a “culture of trust” in churches.
- Protecting children’s *right to privacy*: as more and more children spend time online (given virtual modes of learning and the shift from in-person socialisation to virtual socialisation), children’s identities and privacy must be protected, respected, and safeguarded from exploitation, abuse, and bullying.
- Securing *collaborative, meaningful, and holistic partnerships*: churches must pool resources (human and financial) with related agencies and those invested in children’s well-being so that children thrive physically, socio-emotionally, and spiritually.

The Defenders’ Commitment from the Institute on Human Rights (IHR)–2021 on ‘Being Defenders of Human Rights and Human Dignity’

28 May 2021

“...And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

We, twenty-five young people from ten countries in Asia, gathered for the Christian Conference of Asia's Institute on Human Rights (IHR), a two-week training programme on human rights advocacy and action, from 17 to 28 May 2021.

Committed to the defence of human rights and human dignity in our own capacities and contexts, we convened under the theme, "Being Defenders of Human Rights and Human Dignity." Coming from diverse and pluralistic regions, we learnt about the nature of the different human rights violations that currently plague Asia, as well as the mechanisms and systems in action to combat and prevent such violations.

As a united cohort of young Asian Christians, we are committed to following the footsteps of Christ, who incarnated "good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom from oppression, and the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19). We affirm the image of God in every person we encounter, and we recognise the "neighbour" in the other (Hebrews 13:1-2).

Loving Kindness (what we have learnt and commit to upholding)

We were taken under the wings of specialists on human rights concerns in the region and worldwide, from human rights defenders like ourselves to educators, social scientists, and legal luminaries. We were capacitated and motivated for the great—and sometimes deadly—work of human rights advocacy.

Among others, we studied and reflected on:

- Christian and interreligious notions on human rights and human dignity;
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other standards of human rights from the global to the local contexts;
- Human rights mechanisms in the United Nations, and regional and national institutions focussed on human rights work;
- Victories and challenges for human rights advocacy and action in Asia-Pacific;
- Prospects for human rights defence in Asia-Pacific;

- The specific rights of women, of children, of the family, of refugees, migrants and stateless persons, and of minorities and indigenous peoples; and,
- The role of the church and the ecumenical movement in promoting the rights and dignity of all people, and strengthening human rights advocacy and action everywhere.

We affirm that the long history of and work on the protection of every human right is, first, a manifestation of God’s faithfulness to the created world—“For the Lord is good, and God’s love is eternal; God’s faithfulness endures through all generations” (Psalm 100:5). Today, God still uses ordinary people who are humble and willing to participate in the ongoing salvific work of God through defending our sacred human rights.

Every effort by every human rights defender is a concrete expression of love and care for the “other” and/or “neighbour”. Upholding human rights today, for Christians, is in truth an act of discipleship answering the call and teaching of Jesus Christ to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40).

We further commit our sincerest efforts to the global, regional, national, and local advances of our fellow human rights defenders, and align our hearts and hands to the cause that they pursue. The International Bill of Rights coupled with the Sustainable Development Goals and other Conventions and Covenants are proof that we collectively yearn for and seek a better world. As graduates of the IHR, we undertake this task of accountability and firmly commit ourselves and our work to fulfilling and living out these universal principles to achieve dignity and development for all.

Doing Justice (identifying and addressing injustices and inequality)

We are highly cognisant of and alarmed by the inhumane and degrading atrocities that continue to occur with impunity around the globe, and particularly in Asia. There is no peace without justice; there cannot be any durable and lasting development without the

promotion of broad social progress and better standards of life for all. Rather than advancing to greater freedom, equality, justice, and peace, we are sliding backwards.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified social inequities and further plunged millions of people into stubborn and unrelenting poverty. Lack of access to and inequality in the provision of basic healthcare services has led to unnecessary suffering and loss of life. The rights of those with disabilities have been greatly curtailed. Food insecurity and reduced access to clean, safe, and potable water further exacerbate the risk to good health. Despite the distress and hardship suffered by many, still a handful of rich and powerful people continue to profit from the pandemic.

With the curtailment of democratic liberties, the most basic rights of people in Asia are infringed upon. We continue to see discrimination based on one's sex and gender, ethnicity, language, religion and caste, and ability, among others. State repression and extrajudicial killings have become commonplace in many countries. Dispossession and destruction due to business interests and corporate greed are threatening several Asian communities. The issues of ecological destruction and climate change do not get the attention and action they desperately require.

While we respond in our capacities as individuals and communities of human rights defenders, we call on the states to observe their responsibility as duty-bearers and as primary defenders of human rights where it is not upheld. They must create social conditions and policies that make human rights available to all. Furthermore, states should not simply pass laws on human rights but also implement them properly—clarifying ambiguities, outlining the roles of state forces and prosecutors, and administering justice to perpetrators of human rights violations. The government should ensure that administrative measures make responsible, good, wise, and caring use of the country's resources (including human and financial resources).

Our "brother's blood cries out to us from the ground" (Genesis 4:10), and we lament along with "the entire creation that is groaning in pain until now" (Romans 8:22). We commit ourselves to being the

keeper of our siblings—we pledge ourselves to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; protect the rights of all who are helpless, speaking for them and being righteous; and protecting the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8–9).

Walking humbly with God (our faith in action)

Actualising our faith in action and being the church for others, we “put on the full armour of God” (Ephesians 6:11) and take a stand in the struggle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world” (Ephesians 6:12). “With the belt of truth buckled around our waist, the breastplate of righteousness in place, with our feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, with the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:13–17), we stand ready as defenders of the dignity and rights of the oppressed, the vulnerable and the marginalised.

- We will accompany our neighbours who are victims of oppression, become a protective presence for them in the midst of injustices and violations, and empower them to speak their truth to power and in a spirit of love (Ephesians 4:15);
- We will become bridges between the secular and the spiritual spheres, inviting greater church involvement and commitment in social, economic, and political issues;
- We will strengthen the international ecumenical networks we have formed through the IHR, learn from each other’s stories and histories, share solutions and best practices, and support each other in our struggles;
- We will support, empower, and journey with victims of human rights violations towards healing and advocacy, address perpetrators with justice, and take both retrospective and prospective action to dismantle the systems that allow the violation of human rights and disrespect of human dignity;
- We will amplify and strengthen communication (both online and offline) and cooperation among government and nongovernment stakeholders to challenge the systemic barriers preventing the full realisation of dignity, peace and justice;

- We will become catalysts and continue to educate people on human rights and dignity; champion the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights; and encourage them to join us in the quest to uphold human rights by facilitating similar training and advocacy programmes, thus “provoking one another unto love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24); and,
- We will commit to keeping each other constantly in prayer that “God may find us worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of ours and every act prompted by our faith” (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12).

In humility, we carry out God’s vision for justice, acknowledging that the ultimate saving action and redemption are still that of God.

Communique of the South Asia Sub-Regional Consultation on ‘South Asian Churches Engagement with HIV and AIDS: Discerning Signs – Working Towards Informed Responses’

28 November 2021

We, the participants of the CCA–NCCI South Asia Sub-Regional Consultation on ‘South Asian Churches Engagement with HIV and AIDS: Discerning Signs – Working Towards Informed Responses’, convened online from 25–28 November 2021 and represented different countries (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and India), denominations, professional backgrounds, and cultures, and who acknowledged that we are part of the Body of Christ, His Church in the world. We recount the personal work of Jesus, who exemplified life as a true champion of justice, dignity, equality, and peace through radical messages and actions of acceptance and love.

Discerning Signs

Even before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was ravaged by a far more serious pandemic of HIV and AIDS, which has caused the loss of millions of lives over the past four decades. We also acknowledge the increasing incidence of new HIV infections in our region and that we are still falling short of achieving the 90-

90-90 target in all aspects of testing, prevention, and treatment of those infected with HIV. People living with HIV (PLHIV) and other vulnerable communities continue to suffer not just physical diseases but religious and social diseases of discrimination and stigma. We acknowledge that we have been complicit and part of the system that perpetuates this discrimination against PLHIV and other vulnerable communities.

We acknowledge the historic work that has been carried out by National Councils in countries, Christian medical associations, Church healthcare ministries, and other faith initiatives for those infected and affected by HIV in the South Asia region. However, we are challenged to rethink our mission of recognising and attending to the overwhelming suffering of PLHIV and other vulnerable communities yearning for justice and restoration. Although much has been done, there is much more to do.

Just as Jesus was willing to be associated with the stigma of the cross, the cruellest indignity one could suffer in his time, we are called to crucify all forms of stigma that are associated with HIV and stand with those who are infected and affected. Crucifying stigma brings dignity and worth, promotes inclusion and acceptance, and enables the celebration of life in all its fullness by the Church in all its inclusiveness.

We affirm that every human being is made in the image of God, created with dignity irrespective of any personal circumstances, and this is equally true in suffering, disability, or when living with chronic disease. We also acknowledge the vast diversity of human sexualities, including Asian indigenous non-binary identities. Amidst issues that are systemic in nature and legal barriers that increase people's vulnerabilities to HIV and related issues, we draw from the Holy Bible where God's promise is clear for all humanity, "that they may have life...life in all its fullness and abundance," (John 10:10), which can become a reality today, through a living relationship with God, with each other, with themselves, and the world.

In light of the above, we the participants of the Consultation hereby commit ourselves to the following:

Working Towards Informed Responses

1. We reaffirm our commitment to revive and work with more vigour to strengthen our ministries relating to HIV and AIDS, leading us to healing and reconciliation, and place PLHIV and other vulnerable communities at the centre of our holistic initiatives – such as awareness, education, newer modalities of prevention (such as SAVE and PrEP/PEP), advanced treatment strategies (such as U=U), community organising, livelihood support, counselling and care, and public advocacy.
2. We reaffirm our commitment to offer our churches as safe spaces for PLHIV and employ our resources (such as our hospital networks, educational institutions, theological colleges, and other community centres) and our competencies for the care, protection, upliftment, and empowerment of PLHIV and other vulnerable communities, especially for women and children, transpeople, intravenous drug users, and commercial sex workers.
3. We reaffirm our commitment towards practising a theology which is free from stigma and judgement, which is life-affirming and life-liberating, reconciling the body with the soul, and that which celebrates gender and sexual diversities.
4. We reaffirm our commitment to strengthen our regional and national networks and combine our resources and efforts, to share best practices, model approaches, training modules, leadership, and expertise.
5. We reaffirm our commitment to explore more avenues of cooperation with existing government and secular programmes within our countries.
6. We reaffirm our commitment to partnering with global initiatives in the race to meet 2030 targets, by innovating in our outreach (such as developing virtual interventions in this digital age) and moving from a ‘gatekeeper’ to a ‘bridge’ model.

As the world prepares to commit to ‘Ending the HIV Epidemic: Equitable Access, Everyone’s Voice’ this upcoming World AIDS Day, we take this opportunity to express our support for each other in mutual respect, demonstrated by an approach of love, justice, and compassion, our willingness to learn, share, and be a caring and appreciative global Christian community.

2022

2022 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

Statement on International Women's Day–2022 on "Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Tomorrow"

8 March 2022

International Women's Day is commemorated on 8 March every year and is an important opportunity to highlight and recognise the invaluable contributions of women and girls around the world. The theme for the year 2022 is 'Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Tomorrow,' focusing especially on the unique role and leadership of women in the fight against climate change and in developing and furthering climate change adaptation, mitigation, and response strategies for a more sustainable future.

Gender inequality and climate change are closely linked. Tackling gender inequality is critical for climate adaptation. Climate change has severe and lasting consequences, affecting not only the environment but also the economic and social development of individuals and communities. Climate change is a phenomenon that impacts all human beings with calamitous consequences but worsens the disparities for the most vulnerable among us. A growing body of evidence suggests that climate change has a differentiated impact on women and men due to structural inequalities and the gendered division of labour and is also the greatest contributor to hunger, malnutrition, disease, and displacement. Women and girls may bear the brunt of environmental, economic, and social shocks as they face greater health and safety risks due to compromises on water, food, and sanitation, and their care burdens increase in the face of dwindling and scarce resources.

Given especially the post-COVID-19 pandemic context, a larger number of people are likely to face hunger, malnutrition, and

poverty. The dependence of women on natural resources, which face the most direct impacts due to climate change, also places them in vulnerable and disadvantaged situations. Women in Asia's rural areas are highly dependent on natural resources for their energy needs and livelihoods, but their ability to obtain these indispensable resources is reduced; thus affecting not only their material welfare but also their livelihood security, resilience, health, and dignity. Women, who tend to be responsible for water management at the household level, face the far-reaching effects of the erratic availability of freshwater, either due to floods or droughts. Additionally, climate change compounds the challenges of mobility and migration, with the past few decades giving rise to the emergence of climate refugees in the Asia region, who are displaced due to severe coastal weather events, the erosion of shorelines, and flooding.

The task at hand is to continue to boost the adaptive capacities of women and their communities and promote the full participation of women and girls in all decision-making and action pertaining to climate change. The ever-worsening situation warrants us to examine current models of unchecked economic growth that maximise profit over well-being and result in the benefit of a few while relegating the vulnerable to lives of very poor quality. There is an immediate need for gender-sensitive responses to the effects of climate change. Women and girls are powerful and effective agents of change in the pushback against climate change. At the grassroots, they tend to be the first to adopt green technologies and develop resilience strategies, promoting sustainable means of production and distribution of resources and are also usually engaged in those sectors that have the least carbon footprint or greenhouse gas emissions.

On the occasion of International Women's Day–2022, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls for the full eradication of all forms of gender-based inequalities as an integral component of effective climate action. The Church in Asia is called to support strategies of mitigation and adaptation that effectively and systematically address the gender-specific impacts of climate change. Modern models of extractivism and a predatory relationship between humans and the environment that undermine the agency of women directly contravene this divine mandate.

Our lives are intimately connected to our ecosystems, and as custodians of the planet, our common home, we cannot ignore the interdependence and interconnectedness of all life. It is the imperative of the Church in Asia to continue to raise its prophetic voice by highlighting the gendered impacts of climate change and ensuring the empowerment of women as an essential precondition for the promotion of sustainable development. The key involvement of women and girls in sustainability initiatives around the world heralds more effective climate action and a sustainable future for all.

Statement on World Health Day–2022 on “Our Planet, Our Health”

8 March 2022

A healthy, sustainable, and equitable society is essential for the well-being of everyone on our planet. Social and economic conditions, together with accessible and high-quality health care are indispensable for the health of populations everywhere.

Differences in access to medical facilities and health care raise concerns about the prevailing system that often denies social disadvantage, especially with regard to people among socially vulnerable sectors, despite the universally accepted norm of “the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”. Medical care includes preventive services, such as vaccinations, preventive check-ups and health education, as well as treatment and rehabilitation services, all of which are essential parameters for an equitable society.

On the occasion of World Health Day–2022, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) emphasises the need for a healthy and sustainable society that is equitable to all. The theme of World Health Day–2022, ‘Our Planet, Our Health’, stresses the need to equate our health and well-being with our environment, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The well-being of all creation must be in balance for a healthier society.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that over 13 million deaths around the world each year are due to avoidable

environmental causes. This includes the climate crisis, which is the single biggest health threat facing humanity today. The climate crisis is also a health crisis. Improving the quality of the environment in key areas such as air, water, and noise can prevent disease and improve human health. The impacts of climate change pose immediate threats to health, in terms of extreme temperatures, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and shifts in the patterns of infectious diseases and allergens. An individual's socio-economic status influences their exposure to environmental stressors since poorer people are more likely to live in degraded environments or environments that face direct impacts of climate change. Such socially disadvantaged groups of people may be more sensitive to the impacts of environmental stressors due to pre-existing health conditions or poor nutritional status. In the Asia region, emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases, compromised food safety and security, and the health impacts of climate change all threaten regional health security.

The CCA, on World Health Day–2022, urges its member churches, councils, ecumenical partners, and like-minded organisations to take a positive step towards protecting our planet and controlling climate change and its implications for health, while also increasing resilience. Disease is the disruption of a balanced state. Healing is the restoration of balance. Churches are the instruments for healing and reconciliation. The healing ministry of the church relates to all dimensions of life and must be holistic in its nature.

The CCA believes that Asian churches have a crucial role in building awareness, taking measures to improve the environment, and promote healthy and healing communities at all levels, and being cognizant of the unique impacts of climate change on the health of vulnerable groups such as women, children, people with disabilities, people living with HIV, people living in poverty, and other marginalised communities. Community and congregation-based health initiatives have proven to be successful and replicable in many parts of the world, including areas that are hard to reach. Asian churches can leverage existing grassroots networks and community ministries to ensure sustainable health programmes and increased access to services for all. Additionally, churches must

boost climate action initiatives so as to reduce insecurities and vulnerabilities while increasing adaptation and resilience.

Statement submitted to the Sixty-sixth Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

14–25 March 2022

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), a regional ecumenical organisation comprised of 98 member churches and 21 national ecumenical councils representing 45 million Christians from Japan in the east to Iran in the west, and from Nepal in the north to New Zealand in the south, welcomes the sixty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women's focus on the priority theme, "Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes" and the review theme, "Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work", both of which are intrinsically connected. As a faith-based organisation, the CCA focuses on all these areas and concerns as part of its regular programmatic involvement. The CCA upholds the equality and dignity of all human beings, the care of creation, and the call for eco-justice with responsible stewardship.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its associated challenges of structural economic inequality and injustice have pushed the world into deep uncertainty with its compounded effects. Life as we know has been upended. However, the climate crisis remains unrelenting and unabated in its devastation. The COVID-19 pandemic is simply an additional layer of complexity over the climate crisis, revealing the imminent disasters if immediate action is not taken to mitigate it. In the long term, the toll of climate change on people's lives is set to supersede the impact of COVID-19.

Asia is home to the world's largest coastal population. Communities in low-lying coastal areas and floodplains comprise 90 percent of the world's population at risk of exposure to tropical cyclones. Rising sea levels coupled with cyclones of increasing intensity

have repeatedly inundated Asia's coastal communities. Asia's large rural agrarian populations face food insecurity due to changes in crop production and yields, loss of arable land and potable water, and poverty due to a general increase in food prices and costs of living. The oil, gas, and mining sectors in several Asian countries are accused of environmental degradation and abject discrimination against indigenous Asian communities, robbing them of their rights to their ancestral land and livelihood.

The climate crisis renders sustainable development in Asia a distant dream, challenging fundamental goals such as equality, prosperity, and growth. Poor and vulnerable communities are threatened by increased inequity and loss of livelihoods as climate extremes limit their options to cope with adverse events and disasters. Competing national priorities and weak governance, concentrations of wealth and power in the hands of the powerful, limited awareness and capacities, limited financial resources, and institutional barriers further impede the resolution of the climate crisis.

Just as climate change affects regions very differently, it also impacts men and women very differently. The climate crisis is pushing women back into regressive gendered roles and responsibilities in households and communities. It threatens to reinforce gender inequalities or even erode the progress that has been made towards gender equality in many developing countries, especially in Asia, as women are expected to shoulder the increased burden of climate change. Poor women's limited access to resources, restricted rights, limited mobility, and lack of representation in decision-making positions can render them more vulnerable to the compounded effects of climate change, affecting their resilience and abilities of adaptation and mitigation.

The health risks triggered by climate change are borne by all people, but it is undeniable that disproportionate impact of climate change is borne by women and girls. Scarcity of water in rural Asian communities leads to poor maternal health and menstrual hygiene with unintended consequences such as school dropouts and effects on mobility.

Women must be considered as valuable agents of change and not defined only by their vulnerability. Women have been at the forefront of several environmental, social justice, and political movements, demanding change and developing solutions. These efforts are often unpaid, underfunded, or unrecognised, and are carried out by those women who already shoulder the responsibility for family and community wellbeing. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, women activists, leaders, and human rights defenders have continually articulated the multifaceted nature of the climate crisis and the deep and fundamental changes needed for a sustainable future.

Although the window of opportunity is narrowing, fighting climate change is still possible with concerted and collaborative action. The most vulnerable among us are disproportionately affected when those in power refuse to acknowledge or take responsibility for the onslaught and alarming frequency of climate-related events. Thus, the CCA calls upon the United Nations member states and the international community to:

- Prioritise the climate crisis by being accountable for their obligations under the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, along with commitments of the Paris Climate Accord, the Biodiversity Convention and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change;
- Enhance allocations for climate financing, especially for Asian developing countries, to help tackle a problem caused mainly by industrialised countries;
- Promote policy-making and transnational action in pursuit of a just transition to green and low-carbon economies that fully respects the rights of women to secure and sustainable employment and livelihoods;
- Increase the representation of women in climate-negotiating bodies and other decision-making platforms at all levels;
- Integrate the needs and concerns of different groups of women, such as climate refugees, migrant and displaced women, those grappling with food insecurity, women food producers, indigenous women, rural women, and other affected communities.

Statement on World Environment Day–2022 on “Only One Earth”

5 June 2022

It is an irrefutable fact that climate change continues to be one of the most systemic environmental threats that humankind has ever faced. In the quest for rapid growth, it is the environment that is usually compromised the most. The adverse effects of environmental damage are borne by already-vulnerable populations, such as those living in poverty, ethnic or religious minorities, indigenous peoples, internally displaced peoples, migrants, people with disabilities, older persons, and children. Such communities, which have already been historically subject to discrimination, suffer the brunt of pollution, environmental degradation, and climate change. Over 40 percent of the world’s civil wars in the last seven decades have been linked to control over natural resources such as land, oil, and water, and this is only set to become worse as climate change exacerbates the scarcity of such precious resources.

The right to a healthy environment must be at the centre of decision-making processes that relate to achieving a just and sustainable future. A right to a healthy environment includes clean air, safe and sufficient water, sanitation, healthy and sustainable food, a toxins-free environment, a safe climate, healthy ecosystems, and biodiversity. It also includes the rights to environmental information, participation in decision-making processes, and access to justice with effective remedies.

World Environment Day, which falls on 5 June each year, is an opportunity to remind people and communities across the world to recall and emphasise the need for an important mechanism through which worldwide awareness of the environment is stimulated and social action and attention are mobilised. The theme for 2022, ‘Only One Earth’, is a sobering call to the need for more respectful behaviour as we strive to create a just balance among the economic, social, and environmental needs of present and future generations of humanity.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) reminds its member churches and councils that the environment in which we reside is God’s gift, intended to fulfil the needs of all God’s creation. In God’s

perfect love and goodness, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). The environment is thus not a space or property to be possessed and exploited by the privileged and powerful, but a gift to be received with gratitude with a sense of responsibility for the care of creation. The biblical message reminds us to be mindful of the impact of degradation on the environment as described in the prophetic appeal posed as a set of rhetorical questions: “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?” (Ezekiel 34:18) Here we are reminded that there is no place for unchecked abuse of the environment; all of God’s given gifts are to be used with gratitude and with a great sense of responsibility.

The call of World Environment Day-2022, ‘Only One Earth’, is a call for urgent transformative actions to protect the environment in conjunction with our concerns on human rights violations in various forms, climate disruption, toxic pollution, biodiversity loss, and the rapid transmission of zoonotic diseases to humankind, such as COVID-19. We are in a race against time that will require political will, innovation, inclusion, tolerance, values and ethics, financing, and partnerships. Today, the world possesses the scientific understanding, technical capacity, and financial means to combat climate change and establish safe and healthy environments for all human beings. As Christians who are called to be better stewards of God’s creation, we must model our sense of stewardship of the earth as part of our worship of God and our love for our fellow beings. The challenge is not that we do not know what is to be done, but has to do with how quickly we can achieve it. Let us, on this World Environment Day, recommit ourselves to the care of creation, the care of our unique planetary home, the ‘Only One Earth’ that we have.

CCA–WCC joint statement on attacks by Myanmar military on theological seminary and churches in Kachin and Kayah States

16 November 2022

The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) are greatly disturbed by reports of an attack by the

Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) on the Kachin Theological Seminary in Kutkai, Shan State on 3 November 2022, in which artillery fire injured four students in the dormitory. This attack followed a 30 October shelling that partially destroyed a Baptist church and hall in Momauk township, Kachin State.

Subsequently, we have also received news that the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral of the Roman Catholic Church in Pekhon town in Kayah State was hit by the military on 9 November 2022, the second such attack on this church.

These attacks on churches and related institutions are emblematic of the deteriorating humanitarian, human rights and political situation in Myanmar following the military coup that overthrew the country's democratically elected government on 1 February 2021. The lives that many in Myanmar had begun to enjoy following the introduction of democratic reforms have again been destroyed and the country devastated. Armed clashes and attacks are now taking place in each State, region and union territory, and in around 220 out of 330 townships. Myanmar military forces are systematically engaged in committing human rights violations through "clearance operations", combing areas in search of members of armed groups and arresting, torturing, and summarily executing individuals, as well as looting and destroying property. And since the military coup, the poverty rate in Myanmar has climbed to close to 50 percent, and people throughout the country have been reduced to extreme levels of vulnerability.

The WCC and the CCA have expressed deep concerns over the deteriorating human rights situations in different parts of Myanmar and issued joint letters and statements on 3 February, 4 March, and 31 March 2021. The WCC executive committee also issued a statement on 17 November 2021 condemning the ongoing human rights violations in Myanmar.

We reiterate and underscore the concerns previously expressed about the ongoing violence – including sexual and gender-based violence – and brutal attacks by military and security forces.

We renew our calls for the military authorities to hand back the control that they have illegitimately seized, to refrain from

excessive use of force against protesters, to respect the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, to release all those who have been arbitrarily arrested, denied due process, and who remain in detention, and to allow unconditional and unhindered humanitarian access to all areas and all people affected by conflict and violence.

We appeal to all members of the international community to increase their active solidarity and humanitarian support for the people of Myanmar and to redouble their advocacy and engagement for justice, peace, and the restoration of democracy in Myanmar.

We urge all WCC and CCA member churches and ecumenical partners to scale up their diaconal support and partnership with the churches of Myanmar, as they struggle to meet the increasing needs of their suffering communities.

Statement on the International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women

24 November 2022

Systematic and widespread violence against women and girls is an extreme crime against human rights. Women and girls experience brutal violence in physical, psychological, sexual, and economic forms at home and in public spaces—on the streets, at schools, and in the workplaces. The perpetrators on many occasions are not just strangers, but intimate partners and close relatives as well. The high rate of violence against women and girls is just the tip of the iceberg, worst during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In unreachable and isolated areas, victims are terrorised and forced by perpetrators to be passive or silent. It is unfortunate that Asia is becoming a hotspot for the high prevalence of violence against women and girls.

Every year, on 25 November, concerned people and groups commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women—a 16-day period of activism leading up to International Human Rights Day on 10 December. The United Nations Secretary-General and UN Women launched the campaign

in 2008, calling for “global action to increase awareness, promote advocacy, and create opportunities for discussion on challenges and solutions”.

The theme of this year’s campaign is ‘UNITE! Activism to End Violence Against Women and Girls,’ which aims to mobilise all people to take on roles as activists to prevent violence against women, to stand in solidarity with women’s movements around the world and resist the invalidation of women’s emancipation struggles, and, finally, to call for a world free of violence against women and girls. The campaign in 2022 also aims to combat rising anti-rights movements, which have resulted in the shrinking of free spaces and an increase in attacks on women’s rights defenders, advocates, organisations, and on the feminist movement as a whole.

On this occasion of the commemoration of the International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) joins with the rest of the global and Asian women’s movements commemorating the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women-2022. The CCA has been consistently engaged in advocacy for combatting violence against women through a special programme it has initiated, the Ecumenical Women’s Action Against Violence (EWAAV). EWAAV promotes and emphasises collaboration and networking among Asian churches and women’s organisations so as to be in solidarity with each other in their struggle for combatting violence against women and girls.

On this International Day for the EVAW–2022, the Christian Conference of Asia reiterates its commitment to join its member churches and ecumenical councils in advocating for women’s rights and in combatting all forms of violence and abuse against women and girls. The CCA urges its member constituencies to organise, strengthen, and institutionalise programmes and projects in churches and communities that will empower people at large in combatting gender-based violence. As a fellowship of the Asian churches and ecumenical councils, CCA will continue to uphold the dignity of all God’s creation and calls upon all people of conscience to be united in ending violence against women and girls.

Statement on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD)–2022

3 December 2022

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD), which is observed on 3 December each year, raises awareness and promotes the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities in political, social, economic, and cultural life. It also upholds and secures the right of people with disabilities to participate fully, equally, and effectively in society along with others, and face no barriers in all aspects of their lives.

Almost 60 percent of the world's 650 million persons with disabilities live in Asia and the Pacific, according to United Nations estimates. The Asia and Pacific region has by far the largest number of people with disabilities in the world. Most IDPDs are poor, their concerns unknown and their rights overlooked; they are excluded from social opportunities. Less than five percent of children with disabilities attend school in Asia-Pacific countries. Women and girls frequently suffer double discrimination and have even less access to education than men.

Asian cultural and societal perceptions of disabilities as being related to sin or misconduct in a previous life also increase the stigma and discrimination towards persons with disabilities. In some instances, a family member with a disability is perceived as a disgrace to the entire family—which is another important reason for raising public awareness and destigmatising disability issues.

Asian churches must evaluate their own capacities to make visible the needs of those with disabilities in our communities. In many Asian churches, for instance, church buildings themselves still remain inaccessible to those with disabilities, and the voices of the IDPDs are rarely heard in decision-making. The churches are called to act and reiterate commitments to persons with disabilities.

The biblical narrative of 'The Healing at the Pool' (John 5:1-9) is exemplary. Jesus came to the disabled person and asked him for a favour; he heard his voice and healed him. Jesus' compassion and action must be a compass for churches to welcome and serve

people in the spirit of true inclusion, provide better support systems for persons with disabilities, and have open access for them to participate in church life. On this International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the CCA urges its member churches and councils to motivate their members to embrace persons with disabilities, in keeping with the ministry of Jesus, for a fuller and more inclusive koinonia through advocacy and diaconal services in church and society.

2022 Programme Communiqués

Declaration of the Young Ambassadors of Peace in Asia (YAPA)–2022

14 August 2022

We, the twenty-six participants of Young Ambassadors of Peace in Asia (YAPA) 2022, from eleven Asian countries belonging to different ethnicities, religions, races, organisations, and backgrounds, attended the YAPA–2022 training programme organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) at the CCA Headquarters at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 7 August to 14 August 2022. During this time, we were all trained to be catalysts for change and positive actors in the process of establishing peace. Our ability to recognise and speak out against conflict, violence, and human rights violations was strengthened; we learnt how to promote interfaith collaboration, especially in circumstances where religious intolerance is likely to occur.

There is no single uniform context in the Asian region. Its cultural, religious, historical, and political systems are diverse, as are the foreign and domestic influences on legal systems in the region.

As Young Ambassadors of Peace in Asia in 2022, we are meeting at a crucial juncture. A time when cross-state tension among countries is high, a time when Indonesia has concerns with the system of indigenous customary law, which partially survives, and a time when Myanmar is facing threatening political stability and violence against ethnic groups. A time when Sri Lanka faces its worst economic crisis,

a time when Bangladesh has a prominent distinction between the rich and poor, a time of strained cross-strait tensions, and a time when the rise of extremist groups is observed in many countries. Most of our Asian countries face such difficulties, and their citizens are finding ways to survive daily. We meet at a very significant point to converse about these issues and understand what it is that, as youth we can do.

We express our commitment to work for building and living in a peaceful, diverse, multilingual, and multi-religious Asia and the world. We resolve to:

1. educate ourselves with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to promote peace and be nonviolent in all approaches;
2. be active actors in peacebuilding in ways that prioritise community needs and perspectives and use 'do no harm' principles;
3. work for peace, justice, and inclusion of the many, rather than the short-term priorities of the few;
4. work towards the long-term process to eliminate structural violence;
5. promote equality and justice;
6. focus on education for peace to encourage independent thinking and its doors to new ideas for peace and justice; and,
7. holistically engage dignified human beings in all their local wisdom for global peace.

In order to support and build a more peaceful and just world, we call on all governments, civil society organisations, faith-based organisations, and relevant stakeholders to support the meaningful engagement of youth peacebuilders and youth-led organisations to provide the opportunity to engage them in peacebuilding activities, capacity-building programmes, policy-making, and decision-making processes.

Call for Action

1. Acknowledge that youth peacebuilders and youth-led organisations are one of the major stakeholders in the

- peacebuilding processes, strategy development, policy-making, and implementation.
2. Collaborate with youth peacebuilders and youth-led organisations on the implementation of peacebuilding and interfaith initiatives, and involve them at all levels (international, national, and local).
 3. Provide an enabling environment and capacity-building opportunities for innovations, policy dialogues, and networking with other stakeholders.
 4. Allocate long-term sustainable funding to support youth-led organisation networks, individual youth initiatives, and formal and informal youth groups.
 5. Ensure all the peacebuilding processes are gender-sensitive and strive for inclusiveness [intersectionality, equity] in all aspects.

As youth peacebuilders being represented in this programme, we commit to working with all stakeholders to build peace in Asia and around the world. We commit to monitoring the implementation of this declaration.

Communique of the Asia Regional Programme on 'Diakonal Ministry of the Church in Developing Effective Responses to Combat Trafficking in Asia'

30 September 2022

We, the thirty participants from member churches, national ecumenical councils, and other organisations gathered at the Ecumenical Centre of the Council of Churches in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from 28 September to 30 September 2022 for the Asia Regional Programme on 'Diakonal ministry of the Church in developing effective responses to combat human trafficking in Asia' organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

Throughout the three days of dialogue, common worship, prayer, study, sharing, and reflection on the gospel mandate and the reality of the world, especially on the situation of trafficking in persons, we heard the cry of humanity, the reason for the cry, discussed ways of responding to it and ways of becoming channels of restoration

to all who experience one or many forms of dispossession and exploitation. The church has a role to play. In order to do this, we need to come together as one community of faith to combat human trafficking.

Call to Action

We call on the churches and leaders around the world to repent for contributing to 'othering', and to the conversation on 'non-persons'; for othering non-believers and non-Christians; for claiming that salvation is exclusive for those who believe in the resurrection; and for a lack of concern for those discriminated against while covering it up with mere tokenism. We pray for forgiveness and seek to be reconciled to God and from those 'othered'.

The church as one community of faith must work together to welcome, safeguard, enhance, integrate and also re-integrate migrants in both sending and receiving countries using social media and other means to strengthen collaboration, communication, and sharing of resources among the body of Christ.

To have stronger voices, we need to come together as one church. Hence, as the participants of this programme, we would like to propose a few actions to be carried out in order for us to be in solidarity with the little, the last, the least, and the lost through developing effective responses to combat human trafficking in Asia.

These include:

1. *Promote* contextual reading and teaching of the scriptures so that church members are biblically nurtured and oriented towards inclusivity, respect, love and concern for the 'others' and act to protect and restore every person's dignity as an image of God in their own contexts.
2. *Turn theology into action* by welcoming, protecting, integrating, and providing safe spaces for migrants, the marginalised and the vulnerable in our midst as concrete affirmation of our intentional discipleship.
3. *Immerse, connect, and integrate* with the 'othered'. Leaders of churches must understand the lives of the 'othered' not with pens or letters but with their own hands and feet.

Churches must facilitate immersive experiences so that members get out of church buildings and go to the field where non-persons live and work, by adopting a mission strategy of Jesus and having a heart to reach out instead of waiting to be approached.

4. *Strengthen* partnerships and cooperation among councils and churches in Asia to ensure safe migration and re-integration of migrants especially survivors of human trafficking.
5. *Create* a good networking system with various churches and leaders including NGOs, government bodies, FBOs, CSOs, UN agencies, and embassies through lobbying, advocacy, education, and awareness-building using social media and all available means.
6. *Have open conversations* on perpetrators or those who contribute, whether directly or indirectly, to trafficking, such as households who employ trafficked workers and indulge in human rights violations (in receiving countries) or people from the victim's community who have sold them to traffickers or agents for monetary commissions (in sending countries). This must be supplemented with strategies for holding perpetrators accountable as part of the repentance and reconciliation process.
7. In sending countries: *Organise and provide* accurate and up-to-date information for members who wish to migrate for work, ensure safe migration and strengthen networking and communication among churches from receiving countries to prevent members from being trafficked.
8. In receiving countries: *Conscientize* members on the biblical call to be a hospitable and welcoming church towards migrants regardless of race, religion, gender, age, presence or absence of disability, documentation status, and to create a place of solace for migrants, especially victims of trafficking.

Chiang Mai Declaration on Health, Healing, and Wholeness of Life in Asia

12 October 2022

We, the participants of the International Conference on “Faith, Health, and Healing: Christian Response in Asia Today” organised

by the Christian Conference of Asia, held at Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 10–12 October 2022, hailing as we do from different parts of Asia, are from different denominational and professional backgrounds, different cultures and contexts, yet united in the Body of Christ. We met in a post-pandemic context of conflict between communities and countries, climate emergency, threats to life and livelihoods, scarcity of food, water, and energy, and downward spiralling economies.

We affirm that:

1. Every human being is made in the image of God, created with dignity in diversity, irrespective of any personal circumstances, be it in health, sickness, or suffering.
2. Health, healing, and wholeness are central to God's divine grace and purpose for humanity. This involves a harmonious living-in-community with God, people, and the entire creation.
3. The Church continues to have a unique, relevant, and specific role to play in health, health care, healing, and wholeness of life. The Church is called to witness and participate creatively in the divine ministry of healing, restoring wholeness in broken human lives with compassion, and being one with our Lord in His self-emptying and unconditional love.
4. Many Asian churches have pioneered their health ministry by establishing Christian hospitals and by serving people and communities through health care over the decades.

We want to see churches and Christian healthcare institutions:

1. Reflecting Christ's love, at all levels, in all dimensions including physical, mental, and spiritual, for all.
2. Recognising the changing paradigms in health, healing, and wholeness considering the emerging situations due to the climate emergency, post-pandemic context, conflict, and other mega-trends in Asia.
3. Shaping a world where everyone participates in the health and healing experience and no neighbourhood is left behind, based on a primary health care approach ensuring universal health coverage, including equity in financing mechanisms,

thereby protecting individuals and families from falling into poverty through unaffordable health care.

4. Promoting social transformation and upholding human dignity; including committing to the ending of all forms of sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination, and its specific impacts on health and wholeness.
5. Working together with civil society and with people of other faiths and of no faith, including people living with disabilities or diseases, to mobilise governments, international agencies, and the corporate world for greater justice in health, access to medicines, and quality health care.
6. Acknowledging, valuing, documenting, and deploying indigenous wisdom on herbal and traditional healing to benefit communities.

We call on churches and Christian healthcare institutions to:

1. Accept God's calling to be hospitable communities of health and healing, by being open and welcoming especially to those who are marginalised, poor, and vulnerable, upholding their dignity through their active participation.
2. Continue providing accurate and reliable health information to congregations and combat misinformation.
3. Invest in equipping youth and developing their capacities for resilience, which includes a greater commitment to the development of human resources through church-supported medical and para-medical educational institutions.
4. Contribute to the elimination of financial barriers to health care for those who are poor and marginalised.
5. Equip church leaders and local pastors with knowledge of health that allows them to be involved in partnership in providing holistic pastoral care and support health workers and communities.
6. Engage in health promotion, disease prevention, provision of universal health care, palliative care, elderly care, HIV and AIDS, mental health, and other services which constitute the unique contribution of the Church and Christian health care ministry to the arena of health care services.

7. Address environmental issues that contribute towards ill-health and advocate for positive environmental health.
8. Advocate for health for all as a right, and for justice for the community.
9. Participate in healing ministry inspired by the gospel with efficient and fair-minded governance, transparency, and accountability to God and people, specifically in matters related to assets and finances.
10. Address the growing issues of substance abuse proactively by prioritising both the preventive and treatment aspects with compassion and in Christ's love so as to restore healing and wholeness in the afflicted.
11. Work together in solidarity to achieve global immunity and break the chain of COVID-19 and other vaccine-preventable diseases by advocating for and ensuring vaccine equity and the availability of countermeasures.
12. Work hand-in-hand to promote sustainable world peace by enhancing recovery efforts for regional and global situations and contexts.

2023

2023 General Secretary's Letters and Statements

Statement on International Women's Day–2023 on “DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality”

7 March 2023

The observance of International Women's Day (IWD) by the United Nations recognises the importance of the role of women and girls who are championing the advancement of transformative technology and digital education. It is heartening that the UN has taken the initiative to alert the international community by calling for a focus on the impact of the digital gender gap on widening economic and social inequalities. The theme of International Women's Day (IWD)–2023, “DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality”, is an opportunity to address the impact of the digital gender gap on widening economic and social inequalities, to revisit the gendered impacts of innovation and technology, and to identify pathways that will allow for a more inclusive and equitable world.

The digital revolution has been a seismic shift that has shaped the 21st century. Technology has greatly improved people's quality of life by easing communication and information access as well as by tackling large-scale development and humanitarian issues. However, it must also be recognised that technology can perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination, as well as exacerbate existing social, economic, and political disparities. While the digital revolution offers immense potential to improve social and economic outcomes for women, it also has the potential to reinforce and embed existing patterns of gender inequality and limit the equitable distribution of the benefits of digital transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the digital gender divide, with women and girls most disproportionately affected by the lack of access to technology and the internet. The pandemic has also exposed the way technology can be used to perpetuate violence against women, through activities like cyberstalking, harassment, and online abuse, which ranges from identity-based insults to targeted harassment and attacks on privacy; the unique harassment faced online includes the possibilities of anonymous attacks, the ease of “viralising” harmful and hateful content to an expanded audience, the difficulty of removing content once it is on the internet, and woefully inadequate regulation by internet service providers and online social media giants. Digital violence is not a phenomenon that is isolated from other forms of violence. Unhindered and conducive digital access is key to promoting awareness of the rights that women and girls hold, to increasing civic engagement, and to the full and free expression of ideas and opinions. The digital revolution, the fruits of which will be enjoyed for generations to come, can be a positive driver-of0change for gender equality and women’s empowerment by expanding access to information, knowledge, essential public services, and opportunities for the full participation of women and girls in socio-economic and political life.

On this International Women’s Day, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) affirms its commitment to standing in solidarity with women and girls around the world and to using our platform, voice, and resources to advocate for gender equality and justice. The CCA calls upon its member constituencies and ecumenical partners to deepen their understanding of digital inequalities and address, to the best of their capacities, the barriers that women and girls face in the productive use of digital technologies and science.

Two key areas in which churches and faith-based organisations in Asia can make a meaningful impact are in promoting affordability and addressing harmful social norms. Affordable access and a supportive social environment can enable women and girls to thrive in their use of digital technologies. Churches and faith-based organisations must promote community awareness and education campaigns to eliminate discriminatory norms and attitudes that

underpin gender-based discrimination and violence. Churches in Asia must engage themselves in ending harmful attitudes and behaviours in their constituencies. Churches and faith-based organisations must also make available pastoral care for women and girls who have experienced online and technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Statement submitted to the Sixty-seventh Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

6–17 March 2023

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), a regional ecumenical organisation comprised of 98 member churches and 21 national ecumenical councils, and representing 45 million Christians from Japan in the east to Iran in the west, and from Nepal in the north to New Zealand in the south, welcomes the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women's focus on the priority theme, "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" and the review theme, "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls". As a faith-based organisation, the CCA advocates for a focus on these areas as part of its regular programmatic involvement.

The Gender Digital Divide

Recent frontier technology and innovation have profoundly transformed society offering unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Technology and innovation have inseparable and deep connections with gender equality because of their powerful impact on the economy, offering 'leapfrog' opportunities with their capacity to expand access to meaningful employment, communication, and financial or business services.

However, of the 2.9 billion people still offline, the majority are women and girls who are less likely to own a mobile phone, use the internet, or know how to leverage digital technology. Although the COVID-19 pandemic hastened the mainstreaming of digital

services and onboarding of those who were not yet engaged with online or digital technologies, there was a reinforcement of gender stereotypes that discriminate against women and girls. Thus, digital technologies, platforms, and tools must be designed to be safe, inclusive, and accessible from the start. The world must share a common vision for digital cooperation that is grounded on digital safety, security, and trust to realise the full potential of positive technology usage for connectivity and prosperity.

The instrumentalization of digital tools and technology to support women's empowerment necessitates first the ending of online violence against women. Violence against women, both online and offline, is a manifestation of the systemic marginalisation of women throughout society. The main targets of online violence and abuse are women and girls, particularly those who are more likely to experience numerous and overlapping forms of discrimination. As a result, they are pushed out of public participation, opportunity utilisation, online conversation, and digital spaces more broadly. Online presence, participation, privacy and data must be protected using human rights principles that encourage accountability and deter exploitation or discrimination.

The Gender Employment and Skills Gap

Even if there has been progress in Asia towards gender equality in the workplace, women still face additional difficulties in the age of automation, given the lack of skills and connectivity. It is only recently that Asian states are taking into consideration the impact of the digital economy on the world of work and women. Supporting women to benefit from such technological innovations will mean higher labour force participation. The effects of automation on women's employment and their role in Asia's economic development are routinely overlooked, although the low-paid, lower-skill positions that women typically hold are those that are most vulnerable to automation. Additionally, although women in Asia can now access a growing online gig economy that allows for flexible and independent work arrangements via digital platforms, it can become a yet-another sector that reinforces gender

stereotypes under precarious working conditions given the high degrees of informality and lack of regulation. Job equality must go hand in hand with job quality. The empowerment of women to take up high-skilled science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) jobs should be more intentional and concerted.

This must be supplemented with broader campaigns to facilitate the overall labour market participation of women through the provision of support services and the redistribution of care work that allow women to pursue meaningful and stable careers while not compromising on their familial responsibilities.

Key Gender-Related Policy Recommendations

The Christian Conference of Asia calls upon member states to:

1. Establish, bolster, and advance public commitments to digital literacy, entrepreneurial education, and skills endowment for the confidence-building and empowerment of women and girls;
2. Encourage stronger government-backed STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and STEM-related investments and initiatives to support women as innovators and entrepreneurs;
3. Integrate gender equality, accountability, and non-discrimination into policy and practice surrounding emerging digital tools and technologies;
4. Collect, track, and report sex-disaggregated and gender-specific data in the usage of, and, in employment in, tech and innovation for evidence-based policy, monitoring, and solutions, to measure gaps and progress for gender equality;
5. Fulfil obligations to protect individuals, especially women and girls, from harm, including non-physical violence such as online sexual exploitation that can, at times, surpass the harm of physical violence;
6. Promote the digital commons as a global public good that is safe for communication and employment, and that protects identities and data, through the elimination of unscrupulous, fraudulent, or exploitative digital tools and technologies;

7. Partner with businesses and corporations for structured bridging programmes, for building strong women's networks, and ensure that best practices are leveraged across all technology sectors.

Statement on World Refugee Day–2023 on “Hope Away From Home: A World Where Refugees are Always Included”

19 June 2023

The theme of World Refugee Day–2023, ‘Hope Away from Home: A World Where Refugees are Always Included’, reminds us of the transformative power of inclusion and the importance of equitable access to spaces where refugees can be safe and thrive. As we commemorate World Refugee Day, let us reflect on the urgent need to protect and support refugees, especially those in Asia. We must strive to reach those most in need and promote human rights, equality, dignity, meaningful participation, peace, and security. Together, with the dedication of citizens and organisations, we can make a difference in the lives of refugees and work towards a more just and compassionate world.

A neglected humanitarian crisis due to the increase of refugees has been unfolding in Asia for several years. By the end of 2022, Asia and the Pacific hosted 6.8 million refugees, five million internally displaced refugees (IDPs), and 1.2 million stateless persons. The plight of refugees in Asia does not receive sufficient international attention and support. The refugee crisis caused by conflicts in Asia presents a complex set of situations needing greater responsibility-sharing and sustained commitment of resources. It demands our immediate action and attention.

Refugee protection is a shared, transnational challenge that requires shared solutions. It is crucial that we champion the right of refugees to seek safety, build support for their economic and social inclusion, and advocate for sustainable solutions. Inclusion is key to empowering refugees and enabling them to restart their lives, contributing to their host countries, and preparing for the

possibility of their returning home when conditions allow. Matthew 25:35–40 reminds us, as communities of faith, of our responsibility to provide refuge and care for those in need. Including refugees in our communities means ensuring they have access to essential services such as education, healthcare, housing, and employment. It requires creating an environment of solidarity and welcoming that nurtures a sense of belonging. Refugees are resilient and make valuable contributions to the fabric of communities. They bring with them unique skills and talents that can benefit and enrich societies. By promoting their physical, economic, social, and psychological health and well-being, they can be enabled to thrive and become active contributors to their communities, and thus it would be possible for us to create for them ‘Hope Away from Home: A World Where Refugees are Always Included’.

The full inclusion of refugees is impeded due to racism, xenophobia, and competition for resources. The cost of exclusion is far higher than the cost of inclusion. Refugees do not seek handouts but want opportunities to become self-reliant and contribute to society. By empowering refugees and providing them with opportunities, we can give them hope and enable them to take greater command of their lives despite the immense distress they have faced.

On World Refugee Day–2023, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) stands in solidarity with refugees, especially those in Asia, acknowledging the immense hardship they experience and courage amidst adversity. We denounce the policies of ‘containment and confinement’ that have plagued the region and renew our commitment to supporting and advocating for the rights, well-being, and inclusion of refugees in Asia.

The CCA urges the international community and neighbouring Asian countries to take immediate action to protect these civilians and provide them with the necessary support. At the same time, we urge the international community to work towards peace and find long-term solutions for refugees so they can safely return home or find opportunities for resettlement. The CCA especially appeals to its member constituencies and partners to extend all support to the mission of ameliorating the conditions of refugees in Asia.

Statement on World Day Against Trafficking in Persons on “Reach Every Victim of Trafficking: Leave No One Behind”

29 July 2023

Human trafficking, a form of modern slavery, is an affront to the foundational value that everyone is created equal and has the inalienable right to life with dignity, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Trafficking in persons is a crime of exploitation and coercion, violating the principles of justice and compassion that are at the heart of our Christian faith. Every year, millions of people are exploited within and across borders, subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, and various forms of dehumanisation. Civil war, ethnic conflicts, and the climate emergency exacerbate the risks of being trafficked, especially in regions like Asia. Displacement, socio-economic inequalities, and discrimination leave thousands of Asians vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers.

Tackling the global problem of trafficking requires a collective effort, transcending the boundaries of government, business, and civil society. As Christians, we are called to stand in solidarity with the marginalised and vulnerable, protect the oppressed, and seek justice for the victims. Through partnerships and collaborations, we can create a net of safety to protect each victim of trafficking, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Our faith teaches us that we are all part of one body, interconnected and interdependent. The Bible reminds us of our duty to protect the vulnerable and seek justice for the oppressed. In Isaiah 1:17, we are called to “learn to do right; seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the orphaned, and plead the case of the widow”. This commandment compels us to join hands and form partnerships to address the root causes of trafficking and work towards its eradication. It is through our collective efforts that we can build a just and compassionate society, free from the chains of exploitation. By sharing resources and information, we can equip frontline stakeholders to effectively track and respond to evolving trafficking trends. By partnering with survivors, we can

establish trauma-informed policies and strategies that prioritise the well-being and empowerment of victims. Our partnerships should extend to the trafficked people, ensuring that their voices are heard, their rights are protected, and their dignity is upheld. Partnerships are the essential foundation for sustainable and successful anti-trafficking work. To effectively combat trafficking, partnerships must extend beyond the boundaries of our immediate communities. International collaboration is crucial in identifying victims, prosecuting perpetrators, and implementing comprehensive protection services. By joining forces with governments, law enforcement agencies, NGOs, international organisations, and the private sector, we can strengthen our collective response to transnational trafficking and ensure that victims are not left without support. Only by working hand-in-hand can we dismantle the networks of traffickers and create a world where every victim is reached and protected.

Survivors of trafficking are not merely victims but essential partners in the anti-trafficking movement. Their lived experiences and unique perspectives bring invaluable insights that can shape programmes, policies, and strategies to ensure victim-centred, trauma-informed, and culturally competent responses. As Christians, we are called to love our neighbours and extend a helping hand to those in need. Leaving no one behind in the fight against trafficking means ending the exploitation of victims, providing comprehensive support for survivors, and addressing the vulnerabilities that make certain groups more susceptible to trafficking. It requires us to build strong partnerships based on trust, respect, and shared responsibility. We are reminded “to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute” (Proverbs 31:8). Let us heed this wisdom and prioritise survivor engagement and leadership in our partnerships.

On this World Day Against Trafficking in Persons–2023, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) calls on governments, law enforcement agencies, public services, and civil society to recommit their efforts to prevent trafficking, identify and support victims, and end impunity. We urge policymakers to create clear and resourced plans

that prioritise the fight against trafficking and ensure the well-being of survivors. Let us sensitise our churches to the reality of human trafficking and mobilise all sectors to take action. Together, let us strengthen our resolve to end trafficking, a crime that violates the basic dignity and rights accorded to each human being. By forging partnerships rooted in compassion, justice, and solidarity, we can build a world where no one is left behind and where the scourge of trafficking is eradicated.

Statement on Violence against Christian Homes and Churches in Pakistan

17 August 2023

It is with great dismay that the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has received reports from Pakistan about violent attacks on churches and Christians in Jaranwala, Faisalabad district, of the Punjab province in Pakistan.

The violence ensued after two Christians were allegedly accused of committing blasphemy.

Eleven churches have been burnt and destroyed so far, including Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Full Gospel Assembly, Salvation Army, and other independent churches. Christian households have also been targeted, looted, and burnt, which has compelled over 500 families in Maharanwala Basti to vacate and hide in fields for fear of their lives. Local clergy members have also been threatened and harassed.

The CCA condemns the attacks on the Christian community in Pakistan, a minority community that has faced escalating persecution and prejudice from extremist groups. The Jaranwala incident is the latest in a string of alleged accusations of blasphemy against Christians in different Pakistani cities.

Pakistani Christians have long been marginalised and have become targets of violence and forced conversions. They have suffered the destruction of their places of worship and homes due to growing intolerance. A lack of meaningful action from authorities further propels widespread impunity.

The CCA has repeatedly denounced the weaponisation of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws against Pakistan’s minorities. Pakistan has one of the strictest blasphemy laws in the world, with a possible death sentence for anyone found guilty of insulting Islam. The threat of being accused of blasphemy is used to intimidate and persecute the minority Christians, and the law is exploited to settle personal vendettas.

The CCA calls for immediate police intervention and the safeguarding of Christian residences and churches. The CCA also calls for the prevention of further escalation of violence. The Government of Pakistan must uphold its commitment to religious freedom and safeguard all citizens, going strictly by the principles enshrined in its constitution and in line with international covenants to which Pakistan is a signatory.

CCA urges immediate end to blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh and establish peace with justice in the region

18 August 2023

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) urges the immediate lifting of the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, currently facing a dire humanitarian crisis affecting more than 120,000 individuals, including 30,000 children.

The CCA is deeply concerned about the worsening humanitarian situation within the blockaded Nagorno-Karabakh region, also known as Artsakh. As the crisis reaches critical levels, the CCA emphasises the urgent need for immediate action from the global community.

The Lachin corridor, which serves as the sole route connecting the area to Armenia, has remained sealed for over seven months. This blockade has led to a severe humanitarian emergency, putting the lives of 120,000 residents, including vulnerable children, in grave jeopardy. The scarcity of essential resources such as food, medicine, electricity, and fuel has exacerbated the suffering of the affected population.

The CCA strongly condemns Azerbaijan’s blockade of the ethnic Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and denounces it as a violation of international agreements, humanitarian and human rights principles, and moral standards. The deliberate obstruction of the Lachin corridor exacerbates an already dire situation for the Armenian residents. Such actions contradict claims of goodwill and humanitarian responsibility by Azerbaijan, underscoring the urgent need for international attention.

The CCA appeals to Azerbaijan and all concerned parties to immediately lift the blockade and reopen the Lachin corridor. This action would enable unobstructed two-way movement of civilians, goods, and transportation, guaranteeing vital humanitarian access that will help alleviate the hardships faced by the Armenian community of Artsakh.

The CCA urges the international community to promptly intervene in order to dismantle the blockade and safeguard the lives of those residing in Artsakh. The CCA calls for dialogue and diplomatic initiatives to establish just and lasting peace in the region.

2023 Programme Communiqués

Communique of the Asian Church and Ecumenical Leaders’ Conference on ‘Changing Ecclesial and Ecumenical Landscape in Asia: Our Common Witness and Accompaniment’

5 May 2023

We, comprising over one hundred church and ecumenical leaders from different denominations, national Christian councils, and the ecumenical partners of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), gathered at the Millennium Hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia from 1 to 5 May 2023 for the Asian Church and Ecumenical Leaders’ Conference (ACELC) on the theme ‘Changing Ecclesial and Ecumenical Landscape in Asia: Our Common Witness and Accompaniment’, hosted by the CCA’s member church, the Protestant Church in the Western Part

of Indonesia (GPIB) in coordination with the CCA's member national council, the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI).

Meeting in a post-COVID-19 context, we recognise the world's brokenness and division, a worsening ecological situation, and the reverberating economic impacts of war and conflict, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine. Our ecumenical vision compels and entrusts us with the care of all of God's creation, with the mission of engaging in God's work of renewal and transformation. Our ecumenical accompaniment is not limited to ecclesial unity in the pursuit of the well-being of our church communities but involves the pursuit of justice and peace for all of God's people and for the entirety of God's creation.

Such an accompaniment entails a constant process of reflection, and of being and relating with each other and with the world at large. During the first segment of the ACELC, we deliberated upon good governance, integrity in leadership, and consensus decision-making. In the second part of the ACELC, we looked outwards and explored avenues to strengthen our involvement in the broader community through ecumenical diakonia. We were able to reflect on Asian churches' participation in ecumenical diakonia based on the principles outlined in the document 'Ecumenical Diakonia: Called to Transformation' published by the World Council of Churches (WCC).

Good governance enables us as church leaders to serve God's mission to the best of our ability, with sustainability, accountability, and effectiveness. Transcendental leadership that prioritises planet-oriented stewardship of creation, rather than being limited to a select group of people, is our calling. Consensus decision-making allows for a new way of being in community—one that hears and embraces the marginalised and dissenting voices among us and where decision-making power is shared.

Despite these efforts, we are also cognizant of, and acknowledge, the many aspects of church life that negatively impact the ecumenical movement. These include growing denominationalism and efforts to resurrect and promote narrow ecclesial or confessional group

identities, leading to a reluctance to embrace the wider fellowship; and a proliferation of organisations and structures that lead to duplication of diaconal efforts. We also observe some limited vision of leadership and the need for increased commitments to engage in ecumenism in Asia, with the result that there is insufficient or inadequate interest in the younger generation's ecumenical formation.

In a fragmented world, we firmly underscore the necessity of ecumenical diakonia and accompaniment. Our diakonia must be transformative, dignifying, and empowering, rather than a tool of dominance and dependence. Participating in the struggle for social justice must be an inseparable part of the church's diaconal mission—we possess the capacity to be living examples of Christ in community. We are challenged to be ambassadors for Christ and heralds of God so that transformation and reconciliation can be experienced by all. Diakonia must have its prophetic role of being in solidarity with people in their struggle for peace with justice, human dignity, and human rights. We also heard and discussed the prophetic role of churches and the need for developing understandings of dignity and justice that should emerge from the perception of the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is in this context that we comprehend diakonia as more than just sharing of resources. Practical actions of solidarity, capacity-building, and empowerment within communities as well as equipping communities for advocacy are essential components of diakonia.

Through biblical-theological reflections and worship, we explored and affirmed our deep commitment as good stewards of God's creation. Throughout history, God's intervention has renewed, transformed, and supported the oppressed and wronged-against, inspiring hope and strengthening accompaniment, support, and solidarity. God's purpose is the reconciliation and communion of the entire cosmos, motivating us to be faithful companions as the Spirit of God moves in the entire oikoumene.

We acknowledge:

1. The commitment to unity and sharing cannot be limited to ecclesial unity for self-interest or to concern only for the

well-being of churches. Our ecumenical accompaniment must reflect a calling to serve all creation, participate in God's healing and liberating mission, and work together for justice and peace. It must reflect a spirit of partnership, collaboration, and solidarity rather than create relationships of dependency or dominance.

2. In the context of conflict, geopolitical polarisation, and the resurgence of ethnic and religious extremism in Asia, ecumenical diakonia can be a pathway to the search for the Asian churches' common faith and visible unity, and can even strengthen wider ecumenism through closer cooperation and collaboration with communities of other faiths.
3. Koinonia and diakonia must first be preceded by metanoia or repentance. We often forget or neglect that the earth and people, intrinsically related, belong to God. Therefore, our diaconal efforts would be lacking unless they fully address concerns of ecological justice and restoration. The climate emergency demands our timely collective prophetic voices and concerted actions.
4. Such actions of stewardship, care, and engagement require good governance and capable leadership for handling resources with better stewardship. The governance we exhibit must be marked by integrity, participation, consensus, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency, equity, inclusivity, and adherence to the rule of law.

We call on our churches, national church councils, and ecumenical partners to:

1. Reflect on and renew the theological basis for good governance rooted in the Trinitarian mystery of God, and in church leadership at all levels (from national to local) and manifested through service and good stewardship;
2. Take action to ensure that leadership at all levels is ethical and is motivated by a commitment to serving Christ, the church, and the marginalised;
3. Create, nurture, cultivate, and make spaces and opportunities for second and third lines of leadership in the churches, without any discrimination based on age, gender, or ability;

4. Urge the prevention of the emotional and physical abuse of people in churches and diaconal institutions;
5. Promote spaces and opportunities for a living prophetic voice that speaks truth to power, calls the church to clarify its whole mission to the whole world, seeks peace with justice, and integrates prophetic and transformative diaconal ministry into the life of the member churches and councils of the CCA that moves beyond being involved in mere charity work and leads to the upholding of human rights and dignity and into active advocacy for all God's people. Such ministry is as important as the preaching of God's Word;
6. Renew a commitment to an integrated sense of mission that takes seriously ecumenical diaconal action in all its forms: restorative diakonia, eco-diakonia, and transformative diakonia. We appreciate the strengths and ecumenical capital of our region, and we move in this direction as we take the care of creation seriously, place the poor and marginalised in the centre of our work, and address regional conflicts and tensions in Asia while committing ourselves to the cause of justice and peace;
7. Take up the challenge and opportunity that eco-diakonia offers, in partnership with and guided by indigenous people across Asia;
8. Recommend to the CCA General Assembly to establish a CCA Ecumenical Diakonia Forum which will comprise churches, national Christian councils, and church-related ecumenical organisations involved in diaconal ministries in Asia, to provide support, enable collaboration, pool together resources, and promote shared learning as part of a renewed commitment to the development of growing partnerships in witness and service—that includes a focus on the prophetic and restorative aspect of diaconal activity;
9. Urge the CCA and WCC to facilitate more meaningful participation and engagement of Asian churches and the Asian ecumenical movement in advocacy on human rights violations in Myanmar, religious and ethnic conflicts, the plight of religious minorities in different Asian countries, peace and reconciliation in the Korean peninsula, and the challenges related to emerging geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-strategic arenas; also recognising the need for wider

collaborations with civil society networks and faith-based groups so as to better respond to the emerging crises in Asia.

With humility, we acknowledge that the ultimate redeeming, restoring, and transforming action is still that of God, as we carry out God's vision and mission for justice and peace in Asia.

We commit ourselves to the cause of multilateral ecumenical diakonia and accompaniment while encouraging the wider ecumenical movement to join us in this journey, in accordance with the call to "spur one another unto love and good works" (Hebrew 10:24). We commit to keeping one another in constant prayer, that God may fulfil every good purpose of ours and every act prompted by our faith (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12).

“The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has been a vital conduit during the past decades in bringing the voices and concerns of Asian churches to the international stage. The Public Issues statements of CCA and other documents included in this volume serve as a record of the CCA’s prophetic interventions as well as a reminder of the fact that the pursuit of justice, compassion, and solidarity is not confined to any one corner of the world, but is a shared and universal mission. It is hoped that these resources inspire many to continue raising their voices to advocate for justice, and to walk in accompaniment and solidarity.”

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