



Christian Conference of Asia

**General Secretary's Reports
to the Executive Committee
2015–2023**



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**Reports of the General Secretary
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Introduction

Reports summarising programmes implemented and activities undertaken during a particular period are helpful indicators to assess progress, challenges, and outcomes. Such reports are effective tools, helpful to a certain extent for assessing the success and failures based on the parameters of the goals initially envisaged and actualised, or the planned activities successfully implemented. Narrative reports are also helpful when priority areas need to be identified for setting new priorities and future directions.

The Report of the General Secretary presented annually at every Executive Committee meeting gives an account not only of CCA's programmes and activities but also various other issues and concerns regarding the emerging trends in the region, geopolitical, and socio-economic challenges. Such Reports also address trends and analyses related to the Asian ecumenical or ecclesial arena. In other words, such reports presented are contextual and indicators of ecumenical milestones.

The period between CCA's post-Jakarta Assembly, starting from mid-2015 to the Kottayam Assembly in 2023 has been a challenging era in Asian ecumenical history too. These Reports, therefore, are historical accounts or snapshots of time within the past eight years of the Asian ecumenical journey. It is hoped that the participants of the CCA 15th General Assembly will get an overview of CCA's journey starting from the post-14th to the 15th General Assemblies of CCA, Jakarta to Kottayam.

Yours along the journey,



Dr Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2015

13–16 October 2015 | Bangkok, Thailand

It has become customary to present a report by the General Secretary to every governing board meeting of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). I noticed such practices when I joined the staff of CCA, and my work with CCA during the tenure of two General Secretaries in the 1990s. Subsequently I also had first-hand experiences in listening to such reports by other General Secretaries of CCA while I was participating in meetings as an ex-officio member of CCA General Committee during my tenure as the Asia Secretary of World Council of Churches (WCC). Now through my current position as the 10th General Secretary of CCA, it gives me immense pleasure and privilege to stand before you to present this first report of the General Secretary to the first meeting of the new Executive Committee.

It is also my special privilege to welcome each and every one of you to the first meeting of the new CCA Executive Committee. The membership and the composition of the new CCA Executive Committee, elected at the Jakarta Assembly, is a great asset for the Asian ecumenical movement. We have a galaxy of very important ecumenical personalities from different ecclesiastical and confessional backgrounds who possess a variety of ecumenical experiences, unique qualities, and maturity. I am privileged to be your fellow traveller in our common ecumenical journey in the coming years. In fact, I feel that I am being accompanied by a group of seasoned ecumenical and church leaders who can guide and support me in different ways with your vast expertise while I am entrusted with the responsibilities to lead CCA in the next five years. I am also particularly happy that I am not a stranger to most of you. Some of us were contemporaries in the Asian ecumenical movement since our youth days, and with some others I worked in different capacities through my ecumenical engagements during the past quarter of a century in the Asian and global ecumenical movement especially through my several

years of official responsibilities in CCA and WCC. So when I officially assumed my responsibility as the General Secretary of CCA, another important chapter in ecumenical engagements in Asia, I felt a sense of belonging and a sense of security when I started realising the enormous challenges CCA will have to address in the coming years. However, I foresee much potential and many opportunities ahead of us. I am sure, the support of the Executive Committee members and your guidance will help me to perform my tasks which will take CCA to new horizons during our tenure.

CCA amidst Asia's Challenges and Realities

The challenges and imperatives that emerge from the changes and transformations taking place in Asia are enormous and often they surprise us. Well, one can say that such changes are not exceptional or isolated only in Asia, but the element of surprise in international relations appears more frequent and more ferocious. We know that all these changes or transformations are the products or by-products of a dangerously fragile socio-political and economic system part of the geopolitical architecture in an emerging global order. It is increasingly understood that we live now in a new phase of global system, which is defined and designed more with segments of divergence than convergence as well as more fragmentations of the world. Some time ago the world boasted about an emerging reality of globalisation, a vehicle for fast changes and progress in the modern world. The speed with which different Asian countries progressed was also pointed out as the successful outcome of the globalisation process. Today, it is being said that what is less appreciated of the globalisation process over the years, the basic enablers of globalisation—finance, technology, energy, education, science, law, trade, travel—have all turned into weapons in a new form of warfare. Forces that should be binding together as diverse components of the globe are instead transformed into divisive elements or disruptive tools. Nader Mousavizadeh, a geopolitical analyst, describes this trend as ‘weaponisation of everything’, which is the new reality of globalisation. This has profound implications for governments, companies, international organisations, and individuals alike. According to Nader, not every aspect of this

weaponisation is, of course, new. What is new is the “velocity and impact of weaponising today’s tools of global integration in an age of unprecedented interdependence”. The Asian reality is not far from the current global reality. We are at a turning point in Asia’s history and we know that such times always bring heavy burdens of challenges to us, and the responsibility of transformations within us.

The question before CCA and the Asian ecumenical movement is how to address such challenges as we have to face numerous issues on the one hand at Asia’s geopolitical context and at the same time our own ecumenical realm. How can we turn the weaknesses of the contemporary scenario into a strength? In other words, as we face numerous challenges and we are bound to respond to them, such challenges also demand ecumenical engagements. The CCA, which is considered as the coordinator and facilitator responsible for ensuring the coherence of the Asian ecumenical movement, is expected to act and perform its task without fail. We discussed several such issues during the Sarasahan sessions at the 14th Assembly and we tried to identify ecumenical responses. There are questions related to Asia’s geopolitical trends, militarisation, arms race, territorial disputes, people’s quest for building peace, gross and systematic human rights violations, rights of migrant workers and stateless people, increasing human trafficking, eco-justice and sustainable development, situations of vulnerable communities and indigenous people, rights of religious minorities and freedom of religion, etc. Several of these emerging Asian realities warrant CCA and its constituencies to articulate their perceptions and responses from a biblical theological basis as well as the Asian church’s prophetic witness and mission for which relevant theological and missiological articulations are needed. Probably we will also be discussing some other priorities as part of issues that need ecumenical responses. When we discuss later about the new programme thrusts and priorities of CCA for the next five years, several other issues also might arise. The issues related to advocacy on peace and reconciliation in the context of Korean peninsula, the changing role of Japan and related security issues, territorial disputes and emerging role of China’s economic and strategic

supremacy, foreign interventions in Asia's internal strategic and security affairs, people's struggle for right to self-determination and democratic governance, rise of religious extremism, the impact of degeneration of Asia's rich tradition and heritage of family values, the problems and issues related to ageing, mental health and disability, etc. It was reported last week that about 58 percent of the world's older persons live in Asia and that the number of older persons in Asia is estimated to triple from 438 million in 2010 to 1.26 billion by 2050. One in every six persons in Asia has some form of disability; this is about 650 million men, women and children. The number is expected to rise over the next decades due to population ageing, natural disasters, chronic health conditions, road traffic injuries, poor working conditions and other factors. Despite the constant increase in their number, persons with disabilities tend to be unseen, unheard and uncounted. They are often excluded from access to education, employment, social protection services and legal support systems, and are subject to disproportionately high rates of poverty. Despite high and long-lasting economic growth, inequalities are widening in most countries in the Asia region. Currently one out of every three (1.5 billion) people in the region live on less than USD 2 per day, deprived of their basic human rights. They are vulnerable to increased economic and environmental risks.

Within this context, the question before us is how do we respond to such issues and problems as part of our Christian and ecumenical witness in Asia. The enduring vision and abiding mandates of CCA have been articulated in this way: *"Believing that the purpose of God for the Churches in Asia is life together in a common obedience of witness to the mission of God in the world, the CCA exists as an organ and a forum of continuing cooperation among churches and national ecumenical bodies in Asia within the framework of the wider ecumenical movement."*

Future Programme Directions and a Viable Structure

CCA has been reviewing and streamlining its programme priorities and structures at different stages of its past fifty-eight years of history. Such processes always helped CCA to re-envision its

programme priorities in the changing Asian contexts from time to time. The sharpening of ideas to refocus the programme thrusts continue to be a priority while being engaged in fulfilling its mission. When new programme thrusts and prioritised programme areas are identified, relevant management methodology also needs to be introduced. It is also required to introduce new approaches for increased visibility of CCA's programmes as well as communicating CCA's work to all its members and partners in timely and relevant ways.

The current programme structure of CCA was originally developed in 1998 and finally it was systematised and became fully operational in the post-Tomohon Assembly period, it has been experienced for some years and noted at different times by the governing boards and assemblies that the current programme structure has not been viable for CCA especially due to the shrinking of financial resources as well as a lessening sense of ownership by member churches and councils. During the period between the Chiang Mai and Kuala Lumpur Assemblies, there was an Organisational Review and Assessment (OA) undertaken by CCA. The OA team presented number of proposals at the Kuala Lumpur Assembly and asked for follow-up actions including programme restructuring. No restructuring was initiated; instead, several staff positions were kept vacant during the past several years and the number of programmes were reduced year after year. This has affected the credibility and the image of CCA. It is now viewed as a regional ecumenical organisation which has very limited organisational capacity to respond to the emerging Asian realities. There has been for some time a growing demand from the CCA constituency to review and set up the programme directions in the contemporary ecumenical, ecclesial, missiological contexts and address the emerging realities of our time.

The constitutional amendments adopted by the Assembly also took this issue seriously and gave wider scope for restructuring of programmes. As per the provisions in the new constitution, there will only be one programme committee, instead of three different programme committees with a total membership of forty-five

members and three moderators as it was in the past. However, the current programme structure even at this stage is basically based on a programme structure that was developed in 1998. As per this programme structure, three main programme areas still exist with provisions for six executive secretaries. But in recent years the number of staff in each programme cluster has been limited to one due to financial constraints and there are only just two executive secretaries now for all programmes. At the same time, demand for programmatic involvement of CCA in various areas by member constituencies have increased.

The Assembly also identified several new priorities, affirmed several existing programmes and demanded CCA's programmatic involvement in various areas where ecclesiastical and ecumenical responses are warranted. The 14th General Assembly in its two separate sessions initiated discussions about the future programme direction of CCA especially for the next five years or beyond. Each of the seven working groups of the Assembly identified several priorities made certain proposals. Each working group also reflected on specific programme thrusts and proposed certain priority concerns for the future programmatic involvement of CCA. The twelve specific themes discussed at the Sarasehan sessions also brought forward proposals with key suggestions. Those major areas of issues and programme priorities are now filtered and grouped into specific thematic framework. You can see the proposal for a new programme structure based on the priorities identified by the assembly and through a subsequent filtering of those proposals.

CCA's Financial Profile and Current Trends

As the Asia Secretary of WCC, I have had the opportunity to coordinate CCA's Round Table mechanism for almost ten years from 2000 to 2009. Prior to that I was on the staff of CCA for seven years and as a staff member I had participated and observed during that time several Round Table meetings. I remember that CCA had a total budget of almost USD 2.5 million for some years, including the designated funds received from various ecumenical partners. However, the ecumenical partners who generously supported

CCA reminded CCA leadership from time to time about the need to generate more financial resources within Asia for CCA. During the past ten years, CCA's total annual income has been drastically reduced. Total income has been decreasing every year. The total financial contributions from CCA member churches and councils in 2014 was only about USD 88,000 and the grant for General Funds from ecumenical partners was about USD 348,000 during the same year. Due to the drastic reductions in staff and programme costs as well as the relocation of the office to Chiang Mai from Hong Kong, staff costs and administrative costs have been reduced during the past years in order to keep a balanced budget. However, this approach has not been helpful for CCA as a regional ecumenical organisation as this has affected the quality of programmes and activities of CCA as well as efficiency and motivation of the staff. The number of staff who can organise programmes in an effective way and raise the profile of CCA by way of addressing emerging Asian issues have been much lower than the period when CCA was based in Hong Kong or at the beginning of the period when CCA was moved to Chiang Mai. This warrants a situation of envisioning future income generation strategy and financial stewardship without compromising staff efficiency and programme implementation. Income generation from CCA member churches and councils should be a priority for CCA in the coming years.

Many member churches and member councils of CCA are in a comparatively better position to contribute more financially to CCA's general budget. Nevertheless, there is lack of a sense of ownership demonstrated over the years. This aspect also was discussed and considered by the 14th Assembly. The Assembly mandated the new Executive Committee to decide on policies related to membership contribution, income development, sharing of programme costs by member churches and councils, and introducing a travel subsidy policy in CCA for the committee members from financially well-off CCA member constituencies whenever they attend committee meetings and programmes in a way, the Assembly mandate to the executive committee is to find a new way and a methodology to ensure a greater sense of ownership and sharing of financial resources for members' participation in CCA Committees and

programmes. As we all know, the World Council of Churches has been experimenting with such practices over the past several years and WCC member churches from Asian countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have been extending their generous support to WCC with increased contribution of financial resources. Similarly, regular support has been extended by the same churches to some of the confessional fellowships or communions like the WCRC, LWF, WMC, etc. Fifty-eight years after the founding of CCA, now the time has come for CCA to introduce a new income generation and travel subsidy policy and seek more collaboration and participation of its member constituencies to CCA's programmes, personnel, and programme implementation as well as participation in decision-making and advisory bodies.

The deteriorating financial situation in the global arena has already affected countries, governments, financial and multilateral institutions in the West. It is also affecting the life and work of the ecumenical organisations in various parts of the world and even certain ecumenical specialised ministries are finding it difficult to continue their operations as their back donors, their governments, have stopped funding. The World Council of Churches has again been affected more seriously in the past week through the financial crises in the West. I have had certain meetings and discussions with some of CCA's traditional funding partners in Europe recently. They were asking several questions about CCA's plans for future financial sustainability and, in a way, I guessed their indication about reduction of support in future. Those discussions helped me to think loudly on how to reposition CCA in the future and how to convert the difficulties as new opportunities in CCA's life and witness. It is the responsibility of the governing board of CCA to find creative ways and means to overcome the difficulties. We should be able to find some solutions through certain creative ways during the tenure of our term and initiate a process of revitalising the Asian ecumenical movement. In this context I am wondering whether the shrinking financial contributions from the West will be an opportunity for Asian churches to think and act to raise more support within Asia. I am confident of the fact that more and more

Asian churches will be able to support CCA in the coming years. In the past, CCA used to ask the ecumenical partners for special grants and additional financial support for each General Assembly. CCA has not been following such practices for some time. We have seen recently how one single member church of CCA mobilised financial resources to host the last CCA assembly for which they generated USD 400,000 from local churches. I am sure other Asian churches will come forward to host number of CCA programmes in the coming years. There are signs of changes in trends of extending contributions. We will prove that we are not always at the receiving end, but that our churches are committed to revitalise the Asian ecumenical movement in the near future. By the grace of God, we will be able to generate more and more funds within Asia and then we shall rejoice and remember the assurances: “For He has given you the former rain faithfully, and He will cause the rain to come down for you--the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month. The threshing floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil.” (Joel 2:23-24).

Collaborative Ecumenical Partnership to face the “Ecumenical Winter”

Our ecumenical commitment and calling take us to another reason to think about a more systematic approach in making CCA’s witness more effectively in partnership with other ecumenical organisations and platforms in Asia region and beyond the Asia region. There are questions raised from many corners these days about the viability and effectiveness of various ecumenical organisations, especially when the “ecumenical winter” is becoming much stronger these days. “Ecumenical winter” has become a terminology for some time now to indicate the crises in the ecumenical movement especially due to the shrinking nature of activities and lack of financial support. As we know, in winter, due to the frozen climate, our movements are restricted, sometimes even inducing situations of semi-paralysis. In order to overcome the winter, we need extra care. Today’s ecumenical winter is affecting the effectiveness of an active ecumenical movement and its functions.

Through my work at WCC and CCA, I am quite familiar with Asia’s ecumenical seasons. It is my firm conviction that we need to

develop collaboration and joint actions in our common ecumenical journey. Often, we are eloquent about our ecumenical partnership and mutual solidarity. However, this partnership should be able to reach the goal of certain visible and result-oriented partnerships with other members in the ecumenical family in Asia which will make a difference in the quality of our partnership within the ecumenical family. CCA, as a regional ecumenical organisation in Asia with a very vast constituency, is in a unique position to enter into quality partnership arrangements with other ecumenical bodies in a creative way. If CCA agreed to a new initiative of collaborative partnership, it will help CCA to maximise its ecumenical actions in a collaborative way. We need to develop guidelines in order to provide a normative framework for such cooperation with other ecumenical organisations or ecumenical structures who are expressing to be in partnership with CCA. We can propose a brand name for this effort: 'Collaborative Ecumenical Partnership in Programmes and Activities' (CEPAP). It is my considered opinion that such partnerships will allow considerable leverage of each partner's unique strengths and resources to pool together through collaborative ecumenical partnership in planning and implementing programmes and activities jointly. I am proposing this new initiative for CCA to consider as one of the ways to revitalise CCA and its activities in future together with ecumenical actors. Financial support only should not be the criteria for developing this partnership and collaboration within Asian ecumenical family, but it is also part of our commitment to embrace and cooperate with all ecumenical actors and players within the Asian ecumenical family.

Recently, I have received a letter from an Asian ecumenical organisation which was originally supported by CCA including its establishment in 1970, the Association of Christian Institutes for Social Concerns in Asia (ACISCA). The ACISCA has membership in Several Asian countries with more than forty lay leadership training centres and centres that are involved in training people to address social concerns in an ecumenical framework. However, it has been a defunct mechanism for some years due to lack of availability of separate financial resources for regional activities. The current leadership of ACISCA recently approached me to explore the

possibility for joint programmes and collaboration. I recommend to the Executive Committee to consider this suggestion and work out certain modalities in the form of a guideline or MoU in order to shape a more systematic and official policy for future collaborations and joint actions with ACISCA. There are certain other MoUs already in place with other ecumenical organisations and CCA. The MoU between CCA and the Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs in one particular area of work, School of Peace, is being implemented by another mechanism created more than ten years ago, which is known as IFC. Although there have been certain working arrangements and now a MoU has been developed, the methodology needs to be reviewed as CCA's participation has not been effective in recent years for various reasons. For this reason, I am suggesting a systematic approach in entering into such partnership with a more professional approach which can be through a Collaborative Ecumenical Partnership in Programmes and Activities (CEPAP).

As we know CCA alone does not make the Asian ecumenical movement and CCA is not the only Asian ecumenical organisation. The ecumenical and ecclesiastical landscapes in Asia have changed over the past decades. Different institutional and organisational manifestations also were emerged. But it is an accepted fact within the ecumenical movement that CCA is the privileged instrument responsible for ensuring the coherence and coordination of the ecumenical movement in Asia. But, CCA is helpless to perform its role today due to multiplicity of ecumenical organisations as well as external interventions every now and then which create more disharmony within Asia. What we experience now in Asia is a trend of "Archipelago Ecumenism". Instead of nurturing an integrated approach in ensuring the coherence and unity of the one ecumenical movement, we are experiencing a compartmentalisation of the ecumenical movement and ecumenism in Asia. At one time, coherence and coordination of the ecumenical movement was the main emphasis and slogan of WCC and Western mission and ecumenical agencies. Today the same ecumenical and mission bodies are competing with each other in their former mission fields in Asia to establish their denominations or their own style of networks in the name of ecumenism. As a result of this trend, the

ecumenical movement in Asia becomes a model of an archipelago of ecumenism” within Asia rather than promoting the values of a united ecumenical movement. This “archipelago ecumenism” is being created in Asia as a result of the parachuted ecumenism.

Reviewing the Location of CCA

As per the decision of the 12th General Assembly, CCA moved its headquarters from Hong Kong to Chiang Mai in 2006. The main reason for the relocation of the headquarters was based on the concern of increasing overhead expenses, especially increasing maintenance costs of buildings on the CCA campus in Hong Kong. However, at the time of relocation in Chiang Mai, a number of other factors such as visa requirements related to international staff and their families, government restrictions and changing immigration policies, practical difficulty of obtaining visas for staff travels to other countries, recruitment of administrative staff with adequate quality to work in international organisation, etc., were not considered or carefully looked at.

The 14th General Assembly gave us mandates to follow-up its proposals and decisions in various areas of the work of CCA including a review on the current location of the CCA headquarters and the practical difficulties CCA is facing while it is anchored now in Chiang Mai. It is primarily the responsibility of the Executive Committee to initiate a process of reviewing the merits and demerits of having the headquarters in Chiang Mai. About ten years ago CCA was shifted from Hong Kong with the hope that CCA would be able to set up a new headquarters in Chiang Mai with much better facilities compared to the then existing facilities in Hong Kong. But, over the years CCA has been experiencing increased practical difficulties in its operations and existence in Chiang Mai as an international organisation. We have been made aware most recently that CCA’s registration as a Foundation in Thailand itself is not in accordance with the actual work of CCA. CCA’s operations and programmes cover a vast geographical area outside of Thailand, whereas the programmes through a Foundation’s objectives are intended only to undertake projects and programmes within the territories of this

country. The more stringent rules applied by the Government of Thailand in recent times to grant employment visas to expatriate staff is also becoming a major concern, hindering the smooth work of CCA.

CCA and its Unique Role in Asia

The specific responsibility and role of CCA is to search for the expression of Asian churches common faith through its engagement in a pluralistic Asia and work for the visible unity despite doctrinal differences or confessional barriers. As we all agree, the central calling of the ecumenical movement is the quest for the unity of the church. It is a quest which looks to the kingdom of God and participates in human conflicts as mandated by the Gospel of Christ. We are called to participate in witnessing in unity and serve the reconciliation of all humanity and the whole creation in the household of God. In fact, we are not trying to build a unity of Asian churches that did not exist before. What we are expecting is to open ourselves to one another in our ecumenical journey and pilgrimage. The ecumenical pilgrimage the Asian church leaders articulated decades ago is a commitment to unity. Our ancestors envisioned and longed for that unity of Asian churches and strengthening of an Asian ecumenical movement. This was the reason that they challenged the paternalistic values of the colonial missionary era. Their efforts ultimately provoked some but strengthened many. An Asian ecumenical identity was established within Asia and beyond Asia. It is high time for us to reposition CCA on the search for the visible unity in responding to the challenges of contemporary Asian realities.

As we move forward with new programme thrusts in the post-Assembly period, we will have to envisage some new programmes and to ensure participation of a wide spectrum of participants from various constituencies. Let me sum up this report by mentioning a number of areas on which I believe the CCA must focus in the coming five years. We are going to be in a better position now to plan and envision some new events that will contribute to make certain important milestones in Asia's ecumenical history, for example, a major celebration to mark the 60th anniversary of CCA,

which will fall during the tenure of this Executive Committee, less than two years from now, in May 2017. This will be a very significant milestone in the history of CCA and according to our common Asian tradition and custom, sixty is the age that we become wiser and it will be the beginning of the new cycle of a life span. We need to plan the preparations for this from now onwards for this major event. In order to begin the process and to popularise the forthcoming 60th anniversary event, I have suggested to colleagues that we should encourage member churches and council to organise 60 echo meetings based on CCA's Assembly theme in different CCA member constituencies until the period up to May 2017. There are at least four or five such echo meetings on CCA's assembly theme have been already organised. The time is due now to organise certain other major events such as an Asia Mission Conference, an Asia Youth Assembly, and Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly. All these events during the next five years before the next Assembly and the end of the term of this Executive Committee will help us to revitalise CCA.

We need to recover our lost vision and passion for ecumenism, discerning in the depth of our faith. We need to recognise that as members of the Asian ecumenical fraternity, we have to grow and progress in the quest for accepting the growing reality of our common belonging, and our being in Christ. Let us keep travelling to reach the goal of our common witness in unity.

Mathews George Chunakara

General Secretary, CCA

13 October 2015

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2016

18–22 July 2016 | Medan, Indonesia

It is almost nine months since we met last time as members of the Executive Committee of CCA. Although the provision in the constitution is for the meeting of an Executive Committee once every year, this is probably the first time that we are meeting much ahead of the time frame than the normally stipulated for the frequency of the Executive Committee meeting. However, there are several issues we need to address in this Executive Committee meeting as part of our routine business as well as we need to reflect on the contemporary realities. The role of the Executive Committee is not only to deal with the routine business agenda, but our task is also to address the emerging contexts and their wider implications in the life and witness of churches in Asia and the ecumenical movement. As we are expected to undertake this task as part of our mandate, it is an imperative for us to analyse and reflect on the contemporary situation and evolve ecumenical responses while we move ahead with programmes, activities, and plan of actions.

The events in our day-to-day lives are replete with numerous challenges. It is no longer news or novelty in hearing stories about the crises in our world today. The reality is that the crises are spreading far beyond its point of origin. The crisis is not limited in a particular area or aspect, or confined only in a specific geographical region; it is global and it is spreading in many parts of the world, often with multiple effects. René Guénon (1886–1951), French metaphysician and scholar of religions, who was also a critic of modern civilisation, wrote nine decades ago a manifesto and ‘call-to-action’ in response to the then world crisis, which was known as ‘The Crisis of the Modern World’. The reasons for today’s global crises may have now surpassed René Guénon’s theories of the modern world crisis in 1920s. The world order today is in the worst state since the end of World War-II. The crisis in today’s world goes beyond the boundaries of nation-states. For example, the war in Syria that has spread to the entire region and has led to large-

scale migration crises in other continents. This is what was recently described by Wolfgang Ischinger, the Munich Security Conference chairman, that “today’s international relations experience dramatic crisis, the worst since World War-II”. He said, “The international community needs ‘greater solidarity, integration and cooperation’”.

It has been evident for some time that the contemporary crisis, whether it is of neoliberal globalisation, militarisation, or ecological degradation, has deep roots in the capitalist world-system. One may argue that this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it was pointed out long time ago by the great moral philosopher and economist Adam Smith, who had critiqued what he called “prodigals and prospectors”. It is more evident from recent happenings, such as increasing global conflict and its relationship with economic inequality, climate change, peace, and security, that the world is affected with more complex problems. More than at any time in history, the contemporary world is engaged in conflicts and their effects are seen in manifold forms, which create a fragile landscape of peace and security. The biggest threat to security and stability in the world over the next decade is likely to come from various forms of geopolitical tensions. Asia will have to witness or face the direct or indirect impacts of such crises; whether these crises stem out of the crisis in Ukraine, Russia’s simmering tensions with Europe, tensions regarding South China Sea, or strained relations between China and Philippines or China and Japan on their respective territorial claims. All these factors are evidences of the strategic power struggles in which the world’s biggest powers have again started their engagement. The effects of the spiralling crisis are more and more visible in Asia. The alarming trend is reported every day from some corners of Asia.

Although not all these tensions and conflicts are explicitly violent in nature, there are more probabilities for regional spill-overs, which might derail global stability in the short and long-term. Often, we talk about economic crisis in the world, but we are now facing several other problems in addition to the economic downturn. It was true that the world was faced with an “annus horribilis” in the economic realm about two years ago, the worst in a decade,

with high unemployment, corporate failures, and the downturn of the stock market. The geopolitical threats now have topped the risk index, overtaking the financial crisis. Although, the world has not escaped from such a crisis, in addition to that, what is being experienced now is an “annus horribilis” in the geopolitical arena, especially in terms of conflicts, violence and threats to peace and security.

The geopolitical threats now have topped the risk index, overtaking the financial crisis. There are various signs of this trend. Quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world again faces the risk of major conflicts between states. There are a number of issues and reasons have been identified or pointed out for increasing crisis in the world. There are several problems and concerns that have leapfrogged to the top of the list of crises; increasing role of non-state actors, mounting environmental problems, crisis in the world’s water supply, especially when clean drinking water is becoming a rare commodity.

Water becomes an economic and political issue as well when people have started fighting for this resource. An estimated four to five billion people in the world suffer from strained access to clean water. In Asia, struggle for access to clean water is a growing problem. The spread of terrorism and violence have become common trends in many countries and regions, in which the role of non-state actors is systematic. The emergence of non-state actors such as Islamic State (IS) over-ran the sovereignty of nation-states. They are not only posing threat to Syria or Iraq or in the Middle East. The influence of IS is spreading over to many parts of Asia. Asia is becoming a breeding or multiplying ground for terrorist groups. Militants from many parts of Asia have been recruited by terrorist groups and taken to Syria and Iraq for Islamic State. The recent events, especially the increasing violence and terrorism in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, and the growing influences of IS and other religious extremist groups in Indonesia and several other Asian countries are more alarming. Intelligence reports and analyses give signals that the religious terrorist groups also could trigger use of weapons of mass destruction and engage in large-scale terrorist

attacks in the coming years. From Asia, young people from several countries are being recruited to IS, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia, China, and Brunei. This is an alarming situation and a grave concern on as how they will be used after their return to their home countries or if they are deployed to work in a neighbouring country. A growing concern is that the spread of terrorism orchestrated in the name of Islam remains the most significant immediate threat to regional security in Asia.

Religious fundamentalism has emerged as the most serious threat to democratic values, peace, and security in most of the Asian countries. In Pakistan, the menace of terrorism, in particular, terrorism of the religious kind, has spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. There are people and groups who extend direct or indirect support to the terrorist activities of the Taliban and its link in the name of religion in Pakistan. Violence has become a norm and religion is routinely used to silence voices of reason and compassion. The society has taken a turn towards the right-wing in India, attacks by fanatic religious fundamentalists are becoming increasingly common in several parts of the country, especially in areas where minority religious communities live. A systematic campaign spreading reactionary political ideology among the adherents of majority religions and this tendency is patronising communal violence as well as communal polarisation. Recent events indicate that violent extremist ideals are expanding throughout the region. In the coming years, these threats will coincide with other incidents that could aggravate the situation for countries in the Asia region. In Asia, religious fundamentalism and extremism find their roots in the backwardness of society. The proponents of religious fanaticism exploit the situations of social deprivation, a low level of consciousness, poverty, and ignorance of illiterate or semi-literate people. The growing tendency of propagation of hatred and religious intolerance is becoming a common trend connected with all major religions in Asia: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

Religious extremism and violence are not the only threat Asian countries are facing or that require the attention and response

of the churches and the ecumenical movement. While the major environmental problems are affecting the entire world in serious ways, their manifestations are more and more evident in Asia. Increase in air pollution, climate change and global warming, overpopulation, depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, water pollution and sanitation facilities, industrialisation, spread of toxic pollutants are major threats Asian countries are facing. Several Asian countries face the worst hits of climate change in recent years. The typhoons, floods, and droughts are common scenes for several months every year in most Asian countries. Bangladesh is among the most vulnerable to climate change. While flooding and cyclones have always plagued this poverty-stricken nation, climate change is increasing their frequency and severity. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is full of climate refugees every monsoon season.

The world today, especially the Western countries, are lamenting the influx of migrants arriving in their countries due to the crises in many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East and in Africa. We hear stories every day on how the whole European Union is under threat amid differing strategies to deal with the issue of migrations and border controls. The current number of displaced people globally is nonetheless the highest since the aftermath of World War-II. The global population of forcibly displaced people today is larger than the entire population of the United Kingdom. Displaced people from different Asian countries also are seeking asylum in different parts of the world. Migration of people from zones affected by religious conflict is not just confined to countries in West Asia or North Africa. South Asian countries have witnessed various instances of mass migrations by persecuted religious minorities. In Pakistan, scores of Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus have left the country for safer shelters. The Christian minority communities in Pakistan live in a state of fear and terror. They are being persecuted, tortured, and killed in the name of their faith or because of religious hatred. Every day, at least one Christian in the country is persecuted because of his or her Christian identity. Over 800,000 people have left their homes in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) linking Pakistan and Afghanistan in the wake of an ongoing military operation since last year. Most of these have

ended up as internally displaced people (IDPs) and are forced to live in inhumane conditions in refugee camps.

Statelessness is another major issue today faced by a sizeable number of Asians. Statelessness is the situation when a person does not have the nationality of any country, which restricts their fundamental human, social, and political rights, such as access to education, health care and freedom of movement. The UNHCR estimates that at least 10 million people globally are stateless in seventy-eight countries and Asia alone has more than 1.33 million Rohingyas with 800,000 in Myanmar and 500,000 in Bangladesh, and many others in Indonesia and Malaysia. Asia has about 1.5 million stateless people. Hundreds of thousands of stateless people are believed to be in Nepal, although there is no official figure. Part of the problem derives from laws which prevent women passing their nationality to their children. There is also a stateless population of people who were expelled by Bhutan in the 1990s. More than 500,000 people are stateless in Thailand. Many are from ethnic hill tribes such as the Yao, Hmong, and Karen who live in the mountainous border with Myanmar and Laos and have distinct languages and cultures. The government denies them ID cards or access to state services, leaving them vulnerable to trafficking. Tens of thousands of children in the Malaysian state of Sabah in Borneo are stateless. They are the children of Indonesians and Filipinos who have migrated to work, often in palm oil plantations. They have no rights to education or healthcare and many end up as child labourers. Sometimes authorities force them to leave the country and the mass deportations often end up with children stranded without their parents. It is also evident that statelessness is severely underreported in Asia. It is more realistic to project that the true number of stateless persons in Asia is more than double what UNHCR is currently able to account for in its statelessness statistics. It may be far higher if, indeed, there are widespread problems of statelessness in India, Indonesia, and Pakistan.

The growing level of unemployment, poverty, farmer and peasant suicides, and the increasing number of women and children who are trafficked for sex slavery are serious situations in various

Asian contexts. Gross and systematic violations of human rights, increasing militarisation and other forms of dehumanisation have become a common trend in various Asian countries.

Where are We Heading To: Challenges in Our Witness and Mission

As the world faces innumerable challenges, and we live in the midst of sense of frustrations and darkness, the question that is being asked is where are we heading to? The presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA echoed his concern about the deteriorating or degenerating situation in his home land, the USA. He recently told at the Anglican Church of Canada's General Synod in his address that the violence in the US had its roots in a "spiritual malady". "Our culture, our society, our world is begging us, show us another way". 'Show us another way' is the cry or plea of the people in many parts of the world! We hear this cry in our day-to-day lives in Asia. We heard the cry of many innocent people who are persecuted and violently attacked and killed recently in violent conflicts and terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand and in India as well as in many other parts of the world—in Paris, Nice, Turkey, Brussels, and the USA.

In recent months, there were several instances of violence and terrorism on Asian soil. The churches and ecumenical movement often come forward to express their solidarity during such instances. Often, we are strengthened and supported by the mutual prayers and expression of solidarity by churches and ecumenical movement. In this context, I would like to mention about the solidarity and cooperation being extended by different Asian churches as well as churches around the world. I received a letter from the Moderator of the United Church of Canada expressing concern about a suicide bombing, which killed several innocent people in Lahore, Pakistan on Easter Sunday this year. The moderator of UCC, the Right Reverend Jordan Cantwell, while expressing UCC's solidarity, stated in the letter that we stand together and commit to respecting and caring for one another, to protecting one another, and to preventing such violence, and offered a prayer that, "The United Church holds in prayer and love all those grieving loved ones killed in the violence, the wounded and all those caring for them. As a church, we mourn

the perversion of an expression of religious faith through violence and harm done to innocents in the name of religion. We continue to pray and act for peace in this troubled world, working with all those of like mind. We join with other faith communities across borders and boundaries and forces that seek to divide to oppose violence, terror, oppression, and domination. And as church we offer this prayer, from our Song of Faith, seeking to live out God's call for peace and justice: Yet evil does not-cannot- undermine or overcome the love of God... we embrace the present, embodying hope, loving our enemies, caring for the earth, choosing life." This message and prayer was heartening, and it really conveys the true sentiments and solidarity of the brothers and sisters in Christ who are mindful of their sisters and brothers in Christ in Pakistan or elsewhere in Asia. We very much value this kind gesture of solidarity and concern expressed by the leadership of UCC.

Programmes since the Executive Committee meeting in October 2015

We adopted a new programme structure in the last meeting of the Executive Committee held in October 2015. Subsequently the Programme Committee in its first meeting in the first week of December 2015 gave more pragmatic shape for a strategic programme plan and direction, and prioritised programmes and activities. However, the biggest challenge to implement most of those plans was due to lack of staff members or adequate human resources. In the midst of such deficiencies, still we tried our level best to organise and facilitate several or many programmes and activities from October 2015 to July 2016. During the past nine months, CCA organised twenty-six programmes or activities. In addition to these programmes, CCA was directly involved in several advocacy initiatives including the participation of three accredited representatives of CCA (Rev. Kim Kyrie, Mr Sunil Babu Sreshta, and Ms Sunil Ammar) to the United Nation's CSW held in New York in March 2016. Although CCA has the status as an organisation in special consultation with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, this was the first time that CCA sent a delegation to the UN for a major event with official accreditation in the name of CCA.

The other main advocacy initiative during this period was the observance of the Asia Sunday on the theme 'Peace and Reconciliation of the Korean peninsula', and public issues actions through ecumenical responses to emerging Asian issues. It is heartening to specially mention here the contribution of five youth interns CCA has recruited for a one-year internship programme in implementing some of these programmes. It is also an encouragement for all of us to know that Asian churches have many young talents. There are many "frozen assets" among the young people in the churches and in the ecumenical movement in Asia. They need to be identified and more young people should be given opportunities by CCA to build up their talents and make them as future leaders in church and ecumenical movement in the coming years.

The General Secretary and other staff members have participated in several ecumenical events and programmes during the past nine months in addition to their direct involvement in programme planning and implementations. CCA has been constantly invited to participate in member churches' and councils' special events. These occasions are also opportunities for strengthening ecumenical relations and seeking member churches' and councils' wider participation and collaboration in CCA. The General Secretary participated in the following programmes and events of CCA member churches, councils, as well as CCA's own programmes since October 2015:

150th anniversary of PCT, Taiwan (October 2015); Programme Committee meeting, Chiang Mai (December 2015); Asian Conference of Ecumenical Sunday School Programme, Chiang Mai (January 2016); Working Group meeting of CCA-Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCA joint programme on Peace, Malaysia (February 2016); Visit to Karen Baptist Bible College at Burmese Refugee Camp and Participation at the Convocation, Mae Sot, Thailand; Visit to CCT headquarters and participation in the ASEAN Conference (March 2016); Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS)–VII, Kochi, India (April 2016); Convocation of the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary, India (April 2016); NCC-India General Assembly (April

2016); Asia Sunday celebrations in South Korea and visits to CCA member churches and council in Korea (May 2016); Visit to Hong Kong Christian Council and Hong Kong Council of Churches of Christ in China (May 2016); Joint Planning meeting of CCA and APAYMCA on Interfaith Peace Consultation (May 2016); Article 9 International Consultation and CCA member churches and council in Japan (June 2016).

Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability continues to be a major issue before us. We are being informed by the traditional ecumenical partners from the West of their inability to support CCA the same way they generously supported us during the past many years or decades. Although this is not a new signal to us, they are again reminding us that we need to be mindful of their early warnings. This gives us an opportunity to search for new strategies for more concerted efforts in raising resources within Asia and from our member constituencies. As I mentioned in my last report, among the CCA member churches, a large number of them are in a situation to contribute more to CCA. In fact, a sizeable number of CCA member churches are already contributing regularly to various other ecumenical and confessional, as well as mission, bodies in the West. It is high time now that there should be more solidarity from Asia to CCA for strengthening our common ecumenical journey. I do not know where the barrier lies. Maybe it is due to our organisational weakness of making any serious attempts or effort to approach our member churches and councils on a regular basis. We need the special attention and support of CCA Executive Committee members, programme committee members and all other advisory board members to generate more financial contributions to CCA.

The Finance Committee, which met during the past three days, came up with certain policy guidelines for fundraising and income generation. This will be presented to you for further discussion and adoption.

The Finance Committee also tried to explore various options to increase the income through proper investments of the endowment

funds and certain proposals will be brought forward to the consideration of the Executive Committee and further action. With regard to the follow-up of the earlier decision regarding the sale of the property in Chiang Mai, this will also be shared at a later stage.

Update on the Process of Reviewing the Current Location of CCA Headquarters

You might recall that the last General Assembly of CCA, and also the last meeting of the Executive Committee held in Bangkok last year, discussed about the need to review the current location of CCA headquarters. A sub-committee was appointed by the Executive Committee to initiate a discussion and study about various options. However, we have not been able to meet yet due to various reasons. Meanwhile, the General Secretary has initiated a discussion with the leadership of the Church of Christ in Thailand, the current sponsor and host of CCA in Thailand, to seek their advice on this matter. The Indonesian churches and Sri Lankan churches also have informed us that they are willing to discuss more seriously about this matter and explore options for CCA to be located in these countries through the sponsorship of churches in these two countries. It is a long way to go for us before we take any decision in future. A meeting of the sub-committee will be convened soon to discuss on how to move forward.

CCA: 60 Years of Existence; Sustainability in the Future

In our last meeting, I reported about CCA completing 60 years of its existence in 2017. In our Asian culture, the 60th birthday is very significant. In Asian culture, the 60th birthday holds special meaning and is widely celebrated with food, gifts, and festivities. In the East Asian culture and tradition, it is believed that when a person reaches the age of 60, he or she has completed a full cycle of life, which calls for a grand celebration. In Korean it is *Hwangab* (Hangul; hanja), in Japanese it is *Kanreki*, and in Chinese it is known as *Jiazi*. The number 60 means accomplishing one big circle and starting another one in one's life as the traditional 60-year calendar cycle. In Indian culture as well as in most South Asian cultures and traditions, it is known as *Shasti Poorthi*, a celebration on completion of 60 years of age. It

marks the completion of half the years of one's lifetime. In Hindu tradition, 120 years is considered the life span of a human being. The sixtieth year in one's life is a significant milestone, memorable turning point, a touching reminder, mellowed life that would unfold in the years to come. *Shashti Poorthi* marks the completion of one such cycle. Considering all these Asian traditions, one can imagine how much importance we give for 60 years of a life span. In this context, 60 years is a very important year and milestone in CCA's life, which will be in 2017. We need to reflect and plan on how best we could make it a memorable event. What are the best ways we can contribute to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of CCA as a celebrative occasion? Should we make it as a one bigger event at the end or organise several events that will provide opportunities for CCA member churches and councils to come together to give thanks for the ways God has led this organisation as his instrument to perform the mission of God.

CCA is not the sole representative of the Asian ecumenical movement. However, it has been demonstrating a unique and prominent role as the coordinator, facilitator, and well-respected regional ecumenical body during the past six decades. CCA has the support of a large member constituency with its membership expanding or covering from Iran in the West to Japan in the East, and Nepal in the North to New Zealand in the South. That means, the roots are widely spread from one end to the other and it is indeed deeply rooted. As a person who has been privileged to associate with CCA in various ways during the past several years I am fully aware of its deep roots. As a phrase in Charles Dickens's novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, "the Worst of Times and the Best of Times", CCA has faced or experienced the worst and the best times of its history. However, its strength lies with its strong roots in the constituencies.

When I am reminded of the strong roots, I often think of the analogy used by Prof. Masao Takenaka, the famous Japanese theologian who was a strong pillar of EACC/CCA for many years. In his book under the title, 'When the Bamboo Bends', he mentioned about the unique characteristics of bamboo in its root system and strength. We know that in spite of wind and storm, the bamboo

demonstrates amazing flexibility or elasticity. In winter, it bears heavy snow. Though it bends, does not fall down. It swings at the time of the storm yet when it is over, the bamboo returns back to a straight position. When Takenako describes the symbolism of bamboo, he talks about the practical character of bamboo. I would argue that the special characteristic of bamboo is an apt analogy when it is compared with CCA and its life during the past decades. CCA faced many storms and winds, but it showed amazing capacity to overcome those strong winds and storms. When CCA was expelled from Singapore and, it has been moving around from place to place as a wanderer, when a severe financial crisis affected during latter part of 1990s, it survived all those winds and storms by the grace of God. CCA's roots strengthened its vitality in the midst of the storms. We do not normally see the roots of bamboo as they are hidden from our sight. But these roots are the source of the vitality of the bamboo as they stretch and grow, putting up new shoots. Its roots grow horizontally with amazing strength, stretch steadily and gradually increase the size and strength of the plant. Bamboo grows steadily even when bending under the weight of snow during winter season. It also multiplies. That is what exactly happens in the case of CCA.

When CCA was founded only fourteen countries and about thirty-six churches were involved in CCA. It was even known as the 'East Asian Christian Conference', showing its limited geographical jurisdiction, but it has gradually taken roots across Asia. Today, the roots have reached horizontally from Iran in the West to Japan in the East; Nepal in the North to New Zealand in the South. The roots widely spread to new countries such as Iran, Nepal, Bhutan, Laos, Cambodia, and East Timor; all were added subsequently to CCA's wider fellowship. CCA also helped to multiply the ecumenical genus over the years through the establishment of several other specialised ministries in Asia such as the Asia Migrant Centre (AMC), ECPAT, CAW, AHRC, ALRC, and DAGA. Considering all these factors, there is a valid reason for CCA to celebrate its Diamond Jubilee in 2017. I do hope that this Executive Committee will come up with a concrete proposal, and a mandate to initiate the preparation for the 60th anniversary celebrations in 2017. The 60th anniversary is not

only a time for looking at the past history, but it should be seen as an opportunity to reflect about the past, looking at the present and envisioning the future.

Towards Envisioning Mission and Reshaping the Ecumenical Identity

Mission of the church is not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to greater numbers of people, but the essence of the Gospel is meant to transform the world to higher humanity. While analysing the Christian mission in the third millennium, Jose Cheriampattu said, "Mission is transformation of the world to higher humanity." He said at Vatican II that the concept of mission was in transition and the language of mission concept itself was changed; from "missions" in the plural to mission in the singular, from evangelisation to development, to humanisation; from inculturation to liberation, to preferential option for the poor. As far as the Roman Catholic Church, a new thrust in the missiological emphasis was articulated since the Second Vatican Council in 1964. However, earlier to Second Vatican Council, in 1957 itself, at the Prapat founding Conference of CCA, reflected on the theme of "The Common Evangelistic Task", reflected on "the mission and its encounter with the Asian revolution". M.M Thomas in a keynote presentation at Prapat said, "By mission, we mean the mission of the church to witness to as Lord and Redeemer...The Church is involved in the Asian revolution and in part reflects it. But this involvement gives the Church the opportunity to encounter it". Bishop E.C. Sobrepena of the Philippines said at the Prapat Conference, "the Asian churches, in rediscovering the compulsion of witness bearing, are at the same time recapturing the sense of urgency. Asian Christians live and work in situations of rapid social change; they are confronted by ideologies that negate the basic philosophy and practice of Christianity... The struggle becomes deeper and more intense every day."

He added that Asian Christians and Churches were called to mission and action even in their numerical weakness. Ever since the Prapat Conference, EACC/CCA has been providing the Asian churches

a sense of togetherness and a common responsibility in doing Mission as well as helping churches to discern Christ's presence in Asian history in terms of its socio-religious, economic and political context. Mission in action involves the participation in all forms of struggles in the world and it cannot be merely interpreted as preaching Gospel for adding numerical numbers or church planting. CCA believes that the purpose of God for the Church in Asia is life together in a common obedience to him for the doing of his will in the world.

CCA affirms its conviction that the mission to transform the world is not secondary to the Church but a constitutive of the Gospel proclamation and that it is the rethinking of human existence in the light of the Gospel. It is with this perception and conviction that CCA tries to shape ecumenism as a cardinal principle of mission. N.B. Gladstone Robert, a young pastor of the Church of South India who tried to reformulate and comprehend socio-cultural and religious life of the people of Asia in the broader framework of mission and Ecumenical Concerns of CCA as part of his doctoral studies, observes, "The significance of ecumenical thoughts which originates from the Asian scenario towards the global level as well to the Asian situation is the kernel of the mission understanding and the contribution of the CCA...It is noteworthy that the ecumenical witness, enhanced by the very formation of CCA, continues to gain its distinct character through challenging the divisive denominationalism, confessional, ecclesiastical, and theological differences that had originated in the Western churches and their missions in Asia." While engaged in its ecumenical witness in Asia from the very beginning of the formation, CCA has gained its character of doing mission in Asia together, for which CCA has called "the churches in Asia to be in unity not only across different ecclesial and theological traditions but also beyond the religious, cultural, and political boundaries or barriers." With this conviction, CCA time and again emphasises "God's mission in Asia is for all God's people in Asia".

As CCA approaches to the 60th anniversary of its founding, it gives us an opportunity to seriously reflect and discuss about envisioning its mission and reshaping the ecumenical identity in the emerging

Asian context. From the very beginning of its existence as a regional ecumenical body, CCA has recognised that ecumenism in Asia has its deep roots in mission of the Asian churches. This was also based on the firm conviction that mission of the churches in unity only can bear the fruits as they are inseparable and the Church is called to participate in God's mission in unity. Mission belongs to the very being of the Church, and through its mission, the Church is expected to transform the treasures of the Gospel. CCA made attempts from time to time to articulate the mission of the Asian churches and the ecumenical movement. Asia Mission Conferences organised by CCA in the past have been an integral component of the life and witness of the Asian churches and the ecumenical movement in Asia. The mission conferences were part of Asian churches' efforts of contextualisation of theological thinking and articulation of missiological issues in Asia. CCA has been a catalyst to equip the churches and the ecumenical movement in Asia as a whole to perform mission in the midst of emerging Asian context and realities. CCA assemblies as well as Asia Mission Conferences provided opportunities and impetus to think loudly about the missiological convictions amidst Asia's pluralistic contexts and shape the ecumenical identities. However, it has been a while that CCA made any specific effort to provide another opportunity for Asian churches and all other ecumenical partners in their common faith journey to reflect on the emerging mission contexts in Asia. The last such attempt was in 1994. Now the time has come, especially in the context of CCA's Diamond Jubilee, to provide such an opportunity. In a separate session later, we will be discussing the proposal of the Assembly and the Programme Committee, and more concrete plans for organising an Asia Mission Conference in 2017.

Has the ecumenical movement become more divisive and less effective?

It is also important for us at this stage to look at the current situation of the ecumenical movement. The Asian ecumenical movement is not detached from the global ecumenical movement. We believe in one ecumenical movement and the need for affirming and strengthening the value of one ecumenical movement. Changing

landscapes of ecumenism, changes in ecclesial landscapes, etc., are certain terminologies repeatedly used in ecumenical circles for almost two decades now. However, the question is how successful we have been in addressing emerging challenges in various contexts thus far. On the one hand, we try to analyse the landscapes and often end up in the same old analysis or end up using exaggerated symbolisms or analogies to illustrate the situations of ecumenical and ecclesiastical structures. However, as time passes, no effective actions are taken to really understand and respond to the challenges in ecumenical or ecclesial perspectives with certain authentic approach or commitment in the Asian contexts, we can identify various examples for more and more divisiveness which is fragmenting the ecumenical ethos and values of ecumenism. In other words, what we see today is a more visible expression of lack of coherence and coordination of the ecumenical movement in Asia or other parts of the world. This is often initiated by those who are expected to ensure the coherence of one ecumenical movement.

As the ecumenical agenda has been changing and moving away from the priorities of ecumenical commitment three or four decades ago, there is no point in simply repeating the same jargon with certain cosmetic changes or prefixes and suffixes. Whatever may be the issue to be addressed, what we need is a strong and committed ecumenical movement with the full cooperation and support of its member constituencies. In addition to this, what is required is full cooperation and participation with all ecumenical and ecclesiastical partners and actors in our region. We find today a variety of organisations and institutions working on similar areas or concerns—NGOS, INGOs, faith-based organisations, governments, multilateral organisations, etc. These groups are loosely connected with institutional churches or ecumenical organisations. In many contexts, collaboration with them is much easier, but often the problem we face is lack of ecumenical cooperation and collaboration among ecumenical partners and mission agencies who are working in the same region with similar agendas where collective ecumenical actions are needed. It is an important to demonstrate Christian unity and ecumenical visibility in actions when the same church-based organisations are trying to address similar issues

in one region or country with an aim for a common goal. It is in this context that the relevance of a conciliar body like a Regional Ecumenical Organisation (REO) such as CCA has been valued over the years. Dr Konrad Raiser, former General Secretary of WCC, described the special role of such conciliar bodies—the WCC, REOs, and NCCs—and he stated that these ecumenical structures should be seen as the backbone of ecumenical cooperation. While he was leading the WCC, he emphasised the importance of discussions on such issues at the annual meetings between WCC and the REOs, as well as in the periodic meetings of NCCs. The specific roles of the conciliar bodies on local, national, regional, and world levels need to be worked out more carefully as their role will not be in implementing programmes and projects but in facilitating, interpreting, connecting, and providing the communication flow for the entire multilateral ecumenical configurations. However, what we see today is more polarisation and divisiveness due to lack of clarity and vision in shaping unity of the one ecumenical movement. CCA has always given special importance to relate with NCCs in Asia. The meetings with the General Secretaries of NCCs in Asia have been mutually helpful in strengthening in our common ecumenical bonds and joint ecumenical actions in the past. However, CCA's meetings with NCC General Secretaries have not been taking place for some time now. It is expected that a meeting of CCA and NCCs in Asia will be held in 2017.

Called to bear witness to the truth and hope in action

In this report, I tried to portray a picture of Asian realities in which we are deeply immersed in, and also the current state of affairs of CCA in the context of wider ecumenical, ecclesiastical realities as well as missiological convictions.

In this context, I would say that it is an imperative for us to see the rays of hope in the midst of darkness and affirm our faith in the presence of the living reality, God. As Christians, we are bound to be strengthened by our faith and to live in hope in order to be a light of life amidst darkness. We are reminded of the assurances of Christ who said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me

will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12).” The Gospel tells us that Jesus shares with us the healing power that is a part of God’s kingdom with those who were deprived of all strength: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Mathew 11:28).” The words of St. Gregory the Theologian, 4th Century, remind us that Jesus assumed the worse that “he might give us the better. He came down that we might be lifted up. He was tempted that through him we might conquer. He died that he might save us”. From the beginning, Christian communities have regarded the death of Jesus in the light of the words of the prophet Isaiah. “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...he was wounded for our transgressions (Isaiah 53: 4-5).” This is not to venerate suffering for its own sake or to perceive it as an advantage in itself, but it is to encourage people simply to accept the sufferings imposed upon them by others. It is a reminder for us to be encouraged that Jesus is beside of us with the assurances of the restoration of light at times of darkness in life, restoration of wholeness to every stage of brokenness in life. As Paul writes to Timothy, “For this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10).

The conviction of our ancestors who initiated CCA was based on their firm belief that mission is the core of the ecumenical movement in Asia and ecumenism cannot be a mere fellowship of a few Christians. The new ecumenical venture in Asia came into being out of such a conviction of the Asian churches that the united witness and mission of the churches in Asia is inevitable. Almost six decades later, we are still affirming this conviction and we are still hopeful that ecumenism in Asia will grow and flourish to face the challenges that Asia faces today. We are hopeful of the fact that CCA will be instrumental to bear witness to the truth and face the challenges of the ecumenical witness. We need to be hopeful that the ecumenical witness envisioned by the very foundation of CCA will gain more momentum of doing mission in Asia in unity, beyond narrow ecclesial and theological boundaries. We are hopeful that God’s presence and guidance will lead to people-centred mission

and ecumenism. This is hope in action to live in God's presence in the midst of despair. There are many moments of despair we are faced with during our ecumenical journey, but I am hopeful of the fact that CCA, as a privileged instrument in the hands of God assigned to perform His task, will be in a much better position by the grace of God in future to bear witness to the truth. Often, we are not prepared or not confident enough to respond to God's call to be His witnesses. Often, we are not confident enough to bear the witness to the truth. In human history, this has been a perennial problem at every stage in life. An ancient Vedic prayer in Indian tradition echoes the same message and earnest longing to be freed from such despairs in the midst of ignorance and darkness:

“From ignorance, lead me to truth;
From darkness, lead me to light;
From death, lead me to immortality.”
*(“Asato Mo Sat Gomaya, Tamaso Ma Jyotir Gamaya,
Mrtyorma amrtam gamaya”)*

While appreciating the bursting buds on a plum tree in the winter, Joseph Hardy Neeshima, founder of the Doshisha University in Japan, once said:

“Truth is just like the winter plum blossom
It dares to bloom despite snow and wind”.

Neeshima wrote these lines about plum blossom at the time of the year when the trees have shed all their leaves. But he saw a bud on the branch of a plum tree—a foretaste of the spring to come. It gave him hope that something was happening despite snow and wind. This is true in our ecumenical context too. Often, it is said that the ecumenical movement is facing a winter, in which everything is frozen and movement is restricted or everything becomes static and we are in the midst of a sense of darkness. But we are being called to respond to such situations with hope in action and we are called to “bear witness to the truth” and be “the light of life” (John 18:37, John 8:12). We will be able to bear the witness to the truth only in faith of the living reality of the presence of God in our midst. This situation of experiencing the beauty and reality of God's presence in everyday life, in the midst of anxiety or doubts, is narrated in the

book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was called to be a prophet among the nations. He thought that he would not be able to perform the task. Jeremiah was doubtful and not confident. He expressed his lack of confidence and doubt. Then, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” He said, “I see a branch of almond tree” (Jer 1:11). The Hebrew words for almond means “to awaken”. In this context, Takenaka says, this story is an allegory for the awakening of people to the living reality of God’s presence. Let us awake to experience the living reality of God’s presence and let us respond to His call to bear witness to the truth and light of life in Asia.

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA
19 July 2016

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2017

13–14 July 2017 | Chiang Mai, Thailand

It was about one year ago that the last meeting of the Executive Committee was held in Medan, Indonesia. This year, when we are meeting at the headquarters of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), we have a wide range of items on the agenda that need to be dealt with at this meeting. This Executive Committee meeting has a special significance since it is being held in the Diamond Jubilee year of the CCA.

There are a number of issues to be reported and dealt with in detail at this meeting. It is little bit hectic this time to sit on a series of sessions, especially immediately after a very important international consultation focused on the theme 'Towards Revitalising the Asian Ecumenical Movement' in which all committee members present at this meeting have participated.

The General Secretary's Report is expected not only to introduce business matters, but also to introduce a number of other pertinent regional issues in the context of emerging geopolitical, as well as ecumenical and ecclesiastical, issues. Although there are a wide range of issues and situations that are emerging in recent times, I shall not venture to address all such issues. We have already covered a wide range of issues from Asian perspectives during the past two days in the successful deliberations of the consultations. I am sure, those discussions really enriched us, and in this situation, I do not think we need additional discussion; what we do need, is to discuss the follow-up in the near future.

Programmes and Activities

CCA's programmes and activities have been implanted during the past one and a half year under the thematic groupings of four areas. The overall emphasis of our programmes and activities was focused on 'Shaping a New Ecumenical Paradigm in Asia'. In 2016, we organised thirty-three programmes and during the first half

of 2017, we organised sixteen programmes. These programmes cover a wide range of activities. Some of the new programmes we have initiated as part of the new programme structure, have already proven to be very successful and encouraging. The way our constituencies have welcomed such programmes and activities are really encouraging for us as we move forward.

The Asian Ecumenical Institute (AEI), a month-long intensive course, the Young Ambassadors for Peace in Asia (YAPA), a week-long training, ecumenical formation and leadership training programmes at the national and sub-regional levels, Ecumenical Women's Advocacy against Violence (EWAAV), Accompanying People and Communities in vulnerable situations, especially in minority contexts in Asia, Advocacy at the UN, the year-long internship programme, etc., are some such examples. Several other programmes, such as migration, statelessness, human trafficking, and strengthening of ecumenism at the grassroots in Asia have also gained momentum in the post-Jakarta Assembly period.

The last three-year phase of the HIV and AIDS Special Project ended in December 2016. We are currently in the process of negotiations and discussions with our partners to initiate the next phase of this Special Project for another three-year period. It is agreed by the main partner of this project to support the CCA for initiating the project from October 2017 to September 2020.

While implementing all programmes and activities, we are conscious of our responsibilities to ensure the quality of each programme and activity. This is being appreciated, and the feedback we receive at the end of each programme and the subsequent responses from the participants received by my colleagues from time to time also testify to this.

We have a strategic programme plan for five years and every year, we filter it and select more relevant activities for the following year. Often, we discuss emerging concerns and priorities at the Executive Committee level also. During the last meeting of the Executive Committee, held in Indonesia, we spent some time deliberating about the growing trend of religious extremism in

Pakistan, which has become a serious threat to peace and security in the country. As a follow-up of our discussion, we organised a pastoral solidarity team visit to Pakistan in November 2016, in which three members participated under the leadership of Bishop Philip Huggins of the Anglican Church in Australia and the President of the National Council of Churches (NCC), Australia. Mr Victor Hsu of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan and CCA staff member Dr Rey Ty were the other members. The three-member pastoral solidarity team visited Pakistan and met with a wide range of people, conflict-affected communities, civil society groups, and interfaith leaders. The National Council of Churches in Pakistan (NCCP) and the Presbyterian Church in Pakistan (PCP) made arrangements for the visit and we are extremely thankful to Mr Victor Azariah, the General Secretary of NCCP, and Rev. Arshad Gill, Executive Committee member of CCA, for their assistance. In a similar way, we sent another pastoral solidarity team to visit Bangladesh on 7–11 May 2017, another majority Islamic country where Christians and other minority religious communities are facing enormous threats and challenges. NCC Bangladesh made necessary arrangements for the visit and our thanks are due to the staff of NCCB, especially to its General Secretary Rev. David Doss. Detailed reports of both these visits are now available.

Reports and instances shared with us from different corners of Asia add to our anxieties as we realise that Asia is increasingly becoming a breeding ground for growing religious intolerance. The long-nurtured and cherished value of social and communal harmony is in peril in different Asian countries, whether it is majority Muslim or Hindu or Theravada Buddhist countries. The adherents of minority religions in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, the world's most populous majority Muslim nations, and minorities in Hindu-majority countries, such as India and Nepal, and Theravada Buddhist countries, such as Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka are undergoing traumatic experiences.

The recent situation in Indonesia has been a matter of serious concern as the rise of political Islam demonstrated its worst head, when a Christian Governor of Jakarta was accused by hard-

line Islamic groups for an alleged statement that they claimed blasphemous. The worry now is whether the country will slip into the hands of fundamentalist Muslims, led by forces unleashed by this sorry saga and may emerge during the time of Presidential elections in the country two years later. For the sake of the stability and progress of the country and the region, those who use religion as a political card must stop it.

Indonesia, a traditionally liberal Islamic country which always upheld the values of its Pancasila principles, is now experiencing deep mistrust amongst the Christians and the Muslims. The politicisation of religion is pervading every area in the country. This was evident through the highest voter turnout in the history of the gubernatorial elections in Jakarta to elect a new Governor. The record-breaking level of participation at the polls was largely believed to be the result of high religious tensions running throughout the election campaign. It was evident that religious sentiments, which were fostered throughout the campaign period, were effective in mobilising voters in the name of religion, and the voters were brainwashed to cast their ballots as part of their duty to defend their religion, on the principle conceded or driven by a doctrine that mandates Muslims to vote only for Muslim candidates, if it was not so, it would be a sin.

The churches in Indonesia need accompaniment and our prayers during their time of high anxiety.

Round Table Meeting with the Ecumenical Partners

A round table meeting of the CCA with the Ecumenical Partners was held at the headquarters of the CCA at the Payap University, Chiang Mai on 25–26 October 2016, in which eleven representatives of partner organisations and churches from Europe and North America attended the meeting. The main focus of the discussions centred around various topics such as new programme directions in the post-Jakarta Assembly, CCA's financial profile, budget and income development strategies within Asia, as well as the challenges to CCA's mission and witness in Asia.

CCA Diamond Jubilee and Asia Mission Conference (AMC)

You might recall that we spent a substantial time during the last Executive Committee meeting to discuss about the AMC and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. In last year's meeting, we had detailed discussions about the proposed plan of the Diamond Jubilee of the CCA. We noticed at that time how important it was to celebrate 60th anniversaries in our Asian cultural contexts. About one year ago, when we discussed it, we had only wild dreams and certain proposals we were asking your advice for, and mandates to move forward. We were not sure about how we would materialise those dreams and ideas. Now, when we meet again after a year, I am happy to report to you the developments since that time.

Sixty years ago in 1957, when the Asian church leaders met at Parapet, Indonesia, they focused on the theme, 'Our Common Evangelistic Tasks in Asia'. The CCA was born at the Asian Church Leaders Conference which was actually focusing on Asian churches' missionary tasks. Sixty years later, in 2017, when the CCA commemorates its 60th anniversary, the member churches and councils of the CCA will gather together again in the context of another Mission Conference and this will be an opportunity for us to give thanks to God almighty for Asian churches' journeying together during the past six decades. We will be engaged in the important task of reflecting upon our ecumenical journey within the context of a missiological theme from an Asian perspective. This special engagement, a reflection of the Asian ecumenical journey is going to be a historic milestone. As such, the Asia Mission Conference has been planned in conjunction with the Diamond Jubilee as yet another milestone in the history of the Asian ecumenical movement. It will be an important occasion for us to reflect on our mission and witness in a changing Asia since the last AMC was held in 1994.

Although we discussed our plans and ideas one year ago in July 2016, we did not take any final decisions on the theme of the AMC. The Executive Committee gave the mandate to the General Secretary to develop and finalise the theme later with the officers. In order to follow-up the recommendations and the decisions of the

Executive Committee meeting last year, we organised a workshop to initiate the process of developing the AMC theme. An expert group composed of theologians, missiologists, including representatives of the 'Mission in Unity and Contextual Theology' working group of CCA's Programme Committee, representatives of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC), Asia Evangelical Alliance (AEA), etc., were invited to be a part of these reflections. After three days of intensive discussions, the group developed a thematic framework for the AMC and based on that decided to recommend the theme, 'Journeying Together: Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia'.

The AMC theme is based on the Biblical verses from the Gospel of St. John:

- "I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth." (John 18:37)
- "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me, will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

This theme resonates with the contemporary situation in Asia, and in the world. As the world faces grave realities, the theme 'Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia' will be greatly oblige reflection on the Christian witness in the midst of adverse realities, and to emphasise the hope and trust in God's promises. The significance of this theme is also that it is linked to the role and relevance of the CCA in the Asian context, especially when it celebrates its ecumenical journey of 60 years. The CCA, as an instrument of God, working on behalf of the Asian churches, is called to bear prophetic witness in Asia.

The prophetic witness to the truth is on the basis of the vision of the kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed. The truth in this context, implies that the ultimate freedom and liberation for all God's people and the entire cosmos; it is the essence of the message of the Gospel.

The four sub-themes developed within the broad framework of the main theme cover the thematic thrusts in the contemporary contexts of Mission. They are:

- Prophetic Accompaniment (Isaiah 61:1–2, Matthew 25:35–40, Micah 6:8);
- Affirming the Servanthood (Matthew 20:28, Luke 17:7–10, Luke 24:27);
- Participating in the Reign of God (Romans 12:2, Matthew 5:17–20); and,
- Embodying the Spirituality of the Cross (Matthew 16:24, Philippians 2:5–8, Luke 6:35, Hebrews 12:1–3)

In Asia, we are facing numerous problems and we are highly concerned about innumerable issues. However, specific areas of concerns have been identified for deeper missional involvement by the Asian churches: Groaning of Creation: Stewardship; People on the Move: Embracing the Stranger; the Excluded and the Marginalised: Accompanying People and Communities; Economic Injustice: Prophetic Witnessing; Religious Intolerance: Nurturing Interfaith Harmony; and Geopolitical Turmoil: Building Peace.

During our last meeting, we discussed various options for identifying a suitable venue for the AMC and CCA's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. Out of the four priority venues we were deliberating upon the last time (Yangon, Myanmar; Jabalpur, India; Chiang Mai, Thailand; and Taipei, Taiwan), we selected Yangon, Myanmar to be the venue. The officers in a meeting, held on 24 October 2016, decided to accept the proposal of the General Secretary as the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC) graciously offered to host both the events. The Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) agreed to coordinate the logistics in Myanmar, especially the Visas, local transportation and arrival/departure formalities of the guests, visits to local congregations, etc. Both the MBC and the MCC are now working together for the success of the AMC and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. The events will be held from 11 to 17 October 2017, which is the same date the Executive Committee favoured and agreed upon during the last meeting. It is expected that 400 delegates will attend the AMC in different categories. It is also expected that 5000 people will attend CCA's Diamond Jubilee commemorative events on Sunday, 15 October 2017.

The venue of the AMC in Myanmar itself is very significant. As we know, this Asian country has remained a closed- door society for more than half a century. Churches in Myanmar have been undergoing traumatic experiences during years of military dictatorship and isolation. Churches and Christians in the country have suffered tremendously. In a country where Theravada Buddhism has been enjoying the official patronage of the ruling military junta, Christians have suffered religious persecutions led by fundamentalist Theravada Buddhist groups and innumerable cruelties inflicted by the military, although the Christian mission in Myanmar has a history of more than two centuries of existence. Amidst ongoing civil wars, ethnic strife, gross and systematic violations of human rights and the denial of freedom of religion, churches in Myanmar have been faithfully engaged in mission and have been agents of peace with justice and reconciliation.

Today, the Church in Myanmar is vibrant and actively participating in proclaiming the Gospel. The MBC, the host of the AMC, is spread all across the country. The MBC has more than 5000 congregations in different parts of the country. Despite the Christians in Myanmar being economically disadvantaged, the MBC has come forward to host the AMC. They are engaged in generating substantial funds for hosting the AMC and for the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the CCA. Other CCA member churches in Myanmar are also wholeheartedly participating in the preparations for hosting the AMC and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, through the coordination of the MCC.

Mission Statement in the Context of AMC

Although the CCA has been organising AMCs and missiological consultations ever since the first one in Prapat in 1957, it has not aimed at any time in the past to come up with a 'Mission Statement'. As part of the AMC, a preparatory process to draft a Mission Statement has been initiated. A drafting group was identified by the General Secretary, and the members of the group were invited to come to CCA's headquarters for a reflection on the proposed Mission Statement. The initial draft prepared by the group has undergone several revisions and subsequently, it was shared

with the member churches, councils, and ecumenical networks, including theological institutions in Asia, with an aim to initiate discussion and invite comments. It is expected that this initial draft will be discussed and reflected upon at different levels, before it will be revised and presented at the AMC for a final round of discussion and adoption. The purpose of initiating the Mission Statement will not be for developing any concepts with theological theories, but it is expected that the Mission Statement will inspire churches in Asia and help reflecting on sharpening their missiological convictions.

The Challenges of the Mission and our Hope

As we are preparing for the AMC and reflecting upon journeying together, we need to also undertake a serious reflection about the role of the Church in Asia and our participation in God's mission. Today, mission is understood and talked about differently. In most contexts, mission is understood as offering the sharing of Gospel or Good News to others, as we have been traditionally repeating since the days of the Western missionary era. The images of Jesus that would have developed in Asia, whether it is through paintings, statues, or interpretations of Jesus and his ministry, are all replicas which we have patterned since the days of the Western missionary era. With the images and the identity in the West, we were taught either to a conquering community identity "Christ the King" or to private emotional piety like "the suffering Christ". Michael Amaladoss, a Jesuit theologian of the Vidya Jothi faculty says, "such an interpretation that the image of Christ the King helped to legitimise civil and ecclesiastical authority and justify its abuses". At the same time, the image of the Christ who had realised in his own life the readiness for total self-gift, even unto death is not talked about often. The Christ who dared to tell the truth to the powerful, who did speak about the real problems of the marginalised, who did not hesitate to criticise the rich and the powerful when they became oppressive, who promoted the spirit of caring, sharing, equality, justice, and propagated the message of brotherhood, forgiveness and reconciliation would have found more appeal in Asia. However, none of these images have not been sketched in our propagation of the Gospel and its message. This raises the cardinal question that

when are we going to interpret the message of the Gospel with a more comprehensive understanding of the mission mandate that goes beyond the traditional missionary era interpretation? When are we going to tell the truth, envisage the message of mission and emphasise the concept of salt, light, and leaven?

We have noticed that the challenges confronting the Church and the ecumenical movement in Asia are many, as millions of people in Asia are looking for a new future, where their aspirations for peace with justice and over all wellbeing will be realised. The greatest challenge we are now facing is to kindle hope in the hearts of millions of Asians. They are looking for a ray of hope which will light up their lives and make all their struggles meaningful. What Asia needs at this stage is the redemptive message of Christ; a message of hope for which the Church in Asia must become more of an animator, facilitator, and accompanier rather than a dominator.

The Church and the ecumenical movement in Asia will have to become a prophetic witness to proclaim the truth and hope in order to fulfil God's mission in Asia. Paul Puthanangadi of the Roman Catholic Church in India says, "In the fulfilment of our role in the mission, we should stress the aspect of Christ as the proclaimer of a new hope than as another avatar of the divinity calling for adoration and worship...The new way of fulfilling the mission necessarily will demand a new way of being the Church because it is the mission that determines the being of the Church." Let the AMC-2017 and the message of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations help us proclaim the message of new hope.

Asia Sunday-2017

As per the suggestion of the Myanmar churches, and as decided by the officers, the Asia Sunday-2017 will be observed on 15 October 2017, on the same theme of the AMC. Preparations are underway to formulate and facilitate the special Asia Sunday liturgy. CCA member churches and councils, as well as the partners of Asian churches worldwide have been alerted to the change of date and encouraged to observe this year's Asia Sunday on 15 October 2017 as a commemoration of CCA's Diamond Jubilee.

Location or Relocation of CCA's Headquarters

During the past six decades, the CCA has experienced different statuses—homeless, refugee, internally displaced and now again, for the past eleven years, as an asylum seeker. After the Prapat in 1957, there was no headquarters as such for its joint operation; then located in a car shed on the campus of the Bangkok Christian College in 1960s; later in the 1980s as rented office space in Singapore; subsequently, scattered in different Asian cities—Manila, Osaka, Hong Kong, and Chiang Mai during the late 1980s and early 1990s after the expulsion from Singapore. Everybody could come together later under one roof from 1992 to 2006 in Hong Kong. It has been debated and discussed whether the decision to sell the property in Hong Kong in 2006 and shift the headquarters from Hong Kong, a global city to Chiang Mai in Thailand was an appropriate and/or wise decision. Whatever the reason was at that time, there is no point in crying over spilt milk now. Instead, it is high time that we decide about the location of the headquarters of the CCA. Since the CCA headquarter was shifted to Chiang Mai, the Committee of the CCA has been discussing various options, but no concrete decisions have yet been taken. This is the third Committee that is entrusted with the responsibility and mandate to decide about the future location of the headquarters of the CCA.

The question before us is whether we prefer to stay in Chiang Mai or decide to move out and find a new location. Whatever it might be, we need to move ahead with a proper decision, especially now, when we have reached the age of sixty. There are several pros and cons for our rationale to stay in Chiang Mai or to set up a new location elsewhere in Asia. The fact is that, as D.T. Niles had stated in his report in the 1968 Bangkok Assembly, there is no Switzerland in Asia for the CCA. He said this half a century ago, when the CCA was only 10 years old. He was pointing out the practical difficulties in Asian countries at that time. Today, when the CCA has reached the age of 60, the situation is no better, if not worst compared to the scenario 50 years ago.

Where shall we fix our tent as we move forward?

Today, we have limited choices as we look around to find a proper place for CCA's headquarters, although Asia remains the most

diverse region due to various reasons. In terms of the cost of living, Asian cities continue to climb up the global ladder, accounting for half of the ten most expensive cities in the latest Worldwide Cost of Living Survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit. Singapore and Hong Kong continue to be the most and second most expensive cities in the world respectively. Tokyo, Osaka, Seoul are the other most expensive countries in Asia, however, the cheapest Delhi, Chennai, Karachi, and Bangalore represent the best value for money in Asia and are among the thirty cheapest in the world because of lower incomes and closer links to agriculture and manufacturing chains. However, cheap living costs alone cannot be the reason for setting up CCA's permanent headquarter. Several other factors also have to be considered, including the visa and work permit, freedom of religious organisations to operate independently, banking facilities, and permissions for using or dealing with hard currencies and foreign currency exchange facilities. We need to look into various options in the near future and as we move forward, we need to club together another important aspect, the financial sustainability of the CCA. This will also lead to another important matter, to decide on the use of CCA's land, purchased about ten years ago.

Financial Sustainability and Development of CCA's property in Chiang Mai

Ever since I assumed responsibility as the General Secretary, I have been engaged in discussions with several committee members about the future of CCA's financial sustainability. As a person who was coordinating CCA's financial contribution mechanism, through a WCC-coordinated roundtable platform of Western ecumenical and church partners for ten years, I have gathered information from my predecessor and also in the past few years during my conversations with several ecumenical partners in Europe and North America that the CCA's financial support will be ending in the near future. In that case, we need to think of a scenario in which the CCA can find maximum resources generated within Asia.

The Executive Committee and the Finance Committee engaged in an exercise of evaluating the pattern of membership contributions to the CCA from its members, as well as the possibility of requesting

member churches to increase each member's contributions in the future. I wrote to member churches and councils and approached them personally during my visits, as well as speaking to some of them over the telephone. There are a number of positive responses and as a result of such efforts, several churches and councils have increased their contributions, while others have promised that they would increase membership contributions in the coming years. Although such promises are helpful indicators, this support alone is not sufficient to keep the minimum level of programmes and operational costs of an REO, like the CCA.

The Finance Committee of the CCA which met in October 2016 and July 2017 engaged in serious discussions about the future financial sustainability of the CCA. During the discussions, it was suggested to explore various options, including the option of developing the property to generate income. The land purchased in 2007 has not been utilised yet. The value of the land, when it was purchased, was about USD 550,000 has increased now. It is more than one million USD now. As per the decision of the Finance Committee, we have taken certain measures to make a feasibility study to assess the value of the land. One company estimated the market price, 40 million Thai Baht which is more than 1.1 million USD. The Finance Committee also decided in its meeting in October 2016 to explore the possibilities of certain options to either use part of the land or the entire portion for income generation. We will be discussing some of these options today and tomorrow. A company which studied about this has already shared its findings and different options with the Finance Committee in its meeting on 10 July 2017. The Finance Committee after some detailed discussions decided to forward some proposals for more detailed discussions in the Executive Committee. This will only be the beginning of an exploratory or study process before we can arrive at a proper decision within the next one or two years.

The sale of this land, as it was decided by the Executive Committee in the past, or the development of this property for income generation should also be another option considered in the near future. There are other options also before us based on my conversations with

church leaders in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and most recently in Hong Kong. I am exploring the convenient time for a meeting of the sub-committee constituted by the Executive Committee to hold a meeting in the near future.

Towards a Revitalised Asian Ecumenical Movement

The consultation we have just organised gave us lots of opportunities and food for thoughts to revitalise the Asian ecumenical movement. We have heard numerous stories about the trends related to ecumenism and the ecumenical movement in Asia and beyond. We received first-hand information about several important issues in which ecumenical responses are warranted. So the tasks and challenges awaiting us ahead are numerous. The question before us is: How to move forward? How to reposition ourselves? And how to motivate and sensitise our constituencies to be engaged in a meaningful mission of revitalising the Asian ecumenical movement and partaking in God's mission.

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA
13 July 2017

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2018

1–3 July 2018 | Antelias, Lebanon

It has been almost one year since we had the last meeting of the Executive Committee of CCA. Several changes have taken place during the past year in Asia, geo-politically, as well as in the ecumenical and ecclesial settings. Some of those issues have been close to our hearts and minds as we all live in the midst of such realities.

Among the numerous geopolitical changes in Asia in recent times include the developments in the Korean peninsula. This issue has a special significance as the ecumenical movement has been focusing on the issue of peace, reconciliation, and the reunification of the Korean peninsula. There are several other pertinent geopolitical changes that have been taking place in Asia during the past year. In fact, we can analyse them from various angles and then we can find a rationale for our ecumenical involvements and actions. However, I am not making any attempts for such an analysis at this stage, but the focus of this report will be mainly on some of the most pressing matters related to CCA's vital role through our programmatic involvement as well as organisational matters.

CCA Executive Committee in Lebanon in the 'Middle East': a Historic Ecumenical Milestone

We are now meeting in the Middle East region, the cradle of Christianity. This is the first time that a meeting of CCA executive committee takes place outside the traditional orbit of the Asian ecumenical movement— by traditional orbit, I mean as we understand or have classified the Asian ecumenical movement thus far. We have been told or taught that this geographical area is the Middle East; since time immemorial, especially since Biblical history presents the Middle East region as part of Asia, was West Asia. Today's classified or demarked area of the Middle East and West Asia, as we know, are the same region, but the difference lies in the context we are talking about or considering. When we talk about

Asia, it refers to the region we call the Middle East, but in the map, this is clearly marked as West Asia. The Europeans and Americans historically refer to the region as the Middle East, because it is in the middle of the East when it is looked at from their region. It is like China or Japan in the Far East.

Shayn McCallum, from Turkey's Bogazici University, once wrote: Why are Western Asian countries known as Middle Eastern countries? Because of Eurocentric geography. British, French, and German geographers divided the world according to its proximity to Western and central Europe. Even in Australia, it is common to use this Eurocentric terminology even though for them the Far East should be South America, and the far North is China and Japan. West Asia is geographically the proper term for the so-called 'Middle East'. The United Nations started to use the term West Asia, but it is unclear if they use it across all of their documents. We can say that 'The Middle East' is a nickname, nothing more. West Asia is a geographical designation.

For us, the churches in Asia, we have sentimental attachments to this geographical region. Ironically, the Middle East, which is experiencing such extreme chaos, wars, and suffering was historically the birthplace of the world's three major religions, Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant), Islam (Sunni and Shi'a) and Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed), as well as a number of other smaller faiths. This is the cradle of Christianity. However, Christianity and the Christians in this region have been facing the most difficult challenges during the past several years. The Christian communities in West Asia have survived 2,000 years of tumult and war. In some of these ancient Christian communities, prayers are still said in Aramaic, the language that Jesus used in daily life. These communities now tremble on the brink of destruction. Churches in many parts of the world expressed concerns on the plight of the Christians in the Middle East region. However, often I was wondering whether there had been a deafening silence from the part of Asian Christians about the plight of Christians, although this was happening within the traditional boundaries of Asia, in West Asia!

The sufferings of Christians in West Asia should not be considered as an abstraction by other Asian Christians. As a Coptic Church leader recalled some time ago when speaking of the Holy Land's persecuted Christians, "We are members of the same Body. There is only one Body for us. It rejoices as one, it mourns as one, it also struggles as one."

CCA is now in this part of the world on the invitation of our member church in Iran, the Armenian Apostolic Church in Iran which is part of the Armenian Apostolic Church Catholicosate of Cilicia. The Catholicosate graciously extended us the invitation to hold the Executive Committee at the headquarters of the Church, here in Antelias. This is a great opportunity for CCA to widen the horizons of the Asian ecumenical movement as well as widening our interactions with ecumenical movement in other parts of Asia and in the world.

Programmes and Events since the Previous Executive Committee Meeting

During the last year's Executive Committee meeting, we spent substantial time for discussion on the Asia Mission Conference (AMC) and the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of CCA. By the grace of God, both events took place in Yangon, Myanmar successfully. Those two significant events would be considered as milestones in ecumenical history. I am sure, Yangon will be added as yet another mission conference destination in the global ecumenical map. We have received several positive responses from participants of the AMC, and the Diamond Jubilee celebration. More than 600 participants attended the AMC and more than 6,000 people attended the Thanksgiving Service to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee, which was held on Sunday, 15 October.

Another major ecumenical event CCA organised was the Asian Ecumenical Youth Assembly (AEYA), which will also be recorded in future as a historical milestone in Asian ecumenical movement. The AEYA took place after a gap of thirty-four years since the earlier one was held in 1984. More than 400 participants attended the AEYA.

A total of thirty-seven programmes were organised by CCA during the year 2017 in four programme areas and the General Secretariat. The special project of HIV and AIDS advocacy was not functional in 2017, as the project completed its earlier phase by the end of 2016, and the new phase started only in December 2017. We can see that a wide range of issues and themes covered while implementing various activities and programmes in 2017 with a focus on revitalising the Asian ecumenical movement. The overall thematic focus of the programmes was within the context of 'Prophetic Witness to the Truth and Light in Asia'.

The observance of Asia Sunday–2018 was on the theme, 'Embracing the Differently-Abled and Upholding Their Dignity'. As per the reports and responses we have received, CCA member churches and councils observed Asia Sunday–2018 in a befitting manner. In some countries, it is still being observed.

Asian Diaspora in the Arabian Gulf and Pastoral Solidarity Visit by the Ex-Com Members

A Pastoral Solidarity Team visit to the UAE in conjunction with the Executive Committee meeting took place from 28–30 June, en-route to Beirut. The thirteen-member team of CCA visited Dubai and Sharjah in the UAE gave opportunities to understand the realities with regard to the life and work of Asian migrants in the Arabian countries.

People on the move, especially migration and migrant workers have been a special concern of CCA in the past. However, in recent years CCA did not pay much attention to this concern although the issue has been more alarming in different contexts. CCA's focus on the migration issue has been by and large focused within Asian countries. But the migration related to the Arabian Gulf countries has not been focused in the past. Asian migration to the Gulf has become more differentiated over the years. Large-scale migration from Asian countries, mainly from South and South-East Asia to the Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have been taking place since the oil price started rising in the 1970s. In the 1970s, this involved mainly

male migrants for construction, initially from India and Pakistan, then from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Korea. Many of those projects were led by Korean construction companies. From the mid-1980s, as living standards rose, there was a progressive feminisation of Asian migrant labour in the Gulf region, with a growing demand for domestic workers, nurses, sales staff, and other service personnel. Females now account for about 40 percent of Asian migrants in the Gulf countries.

While many migrants remain low-skilled labourers, others are semi-skilled, professional or para-professionals. Overall, there are close to 30 million migrants in the Gulf region, and a large section of them are from Asia. These Asian migrants make major contributions to their Gulf destination countries where they make up around 40 percent of the population overall, and two-thirds of the labour force. Some 90 percent of private-sector jobs in the Gulf are occupied by migrants. Among the issues identified were: non-remunerated overtime work; non-payment of wages; average working hours per week over 100 hours; little or no time off work; physical (including sexual), psychological, and verbal abuse. The system for addressing foreign workers' complaints is inadequate or non-existent; labour laws generally do not cover female domestic workers because they are not considered employees, and domestic workers are also excluded from labour protection under any other national law. Trafficking of persons from Asia to the Arabian Gulf countries has become a common trend in recent times.

In this context, CCA is initiating a programme to focus on the Asian Diaspora in the Arabian Gulf. As a follow-up the recent pastoral, solidarity visit to UAE, CCA will organise a Consultation with a focus on migration and human trafficking which will be held in November this year. We are hoping that this initiative will help CCA to be more engaged in advocacy on migrant workers and human trafficking.

CCA's Location and Sustainability

The location of CCA's headquarters and the options for its relocation as well as the financial sustainability of CCA, in the long run, were our concerns for some time. You might recall that I raised a question

in the General Secretary's report to the Executive Committee in 2017: "Where shall we fix our tent as we move forward?" We spent substantial time during the last meeting of the Executive Committee to discuss the development of CCA's Chiang Mai property, and the possibility of establishing a permanent headquarters for CCA. Although we decided to go ahead in principle with the plan of setting up CCA headquarters building in CCA's Chiang Mai as it was originally decided more than a decade ago, other options were also explored. There was also a proposal to look for another convenient land to construct a building with at least eight floors. The sub-committee appointed by the Executive Committee to deal with the relocation and met and assessed various new proposals and looked into different options. More details about this will be shared later.

The most important aspect with regard to this proposal is that it would be appropriate to make a decision about the construction of the headquarters at the earliest. The original decision about the construction of the headquarters with adequate facilities was taken in 2006, but due to various reasons the decision was not implemented and a proper decision-making process was dragging. The fund designated for the construction was not properly invested and the value for the money was declining. At the same time, we have been spending a good amount of money on renting the current office space at Payap University. We also do not have adequate facilities in the current office space and we are facing several practical difficulties. Files and documents shipped from Hong Kong are still kept in the storeroom and remain unpacked. Thousands of photos which from CCA's history were undocumented and scattered on the floors or elsewhere in the office. How long we should allow this to continue even after 60 years of CCA's existence?

Income Development and Financial Sustainability, an Urgent Priority

Although there will be a separate Finance Report by the Treasurer, I would like to update you about the income and dwindling finance situation of CCA. There are several positive and encouraging responses from the member churches in terms of hosting programmes. This was evident recently also through the generous

contributions and support CCA received from churches in Myanmar and Indonesia. Myanmar churches are rather financially weaker, but their contributions for hosting the AMC and the Diamond Jubilee celebration were extremely generous. They contributed USD 44,912 for hosting the Asia Mission Conference and for the Diamond Jubilee commemorative event. In addition to this, their in-kind contributions provided additional support. Through the Protestant Church in Minahasa, Indonesia (GMIM), the Provincial Government of North Sulawesi spent a substantial amount to host the AEYA–2018 which was held in Manado, Indonesia. The board and lodging of 400 participants, local transportation, international tickets of thirty-five participants and domestic tickets of almost 100 Indonesian participants from various parts of the country, printing costs, local transportation, expenses related to exposure programmes, etc. were covered fully by the local hosts. We have not yet received the details about the expenses incurred by the local hosts. Such positive responses are very encouraging. However, it is also disappointing that many economically well-off churches in Asia's rich countries are not generous enough to support CCA by way of adding more membership contributions or programme fund contributions.

The income from the international ecumenical partners is not increasing in recent years and they have given us sufficient indications that it is time for CCA to stand on its own feet. It has become increasingly evident that the financial contributions from the non-Asian partners will be drastically reduced in the coming years. It is in this context that I want to alert you again that it is high time for CCA to look for income from other reliable and stable sources. The property development or income development sources together with the CCA headquarters building project need to be seen as a priority before the end of the term of this Executive Committee.

Leadership Crises in Asian Churches; Capacity Building

Whether we like it or not, it is a reality that a large number of Asian churches and ecumenical councils are facing a leadership

crisis. Some of the CCA member churches and NCCs are finding it extremely difficult to identify suitable leaders to lead their respective churches and the councils. In addition to this, churches and councils are facing problems with regard to good governance and accountability. Lack of ecumenical formation among church leaders is widely evident. These situations warrant the need for ecumenical leadership development in churches and ecumenical councils. During the last meeting of the Executive Committee, we did discuss the need to strengthen the ecumenical movement at different levels, for which adequate human resources are needed.

During the past two years, CCA has been focusing on the ecumenical formation and ecumenical leadership development at various levels including at the grassroots levels. For example, CCA's programme of ecumenical formation training for the Bible School teachers of eight Bible Schools in the refugee camps on the border of Thailand and Myanmar is an example of such grassroots involvement. No one came forward to undertake this task until we took the initiative. We organised ecumenical leadership development training in countries such as East Timor, Cambodia, Laos, and Nepal during the past three years; these are the forgotten areas in the ecumenical movement. We need to make special efforts for systematic long-term training programmes in leadership development and capacity building. It is also important to arrange or support theological education training of young people from these countries. The countries that need special attention for ecumenical leadership development and theological training of young people in CCA constituencies are Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Bhutan, East Timor, Nepal, Thailand, and Pakistan. In the past, the WCC had special arrangements through CCA for some training and theological education assistance to some of these countries. But it has been stopped for a while. The expense for a student to study at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute is more than USD 22,000 for a five-month course. So the opportunities for students from Asia or other developing countries are fewer these days. The possibility of systematising the ecumenical formation and leadership development through an Asian Ecumenical Institute was discussed during the last meeting. In this context, I would like to draw your attention again to this original idea we discussed.

Asian Ecumenical Institute (AEI)

CCA is now organising a month-long training, an Asian Ecumenical Institute, which was started in 2015. During the past three courses, we have proved month-long training for seventy-five young people. It has been proved that the AEI will be a potential platform to train young ecumenists, but a month-long course is not sufficient to provide proper academic and practical training. I have shared some proposals earlier also about the possibility of developing an Asian Ecumenical Institute with a long-term course. I am proposing this Executive Committee to concretise this original proposal and explore the possibility to link the AEI with the CCA headquarters and building project.

In addition to the AEI, there are other possibilities also to organise the training in different areas: in addition to a six-month training in ecumenical formation annually for young pastors and church workers two other courses also can be initiated; a two-month course for prospective missionaries with a focus on mission in multi-cultural and religious contexts; and a training course on conflict resolution and peacebuilding with three-month duration. These training courses will be CCA's stable programmes which can generate funding support from different sources from churches and governmental funding or secular foundation funding. This will also provide scope for income generation as it will be a source to convert a large chunk of expenses as income from renting out CCA's own conference and accommodation facilities.

Crises in Ecumenical Councils in Asia

There are fifteen NCCs that are members of CCA, and most of these councils are facing deep crises due to financial difficulties and lack of human resources. WCC and CCA have been accompanying some of these councils in the past through two ecumenical partnership programmes initiated jointly by CCA and WCC to assist the weaker NCCs, especially the NCCs of Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Cambodia, Bangladesh, etc. Some other NCCs are rather weak in terms of staff capacity or lack of interest and sense of ownership by member churches. Among these, the NCC Nepal and the Christian Council

in Cambodia (KCC) are facing deep crises. CCA has been able to initiate processes in Cambodia and Nepal to reactivate the NCCs. The problem that exists in KCC is related to the land and the office belonging to KCC, which was originally purchased through CCA. Lack of proper leadership in KCC also a matter of concern. The leadership crisis is a matter of concern in NCC Nepal also. Certain initiatives have been taken by CCA and I just want to share this information with the members of the Executive Committee.

Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace Asia Focus–2019

As you know WCC initiated the pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (PJP) and called upon member churches and partners “to walk together through collaborative engagement to address the issues of justice and peace, healing a world filled with conflict, injustice and pain”. It is stated, “Churches together and with their ecumenical partners, both in their own context and cooperating internationally, will be the main actors of the pilgrimage. Still, this pilgrimage is an invitation as well as an opportunity for individuals, parishes, and communities to participate in the movement of justice and peace”. It is envisaged that this ‘process of transformation will include experience, sharing, listening, praying, penance, witnessing, awareness-building, reflecting, and acting’. Although this invitation was extended to member churches all over the world five years ago, it has not made any impact among most Asian churches. In my own experiences in Asia, whenever I was visiting and meeting CCA member churches and councils, I realised that the Asian churches have not recognised the PJP as a programme when it was compared with the programme of Decade to Overcome Violence (DoV), which was also initiated by WCC.

Meanwhile, WCC has decided the PJP in 2019 with an Asia focus. The WCC leadership now approached CCA to facilitate the coordination of the PJP Asia Focus. It is proposed that nine pilgrimage visits will be organised to countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand-Myanmar border, Sri Lanka, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, and Korea. CCA will coordinate and facilitate the visits of the international ecumenical team to visit these countries in collaborations with respective NCCs. A meeting of the NCC General

Secretaries and representatives of NCCs will be held at the CCA headquarters to make further plans about each visit. I have already made a proposal that in each team visit at least one representative from the executive committee or programme committee of CCA also to participate as an Asian church representative. The annual meeting of the International Reference Group of the PJP will be held in conjunction with the Asia Focus and the proposed date for this meeting will be from 1–4 March 2019 and the venue will be in Chiang Mai.

Asian Ecumenical Women’s Assembly (AEWA)–2019

Another major ecumenical initiative of CCA in 2019 will be the AEWA. The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan has extended the invitation and agreed to host the AEWA in Taiwan in August 2019. A preparatory meeting on AEWA was held and initial preparation was made to facilitate the AEWA. It is hoped that we will be able to bring together at least 200 women from Asia to participate at the AEWA–2019.

Asian Inter-Religious Leaders’ Summit on Building Peace and Moving Beyond Conflicts

Religious intolerance in Asia is on the rise with more and more countries falling foul of such acts. From Muslim extremism in Pakistan to Theravada Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, as well as growing Hindutva fundamentalist ideology in India and Nepal, minority religions, are finding themselves targeted. The politicisation of religion and religionisation of politics add more animosities among traditionally tolerant Asian societies and adding more and more political instability in different parts of Asia.

Although freedom of religion is guaranteed by most countries through constitutional provisions the situation with regard to intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief is alarming. In recent times, Asia has witnessed an increase in the level of religious intolerance and overt forms of disrespect and aggression. As a result of this trend, peace, security and justice are

denied to a large section of Asians and they are persecuted because of their faith. CCA needs to address this concern with some urgent priority. In this situation, CCA has a responsibility to address this growing trend of religious intolerance. We are now in a process of initiating an 'Asian Inter-Religious Summit on Building Peace and Moving beyond Conflicts'. The initial proposal has been worked out and efforts are being made for requesting special funds from non-traditional partners of CCA to make the event more visible and fruitful. During my recent visit to Berlin, Germany to attend the meeting of the Asian Religious Leaders on Responsibility of Religions for Peace, which was organised by the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Federal Government of Germany and the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Finland, I have had initial discussions with some of the officers of both governments about CCA's proposed Asian Religious Leaders' Summit. There were some positive signals from them to collaborate with CCA in organising this major Asian event. The idea is to bring together at least 100 leaders of various religions from all over Asia to a common platform provided by CCA. It is our hope and prayer that we will be able to accomplish our mission of prophetic witness towards this direction. This programme is now going to be part of our programme plan in 2019, and provision for allocation of the budget also has been made for organising this event.

CCA General Assembly Preparation

The General Assembly, the supreme body of the CCA will have to meet once in five years. The last CCA assembly was held in May 2015 and in that case, the next CCA assembly should normally take place in the first half of 2020. An assembly is such an important event to be held once in five years. It needs careful and adequate preparations, and we have to start the preparations at the earliest. As part of this preparatory process, a five-member General Assembly Preparatory Committee comprising no more than five persons should be appointed by the Executive Committee. The immediate task is to develop the assembly theme as well as to identify the venue of the assembly, assembly worship preparatory team, etc. In order to develop the assembly theme, we shall organise a small theological consultation with the participation of selected Asian theologians.

Perhaps this consultation could be organised in conjunction with the preparatory meeting of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS) which will be held in the first half of 2019.

With regard to the venue of the Assembly, the Church of North India (CNI) has already extended an invitation to CCA, with an offer that CNI would host the Assembly and cover all expenses related to board and lodging as well as other local expenses. We need to discuss this and take an appropriate decision.

Towards Wider Ecumenism in Asia

In this report, I tried to share with you several important aspects related to life and witness as well as some indicators about CCA's sustainability and also the effectiveness of its programmes. The programmes and activities we have planned as per the strategic plan framework for the year 2018 focus on the theme are 'Towards Wider Ecumenism in Asia'. However, the concept of wider ecumenism has much more serious meaning in the Asian context. There are several contexts and instances that can testify how wider ecumenism in various Asian cultures and values of religious contexts also can be interpreted and applied more relevantly. Our task in this context is to search for the meaning of the shift or changing paradigms of ecumenism in Asia. In our learning process of understanding the wider dimensions of ecumenism, we are making many efforts at every stage of our ecumenical journey. As Catholicos Aram I reminded us yesterday, "Ecumenism is a pilgrimage towards unity," and "a call for visible unity". In our search for attaining the goal of ecumenism, we experience hopes, sacrifices, and risks. We need to be prepared for facing such realities. What we heard yesterday also reminded us to understand the issues related to the challenges of the ecumenical movement. Ecumenical movement as a whole is at a decisive point in history, but we are hopeful that the current realities of stagnation or uncertainty are not a permanent fixture. That is why ecumenism, for us, is hope in action. Ecumenism is a vital dimension of our faith and witness. As we move forward, let us pray and hope that our efforts to reaching the goal of the visible unity of all God's people and all God's creation will be attained through our humble and minor efforts in Asia. We recognise the

fact that the small or minor effort has its own value. This is what we are reminded of a parable Jesus described; a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade. (Mark 4:31–32). Our efforts to participate in God’s mission of planting and nurturing ecumenism in Asia will be a small or minor effort at this stage. Yet we need to plant the small seed with the hope that it will grow and become a larger garden plant, or a bigger tree which might produce fruits in future. This should be our hope and this is the hope that gives us an impetus and motivation to move forward as we are journeying together in Asia.

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA
2 July 2018

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2019

15–19 July 2019 | Phnom Penh, Cambodia

This is the fifth meeting of the Executive Committee since the 14th General Assembly of CCA which was held in May 2015. As was in the case of the Lebanon Executive Committee meeting last year, this year's meeting is taking place in a country which is unfamiliar to most of you. This is probably the first time that most of you are in Cambodia. Cambodia has been a forgotten area for several church leaders in Asia although CCA and the global ecumenical movement have been accompanying the people of Cambodia for many years, especially since the time of the prolonged civil war in the country and the post-conflict period. This is a country where the global ecumenical movement including CCA has invested lots of time and resources for some time. However, this is another Asian country where fewer Asian church and ecumenical leaders visit or interact with churches in Cambodia. CCA has not been making any serious attempts for some time to make it known within Asia. It is in this context that our meeting as the leaders of the Asian ecumenical movement here in Phnom Penh is significant.

The history of Christianity and ecumenism in Cambodia has undergone many changes especially since the country started a new political beginning after the Paris Peace Agreement in 1992. I shall not give you a detailed account of the church and ecumenical situation in Cambodia in this report. However, I would encourage you to understand a little bit more about Christianity and ecumenism in Cambodia, which can be found in a chapter of my book on 'Ecumenism in Asia', which I wrote some time ago. Although the time we spend here is limited, I am sure that you will be able to understand the church and ecumenical situation at least in a limited way. We have many things to learn from the experiences of Cambodia and the Cambodians who have undergone traumatic experiences. This is a country where more than two million people were massacred. It is not easy to recognise from today's developed conditions in and around Phnom Penh that this country has a dark past and the people have a horrifying memory. This is the country in Asia where Christianity was completely wiped out during the

dark days of brutal communist leader Pol Pot. The Church and Christianity in Cambodia had images of the colonial establishment. When the Cambodian communists came to power in 1975, one of their first actions was to dismantle the Roman Catholic cathedral in Phnom Penh, which they called ‘the Vietnamese church’, but they saw it as the residue of French colonialism. They tore down other church buildings all over the country. The Cambodian church we see here is a brand-new Christianity which can be traced only after 1990 or more precisely the growth of Christianity started only after the Paris Peace Agreement of 1992. Today, the Church in Cambodia is growing, and it has become a missionary battlefield. At the same time, there exists more disunity or competition among the Christians. What we see in Cambodia is a highly disunited church. The ecumenical movement in the country is also divided although both CCA and WCC jointly supported the churches and a national ecumenical council in Cambodia. The meeting of the CCA Executive Committee in Cambodia now, a first in the history of CCA, is very important. It is a timely action by CCA now as we try to understand the Cambodian Church and Ecumenism and find ways to continue ecumenical accompaniment in Cambodia in the new context. I am sure that our presence and interactions with Cambodian churches will make a difference.

Since our meeting last year in Beirut, our region has undergone many changes and experienced several traumatic experiences, with Sri Lanka experiencing the most tragic situation. The terrorist acts that took place in Sri Lanka and the murder of more than 250 churchgoers, tourists, and other civilians on Easter Sunday is a reminder that Asia is now the world’s leading site of religious extremism. The undercurrent of such a tragedy is not an isolated event. Sri Lanka is not the only Asian country that faces such a crisis. Other countries in Asia, too, have been hit in recent years, especially after the gradual demise of the Islamic State in the Middle East. The presence and active involvement of IS cadres and supporters are increasingly visible in Asian countries such as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and in China’s complex Xinjiang region as well as the Central Asian Republics. Peace and security in Asia are threatened by global and local terrorist organisations with different strategies.

Today's Asia is perhaps the world's most terrorism-torn region. State repression against an ethnic or religious minority has also been triggered in several places. Asia confronts a serious and growing terrorism-related challenge. These happenings raise a question about the vulnerability of Asians amidst development and progress and the future of peace and security. We are often proud of the way Asia has progressed in many areas over the past three decades it is a fact that economic development and technological innovation rapidly transformed Asia. However, despite these developments we Asians remain caught in protracted cycles of conflict and violence. Such situations only contribute to underdevelopment, poor governance, and instability. In the midst of increasing political gridlock and communal tensions, several Asian countries face much more severe constraints to economic recovery and development. A large number of Asians are forced to live in the midst of gun battles, ethnic conflicts, violence, communal tensions, and political chaos. All these have serious economic repercussions in several Asian countries. Political analysts and observers warn that the region's leaders must either address the problem at its source or prepare for more bloodshed in the coming years and decades. If left unaddressed, this scourge could become the defining crisis of the century for Asia.

All these circumstances warrant us to think about being the Church in the midst of emerging Asian realities and respond to such situations as a community of the ambassadors of Christ.

Being the Church in Accompaniment with Our Co-Pilgrims in Asia

The theme we have chosen this year for our programme thrust is 'Being the Church in Accompaniment with Our Co-Pilgrims in Asia'. As we believe that the Church is the people of God filled with the divine presence of God, the members of the Church are called to be partners in fulfilling God's mission and to commit themselves to the mission of Gospel saturation. The struggle for attaining the goal of peace with justice is the essence of the message of the Gospel. At this crucial time in Asia, as Asian ecumenical family members, how do we find relevance to the value and message of the Gospel? In order to attain the goal of Gospel saturation, the people of God in

Asia are called to be partners and companions with all God's people who are co-pilgrims. The words 'pilgrim' and 'pilgrimage' have become more prominent in the ecumenical movement especially since WCC launched a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace programme. The concept of pilgrimage has different contextual meanings in the world and in Asia too. I tried to articulate this in a small book I wrote and published in 2015. A pilgrim is not a lonely wanderer on the planet, nor is a pilgrimage merely a concept of performing a ritual, or commemoration; it is a search for truth, connection, transformation, participation, accompaniment, and a path leading to peace with justice. In Asia's diverse pluralistic cultural and religious contexts, pilgrimage has elaborate significance and spiritual values. In Asian contexts, pilgrimage is also a journey of search, especially one of exalted purpose or moral significance. In various religious traditions in Asia, pilgrimage is an ongoing process that enables transformation through deep spiritual experiences. The pilgrimage in Asia also has integral components of peacebuilding and nurturing harmony together with our co-pilgrims. It is in this context that we need to find the relevance of being a Church in accompaniment with our co-pilgrims in Asia.

The Church has a responsibility to equip and prepare all members of the Church to be co-pilgrims in God's mission. The Church in Asia is called to participate in God's mission of a spiritual journey of pilgrimage in the struggle for peace with justice. However, the reality is that more and more people are wary of institutional forms of the Church for many reasons. The emerging and pressing need is to learn how to be a catalyst as the Church in Asia, how to be a good partner and companion with our co-pilgrims in a diverse cultural and religious context in Asia in the spirit of Christ's love. As a body of Christ, the Church in Asia today is called to witness Christ in the midst of the increasing painful realities of fragmented communities in Asia. The activities being carried out in 2019 are the fourth part of the original five years Strategic Programme Plan developed and adopted by the CCA Executive Committee for 2016–2020. A wide range of activities is planned and being implemented.

As we continue our journey of implementing all these programmes, the thought that constantly reminds us is that we stand at the

threshold of a new era in humanity's journey towards its destiny. There are many signs all around us that remind us of the new challenges we come across in all areas of life in Asia. The emerging contexts and situations in Asia call for a new way of fulfilling the mission necessary for a new way of being the Church. This is because the mission determines the being of the Church. The Church is the community of disciples that has received the Good News. The Church is called to communicate, accompany, and journey together in the world to share the Good News. In other words, the Church is both conditioned by Christ and conditioned by the world. The first Christian community communicated and manifested its faith in Christ not so much through its doctrinal formulations as by its being a community of love and sharing. However, we Asians have not sufficiently manifested to our brothers and sisters of other faiths and ideologies this specific Christian image of sharing and caring. We still present Christ as a religious founder and Christianity as the supreme religion. This is what is happening in Cambodia, Laos, and/or Nepal today. As a result, we are either tolerated or persecuted as another religion depending on the attitude of the majority religions wherever we live.

The CCA tried to respond to emerging Asian issues and accompanied its member churches and councils that were either caught up in conflict situations or needed support on specific occasions. On behalf of CCA, the General Secretary responded to a number of emerging Asian issues during the past year since we met in Lebanon. The wide variety of issues addressed and responded to by CCA are clear indications of the fragility of Asia's crisis situations and ecumenical responses warranted. The issues addressed range from terrorism, human trafficking, violation of human rights and minority rights, freedom of religion, indiscriminate shootings at worship places, and racial discrimination. The ongoing conflict situation in the Philippines is a matter of serious concern. The churches in Asia are faithfully responding to several pertinent issues in their respective contexts as part of their prophetic witness. In this situation, we find the relevance of being the Church in accompanying people and communities who struggle for justice and peace in Asia. The programmes we are focusing on in the current year touch upon many aspects and areas of Asian situations.

In 2018, CCA initiated, organised, and facilitated thirty-eight programmes. In addition to this, in the first half of 2019 CCA organised and facilitated nineteen programmes. Preparations are underway for another eighteen programmes including certain major events such as the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS)–IX which will be held in Medan, Indonesia, from 5–10 August 2019, with 100 Asian theologians, and the Asian Ecumenical Women’s Assembly (AEWA) in Hsinchu, Taiwan, from 21–27 November 2019, with the participation of 250 women from all over Asia. All these efforts of CCA really help us to revitalise the Asian ecumenical movement while reflecting on being the Church in Asia.

Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Asia Focus

The programme of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace (PJP) initiated by the World Council of Churches has its focus on Asia in 2019. CCA facilitated the meeting of the PJP International Reference Group and the Theological Working Group which was held in Chiang Mai during the first week of March 2019. The members of the Reference Group together with several staff members of WCC joined the Pilgrimage Team Visits organised to Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand-Myanmar border prior to the Chiang Mai meeting. There were three other visits originally planned and scheduled to take place to the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea. Although CCA representatives did not directly participate in these PTVs, CCA facilitated a planning meeting with the General Secretaries of nine NCCS in Asia which enabled better coordination and organisation of each PTV that already took place. The week-long meetings held at the CCA headquarters were focused on peace-related issues in Asia as well as in other parts of the world. The role of CCA in organising and facilitating the PJP Reference Group meeting, an interfaith Worship on Peace organised in conjunction with the PJP meeting, and the launching of the Ecumenical Water Network Lenten campaign were appreciated and recognised by the members of the international reference group.

As this year’s PIP regional focus is on Asia, the WCC’s various programme desks and units will organise programmes with a focus on Asia. The leadership of WCC asked all its programme staff to implement such programmes in Asia only in collaboration

with CCA, and most of them now work together with CCA in implementing programmes in Asia. At least six programmes have been scheduled this year as joint programmes in areas such as stateless people, ecology, human rights advocacy, Diakonia, and sustainable development, evangelism, the dignity of children, and communication training. A meeting of the WCC and eight REO General Secretaries held recently adopted new guidelines for strengthening WCC and REO relations and joint actions. One of the provisions made in these guidelines is to ensure the participation of respective REO from the beginning of the planning stage itself. This needs to be seen as a positive indicator. This is yet another way of strengthening and ensuring the coherence of one ecumenical movement.

Asia Sunday: Stateless and Trafficked People our Co-Pilgrims

The focus of this year's Asia Sunday was on 'Stateless and Trafficked People in Asia: Our Co-Pilgrims' and was yet another opportunity to reflect loudly about one of the most serious contemporary issues faced by humanity.

Statelessness and human trafficking are often intertwined and are grave and widespread human rights problems in the contemporary world. Both issues have even been linked through the common claim that statelessness puts a person at greater risk of becoming a victim of trafficking. Millions of Asians, including women and children, are at risk of being stateless and trafficked as migrant workers both within and outside the region. Stateless people exist in most Asian countries. Forty percent of the identified stateless population of the world live in Asia and the Pacific. In South-East Asia and South Asia, discriminatory laws, policies, and practices on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, and religion have significantly contributed to statelessness. We hear the stories of the plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar who are the most vulnerable stateless people in Asia. Close to one million hill tribe people in Thailand lack Thai citizenship as they are unable to provide documentation of their birthplace or parentage. Children among the two million Myanmar refugees or economic migrants in Thailand are ineligible for Thai or Myanmar citizenship, rendering them stateless. Four million people in the Assam state of India have been effectively

rendered stateless by the Indian government's recent actions since the Indian government will no longer consider them Indian citizens as they are not included in the draft list of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Persons of Chinese descent have also faced restrictions on citizenship rights in Indonesia, Korea, and Vietnam. Tens of thousands of undocumented children of migrant parents in Sabah in eastern Malaysia are believed to be stateless and extremely vulnerable, particularly those whose parents have been deported. Over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal are among the most protracted situations of statelessness. In Cambodia, since being forcibly displaced during the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, many ethnic Cambodians have lived in Vietnam for generations, and they have lost their documentation or any proof of having lived in Cambodia. It is in this context that CCA tried to mobilise and sensitise the Asian churches in various ways of advocacy.

An international consultation was organised in May 2019 together with the World Council of Churches. Focusing on the plight of the stateless people through this year's Asia Sunday was another opportunity. We have received reports from several churches about the observance of Asia Sunday in their respective congregations and NCCs.

Concerns of Asian Diaspora in the Arabian Gulf

We have been trying to address the concerns of the Asian Diaspora in the Arabian Gulf for some time. As a follow-up to earlier solidarity and pastoral visits, we organised a Consultation on Asian Diaspora in the Arabian Gulf which was held in Bangkok in November 2018. The consultation was attended by Asian church representatives together with about twenty representatives of the Asian Diaspora from the Arabian Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Muscat, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Ras Al-Khaimah, and Fujairah. The plight of the migrants and migrant workers in the Arabian Gulf needs to be addressed with an urgent priority in the changing situation in the Gulf countries. Asian churches will also have to play important roles in their respective countries. The representatives of Asian churches in the Gulf region have been repeatedly asking CCA to take a lead in initiating an appropriate programme in the Gulf region for the Asian Diaspora. I recently discussed this issue

with the General Secretaries of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) during the meeting of the WCC and REO General Secretaries. CCA needs to follow up on this issue in the near future.

Conciliar Fellowships in Crisis; Lack of Good Governance?

Traditionally, ecumenism emphasises the unity of the faithful towards the final goal of theological and ecclesial convergence. However, the emphasis and the interpretations have changed over the years. Today ecumenism has a much wider meaning, but ecumenism still mainly addresses, in classical terms, the unity of the churches. The visible expression of such unity is reflected through the work of the national council of churches. Asia has seventeen NCCs, but several of them are really in crisis. There are various reasons and factors for such a crisis and often there are efforts to overcome such a crisis. Meanwhile, other models or descriptions of ecumenism emerge. Receptive Ecumenism is one such trend that accepts a greater degree of difference between Christians and their respective churches. Instead of focusing on areas of potential convergence between the churches, proponents of receptive ecumenism say that ecumenism at the present needs to focus on the individual growth and learning of each church tradition in dialogue with others. This argument of individual churches and bilateral collaboration instead of a multilateral approach to ensuring unity has many negative impacts as such initiatives often promote denominationalism and ignore ecumenical commitments. There are several examples we can take from Asian situations as such attempts are often aimed at narrow personal and political gains. The goal of traditional church-centred ecumenism, visible unity through theological and ecclesial convergence, is often put aside in favour of an ecumenism of bilateral collaboration in the name of denominationalism or reviving the old mission board connections through Western mission agencies now becoming more active in Asia. What the Asian churches need at this juncture is self-examination to find a way of mutual enrichment. This includes a deepening of mutual understanding and appreciation between the churches, but more fundamentally it should aim at the maturing and growth within each church in the process of real receptive learning between churches.

Several member churches and NCCs are in disarray now due to internal conflicts, inter-church rivalries, personal conflicts, leadership crises, lack of accountability and transparency as well as corruption. Whether it is in poor countries or economically advanced countries, the level of corruption taking place in Asian churches is increasing. The only difference probably is regarding the amount of church money given by the faithful to the churches that are used for corrupt practices or how the church property is misappropriated by a poor church or a rich church through the deals by the church leadership. The reputation of several churches in Asia is at stake as there is no stewardship or there is no Code of Conduct in churches to deal with such issues. It is a shame for Asian churches as a whole that some CCA member churches are spending millions of dollars on court litigation. In this meeting, we need to deal with developing a Code of Conduct principle for CCA. This could be applicable eventually to member churches and councils. We are in discussion with the Mission21 in Switzerland to get support for an Asia-wide project to help CCA member churches and councils to develop a Code of Conduct and Good Governance. I know that this may not be a popular programme or proposal as far as some churches and their leaders are concerned but it is essential to uphold the credibility of Asian churches, for which CCA needs to initiate and facilitate certain programmes.

Where are We Heading? Financial Sustainability and the Future

In my report last year, I mentioned the issues related to income development and financial sustainability as an urgent priority. The dwindling financial situation of CCA needs to be considered an urgent priority. As I reported last time, there are several positive and encouraging responses from the member churches in terms of covering the expenses of hosting programmes. In last year's General Secretary's report there were several examples of such generous support received. You will see the visible evidence of such generous support in the audited statement and financial report; we received a total of USD 326,240 in 2018 from Asian churches for various programmes. This was possible due to our consistent efforts of convincing our member churches about the need for their increased support of CCA. We are expecting support from several

other churches in 2019 too. For example, two major forthcoming events of CCA, CATS, and AEWA will be supported by churches in Indonesia and Taiwan. The board and lodging of 100-120 participants of CATS–IX and other local expenses will be covered by a Pentecostal church GBI in Indonesia which is a member church of PGI, and it is through PGI that this church is relating to CCA. The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan will host the Asian Ecumenical Women’s Assembly (AEWA) and pay for all local expenses of 250 participants of AEWA which will be held in November 2019. In this context, I reiterate the disappointment expressed earlier that several economically well-off churches in Asia’s rich countries and councils are still not generous enough to support CCA by way of adding any additional membership contributions or programme support contributions.

Here I would like to report again to the Executive Committee and alert them about the shrinking financial support to CCA from our European and North American church partners. I approached and tried to convince some of CCA’s traditional ecumenical partners in Europe for increased contributions. I made a special appeal for an increase in their regular contributions. As you know, the income from the international ecumenical partners is not increasing in recent years but decreasing annually. They have given us sufficient indications much earlier that the time has come for CCA to stand on its own feet. It has become increasingly evident that the financial contributions from non-Asian partners will be drastically reduced in the coming years. Let me alert you again, all the responsible Asian church leaders, that it is high time for CCA to look for sustainable income development from other reliable and stable sources. I would like to reiterate my earlier proposal that the property development or income development sources together with the CCA headquarters building project need to be a priority for CCA, and it should be the highest priority for CCA to take a proper decision at the earliest. The more we wait, the more our available money will be devalued.

An Update on the Proposed Building Project and Land Development

Once I mentioned a comment by Rev. D.T. Niles who said, “We have no Switzerland in Asia,” What he meant was that Asia has no neutral

country for EACC headquarters to be located and operate without any fear or hindrance or interventions. Six decades later, it is being proved that CCA can anchor its base only in very few countries in Asia, but with many restrictions or hurdles. CCA was expelled from Singapore once and then relocated and operated from four countries. Then it was under one roof in Hong Kong but found it more difficult to be sustainable, hence CCA came back to Thailand, where CCA had its headquarters located for more than a decade in the 1960s and early 1970s. The difference between then and now is that there had been a greater sense of ownership demonstrated by CCA's member church in Thailand, the CCT when CCA housed its headquarters at 25 Papuan Road in Bangkok along with CCT headquarters. Now CCA is just a client availing services at the Payap University campus. The question is how long we will continue like this. Ever since CCA moved to Chiang Mai, every General Secretary tried to do something at the beginning and then left the office without taking any responsible decisions. As a result, time passed and the fund set aside from the sale proceeds in 2006 designated for the building project has diminished in value.

Let me recall the earlier decisions of the CCA Executive Committee with regard to the building project and the land development project. The utilisation of the land owned by the CCA located in Chiang Mai has been a focus of discussion and debate for several years. At different times the General Committee of CCA decided to sell the land, but later the CCA Executive Committee decided that the sale of the land be put on hold for the moment and a mandate had been given to draw up a plan that enabled calculating the cost of the entire process. On another occasion, the decision was to look for an option to buy another piece of land where the height restrictions did not apply and construct more floors with a possibility for better income generation potential for the CCA. The Finance Committee and the Executive Committee received and supported the feasibility report prepared by an architect and appraiser. The proposal was accepted in principle and decided to implement the proposals: using two plots out of the total of four plots utilising 20,000 square feet to be divided for the purposes of CCA office space, library, meeting rooms, staff accommodation and rental accommodation as well as to develop an Asian Ecumenical

Institute, a training centre with appropriate conference facilities. Meanwhile, the sub-committee which is mandated to look into three other options made new proposals. The Executive Committee in its meeting held in Beirut in July 2018 decided to purchase a school building-Lana School property. However, this decision was not implemented after considering various factors.

The post-2018 Executive Committee meeting developments in this regard can be summarised as follows:

1. A two-member team of engineers from the Habitat Technology Group in India visited the Lana School site and examined the conditions of the existing school building. After an inspection and evaluation, the engineers reported their observations:
 - a. The engineers found that the Lana School building was more than 50 years old-although the owner of the property initially told CCA EC member Ms Supaporn that the school building was only 30 years old. The engineers noticed in the approved master plan of the building that the permission for constructing the building was granted by the authorities in the early 1960s.
 - b. The construction of pillars and beams was not strong enough to bear the construction of any further additional floors or rooms.
 - c. The existing buildings on the site were too old and constructed with less-advanced technologies and they were now in very bad condition; taking into consideration the present condition of the building and the expenses needed for refurbishing, the buildings had only zero value and the price negotiated should only be for the land.
 - d. In this situation, as requested by the General Secretary, Ms Supaporn informed the Lana School owner that CCA was not interested in negotiating for the purchase of the school property.
 - e. Ms Supaporn arranged another possibility to buy a property, a hotel owned by a member of the Church of Christ in Thailand. The Habitat Group Engineers visited

the place and examined the building and the property. It was found that we would need more additional constructions to meet all the required needs.

- f. The Habitat Group Engineers, during their stay in Chiang Mai, visited the CCA property site and advised constructing buildings on CCA land as a more practical solution rather than acquiring other existing properties. The location and accessibility to the property provided by roads on three sides were considered advantageous.

Now the questions before this Executive Committee include how to proceed further. Decisions to be taken at this Executive Committee:

- In which direction must the building project be followed up?
- Must an attempt be made to relocate CCA headquarters to Bangkok or another country?
- Should the CCA headquarters be located in Chiang Mai itself? And if yes, should it be in a rented place or in a building constructed on its own land?

I am hoping that the agenda item set apart will help us to discuss further on this matter and take a concrete decision with better clarity.

15th General Assembly of CCA: 2020

The 15th General Assembly is scheduled to take place in 2020. We have already made certain decisions in the Executive Committee meeting held in 2018 with regard to the venue and also formed an Assembly Planning Committee (APC). The APC met once and initiated a preparatory process. More details will be shared later for separate discussions and decisions. The APC undertook a detailed brainstorming exercise to make concrete proposals before the Executive Committee regarding a suitable theme. The APC discussion was centred on the theme of Reconciliation, Renewal, and Restoration. The APC finally filtered the themes from several proposals and considered:

- “God, Restore Us to Yourself and Renew the Creation”
- “God, Restore Us to Your Path and Renew the Creation”
- “God, Restore Us in Your Spirit and Renew the Creation”

After much discussion and deliberations, the APC came up with the final proposed theme to be presented at the Executive Committee meeting to be held in July 2019: “God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation” (Psalm 104:30, Lamentations 5:21).

This has a resemblance with the themes of two other events of CCA this year. The theme of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS), which will be held in Medan, Indonesia from 5–10 August 2019 is ‘Reconciliation, Renewal, and Restoration: Divine Indicative and Human Imperative’. The AEWA theme will be ‘Arise, be Awake to Reconcile, Renew and Restore the Creation’. When the proposed theme of the Assembly is compared with these two themes, one may feel that an important component, ‘Reconciliation’ is missing in the proposed theme for the Assembly. As the Executive Committee is going to make the final decision on the theme of the next Assembly, it would be better to discuss the thematic emphasis in a more in- depth way and ensure better clarity.

The proposed theme is in the form of a prayer, it is more with a theocentric emphasis and the overall missiological emphasis is also articulated in this prayer. We normally approach mission and missiology from the perspective of the history of missions or from that of the Great Commission texts, interpreting them in a narrow sense as a call to baptise everyone. Today, we realise that the welfare of the whole creation is the object of the Christian mission. The Church is like the leaven meant to facilitate the transformation of the world. The mission in which we are called to participate is to be aimed at reconciling, renewing, restoring, and transforming the world and the entire creation. The Christian understanding of the Church and its mission is deeply rooted in God’s grand design for all creation. God’s purpose in creation was hindered by human disobedience which ultimately affected and spoiled the relationship between God and human beings, and created disorder. We are alienated not only from one another but also from the land that sustains us. Our relations are estranged, ecosystems are increasingly damaged, and we are responsible for degrading the creation. God reconciles, renews, and restores everything distorted from its original state into a peaceful, life-promoting relationship with one another. Since human beings are incarnated in material, bodily existence, we are necessarily interdependent on plants and animals, land and sea, heaven and earth. The good news is that

redemption is cosmic. The process of reconciling, renewing, and restoring is God's way of ensuring the fullness of life of all of God's creation. Our faith is in God who reconciles all things in heaven and on earth. What we need to emphasise and convey in a theme of the CCA Assembly is a message that will be fully Asian and authentically Christian.

With regard to the venue, we agreed in principle for the 15th General Assembly to be held in Jabalpur, India as the first option. During my further enquiry and discussions with Churches in northern parts of India and with the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), I discovered certain practical difficulties related to flight connections from international airports to Jabalpur where the delegates will have to travel by domestic flights. Meanwhile, certain other proposals were also made for Kerala, the southernmost state of India, as a possible option to hold the next Assembly if the Assembly will be held in India. The APC during its meeting in May looked into other options either in Bangkok or in Chiang Mai. When we shared this proposal with others we were reminded of the fact that CCA had three General Assemblies already in Thailand; two in Bangkok and one in Chiang Mai. Whether it is in India or Thailand or anywhere else, we need to ensure more sense of ownership by the churches and also a certain level of financial contribution as well as expenses in terms of covering the Assembly costs including travel subsidies at the minimum level. We have worked out certain details based on the available information, which will be presented later. Various factors need to be considered for us to make a proper decision.

CCA Member Churches and Membership Shifting

The geographical area of CCA's membership has been growing for some time. CCA presently has its members starting in West Asia from Iran to Japan in East Asia, and Nepal in the North to New Zealand in the South. However, there are interests expressed by churches from other countries to become members of CCA. The Anglican Church in Mauritius has contacted us and also sent a participant to attend last year's Asian Ecumenical Institute (AEI). The leadership of a Church in Mongolia is in contact with us and also certain churches from the Central Asian Republics such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. At the same time, certain churches in Australia and New Zealand

have become members of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC). The notable fact here is that CCA was never informed of such developments where a member church was seeking membership in another regional ecumenical organisation. Sometimes this creates some confusion with regard to their regional identity. A few years ago, GKI, a CCA member church in West Papua became a member of PCC, and the same church is still a member of CCA. However, in international gatherings, GKI identifies its affiliations with the Pacific region. In several churches, only the leadership knows which direction the church is moving and how it relates to different levels in the ecumenical movement. What Noam Chomsky once commented on another issue is relevant in this context too: “The general population doesn’t know what’s happening, and it doesn’t even know that it doesn’t know!”

Recently the national contact person WV. (Bill) Robinson wrote to us on behalf of The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) New Zealand saying, “We are a relatively small group and need to be careful of the use of our resources and finances. We also note that CCA has grown into a vibrant and active body within Asia so our assistance and backing are no longer needed.” As you know, the Malaysian Methodist Church informed CCA just prior to the 14th General Assembly in 2015 that the Methodist Church in Malaysia had withdrawn from CCA’s fellowship. The reason at that time was probably that the church was concerned about the fraudulent involvement discovered by the investigation team of CCA about the then General Committee member of CCA from Malaysia who was also the Secretary of the Methodist Church in Malaysia. Out of a total of 100 member churches of CCA, we now have only ninety-eight members in our membership register, but some of them are rather non-active members or not responding to our correspondences. We have contacted all member churches again recently to seek certain statistics about each church that are needed for careful decision-making on seat allocation.

New Membership Applications and Guidelines for Processing

As several other churches in Asia are seeking membership in CCA, we need to think about and discuss more on CCA’s membership application policies. As far as seeking new membership in CCA is concerned, we have only a very informal or loose policy for admitting a new member church in CCA. As per the CCA Constitution, in order

to qualify for membership a church must express its agreement with the basis of the WCC (Article I of the Constitution): The CCA is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

CCA is not an organisation dealing with specific countries or nationalities or disputes between nations. CCA does not give preferential treatment in accepting the views and suggestions made by its member churches or councils in terms of its size. However, CCA should have a clear policy and guidelines for accepting member churches or councils. It is more appropriate now for CCA to adopt a policy guideline for receiving and accepting new members in future. The acceptance of any new members in the CCA fellowship should be based on a commonly accepted guideline and systematic process. As it is, there are no guidelines except certain requirements outlined in the CCA Constitution; we do not even have a membership application form for the applicant church to spell out the details. We have included an item on the agenda of this meeting to discuss the guidelines for membership in CCA. A process to develop proper guidelines will help CCA to handle new membership applications in a professional way and introduce and recommend the applicant church/ council at the General Assembly. We need to start the process now as there are certain churches from Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia, and Mauritius that have already expressed interest to join CCA and proper decisions need to be made at the forthcoming Assembly.

Challenges Ahead of Us

As we are now approaching the next General Assembly and completing the assigned mandates of the current Executive Committee, we need to make an assessment of the ongoing challenges ahead of CCA. There are a number of important issues to be addressed still or aimed to be achieved.

a. Human Resources: CCA needs more committed personnel to perform tasks

Commitment to work and committed staff and the level of their enthusiasm are the real strength of an organisation or institution

in order to perform tasks and mandates at a workplace. The enthusiasm and commitment of a person towards the goals, mission, and vision of any organisation would normally be expected. Our ecumenical tasks are achieved by perseverance, hard work, and dedication. All these qualities do not just show up in a day. From my experiences during the past four years as I tried to attain certain goals of CCA through a marathon race, I realised that the challenges are enormous! Finance is not the only factor that hinders CCA from performing a better task. Commitments and committed human resources to undertake the responsibilities and implement them with a certain level of motivation and ecumenical commitment is the most needed factor. The church and the ecumenical movement as a whole in many places face this as a major problem, so as in CCA. Our experiences show this is a major challenge for CCA now. At the same time, I am glad that the young talents we identify from Asia are hopeful signs for the future of the Asian ecumenical movement. Some of the young interns we recruited or other young staff demonstrate their commitment. Their passion and commitment to working in the ecumenical movement have been evident in various ways. What we need are consistent efforts and strategies to identify more young talents in Asia and nurture their enthusiasm, recognise their commitment and allow them to grow and blossom in a way to use their skills for the future of the ecumenical movement. If such efforts are not taken, the ecumenical movement in Asia will have to face paralysis in the near future as we face a situation of shrinking human resources and leadership in the church and ecumenical movement.

b. Communication: CCA needs new strategies

A good communication system in this highly sophisticated digitalised world is crucial in enabling the CCA to present its work in a coherent way and encourage the constituencies especially to engage the young generation with CCA's work in areas or topics in which they are interested. CCA has not evolved a systematic communication strategy yet. The CCA website www.cca.org.hk and the Facebook page serve as the main CCA communication channels. The CCA news releases we publish occasionally, are reaching a fairly wide audience. We have reached a target group of more than 5000 regular subscribers now from zero at the end of 2015 since we

developed a new website and introduced a MailChimp distribution system. Sometimes, our news releases receive 2000 to 3000 hits within the first one or two hours after they are posted on the CCA website. Although we do print and publish certain reports and booklets, we have not had any printed publications for some time. The main reason is that we do not have a communication staff or a staff with expertise in editing and publishing. We advertised for the position of a copy-editor and communication coordinator, but we could not recruit any suitable staff so far.

We are now in the process of organising a capacity building training for a selected group of 20–25 young people who are interested in the field of communication. A plan has been worked out during my last visit to WCC to organise this training with external professional facilitation. This will be fully supported and sponsored by WCC’s Communication department. The idea is to build up an ecumenical network of communicators in Asia with at least one representative from each country or region in Asia’s CCA constituency.

c. Towards a Consensus Model of Decision-Making in CCA

There are lesser disputes and/or less controversial issues that we normally deal with among ourselves as a governing board. This is a positive and healthy trend as far as CCA’s future is concerned. I am fully aware of the past experiences and how much it was internally polarised and how it affected CCA’s growth and witness. Today, we experience a more fruitful collaboration and peaceful atmosphere in our decision-making process with mutual support. This development and the atmosphere we experience now is a positive sign as far as CCA’s future is concerned and the legacy we will pass on to the future and the new generation of ecumenists. The churches in many parts of the world, especially the global ecumenical movement, learnt many positive aspects from the consensus model of decision-making. CCA has not yet initiated such a process or made any attempt to introduce decision-making through a consensus model. The WCC has been following the consensus decision-making for the past two decades and those have been helpful in many ways. It is important that we initiate such a consensus model of decision-making in CCA, at least to start with it at the 15th General Assembly. We have expert assistance within ourselves, and we need to avail such expertise to develop

a consensus model of decision-making in CCA. Rev. Terence Corkin is one of the best-known experts in facilitating the consensus decision-making process and I suggest that we avail his expertise from the Assembly and beyond the Assembly for some time to train the incoming governing board members. We need to make a formal decision about the follow-up and the way we would like to move forward.

d. Organisational evaluation of CCA

A proper assessment and evaluation of the work and activities of any organisation and institution is essential for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the concerned body. CCA undertook a major evaluation almost a decade ago. The evaluation process at that time lasted for more than two years and the final report was presented to the 2010 General Assembly of CCA. The follow-up of that evaluation resulted in the amendment of the Constitution adopted at the General Assembly in 2015 and subsequently introducing a new programme structure in the post-Jakarta Assembly period. Our main funding partner, Bread for the World, made a proposal during the time of the current funding cycle that CCA should make provisions for another round of evaluation. We have been in consultation with Bread for the World and the Church of Sweden about the evaluation process. We have now worked out a Terms of Reference (TOR) for the proposed evaluation and also identified certain names for considering selecting as members of the evaluation team. The TOR also made provisions for representatives or reference persons from CCA to facilitate the evaluation process. The idea is that an evaluation report is presented to the next General Assembly through the Executive Committee. More details will be shared at a later stage for discussion and action. We need to anticipate certain challenges before us regarding the implementation of the recommendations in an effective way in future.

As We Move Forward and Continue Our Ecumenical Journey...

CCA has completed sixty-two years of its ecumenical journey this year. In Asia's multi-cultural context, CCA has completed one full

circle of its life span, and this is the second year of the second life cycle. The member churches and councils in Asia come from different traditions. There are CCA member churches as old as Christianity itself and there are also new churches only two or three decades old. On the whole, our image in Asia is still a foreign religion, and a coloniser's religion imported as part of colonialism. The general perception of Christianity in Indochina countries is a typical example of that as they commonly perceived that the "Cross and the Sword" marched to these countries side by side with the French colonialists. In this situation, we need to project a new image, which should be the classical image of the Church, a community of love and sharing; a community that embraces all God's people; a community that expresses solidarity with our fellow travellers in our communities although they are adherents of other religions. It is not an easy task in today's Asian contexts to perform our tasks in most countries, but God's divine guidance is our source of strength. God's communication with human beings was not in abstract terms, but he entered into the life and cultures of the people. He fully became one with the people (Hebrew 2:17). The Church, being the sacrament of Christ, has to be fully integrated into the people to whom the Church sent in mission. The Church in Asia must become more animating than a dominating centre. The presence of the Church in Asia should be all-pervading and all-permeating. The Church in Asia must make its presence felt in a way that transforms and creates communion among all God's people. The role of the national councils, especially CCA as a fellowship of churches and councils across Asia, has a more specific role to make the presence felt in every sphere of life in all possible ways. Reading the signs of the times enjoins us with the duty to reformulate the meaning and relevance of our witness and journey together in Asia. As we move forward and continue our ecumenical journey in Asia, let us pray and strive to be obedient in responding to God's call.

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA
16 July 2019

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2020

27–28 November 2020 | Online

We are meeting at a time when the world is passing through the most decisive era in history. This virtual meeting of the CCA governing board will be recorded in the annals and archives of our organisation as the first of its kind. One of the most unexpected advantages of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the reduced pace warranted or demanded in our routine lifestyle. In the pre-COVID-19 era, we would complain about the hectic nature of our day-to-day life. We were so eloquent and proud of our special multitasking abilities, which actually only added to the chaos of our frenzied lifestyles. As we face the vicissitudes of our lives, we realise that we are ultimately very fragile beings. Our existence itself is only a fraction of God’s grand design. We are subject to the same laws that govern the rest of God’s creation on the planet. We are also forced to remember that our anthropocentrism and our assumptions of centrality and superiority are futile at best and egoistic at worst.

The pandemic also reminds us that we are “a piece of the continent”—that beneath our artificial and arbitrary boundaries and differentiations of ethnicity, physical features, colour, language, and nationality lie the same fears, same longings, same pain, and ultimately, the same fate of mortality. We have been woven together in a rich tapestry by our great Creator with the threads of interdependence to each other and to all else on this planet.

We are, therefore, learning now to be a little more kind. The smiles we give our neighbours are brighter. The calls and messages to our dear ones scattered across the world are more frequent and important. The sense of community, of shared circumstances, and ultimately of solidarity, has become a little stronger.

Impact of the COVID-19 on the Church and Ecumenical Movement and the “New Normal”

It is becoming more and more clear that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ecumenical movement and its witness will be long-lasting and complex. We can no longer consider returning to

the Church's and the ecumenical movement's prior and so-called "normal" functioning in most contexts. We need to construct and accept the "new normal." This "new normal" is applicable not only in companies or secular frameworks, but it is applicable in the Church and ecumenical movement.

In every sphere of life, we see new norms and regulations. At this point, none of us can predict what the future may hold. As we are beginning to envisage what shape this "new normal" might take, we also need to foresee the substantial changes in the ecumenical movement as the world emerges and evolves from the COVID-19 crisis. In order to meet the challenges of this "new normal", the ecumenical movement also will have to re-invent the way it operates. It is our prayer and hope that the threat of the pandemic will ebb over the coming months and that the Church and the ecumenical movement will resume full functionality.

The digital transformation of our systems and information, which we assumed would happen in the distant future, was quickly accelerated and became our daily reality. The shift from centralised physical offices where all staff sat at their desks to remote and at-home work fundamentally changed the day-to-day operations of not only private corporate companies but also churches and ecumenical organisations in many parts of the world. Almost overnight, even rural churches with the least digital access found ways to conduct online worship services. What was earlier considered unnecessary or irrelevant quickly became critically important.

CCA in the Context of the "New Normal"

Starting from the end of March to June, the CCA office in Chiang Mai was under lockdown. We followed the Thai government's instructions and guidelines. The office has been functional on a part-time basis from the first week of June and timings were rescheduled again in November, but we are still not fully back to normal and have not resumed our original timings and schedule.

During the lockdown period and in the subsequent months, CCA staff members have been involved in organising and facilitating several programmes virtually, despite all adversities given the widespread nature of COVID-19. This includes the month-long Asian Ecumenical Institute (AEI), which is currently underway with the participation of thirty-eight students across Asia, Europe, and North America.

Seven webinars were organised during the lockdown period on the emerging issues and challenges caused by the pandemic. The CCA Webinar series focused on topics and issues such as “Churches Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis”, “Plight of Migrant Workers amidst the COVID-19 Crisis”, “Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Women in Asia”, “Food Insecurity in Asia”, “Right to Health amidst the COVID-19 Crisis”, “Upholding the Rights and Dignity of Children amidst the COVID-19 Crisis”, and “Towards Wider Partnerships for Combatting Trafficking in Women and Girls amidst COVID-19”.

The Asia Sunday observance organised by CCA on 25 May 2020 witnessed the unprecedented virtual participation of 22,000 people from across the world.

Other programmes also were organised virtually since March 2020 and a detailed report will be shared in the next session.

An Update on CCA Programme Evaluation

The Executive Committee Meeting held in Phnom Penh from 16 to 18 July 2019 approved the terms of reference for the CCA programme evaluation from 2016 and appointed two external evaluators—Mr Leo Bashyam and Mrs Helen Monisha Sarker. The evaluation process commenced on 30 September 2019. In a planning meeting held at the CCA headquarters from 30 September to 4 October 2019, the details of the evaluation process were worked out. The discussion finalised the CCA programmes where the evaluators would participate, the countries they would visit for interviews, and the selected participants of earlier programmes for surveys.

The survey questionnaire has been sent to all Executive Committee, Finance Committee, and Programme Committee members. A total of thirty programmes conducted since 2016 were selected at random and the survey questionnaire has been circulated among participants of these programmes. Focus group discussions and one-on-one telephonic interviews were conducted with the leadership of several CCA member churches and councils. The evaluators attended various programmes of CCA and directly interviewed and interacted with the participants. The review of all relevant documents—including annual Programme Reports, Minutes of various meetings since 2016, Finance Reports, and CCA policies and guidelines—was completed.

According to the original plan and timeframe, the evaluation process was expected to conclude in the first half of 2020, with the draft report submitted to the Executive Committee in July 2020 and the final report to the 15th General Assembly in September 2020. However, the COVID-19 situation hampered the ongoing evaluation process. The intention now is to complete the evaluation process by mid-2021.

An Update on the CCA's 15th General Assembly Preparations

The outbreak of the pandemic has had direct and indirect impacts on all aspects and plans. Our aim of holding the 15th General Assembly is no exception to these unique COVID-19-induced circumstances.

The CCA's 15th General Assembly was slated to be held in Kerala, India, after the resolutions of the July 2019 Executive Committee meeting and subsequent discussions with our member churches and council in India.

A local organising committee was formed in India with representatives from CCA member churches and the NCC-India. In September 2019 and February 2020, the CCA staff core group and the local organising committee in India met and worked out several details of the proposed Assembly. Reservations were made for delegates' accommodation in two different hotels and a Convention Centre was finalised. However, at the last minute, the advance payments to the hotels and the Convention Centre were halted due to early warnings about the spread of COVID-19 by the first week of March. Ever since, we have been monitoring the COVID-19 situation and reports coming in from various Asian countries, with special attention to the situation in India.

Members of the Executive Committee might recall that they were informed about the proposal to postpone the date of the Assembly. I have been discussing with various Indian church leaders about the emerging COVID-19 situation and the changing policies of federal and state governments in the country. As the number of cases continues to exponentially rise, and in light of the government policies concerning international travel and other health-related warnings, I have shared my reservations with the CCA Officers regarding the organisation of a major international event like the CCA General Assembly in India. I have also informally discussed these concerns with several Indian church leaders. As there is no

substantial improvement in the COVID-19 situation in India, we need to reconsider not only changing the date but also identifying another suitable venue for the 15th General Assembly. We shall be discussing more details about this during another session in this meeting.

Financial Situation and Future Sustainability

The financial situation and sustainability in the future have been points of discussion in all our previous Executive Committee meetings. The overall situation of contributions and income for the CCA to run its programmes and activities as well as to cover administrative and operational costs does not seem encouraging. The most recent accounts by the CCA's Hong Kong-based Investment Committee on the status of the CCA's investment portfolio in Hong Kong reported a net 10 percent depreciation in the value of the assets, given market fluctuations and the global economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Since the markets were unfavourable, making new purchases and investments were on pause. However, it is hoped that as the markets slowly pick up, the value of our assets would rise again.

As we all know, our main source of income is not from investments or fixed deposits but is generated through contributions from ecumenical partners and member churches. In this context, we need to reappraise the future financial sustainability of the CCA.

Property Development and the CCA Office Building Project

Our discussions in the past Executive Committee meetings as well as our earlier decisions to commence the construction of the CCA office building and complex have not yet materialised due to various reasons. The Executive Committee meeting held in 2017 decided to consider the Finance Committee's proposal to implement the plan of using two plots out of the total of four plots, utilising 20,000 square feet to be divided for the purposes of CCA office space, meeting rooms, and an Asian Ecumenical Institute and Training Centre.

The initial proposal and decision was withheld in light of others, considering new land in other locations. Meanwhile, a new proposal came in at the end of 2019 from the Payap University leadership about the sale of a plot of land outside the main campus. When

the land was inspected, it was found that hidden costs would be incurred during construction as the plot was low-lying and would need additional work to raise it to road level. However, the price of the land was not expected to come down.

We came to know about the government's decision to raise land taxes for vacant plots within the city, and so CCA had to plant forty mango saplings in line with government specifications to deem the plot as agricultural land. This was also done to reduce the overall tax amount.

What we need at this stage is to determine the next course of action. Although this may not be an appropriate time, it will be good to revert to the original decision in 2017 with a plan of using at least 1/4th of the land for the CCA's office complex. However, we must bear in mind that the present period is not the optimal time to begin construction. If there is a firm blueprint in place, we may consider further progress once the COVID-19 situation is ameliorated.

The Finance Committee decided, on 25 November 2020, to propose to the Executive Committee the following: "To develop 1/4th of the CCA's land to construct the office building as soon as possible. The downturn of the construction industry caused by the pandemic could be advantageous in terms of reduced construction costs. This would also avoid the incorrect impression to ecumenical partners that the CCA has accumulated funds without using it for any other purposes, and CCA was quite self-sufficient and needed no financial support." This Executive Committee meeting must discuss this proposal.

Our Hope for a New Beginning

The news concerning effective vaccines and experimental drugs to fight the virus allow us to hope for a new beginning, despite any existential anxiety we have borne since the beginning of the year or even the persistence of the fear of regressing to a worse situation; of a world dominated by vaccine nationalism and a lack of compassion or concern for one's neighbour. We may even witness the further widening of the chasm between the privileged and the oppressed. We must be ready for the daunting tasks that await us. Any recovery and rebuilding now will take time as we will continue to be haunted by the spectre of this virus for generations to come. The latest news reported from Europe is again alarming as several

European countries are on the verge of a second wave. Before we begin to pick up the pieces from this devastation, we must first and foremost acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has morphed into a humanitarian crisis, from which healing will be impossible without God’s divine mercy and grace.

Our world today desperately needs God’s intervention as we develop a solution that is all-encompassing and mindful of not just humans but the entirety of creation. We need to re-examine our conscience and embrace each other at this time of our vulnerability. Even amidst hope, there is undoubtedly a question that we may harbour in our hearts—“Where is God amidst the pandemic?” We may even ask, “What is truly the best and most certain path to love, peace, happiness, and life in all abundance?”

The prophet Hosea posed this question to his religious community, the people of Israel. Hosea’s people lived in a time of great uncertainty, international tensions, and hostility among nations. They were tempted to place their security in their own material possessions and in their political alliances with other nations rather than in God. Hosea called his people to return to God and receive pardon, healing, and restoration. He reminded them that God would “heal their faithlessness and love them freely” (Hosea 14:4). God’s ways are right and God’s wisdom brings strength and blessing to those who follow and trust God.

Despite all our sufferings and difficulties, the message of the Gospel inspires and strengthens us as we continue to believe in the redeeming power of the love of God, our giver and sustainer of life. We believe that God does not abandon us. God is with us even now amidst these great tribulations. As we grapple with great uncertainty and apprehension, let us intensify our prayers and anchor ourselves in the steadfastness of the promise of God. Our hope in God’s abundant mercies and love will not disappoint us. Let us recall God’s assurance: “Behold, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.” (Jeremiah 33:6).

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA
27 November 2020

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2021

9–10 August 2021 | Online

Moderator, Vice-moderator, Members of the Executive Committee, and colleagues,

It is with great joy that once again I am presenting the General Secretary's Report to the Executive Committee. Since we met last year, many changes have taken place in every corner of our respective countries. The dreadful situation that started affecting the world since the outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019/early 2020 still continues. For a while, we assumed that this awful situation would end soon, but we could not imagine that since the Executive Committee met online last year in November 2020, the situation would continue to hound us in a more serious way.

Now that we are together again, for a second time, through this online meeting of the Executive Committee. I am extremely grateful to each one of you for making this online meeting a priority in the midst of the ongoing unprecedented crisis.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis in Asia

The COVID-19 pandemic so far has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health and our existence on this planet. The colossal damage that has affected every sphere of our lives, especially the economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic, is devastating. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people have died. Millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty. Millions more face existential threats. Half of the world's global workforce of 3.3 billion people is at risk of losing stable means of livelihood.

Almost every South and South-East Asian country is experiencing ravaging situations since the COVID-19 outbreak began. Informal economy workers in Asia are particularly vulnerable because the majority of them lack social protection and access to quality health care. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many in Asia are unable to feed themselves and their families. For most,

no income means no food, or, less food, and less nutritious food. Border closures, trade restrictions, and confinement measures have been preventing the normal life activities of millions of Asians, particularly the most marginalised populations, which include small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples.

The people in Myanmar are facing the ravaging hit of COVID-19 along with battling an unstable political situation. Myanmar, which borders countries that are home to about a third of the world's population, risks becoming a "super-spreader state", according to a UN expert on Myanmar. Even with limited testing facilities in Myanmar and the proportion of tests that return positive results has exceeded 35 percent since mid-July, which suggests widespread and uncontrolled community transmission. Myanmar is counting around 360 deaths due to COVID-19 each day. This is one of the world's highest fatality rates, relative to population. Yet it is probably an undercount, something which the military junta has implicitly acknowledged: it is building ten crematoria in Yangon, which will be capable of dispatching more than 3,000 bodies a day. After the coup in February this year, testing, contact-tracing, and treatment of COVID-19 ground to a halt. Public hospitals were emptied of medical workers, thousands of whom joined protests against the coup. Shortages of oxygen have been exacerbated by a rule banning the sale of the life-saving gas to residents of Yangon unless they got permission from local officials appointed by the junta.

In Thailand, the daily COVID-19 cases and deaths both set records again last Saturday, as the country fights its worst surge in infections driven by the highly contagious Delta variant. Daily case tallies in the country have continued to rise sharply in July despite the imposition of tougher restrictions like curfew and partial lockdown in its most affected provinces. Local media reported on 1 August that the soaring cases had prompted the authorities to consider extending the current restrictive measures for another two weeks.

Generally speaking, Asian countries that led the way in controlling COVID-19 last year have now become laggards in the battle against the virus as their efforts to vaccinate their populations fall behind other countries in the world. The problems with vaccination rollouts vary from country to country, but across most of Asia one factor is

constant: a lack of vaccines to administer. Having failed to develop or produce vaccines at home, many Asian countries must wait for vaccine deliveries from other countries, leaving them at the back of the queue. In most Asian countries, the vaccination process is very slow. It is a reality that most Asian countries were unable to control the spread of the virus in time, and at the same time, governments did not invest in vaccines with the same urgency as seen in Europe or the US. This trend will not help the Asian countries to fight the pandemic or reach even some semblance of normalcy.

The suffering and agony of millions of people in this world and the loss of lives of many pastors and church leaders in various Asian countries causes great pain to us. However, the Asian churches have been incredibly resilient and responsive during the pandemic.

Now is the time for global solidarity and support, especially with the most vulnerable in our societies, particularly in the emerging and developing world. Only together can we overcome the intertwined medical, social, and economic impacts of the pandemic and prevent its escalation into a protracted humanitarian catastrophe. The world must recognise this opportunity to build back better, and we need to be committed to pooling our expertise and experience to support countries in their crisis response measures.

Programmes Since the Last Executive Meeting in November 2020

Last year I reported on how CCA had been functioning in the context of the “new normal”. At that time, I reported that starting from the end of March to June 2019, the CCA office in Chiang Mai was under lockdown and we followed the Thai government’s instructions and guidelines. For some months now, the office has been functional on a part-time basis, but we are still not fully back to normal. Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 started affecting us, our movements have been restricted. However, we have been making efforts to organise programmes and trying to implement the planned activities.

Since we shared information about the programmes and activities at the last meeting of the Executive Committee in November 2020, we have been able to organise 16 programmes online including a

month-long training of the Asian Ecumenical Institute (AEI), and the Institute on Human Rights for church workers which lasted for ten days. In terms of preparations for each programme, staff members have to engage themselves fully and devote the same level of time and effort, or even more. Although the online programmes imply a reduction in programme costs, we certainly miss and keenly feel the lack of the added value of having the presence of numerous participants across Asia and facilitating each programme with in-person participation. More details and narrative programme and activities reports will be shared by my colleagues at this Executive Committee meeting.

Ecumenism and Ecumenical Movement in a Digitalised World

The restrictions imposed by the pandemic and strict controls by governments pushed the CCA to accomplish many things in unique ways. The most significant adaptation was the enhanced use of virtual platforms and social media for our programmes and communication. Even though we prefer to meet together in person, we see a future in the digitalised world, and advanced communication methodologies provide new opportunities for our ecumenical engagements. The pandemic allowed us the scope for greater communication with member churches and partners.

Asia Sunday this year was facilitated virtually, and this special worship service held on 16 May with the participation of people across Asia and beyond was another specific example of our meaningful engagement during this pandemic. Remembering the promise given to all God's people in Exodus 15:26, the Asia Sunday-2021 was observed in a virtual service focused on the theme, "I am the Lord Who Heals You and Restores Your Health". A specially prepared liturgy was used for the online worship service, which was led by thirty ecclesiastical and ecumenical leaders from twenty-seven countries and regions in Asia where the CCA's member churches, councils, and partner organisations are based. The worship service was viewed by the faithful, who participated in it through the virtual platforms and social media pages of CCA and related networks from around the world. It was attended or viewed by over 1,600 people.

We are also trying to revive our communication skills. New computers and accessories needed for faster communication techniques have been introduced. The present CCA website designed and launched in 2016 will have to be redesigned and updated. We have engaged external consultants for redesigning our website. In order to facilitate the registration process for the 15th General Assembly and related communications, additional provisions in the new website also will be introduced soon.

Strategic Programme Plan (2016–2020)

You might recall that we adopted a five-year Strategic Programme Plan in the first meeting of our Executive Committee in 2015 October and started the implementation of the programmes since January 2016. I am pleased to report that we were able to organise over 90 percent of the programmes and activities we had planned and scheduled as part of the five-year Strategic Programme Plan. In addition to these programmes, we initiated several additional programmes from time to time based on some emerging issues and concerns. The CCA's five-year strategic plan continues to guide our work, although we need to plan further for a new Strategic Programme Plan for the new post-Assembly period.

Programme Evaluation

The Executive Committee mandated arranging a programme evaluation as decided in its 2019 meeting. The EC approved the terms of reference for the CCA programme evaluation and appointed two external evaluators—Mr Leo Bashyam and Ms Helen Monisha Sarker. The evaluation process commenced on 30 September 2019. The survey has been progressing well for some time with the original plan of presenting the draft report to the EC and the GA in 2020 September.

The evaluators attended various programmes of CCA and directly interviewed and interacted with the participants. The review of all relevant documents—including annual Programme Reports, Minutes of various meetings since 2015, Finance Reports, and CCA policies and guidelines—was completed. They have prepared a tentative report and are planning to discuss it with the staff initially.

The new situation has stalled the evaluation process for a while, but it will be resumed soon.

CCA Property Development

Our discussions in the past Executive Committee meetings as well as our earlier decisions to commence the construction of the CCA office building and complex has not yet materialised due to various reasons.

The Executive Committee meeting in November 2020 had resolved to support the recommendations of the Finance Committee to develop property on 1/4th of the land owned by CCA in Chiang Mai and authorised the General Secretary to develop plans for the office building. As the COVID-19 situation is not congenial for any new initiative now, we have not followed up on this matter. However, we will need to pay serious attention to it once the situation improves.

Update on CCA's 15th General Assembly Preparations and the New Situation

The 2019 Executive Committee's decision to hold the Assembly in 2020 was revisited last year. In the context of the spread of COVID-19, the Executive Committee in its meeting in November 2020 agreed that the proposed dates and venue would have to be determined in lieu of the travel restrictions, mandatory quarantine or isolation requirements, and the health and safety of all delegates while they travel. The Executive Committee noted the inability to hold the Assembly in 2020, as per the EC 2019 resolutions, and authorised the General Secretary to make the necessary inquiries with the view to hold the 15th General Assembly in May–June 2022, possibly in Indonesia.

I have made several enquiries regarding this. I had initial discussions with the churches in Indonesia with the help of CCA Moderator Bishop Simarmata. I contacted the Governor and Vice Governor of North Sulawesi and conversed with them directly over phone. Bishop Simarmata spoke with CCA member churches in North Sumatra. We have different possibilities now as churches in North Sumatra as well as in North Sulawesi have expressed their willingness to host the 15th General Assembly, including their generous offer of bearing the costs of board and lodging.

Although we decided that the date of the Assembly be tentatively fixed for mid-2022, the prevailing situations and predictions raise the question of whether it would be really possible to hold the 15th Assembly by mid-2022.

The number of infected people in most Asian countries has been increasing drastically and government restrictions with regard to international travel, airline operations, and other health-related warnings are still in place. Proof of vaccination or of recovery from infection is increasingly being demanded, not just for international travel but also within countries. It cannot be said that there are any substantial improvements in the COVID-19 situation in most Asian countries.

Foreseeing the possibility of a major Asian gathering in any Asian country which involves international travel is unrealistic at this stage. This warrants the need for us to think about changing the date of the Assembly from mid-2022. We may need to consider two options; either in early December 2022 or by April 2023. This might also give us more time for proper preparations. As was originally planned, Bible studies have been prepared based on the Assembly theme. The first draft of the main study document on the Assembly theme and sub-themes also has been developed as an outcome of a preparatory workshop we had organised by the end of 2019 in anticipation that the GA would take place in 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 situation, we could not progress as expected in our preparations.

Finding Hope and God's Abundant Mercies Amidst the Crisis

This period of trial that we are currently undergoing is at a scale that perhaps none of us has ever experienced. We are cut off from one another, passing our days in varying degrees of isolation. Worries about our health, finances, and the future we had planned dominate our thoughts. Out of desperation, in moments of crisis like the present, we may find ourselves wondering, "Where is God in all this?" It may feel to some that God is simply absent. We have to accept the fact that we live in a fallen and broken world. The present pandemic is a crisis delivered by nature. Here, we must accept the simple truth that we suffer because of our own mistakes.

We need to learn more readily to accept that this world is no heaven, and perhaps go one step further and see pain and suffering as evidence, probably a sort of precursor, of something better that is yet to come. We need to place our trust in God and hold on to our faith in God. Our faith in God with the hope of reaching the destination in our journey must sustain us. We need to find the strength to face the ups and downs in this arduous journey, and it is through these ups and downs that we will grow in faith. If God allows pain, he will give us the strength to go through it, and he will show us the way out of it. The verse in Isaiah 41:10 can serve as a reminder to us all: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Mathews George Chunakara

General Secretary, CCA

9 August 2021

Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2022

2–3 December 2022 | Online

Most respected members of the Executive Committee, Finance Committee, and colleagues,

Once again, we are meeting on a virtual platform for this year's executive committee meeting. In normal circumstances, this should have been an in-person meeting. However, due to various reasons, it became inevitable for us to meet virtually this time as well. It is our hope and prayer that we will have an in-person meeting of the executive and finance committees in March 2023.

Our meeting is taking place this time in the absence of our Moderator, Archbishop Willem T.P. Simarmata, from our midst. The untimely and unexpected death of our dear Asian ecumenical and ecclesiastical leader Simarmata is a great loss for CCA; it is also a loss to the entire Indonesian churches and the people of North Sumatra irrespective of their religions. This report would be inadequate if I do not pay my tribute to the memory of the late Archbishop Simarmata at the outset of this meeting, as this happens to be the first Executive Committee meeting after his sad demise.

One of the most prominent leaders of the Asian churches and the modern Asian ecumenical movement, Archbishop (Ephorus) Simarmata was elected as the Moderator of the CCA at the 14th General Assembly of the CCA in May 2015, a position he served with capable and sincere leadership, especially in closely working together with me, and the two other Officers. He has been extremely helpful in shaping policies and guidelines for the future of the CCA ever since the CCA initiated its new programme structure by the end of 2015 and started implementing it from January 2016. We made several ambitious plans together with him including the preparations for CCA's 15th General Assembly, which he was hoping would be hosted in North Sumatra or North Sulawesi, in Indonesia.

I remember Bishop Simarmata's close association with the CCA since the early 1990s. He was an official delegate to the CCA Assembly held

in 1995, and he participated at subsequent CCA Assemblies, as well as in many other major ecumenical events. I am personally aware of his contributions to CCA in vivid ways and the untiring leadership he provided in hosting and organising the 50th anniversary of the CCA which was held in Prapat in 2007. He was the General Secretary of the HKBP at that time, and subsequently, when he became the Ephorus of HKBP, the biggest Protestant church in Indonesia and the biggest among the whole CCA member churches in Asia, he came forward to accept the then CCA General Secretary's request to host the 14th General Assembly of CCA. I have fond memories of working together with him as CCA General Secretary under his guidance. I experienced him as a very dear friend, a guide, and a spiritual leader who treated me as his younger brother; he extended to me all his support. I found him to be a very fine human being, who was pastoral in his approach and one who dealt with everyone in a true spirit of nobility. He personified a charisma in his leadership there was a special grace radiating out from him. He mentored and inspired many young people in his church. Through his dealings and every action, he exemplified the message that dignity and honour are gifts from God. His contributions to the church and society in manifold ways will be remembered by the generations to come. His illustrious service spanned several decades, and he was known for his deep spirituality and commitment to ecumenism, as well as for his leadership at various levels. I am sure, as members of the CCA Executive Committee, all of us will always cherish and value our close friendship with him and will cherish his leadership.

On behalf of the CCA and our member constituencies, I conveyed our heartfelt condolences to the members of the bereaved family of Ephorus (Emeritus) Willem T.P. Simarmata, and all members of the HKBP. When we received the news about his death, I was affected by COVID-19 and was bedridden in Chiang Mai. I could not travel to Medan to attend his funeral, but our colleague, Dr Ronald Lalthanmawia travelled to Medan and participated in the funeral ceremony and conveyed condolences to the family on behalf of the CCA and the CCA Executive Committee. Later, we organised an online condolence meeting, which several of you attended. Bishop Simarmata's family members also attended the online meeting and his son spoke on the occasion.

In fact, several other church and ecumenical leaders also were called to eternity during the past three years while were all living under lockdown situations and affected by COVID-19. We received information about the demises of some of them, but we came to know about the news of the death of several of our other friends in our ecumenical fraternity only very late. We remember their valuable contributions, we thank God for their life and witness. We believe, *"...neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38–39). Let us remember and pray for the life and witness of all those departed church leaders.

We Survived During the COVID-19 Crisis by the Grace of God

Almost three years have passed since we started experiencing the impacts of the outbreak of COVID-19. Life in every sphere was paralysed for almost three years. The church and the ecumenical movement in every nook of the world have been faced with the innumerable and unexpected challenges of the pandemic that permeated all our lives. It has been an extremely difficult situation for millions of people around the world. The churches also have been facing countless problems for more than two years. Amid all such vulnerabilities and unprecedented situations, Asian churches also were desperate, but in many ways, they experienced the crises as opportunities. I shared some of our own experiences in the past two Executive Committee meetings in 2020 and 2021. However, we are not able to share all that we have experienced or the several lessons we have learnt. Churches in Asia responded to the pandemic in manifold ways. The role of the churches in Asia in responding to the crises was recognised and appreciated at different times. CCA tried to evolve ecumenical responses and brought the church leaders together on common platforms during the past three years through virtual programmes focusing on the vulnerabilities and the COVID-19 situations from different contexts.

Radio Veritas Asia (RVA), a most prominent and the oldest media platform of the Roman Catholic Church, in a report about the

content of one such virtual conference, summarised what the Asian church leaders stated in one of the virtual conferences:

“The Christian churches in Asia are authentic lighthouses of hope and compassion in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. Churches live and play a crucial role in accompanying suffering people and communities while carrying a message of hope and mercy. Churches are provoked by the suffering of countless people who are influenced by the spread of the new coronavirus. The strength of mind, faith, hope, the constant trust in God inspires us to glorify God in this difficult time. God feels our pain, sees our tears, and takes care of his people... The body, which brings together the major Christian denominations in Asia, including the Catholic Church, has launched a series of video conferences and webinars to discuss relevant issues and challenges caused by the global crisis...”

Amid adversities and vulnerabilities, we tried to accompany our constituencies in different ways although those were inadequate and insignificant when compared to the contributions of many churches in our constituencies across Asia. But the concerns we expressed, the contacts we maintained, and the small supports we channelled were appreciated from different corners. During my recent visit to Timor Leste, our member church in Timor Leste, the IPTL repeatedly recognised CCA’s role and how they felt the warmth of CCA’s accompaniment during a time of isolation and helplessness.

When COVID-19 swept through our lives, it toppled everything: ongoing lifestyles, social interactions, health systems and medical treatments, economic lives, fundamental institutional arrangements, communities, and everyday family life. It created divisions and compartmentalisations in our socioeconomic class structures. When we were faced with limitations and restrictions, when we had to live amidst extreme difficulties, we were looking for some help and alternative ways of dealing with difficulties or finding ways for our needs to be met.

Now we live in an improved situation, although one cannot say that we are totally liberated from all those difficulties we have been

facing due to the pandemic that conquered us and paralysed our lives. However, a question that comes to our mind is: Will there be a “new post-pandemic normal” soon or full realisation of a “normal situation”? Will the Church and the ecumenical movement continue to be involved in the mission and witness in a new post-pandemic normal situation?

Is Asia Facing a “Polycrisis”?

It is a fact that a trend of precarity is increasingly evident in the world. The worry that is pervasive everywhere in the world is that the new age of precarity looms ever larger. Historian Adam Tooze argues that the planet is now facing a state of “polycrisis”. Events that “would once have seemed fanciful are now facts”. In the polycrisis, the shocks are unequal, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts. Asia, where a large majority of the world’s people live is not an exemption to precarity as such a trend of precarity is becoming more evident in many Asian countries. The increasing costs of living have driven public anger and unrest in countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Laos, and Indonesia. There are several reasons for the debacle in the economic development of Asian countries. China’s growing economic influence and power in the region is a further source of tension, including controversies over Beijing-backed infrastructure projects in countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan. China’s overall growth rate is falling now which is threatening fallout across Asia. According to the World Bank forecast, rises in China’s GDP this year would be lagging behind the rest of the countries in the region, excluding Japan, for the first time in decades. This is likely to have an impact on all those in Asia who work to supply goods to China or consume products from it.

Another disturbing trend in Asia is the rising hunger and growing inequality. According to the UN, more than 424 million people in the region were undernourished last year, up from 398 million in 2020 and 340 million in 2019. South Asia had the highest number of people affected by conflict in 2021. The growing inequality in Asia today is more than a moral matter. An important dimension, often underplayed, is the uneven distribution of wealth. While inequality

between nations has in many cases fallen during the past few decades, the divide within countries has often grown. A UN survey in 2020 estimated that 71 percent of the world's population lived in nations where inequality had risen during the previous thirty years. These included China and India, Asia's two largest countries by far.

The age of precarity has brought multiple interlocking and unwelcome crises, with Asia central to many of them. People's growing sense of insecurity is more evident in Asia. One is the impact of loneliness in high-income countries such as South Korea, and Japan where a third of all households in 2021 were single-person: an all-time high. Another is the effect of family separation in nations, such as the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, where large numbers of people relocate internally or migrate overseas for work.

While we were focusing our attention on the COVID-19 situation for more than two years, several other emerging situations in the world or situations that are emergent around Asia have become less important, despite the serious implications. The emerging situations in the geopolitical and socioeconomic arena did not attract our attention during the closed-down situation or even after the restoration of normalcy. A major matter of concern in Asia today is whether the changing scenario of Asia's geopolitics will help in maintaining peace and security. Although the United States of America says it does not seek a world of rival power blocs, many countries fear that the rivalry between big powers is leading to a new cold war. If that happens, it will have repercussions in Asia too. In Asia, the USA's effort to constrain China relies heavily on its network of formal alliances and budding partnerships, and bilateral defence treaties. In 2023, the USA wants to strengthen the "connective tissue" between its allies in the East and West. America has tried to overlay its alliances in the Indo-Pacific with ad hoc partnerships: trilateral missile-defence exercises with Japan and South Korea; naval exercises with Japan and Australia; and multifaceted Quad collaboration with Japan, Australia, and India on everything from vaccines to maritime piracy. Some new enthusiasm that has developed these days envisages strengthened linkages among European and Asian allies. Under the Australia-UK

and US (AUKUS) deal, America and Britain will provide Australia with nuclear-propelled submarines and will collaborate in other fields such as cyber-security and hypersonic missiles. Some other countries are thinking of various options to expand the G7 Group of industrialised democracies into a “G12” by adding South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as NATO and the EU. There are other groups emerging including “I2U2” (linking Israel, India, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States) to develop technology for food security and clean energy. This is, in turn, an offshoot of the American-sponsored Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab states spurred by the fear of Iran.

As the USA’s hegemony is not as strong as in the past, China is now more confident in seeking to challenge the status quo in several border regions. Recent tensions between China and Taiwan, however, have underlined the potential for the “frozen” conflicts in Asia to become hot again. Many fear that the long-simmering confrontations could once again become great power conflagrations. Different Asian countries are now opening their doors for the US to return to a trade deal known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). At the same time, China and Russia are building up their own clubs. Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is growing. So is that of the BRICS, a group of large emerging economies. From all these indications we can understand the precarious geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-strategic trends in Asia.

Almost every Asian country is affected by multiple problems. When we meet annually it is also our task to think about and reflect on the emerging contexts in which we live and witness, especially the situation in each country where our member churches and councils are located and the struggles in which they are directly and indirectly involved. Several instances were reported by our member churches and councils in recent times and at the same time, we were trying to express solidarity with them.

The situation in Myanmar gets less attention despite innumerable problems in the country. The country is wrought with devastation and destruction of lives that many around the country had begun

to enjoy since the democratic reform was introduced. The conflict that has spiralled into bloody conflicts since the military removed Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government in February 2021 is now destroying peace and security. More than 2,400 people have been killed in the past two years, according to the monitoring group the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, while the UN children's agency estimates that one million people have been displaced. The rampant militarisation, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, and human rights violations are reported to be horrendous. Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) 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. Armed clashes and attacks are regularly occurring in each state, region, and union territory; and in around 220 out of 330 townships. People across the country live amidst unending nightmares. The news we received in early November about an attack by Myanmar's military on the Kachin Theological Seminary in Kutkai, Shan State on 3 November was further disturbing. Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) fired artillery shells and injured four students in the dormitory. The attack comes after an October 30 shelling that partially destroyed a Baptist church and hall in Momauk township, Kachin State. Subsequently, the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral of the Roman Catholic Church in Pekhonn town in the Kayah state was hit for a second time by the military on 9 November 2022. The WCC and the CCA General Secretaries issued joint letters and statements twice in 2021, and again now on 12 November 2022. I have been discussing with churches in Myanmar and WCC on how to respond ecumenically to address the peace and security concerns in Myanmar. Several Myanmar church leaders were here at the CCA headquarters last month and this month to attend CCA programmes. We are now exploring the possibility of convening a meeting of representatives of Asian and global churches and ecumenical organisations to discuss ecumenical responses to the Myanmar situation.

Pakistan continues to face conflicts and violence in many parts of the country leading to chronic instability. The army is back at the

centre of Pakistan's politics with the appointment of a key military figure as the head of the Army. But Pakistan's state of political uncertainty does not end there. The consequences for the country's democracy are likely to be disastrous. Protest marches broke out all over Pakistan immediately after the attack on former Prime Minister Khan brought utter chaos in the country. Although the planned protest rallies are stalled for a while, the conflict might erupt again. At the same time, Anti-Terror operations along the Afghan border have led to years of population displacement and Pakistan is now home to over 2.5 million displaced people, mostly from crisis-ridden Afghanistan. With large numbers of refugees, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, difficult economic and political conditions, inflation, and increasingly devastating extreme environment-related problems such as the catastrophic floods experienced two months ago, Pakistani people face many challenges. Christians as a minority living in the midst of rising Islamic extremism experience intolerance in their day-to-day life. At the same time deep divisions, and the lack of good governance, accountability and better stewardship among the church leaders are serious matters to be addressed by the Pakistan churches themselves. Several church leaders from Pakistan also were at the CCA headquarters during the last month and the current month for different programmes organised by CCA. They expressed their disappointment, concern, and anguish about ongoing court cases, power struggles, and competition among the church leaders to amass wealth through corrupt practices, especially by selling church properties. The lay faithful in Pakistan is deeply disappointed and concerned about the lack of credibility and integrity of church leaders in their country.

Sri Lanka faces the worst economic crisis in its history now. The dramatic fuel shortages that accompanied mass protests in Sri Lanka about three months ago have eased a little bit now, but for millions of poor Sri Lankans, the worsening economic situation has become a nightmare. Sri Lankan economists fear the economic situation could deteriorate rapidly without action by foreign creditors, placing the basic needs of millions of people in further jeopardy. To stabilise the economy, international creditors should agree to restructure Sri Lanka's debt so the country can secure final approval for an IMF loan and financing from other global agencies.

Food price inflation was over 85 percent last month. This month, the UN renewed a humanitarian appeal, stating that 28 percent of the population faces food insecurity and that the poverty rate this year has doubled. The President has suppressed demonstrations and has used the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to detain student activists. He has even warned that he will again declare a state of emergency and deploy security forces in the event of major protests. It was at the height of the protests by the Aragalaya movement that CCA organised a pastoral solidarity team visit to Sri Lanka and met with leaders of the CCA member churches, NCC Sri Lanka, civil society leaders, members of parliament, political and human rights activists, trade union leaders, and others involved in the struggle.

All these three country situations I have mentioned here warrant serious attention on the part of Asian churches and the ecumenical movement, especially in terms of humanitarian aid and support. The CCA or the Asian churches as a united body has no capacity or mechanisms to extend support. The global ecumenical family's humanitarian support mechanism, ACT Alliance, has not been taking these situations seriously and churches in these three countries are no longer in a situation to help themselves to be engaged in the much-needed humanitarian assistance. It is in this situation that Asian churches need to think seriously about pooling resources within Asia as part of their ecumenical diakonia and come forward to extend support. Many churches in Asia have diaconal missions and they are deeply involved in their local contexts. Some other churches have a strong commitment to engage in humanitarian aid assistance beyond the borders of their countries. This was evident through their engagements in Ukraine, Palestine, and some other countries beyond Asia. CCA, together with WCC, organised two regional consultations on ecumenical diakonia. As an outcome of the discussions in those consultations, we are now planning to organise two consultations on ecumenical diakonia in Colombo, Sri Lanka and in Jakarta, Indonesia with wider participation.

Programmes: Implementation and Forthcoming Activities

When it came to travel or to moving around, the last two years were a time of great difficulty. We were totally cut off from our

meetings and fellowships and faced hurdles on the path to the implementation of our planned and scheduled activities and programmes. All in-person programmes starting from April 2020 to May 2022 were postponed except for two national-level programmes in between. The prevailing travel restrictions detached us from directly interacting with our constituencies. In other words, we faced more than two years of total detachment, disappointments, and alienation from each other. Across the last two years, during our virtual EC meetings, I reported on how CCA had been functioning in the context of the “new normal”. At that time, I reported that starting from the end of March in 2020, the CCA office in Chiang Mai was under lockdown and we strictly followed the Thai government’s instructions and guidelines as well as the restrictions in the university campus where we are located. For some months in between, the office was functional on a part-time basis, but we have been fully back to normal only since June this year. Relaxation in travel restrictions and entry to Thailand became effective from 1 October 2022. This has helped us to organise more offline, in-person programmes instead of virtual programmes. During this period, we were able to organise a total of twenty-seven programmes and another one, a week-long training for young pastors and church workers, will be held in Colombo, Sri Lanka from 5 to 11 December 2022. We had organised fifteen online programmes since the last Executive Committee meeting in August 2021 to May 2022: from April 2020 to May 2022, a total of forty-six virtual programmes were conducted. Those programmes included two month-long programmes, the Asian Ecumenical Institute (AEI), and in both those AEI courses, we were fortunate to have international faculty to provide leadership in facilitating the sessions. We also had the Institute on Human Rights for church workers, which lasted for 10 days. As I mentioned last time, staff members had to engage themselves fully and devote the same level of time to the preparations of each programme. It was true that virtual programmes helped us reduce the costs or overhead expenses, but we missed the real value of face-to-face interactions, ecumenical fellowship, and solidarity. More details and narrative programme and activities reports will be shared at this EC meeting.

We must spend our time, energy, and financial resources in 2023 mainly for the 15th General Assembly. However, we are also expected to implement several programmes and activities in addition to the Assembly and pre-Assembly events. It is also envisaged that all programmes and activities we are planning to organise will emphasise the Assembly theme. Several issues and themes we have identified now will connect with the Assembly theme and all such programmes will be completed by June as the Assembly will take place in September 2023.

Asian Church and Ecumenical Leaders' Conference

It is the need of the hour to discuss and reflect on some most important issues related to the life and witness of the Asian churches and the ecumenical movement prior to the 15th General Assembly of CCA. Ecumenical diakonia and challenges of Asian churches, consensus decision-making, good governance and integrity leadership in Asian churches, and the 15th Assembly theme are to be reflected upon, before the Assembly. The plan is to organise an Asian Church and Ecumenical Leaders' Conference with the participation of heads of churches/general secretaries of member churches and general secretaries of NCCs; a total of about eighty participants are expected to attend. The proposed consultation will have an expanded agenda to discuss issues such as good governance and integrity leadership in Asian churches and consensus decision-making in Asian churches in addition to a major focus on ecumenical diakonia in Asia. We have, in principle, decided to initiate and promote the need for consensus decision-making in Asian churches. However, due to the COVID-19 situation, we could not continue our initiative and now we need to move forward in that direction, especially in the context of the 15th General Assembly.

Artificial Intelligence and Post-Humanism

We have planned and scheduled an international consultation on Artificial Intelligence and Post-Humanism, which will be held most probably in May 2023 in South Korea. Again, this theme is very much integral to the Assembly theme, "God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation", and the sub-themes: 'Harmony

with Creation’, Attaining Life in Its Fullness’. and, Affirming the Will of God’.

As the sweeping societal changes taking place in the post-pandemic situation are taking the world towards greater inequality, rising authoritarianism, and rampant misinformation, we find ourselves becoming too dependent on technologies. Over the last two decades, people’s relationship with technology deepened as larger segments of the population come to rely more on digital connections for work, education, health care, daily commercial transactions, and essential social interactions. As a result, we had to live with what has been described as a “tele-everything” world. On the other hand, those who have had less access to digital tools and less training or aptitude for exploiting them had to face difficulties during this period. Technological advancements or changes eliminated the jobs of many. At the same time, mega-technological companies started exploiting their market advantages and mechanisms such as artificial intelligence (AI) in ways that seem likely to further erode the privacy and autonomy of those who are availing such facilities. Many have now started worrying about significant damage to social stability. There is still a general perception and hope that life will be better in a world that would be built based on ‘tele-everything’.

The proposed consultation on artificial intelligence and post-humanism will be an opportunity for the representatives of churches to ponder together these complex realities. Artificial intelligence has the capability to handle issues ranging from environmental disasters to financial crises, medical issues, crime, and appalling living standards. It is also increasingly evident that AI brings significant benefits to the economy, industry, agriculture, environment, social and medical processes, and the rest of our society as well. Post-humanism is the idea that humanity can be transformed, transcended, or eliminated either by technological advances or the evolutionary process, and the artistic, scientific, or philosophical practices which reflect this belief. In today’s cultural situation, it is almost impossible to have clearly defined borders between scientific concepts and terms in everyday discourse. Considering the proliferation of technology in everyday life,

transforming the very cognitive capacities of the human mind (especially through changing the ways people experience the physical world), and this situation can be seen as significant if we want to discuss ‘intelligence,’ ‘mind,’ ‘cognition,’ and their relevance. From a Christian ethical and moral point of view, we need to look into some of these matters more attentively.

Programme Thrusts

The five-year Strategic Programme Plan and programme priorities introduced with effect from 2016 are the basis of our ongoing programme thrusts. The Assembly will review our programmes, and new programme structure developed after the last Assembly and the Assembly will give advice for setting programme directions and new priorities which normally happens at every General Assembly. I am pleased to report that we were able to organise over 90 percent of the programmes and activities we had planned and scheduled as part of the five-year Strategic Programme Plan; 2016 to 2020. In addition to these programmes, we initiated several additional programmes from time to time based on some emerging issues and concerns. We shall plan a new strategic programme direction for the post-Assembly period after the 15th Assembly.

Programme Evaluation

An update on the progress of a programme evaluation process was presented at the last Executive Committee. You might recall that the EC decided at its meeting in 2019 for the evaluation process to be initiated. The EC approved the terms of reference for the CCA programme evaluation and appointed two external evaluators, Mr Leo Bashyam and Ms Helen Monisha Sarker. The evaluation process commenced on 30 September 2019. The survey was progressing well for some time with the original plan of presenting the draft report to the EC and the GA in 2020 September. The evaluators had started their work and attended various programmes of CCA in different countries and directly interviewed and interacted with the participants. They were able to conduct a number of telephone interviews with participants of different programmes, they spent time at CCA headquarters reviewing all relevant documents—including

annual Programme Reports, Minutes of Executive Committee meetings, Programme Committee meetings, and reports of other sub-committees, and reports of various activities and programmes since 2015, finance reports, and CCA policies and guidelines, etc. However, the COVID-19 situation, especially the restriction of travel and the closure of the CCA office as well as the offices of member churches and councils in various countries, stalled the evaluation process. These details were reported at the last meeting of the EC. Now the evaluation process must be continued, and the task must be completed before the next Assembly as we are expecting the report to be presented to the Assembly in September 2023. A question we need to address in this regard at this stage is whether we should limit the period of evaluation to five years as we originally decided, which is from 2016 to 2020, or now give an additional mandate to cover the period for evaluation from 2016 to 2023, to include the programmes and activities conducted even during the COVID-19 situation. We will be having a meeting with the evaluators next week to work out certain practical details of the resumption of the evaluation process. It is expected that this Executive Committee will discuss the possibility of covering the period of evaluation of the implementation of programmes, especially the virtual programmes carried out during the COVID-19 period, and decisions based on the discussions will have to be conveyed to the evaluators.

CCA Property Development

The plans for CCA's property development have been a pending item for quite a long time. Our earlier plans and discussions in previous Executive Committee meetings, sub-committee meetings as well as our earlier decisions to commence the construction of the CCA office building and complex has not yet materialised due to various reasons. The Executive Committee meeting in November 2020 had resolved to support the recommendations of the Finance Committee to develop property on 1/4th of the land owned by CCA in Chiang Mai and authorised the General Secretary to develop plans for the office building. Last year I reported that the COVID-19 situation is not congenial for any new initiative now, and as such we did not follow up on this matter. This year also I can only report

that there was no progress in terms of following up the plan and earlier decisions. I am not confident enough at this stage to initiate the implementation of the earlier decision and plans for the office building. Our main partner and member church in Thailand is the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT). Whatever we plan and initiate regarding this building project should be implemented with the support of CCT. My observations and conclusion at this stage are that the leadership of CCT did not demonstrate a sense of ownership or sense of belonging as they were fully busy with their regular official businesses. A positive sign for future collaboration we can anticipate now is the fact that a new team of leaders for the next four years, starting from January 2023, has been elected. We need to continue our discussion with the new leadership on all matters related to the building plan and property development.

CCA's 15th General Assembly

We revisited the original plan and decision of the Executive Committee meeting in 2019 and decided to review the proposed dates and venue in light of the travel restrictions, mandatory quarantine or isolation requirements, and the health and safety of all delegates. The Executive Committee noted the inability to hold the Assembly in 2020 and discussed the possibility of shifting the venue of the Assembly from India to another country in the context of the increasing travel restrictions and the wide spread of COVID-19 in India at that time. The EC authorised the General Secretary to make the necessary inquiries to hold the 15th General Assembly in May–June 2022. The former Moderator, the late Bishop Simarmata, and I discussed various options to hold the Assembly in Indonesia and he was discussing this with the churches in North Sumatra and North Sulawesi. In 2021 we decided to postpone the Assembly to 2023.

After the passing away of Bishop Simarmata, as we did not find much enthusiasm in going back to the proposal of holding the Assembly in North Sumatra, we had to think of other options. I have visited certain new venues in and around Chiang Mai together with colleagues and we explored the possibility of holding the Assembly in Chiang Mai. First of all, in terms of budget, Chiang Mai

is not an attractive venue for CCA. Second, we cannot expect the proper support needed for the Assembly from the local church. In this situation, again we revisited our original decision of holding the Assembly in Kerala, India. I wrote initially to five member churches of CCA that have a large presence in Kerala; among the five churches, four of them have their headquarters in Kerala. Subsequently, I met with the heads of four churches and explored the possibility of sticking to our original plan. They welcomed the idea and offered their support to organise the Assembly in Kerala, India. The venue proposed now is Kottayam instead of Trivandrum. There are many advantages to a venue in Kottayam, but there are certain disadvantages also. With the help of some church leaders, I visited the place, visited hotels, possible venues for meetings and pre-assembly events, etc. More details will be shared when we will take up this agenda item.

Will There Be a Post-Pandemic Normal Soon?

For two years that have just gone by the pandemic was the force shaping the immediate future, but now, the main driver is the impact of the war in Ukraine. We have earlier noted how the world has already started to contend with the conflict's impact on geopolitics and security; high inflation; chaos in energy markets; and China's uncertain post-pandemic path. This being the case, it is not surprising for us to wonder whether unpredictability is the new normal, and if there is no getting away from it.

The question before us as the Church and ecumenical community is how are going to cope with the post-pandemic situation. When churches closed down during the pandemic and started arranging online worship services, people used to attend the worship services at home while sitting in front of TV screens or laptops or mobile phones. Now with the return of opportunities for us to freely attend worship services in our churches without restrictions, the free movement of parishioners is once again encouraged. But the irony is that the number of churchgoers has decreased and church life has become less active in many contexts. During my recent visits to CCA member churches in the Philippines, several church leaders shared with me their anxiety about whether more and more people

will continue to prefer sitting at home on Sunday mornings and watching online Sunday services. This is a matter of concern for churches in different Asian countries. This is an indication of what was predicted earlier that the COVID-19 pandemic would profoundly influence how the world experienced life and the situation in which people find themselves in isolation for such a long time. The reaction to the pandemic now calls for a new understanding of how rebuilding societies and communities, including church life, should take place in the future. This is an opportunity for us to view the future possibilities of new relations in the post-pandemic situation.

When I was quarantining in my apartment in Chiang Mai after being affected by COVID-19 I got the opportunity to read and understand varied Biblical exegeses related to the COVID-19 crisis in the world. All those exegeses that I went through focused on several questions related to the pandemic, and indicated how a new situation will emerge after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Questions also were posed by the exegetists on how the church would respond to the situation that would emerge post-COVID-19. What will be done and what will be the future of the church after this pandemic? How will the Church respond to challenges in the post-COVID-19 era? One of those exegeses was about the response of the Jewish community to the situation that arose after the siege of Jerusalem in 587–586 BC, when the Babylonians took Jerusalem, destroyed the First Temple and burned down the city. The small settlements surrounding the city, and those close to the western border of the kingdom, were destroyed as well. The catastrophic destructions of the Temple in Jewish history led to different reactions. Although they left a serious mark on all of Israel's future endeavours, and the prophets warned the people of the forthcoming disasters, they also proclaimed hope, even after the destruction. Some Jews reacted to it by forming close-knit communities and by deepening their commitment to the Torah. It remained a serious challenge to their faith and community life. They carefully studied the prophets to understand the implications of the destruction of the temples. The question of how Christians regarded the destruction of the Temple was also interpreted there. In certain other articles that I read, aspects of the Christian understanding of the destruction of the Temple were dealt with. In the Gospels, the destruction of the Temple is clearly linked

to the fact that Jesus foresaw it. In the Gospels, Jesus foretold the terrible situation of the demise of the Temple and declared that his body would be the new Temple; new life is possible in Him and in the coming of the Kingdom. Some exegetes link the cursing of the fig tree by Jesus to the destruction of the temple, but others see it as a general warning to the Jewish people of their need to honour God. The resurrection of Jesus is regarded as the rebuilding of the new temple in his body. The exegetes interpreted in this way that after the COVID-19 pandemic, believers as servants of the Lord have to build up the church and empower the community of faith again. This should be done on the basis of Jesus the crucified and resurrected Lord. The church has a huge task in this regard, not only in proclaiming Jesus as our only comfort in life and death but also in the commitment to the building up of the community in the post-COVID-19 world.

It is evident in our everyday situation that the Church has a profound influence on communities in most Asian countries. We can see from history how Jewish communities, in particular, had to live in new relations after the destruction of the temple. The Jerusalem Temple held a central position in the relationship between the Jewish people and their God. The destruction of their temple created a major theological challenge for them. Their problem was how to continue the religion and maintain their identity as a people without the Jerusalem Temple. They were toiling with their questions and ideas on an urgent and essential need to discover what could serve as a substitute for the Temple, so long as the latter remained destroyed and unusable. Although the Temple was destroyed, the people of Israel found a new way of dealing with it. The Temple was viewed as an earthly pattern of God's heavenly kingdom. They, therefore, began to establish a community of faith amidst the challenges they faced. Their emphasis on family and a community of faith led to a new relationship with God after the destruction of the temple. This reminds us that the Church has a special task in empowering communities to be in new relations. The Church, deeply involved in diaconal ministries, should be concerned about the inequality that is seen in the post-pandemic era. The church must be more engaged in its diaconal mission and concentrate all its energies on the task of helping each other. It is becoming clear

that the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-term consequences. Many people in several countries will never fully recover from the negative effects of COVID-19. This is an opportunity for the Church and the ecumenical movement in Asia to live out the new relation with God. This is an opportunity for the Asian churches to constantly engage the people and communities in the quest to find new hope; finding hope for all of God's creation even amidst despair. Believers should be prepared to be involved in the community, to bring about new life, renewal, and restoration of the creation. The church and the ecumenical movement should proclaim that Jesus is the One who can give hope to the world; his body is the new temple of God and the church in Him is also a new temple of God.

Towards Hope in Action

As we now embark on a mission to prepare for the 15th General Assembly, let us help members of our churches and networks to carry this message of hope amidst despair; hope about the renewing and restoring the spirit of God for all creation. Our prayer is “God, Renew Us in Your Spirit and Restore the Creation”. Apostle Paul discusses the concept in Romans 8:19–25 that we, as creations and children of God, are subjected to our frailties in hope—in essence, hope for the repair of all our defects and the renewal of our damaged bodies upon our adoption and redemption. But he also implies in verses 20–22 that the “whole creation,” seemingly the entire physical world around us—the rocks, the vegetation, and the animals—all have this same hope. Hope for Creation is a creative celebration of love, solidarity, and hope for God's creation. Paul reminds us again: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope.” (Romans 8:20). Let our prayers, meditations, reflections, and statements lift up the message of love and hope for God's creation.

Let us be sustained by the hope for a post-pandemic normal soon.

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA
2 December 2022

Report of the CCA General Secretary to the Executive Committee, 2023

3–6 March 2023 | Dhaka, Bangladesh

Respected Moderator, Vice Moderator, Treasurer, and other Members of the Executive Committee,

There has been only a three-month gap since the last Executive Committee meeting, which was held in December 2022. The issues that I will share today will relate to the happenings of the past three months. In December last year, I suggested the possibility of holding this particular Executive Committee meeting here in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Significance of Meeting in Bangladesh

You may recall that in past years we made it a point not to hold our Executive Committee meetings exclusively at the head office in Chiang Mai, or in Bangkok but to also reach out to our constituencies in different countries; which is why we previously met in Medan, Indonesia (2016), and another time in Beirut, Lebanon (2018)—a meeting that was originally meant to be in Iran, but given the political situation, shifted to Lebanon—and then we went to Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2019). In 2020, 2021 and 2022 we were only able to meet online. Now we meet in Dhaka, Bangladesh (2023). In this way, we explore the opportunities to be with our member constituencies in different contexts and understand the local realities, the church and ecumenical situations, rather than only discussing business matters or issues in abstract ways.

Yesterday, we had an excellent opportunity to interact with the church and ecumenical leaders in Bangladesh. The National Council of Churches in Bangladesh (NCCB) and the CCA member churches in Bangladesh hosted a dinner and invited us to an ecumenical dialogue and fellowship meeting. In an almost four-hour meeting, we had in-depth discussions and interactions on ecumenism and the ecumenical movement and sharing of experiences from Bangladesh contexts. Those were helpful mutually for all those who were present and engaged in discussions.

In the Asian ecumenical movement, there have been some neglected areas. In the past, CCA used to go to, or hold our meetings in, economically advanced countries, such as Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, and then, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. There were some countries, such as Cambodia in the past, that we could not go to because of political situations or visa problems. We still cannot enter Laos to hold a meeting there due to government restrictions. Some of our constituencies are located in very faraway places in Australia and New Zealand. In the past, CCA did organise committees and programmes in these countries, but that is not possible now given the distance and exorbitant travel costs as well as visa issues. That is why, these days, we only have limited options.

We thought that coming to Bangladesh for the Executive Committee meeting would help us to learn from local experiences and express our solidarity with the churches here in the country. The situation in Bangladesh was discussed in yesterday's fellowship meeting. Bangladesh is an Islamic-majority country, where Christians are a microscopic minority. The country has about 164 million people, of which only 500,000 are Christians, over half of whom are Roman Catholic. 150,000 to 200,000 Protestant Christians are fragmented into many different denominations. About 15 years ago, a survey of Bangladeshi Christians found that there were 67 different denominations in the country. In Bangladesh, several missionary entities are working. The total number of Christians is not increasing, but the number of denominations is increasing—leading to further divisions within the smaller Christian community in the country.

The CCA has two main member churches in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha and the Church of Bangladesh. The Church of Bangladesh is a Uniting Church, formed after the 1970s when the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches came together. In addition, the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship is a member, but is not that active in CCA. Yesterday we were told that NCCB has twenty-one member churches, including the Pentecostals and the Assemblies of God. It is a very mixed group of denominations functioning in Bangladesh. Through NCCB, most are participating in CCA and sending their representatives for different programmes or trainings organised by the CCA.

We must understand the issues that Bangladeshi Christians face today. Bangladesh was known as a very liberal Islamic country in the past, because for them, their language, their culture, and their nationalistic identity were strong, and not so much their Islamic religious identity. However, the trend has been reversed now. The rise of political Islam is a major problem, threatening communal and religious harmony. Several *madrassas* have sprung up all over Bangladesh during the past three decades, and have become the breeding ground of extremist Islamic groups, supported by groups from some Arabian Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia; there were reports that even the Pakistani or Afghani Taliban have infiltrated in different ways through these madrassas. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism or political Islam has created major problems for the religious minorities in the country such as the Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. The long-cherished religious harmony among the Bangladeshis has been disappearing in recent years. The Church has been surviving here, but the community has been facing the phenomenon of mass migration, especially of young people, who are escaping from the country. So, the total number of Christians remains stagnant. I thought of sharing this information about Bangladesh contexts as most of you are visiting this country for the first time, and we have only a limited understanding of the church and ecumenical situation in Bangladesh.

Having said this, let me share with you some of the other issues in our current Asian countries and our programmatic involvement in the near future.

Asian Church and Ecumenical Leaders' Conference (ACELC)

We have scheduled a major event this year, the Asian Church and Ecumenical Leaders' Conference (ACELC), to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia, in the first week of May. The invitation has been extended to selected leaders of the CCA member constituencies—to Moderators, Presiding Bishops or Primate, General Secretaries, heads of churches, and the General Secretaries of all national councils of churches.

In the past, CCA used to organise NCC General Secretaries' meetings. During those days, the CCA would operate or coordinate

ecumenical events through the NCCs. About ten years ago, we faced criticism about this style of functioning. In the CCA, a member church and a member council have equal membership status. The criticism was why were we engaging only with the NCCs and asking them to be “clearing houses” for selecting participants in CCA programmes. When organising programmes in the past, the CCA would ask the NCCs to recommend or send participants from churches in a particular country. Some member churches were not involved in the selection process and were unaware that there was a programme being organised by the CCA for which participants were being sought. From the start of our term, we have evolved a policy and practice of sharing information with all member churches and councils. Earlier, the NCC General Secretaries’ meetings were held almost on an annual basis, and participants for different programmes were selected. We realised that this was not a very effective way or mechanism of selecting participants, or of engaging, equally, all our member constituencies.

So, we implemented a new way of involving all our member constituencies, and of inviting them to be part of various programmes. This became highly effective, enabling us to reach out to more people and more participants, catering to representatives from each and every member church. Frankly speaking, not all NCCs are very systematic in terms of selecting, identifying, or nominating persons to attend programmes. Certain NCCs are quite effective—NCC Sri Lanka, for example, circulates any invitation or information received from CCA to all member churches in the country. Member churches recommend the names to NCC Sri Lanka, which are then passed to us. This is not the case for other countries. Take NCC Pakistan for example—whether it is the churches or NCCs, they send only their relatives. This has become routine, in the absence of any consultative process. This has been repeatedly reported to us, and we have received numerous complaints against the NCC and the churches in Pakistan. However, this does not mean all NCCs operate in the same way.

We have been trying to involve the CCA member churches and councils and increased the frequency of communication between

the CCA and all member constituencies; this means we reach out not just to the member councils but also to the member churches. Normally, most churches do not send the head of the church to the CCA Assembly. Therefore, the heads of such churches may not be aware or familiar with the discussions or policy decisions made at the CCA Assembly. This is why we thought it would be more appropriate for us to invite heads of member churches, together with NCC General Secretaries, to come together on a common platform and discuss some of the most pertinent issues or concerns to generate awareness of the CCA's decisions and operations. Therefore, even if such leaders are not present at the General Assembly as official delegates of the church, they would still be aware of the kind of work that is being done by the CCA and would be aware of the decision-making process and related policies.

This is why we have scheduled this special event—the Asian Church and Ecumenical Leaders' Conference (ACELC), which will bring together about 100 participants in Jakarta, Indonesia. So far, we have received a good number of responses from our member churches and councils. Several NCCs and member churches who were approached by CCA have decided to send either their Moderators, Primates, or General Secretaries of their churches. We will also have some CCA Executive Committee members and WCC Central Committee members from Asia participating in the ACELC.

The focus of the ACELC programme will mainly be on the role of Asian churches in terms of their involvement in diakonia at the local level, and how we can ensure solidarity among Asian churches in the area of diakonia. For example, we know that most of our member churches are directly involved in this kind of ministry at the local rather than the national level. Some member churches are very active in terms of their diaconal ministries' involvement in other countries, within Asia and at times even beyond Asia. Take for example the Korean churches. Almost all the CCA's mainline member churches in South Korea have been involved in diakonia not just within Korea, but in some other Asian and African countries. This is done not on a small scale but on a large one. The same is the case with the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. It is not a small diaconal

ministry, but extends to other countries, especially in the crisis situation in Turkey and Ukraine. This is also true for some Japanese, Malaysian, Australian, New Zealand and Hong Kong churches who have been engaged in diaconal missions in other countries.

There have been proposals that Asian churches need to come together on a common platform to think about how we can coordinate the existing diaconal ministries of the Asian churches in an ecumenical platform or through an ecumenical diaconal mission. This discussion was originally initiated and planned after the earthquake in Nepal in 2015, just prior to the Jakarta Assembly. The coordination mechanism has not been working properly, as some of these churches that are interested in diaconal missions prefer to deal bilaterally with the receiving partners.

In the past WCC had different programmes and activities in the area of diakonia which was helping churches in the southern hemisphere through small-scale project support or solidarity support at times of crisis. Now that such a mechanism within WCC has disappeared. The new diaconal ministry within the global ecumenical family is not in a position to accompany the small churches, as they are listed or branded as churches that have no proper capacity to deal with project management. It is high time that Asian churches reflected and discussed their role in strengthening solidarity support, especially with regard to generating financial support within Asia and extending support to smaller Asian churches that are in need. CCA together with WCC has been discussing these diaconal activities for some time, having jointly organised two consultations to enhance the capacities of Asian churches to be engaged effectively in diaconal ministry. This is also part of WCC's plan or objective to strengthen ecumenical diakonia as much as possible in the regions.

At Jakarta, we also want to share the idea of consensus-building decision-making among Asian churches. We know Asian churches are struggling due to internal conflicts in the decision-making and selection of their leaders. A lack of consensus makes the elections or decision-making of churches problematic and has little acceptance, resulting in litigations especially when matters related to church property are involved. In this situation, we need to sensitise the Asian churches to think seriously about the churches' role in

mutual accountability, transparency, good governance, and work on decision-making processes. We are thinking of highlighting all these issues as part of the Jakarta event, to help member churches translate this to internal policies, and strengthen legally binding mechanisms as part of their Constitution or governance structures. We will seek the assistance and leadership of CCA Executive Committee Member Rev. Terence Corkin, who has previous experience in facilitating special programmes on this topic.

Sustainability of CCA

The other matter I want to share with the Executive Committee is about the sustainability of CCA. Asian churches are participating in ecumenical activities more actively these days, and I say this from my experience. I was on the staff of the CCA in the 1990s. I was recruited to work for the CCA when its headquarters was based in Hong Kong and spent seven years there. Then I moved to the World Council of Churches, where part of my responsibility was to coordinate the roundtable meetings, especially those of the CCA, to discuss the sharing of ecumenical resources from Western agencies. I was aware of the amount of money CCA used to get in those days and the amount of support the local churches were giving CCA. From my experience, when I look back, on these thirty years of experience in dealing with CCA in different capacities, I can say that churches' involvement and active participation in CCA has been taking place, considering also the financial support and in-kind contributions that CCA has been receiving from Asian churches. At one roundtable meeting in the past, it was noted that Asian churches' contribution was only eight percent, but when recalculated it was found to be up to forty percent. That is why we have been able to survive and organise more programmes. But the sixty percent has been coming from outside – whether that will remain the case going forward is the question before us. All indications point to the fact that we cannot simply expect substantial funds in the future from outside. Probably this may last for some more time. But every year we witness a shrinking in our records. This is what we will also have to report to the CCA General Assembly and leadership. When CCA completes seventy years of existence in 2027, we need to discuss the kind of ecumenical structure that will persist in Asia – because ecumenical structures around the world, especially

the REOs (regional ecumenical organisations) are facing lots of difficulties. Some regional organisations have become defunct, such as in Latin America or the Caribbean. The existence of some others is precarious. There is no sense of ownership by member constituencies and it has made functioning extremely difficult. Some REOs have become self-sufficient. Take the AACC (All African Conference of Churches)—they were able to take out substantial amounts or one-time grants from ecumenical partners to be involved in income generation at the local level by constructing convention centres or buildings in places like Addis Ababa, the headquarters of the African Union, which now fetches good economic revenue. Their dependency on others has decreased during the past years.

We had ambitious plans and programmes about constructing the CCA headquarters and training institute, which we could even rent out and fetch income. But amidst the changing political situation in Thailand, it is getting difficult. This is the reason that last time in the Executive Committee meeting, I mentioned that at the beginning of our term, I had the enthusiasm and ambition to initiate something and you had supported that idea, and in principle, it was decided, but now I am convinced that we cannot implement these plans. I am not that enthusiastic regarding this anymore. I used the analogy of what God told King David—that he would not be the one to build the temple, but his son would take that responsibility.

As General Secretary, I lost that enthusiasm—not because of lack of resources but because of other external factors. Our existence is uncertain in Chiang Mai due to several factors. Although our Executive Committee member Ms Supaporn Yarnasarn and CCA Thailand Foundation president Rev. Dr Pradit Takerngangsarit are helping us, this kind of individual support is not sufficient for us to survive, given the changing political and bureaucratic or practical difficulties of obtaining visas, work permits in a place like Chiang Mai. I mentioned the problems related to our visas and the ever-changing policies of the Thai government. This is not specific to the CCA but are general measures introduced by the government that impacts us negatively. Ever since the CCA moved to Thailand, it unfortunately became a country governed by the military. Therefore, we need clearance from the Human Security Department each time we renew our visas. Earlier we would get three-month

extensions but this has now been reduced to one month. Every month, all international staff members must spend a full day at the immigration office. Our immigration service and handling agents have told us that they are now reluctant to continue their services for our non-immigrant visas, as the constant and recurring renewals have increased their workload. They want to stop this and are even suggesting one of our local Thai staff follow these processes, for which they will provide some kind of supervision. I do not know if this will really help CCA in the long run.

This is why I have had some kind of initial informal conversations with some of our member churches. During my visit to the Philippines last November, I discussed this with the leadership of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), when our Acting Vice Moderator, Bishop Reuel N. Marigza, was the General Secretary. I also had some informal conversations with the church leaders in the Philippines. I also initiated some conversations with the Persekutuan Gereja-gereja Indonesia, or the Council of Churches in Indonesia. We have limited options for situating the CCA in Asia. Hong Kong is quite expensive, and this was one of the main reasons why we moved from Hong Kong to Thailand. Now Hong Kong has other problems because of the political situation and China's involvement. The banking system and its restrictions are also difficult to navigate. Some Christian organisations are moving their headquarters out of Hong Kong. The Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY) has decided to shift to Jeju Island in South Korea. The WSCF is also moving its base from Hong Kong. Therefore, we must consider if must move and, if so where we should relocate to.

A matter of serious concern being faced by Asian churches now is the large-scale migration or exodus of Asian Christians from their respective countries to outside the region. Yesterday I mentioned the situation in Bangladesh. Take for example my own state in India, where at least 25 percent are Christians. Various denominations are observing that young people are migrating to other countries and are not returning. The number of empty nests is increasing, where only the old people are left and their children are migrating. These days it is easy to move abroad; young people are going first for education and then for employment with the intention to settle elsewhere. A new phenomenon is the emergence of 'assisted living

sectors’—not old age homes. Elderly parents are being financially supported by their children living abroad, and they live comfortable lives instead of staying alone by themselves. The same is the case in Pakistan. Several Christians are looking for opportunities to migrate elsewhere. Our former CCA colleague from Pakistan who was based in Lahore and working for CCA moved very recently to the UK along with her family.

15th General Assembly Preparations

We will discuss in detail the preparations for the upcoming Assembly. What I must share is that at this stage, the responses to our repeated requests to submit the names of official delegates are not encouraging. We require these names well in advance. The Government of India will not permit anyone to attend the Assembly who will arrive in India on a tourist visa. A special conference visa is needed. Because of this policy, if the names are submitted well in advance, we can expect proper and smooth screening of applications, which will then be passed on to the Ministry of External Affairs. We are attempting to contact the member constituencies by telephone, email, and WhatsApp and have seen only slight progress.

The local preparations are also in progress. I have spoken with five of the CCA member churches who have their main presence in the province where the Assembly will be held. A local host committee has been formed, which will be expanding into different areas of work with seventeen sub-committees. We have also formed a worship committee that is operating at two levels – at the regional level coordinated by CCA staff Rev. Grace Moon with other members from the Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, and India; and at the local level.

The only time that a CCA Assembly was held in India was in Bangalore in 1981. This is an opportunity to strengthen the unity of member churches, especially those in the particular Indian state of Kerala. Kerala is considered the citadel of Christianity in India. We believe that Christianity was introduced in Kerala in the first century in AD 52. However, the historic and traditional churches are very fragmented. Two Orthodox churches have been engaged in a legal battle, which sometimes even spills over into open conflicts. Over a hundred years of litigation has been going on and the division has

intensified. However, a positive thing I have observed is that they are coming together on a common platform to organise the CCA Assembly. Their clergy are sitting together, and they are raising and contributing funds and resources. This is only happening because of the CCA. If the CCA Assembly would not be taking place, they would not come together on such a common Asian ecumenical platform to work for a major event. I found this to be a good contribution from the CCA and an opportunity for the CCA Assembly to bring them together and work together. This is an example of practical ecclesial unity facilitated by the CCA Assembly.

Organisation Evaluation and Programmes

With a new programme structure and governance structure in place, the time has now come to assess where we stand. We underwent a similar evaluation almost fifteen years ago and some recommendations were introduced. Such evaluations are a kind of diagnosis of our work, of our organisation's health and structure. At the same time, we are facing some practical difficulties from certain funding partners—which we will discuss at a later stage. This was deliberated upon by the Finance Committee and Investment Committee who want to convey certain messages to us.

We have tried to convey updates about our activities and messages from the CCA on a regular basis and are also revising the website. Our current website is already eight years old; it was produced in 2015. We are revamping it and adding a new Assembly-related sub-site, from which we will streamline online registrations. We are outsourcing some aspects of technical assistance and communications work, for example, copyediting. The technical assistance is also outsourced since it is difficult to arrange similar personnel in Thailand due to language and communication issues.

These are some of the issues that I am sharing with you for your deliberations in the coming sessions.

Thank you,

Mathews George Chunakara
General Secretary, CCA
4 March 2023

The Report of the General Secretary presented annually at every Executive Committee meeting gives an account not only of CCA's programmes and activities but also other issues and concerns regarding the emerging trends in the region, and geopolitical or socio-economic challenges. Such Reports also analyse matters related to the Asian ecumenical or ecclesial arena. In other words, CCA General Secretary's Reports presented are contextual and indicators of ecumenical milestones. These Reports, therefore, are historical accounts or snapshots of time within the past eight years of the Asian ecumenical journey.



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