

## Missio Dei: Churches in Asia in a Changing Society

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Let me begin by defining Asia where the Asian churches are serving. Asia is the largest continent and the most densely populated portion of the globe. Some of the largest cities in the world are found in this region. Asia contains a wide variety of cultures, religions and traditions. Asian people today have been shaped by different experiences of colonialism and post-colonialism. Christian people in Asia live in the midst of other faiths and religions.

Monica J. Melanchthon rightly points out:

Asia is also the home of world religions and the challenge of religious plurality and religious fundamentalism is most felt by the churches in this region. Patriarchy still manages to suppress the voices of women and hinder their struggle for liberation. Our environment is endangered leading to more than just an ecological crisis. Marginalized communities, who depend on the land for survival and are integrally related to the environment, particularly the indigenous peoples... are further victimized. Asia has also become a continent with a very high incidence of violence where life has become dispensable... Christian churches have been accused of catering to the needs of the rich and powerful within the church rather than approximate the values of the Kingdom. Thus, we are called to participate in God's mission in a context where the majority are socially oppressed, economically marginalized, politically rendered powerless and spiritually pauperized.<sup>1</sup>

Asia is home to some of the richest people of the world and is a region where the majority of the people are living in poverty. It would be ironic and callous for the churches of Asia to do mission without addressing issues of poverty, economy and economic justice. Despite the news of the Asia "tiger nations" and the rapid growth of China, the fact remains that people in Asia continue to die of malnutrition and starvation. Seldom is it reported in the news that food insecurity, the oldest of humanity's concerns, remains one of the greatest contemporary problems in Asia. Yet, the idea of "food security first" still has to gain political attention and intention in many countries in Asia, not only as a moral principle

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Monica J. Melanchthon, a Lutheran Old Testament scholar from Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India in her paper, "Mission in the Asian Context in the Third Millennium: Issues, Questions and Needs," presented at a Seminar on Mission, October 25-30, 2000, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia (unpublished), 3. She refers to George Matthew Nalunnakal, "Mission and Unity in the Context of Contemporary Challenges," in *Quest for Justice: Perspectives on Mission & Unity*, 60. Further Melanchthon writes, "In the postmodern world of today, plurality has come to stay and plurality when studied from a social-political perspective will reveal that plurality is a characteristic feature of Asia. Without it, Asia has no future... The church needs to be in favor of plurality and should not fall victim to any monolithic conception and practice of unity in its practice of Christian mission. Promotion of plurality should become an integral part of mission and by doing so, the Christian church will become a sign of hope for the minority peoples of Asia. Embracing plurality thereby becomes an issue of justice" (4-5). See also James H. Kroeger, *Asia-Church in Mission, Exploring Ad Gentes Mission Initiatives of the Local Churches in Asia in the Vatican II Era* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1999), 21, 74-75, 113-114.

but as a matter of interest to all. Only when people don't have to fear for tomorrow's food, can they meaningfully conceive of development and of establishing justice, peace, human rights, and care for creation. The world produces enough to meet the needs of all people. But, as Mahatma Gandhi has aptly pointed out decades ago, "there is sufficiency in the world for men's [sic] need [humans' need], but not for men's [humans'] greed." It is true, as many experts and activists have pointed out, that in many cases immediate self-interest (I prefer to call it "self-fear") has often played a decisive role in creating and accentuating food insecurity, and thus undermining people's capacity to ensure sustainable food security in the long run. This reality calls for the political will of all stake-holders to seek a more just system on food distribution and the churches in Asia in particular have a strategic role to play in voicing out this imminent problem, and to influence governments to make a visionary goal, that in the year so and so, all people in Asia should have enough to eat. This diverse and complex reality creates a challenge for our understanding of mission (*missio Dei*) in Asia today.<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians (in Asia) still understand the mission of the church as limited "to inviting persons to become Christians and preparing them for baptism." Dr. Hope S. Antone, Joint Executive Secretary for Faith, Mission and Unity of the Christian Conference of Asia (FMU-CCA) expresses her concern about the narrow mission orientation which is "so entrenched in the minds of Asian Christians" when she writes to the participants of the Consultation-Dialogue on "Holistic Mission in the Context of Asian Plurality," held on 24-29 March 2008 in Manila, Philippines:

This mission orientation is clearly manifested in the zealous efforts of Asian Christians to follow the so-called great Commission mandate 'to go into the world to share the gospel' - which is simply equated with Christianizing other Asians. This is really proselytism - which is often wrongly confused with conversion, which has become a bad word in Asia, especially for Asians of other faiths. Although often attributed to the mandate to share the good news (evangelism), upon closer analysis, proselytism springs from a desire for self-propagation, usually of a particular church or denomination and church planting. There are also new congregations, usually with funding from outside, that avidly promote this type of mission. It is ironic that the Asian Christians who inherited this 19<sup>th</sup> century (or even older) mission orientation are now the zealous promoters of this old, traditional concept and practice of mission while many of the former foreign mission bodies have already done a re-thinking of their mission understanding and practices.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, No 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 10, distinguishes between mission (singular) and missions (plural). Mission is *Missio Dei* and missions (*missiones ecclesiae*: the missionary ventures of the church) refers to particular forms, related to specific times, places, or need, of participation in the *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* is God's "yes" to the world; God's love and attention to the whole world. But *missio Dei* is also God's "no" to the world. See also Philip L. Wickeri, "Dialogue and Resistance: Mission in the Context of Globalization," in *Celebrating Life in Asia* [Selected papers from the 2nd Congress of Asian Theologians] and *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XVI, No. 1 (November 1999), 46, who states that *missio Dei* is concerned with "the dynamic relationship between God and the world, a relationship which anticipates the kingdom of God, and therefore a relationship within a human community in a world which is created, redeemed and sanctified by God."

<sup>3</sup> See also, Hope S. Antone, "Editorial," *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. xxiv, Nos. 1-2 (April-August 2008), i-ii.

The stories shared by different participants from different member churches of CCA during the Dialogue-Consultation revealed clearly that this narrow understanding of mission orientation is still strongly believed by many Christians in Asia.<sup>4</sup>

This narrow understanding of mission is no longer adequate in the present Asian context.<sup>5</sup> The biblical warrant for mission is no longer the so-called Great Commission (Mt 28: 18-20). The church is called to be co-worker with God in God's mission (*missio Dei*), proclaiming and living out God's love (Lk 4:16-21; cf., Mt 25: 31-46). As David Bosch writes, "God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate."<sup>6</sup> The Vatican Council documents and more recent statements like *Evangelii Nuntiandi* express the concept of evangelization in broader terms: "Christians should work to bring about a change in 'personal and collective consciences of people, their activities and ways of life, and the milieu in which they live.'"<sup>7</sup> "Beneficiaries of the Church's service are not exclusively, or even primarily, Church members. The Church serves all who need to hear and experience the Good News of the Kingdom of God."<sup>8</sup> The letter from the LWF global consultation on "Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World" (2002) highlights the fact that "diakonia is a core component of the gospel itself, and is thus central to what it means to be the church. Diakonia is not merely an option but an essential part of discipleship. All Christians are called through baptism to live out diakonia through what they do and how they live in the world. It begins as unconditional service to the neighbor in need and leads inevitably to social change and transformation."<sup>9</sup>

Luke 4:16-21, known as "an inaugural episode of Jesus' ministry,"<sup>10</sup> emphasizes the proclamation of the gospel as "the good news" and proclamation of the gospel is a definition of mission that occurs very often in the New Testament (Mk 16:15; 13:10; 14:9; Rom 1:1;

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<sup>4</sup> The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is strongly against this narrow and wrong understanding as clearly stated in *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission*, edited by Peri Rasolondraibe (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004). The purpose of diaconal work of the church "is not to proselytize (to attract other Christians to one's own denomination). In emergencies especially, the church does not use people's vulnerability as an occasion to impose its Christians beliefs.... The church and individual Christians proclaim the gospel by word and bear witness to it by the way they live in every situation in their own context.... Proclaiming and witnessing through diakonia are inseparable as participation in God's transforming, reconciling, and empowering mission in the world. Word without deed can be abstract and powerless, and deed without word can be mute and open for any interpretation" (38).

<sup>5</sup> F. J. Verstraelen, ed., *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Michel, "The Challenge on Interfaith Dialogue," paper presented at the Second Congress of Asian Theologians in Bangalore, India, 8-15 August 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey G. L. Chang, S.J., *Communion and Spiritual Leadership in Asia, Documenta Missionalia - 33* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2008), 102.

<sup>9</sup> LWF, *Mission in Context*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke, Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 67.

1:16; 1 Cor 1:17, etc).<sup>11</sup> After reading from the book of Isaiah, Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21).<sup>12</sup> Luke strongly stresses "the immediate action of the Kingdom in contrast to future apocalyptic fire-works."<sup>13</sup> What was announced to the exiles returning to Jerusalem has now been turned by Luke into fulfillment in the person, words, and deed of Jesus of Nazareth. God's salvific act was fulfilled or realized.<sup>14</sup> Luke stresses the universality of salvation. The gospel ("the good news") is for all people: the poor, the outcast, the least, the sick, the blind, the captive, etc.<sup>15</sup> No one is excluded. The theme of forgiveness is constant throughout the gospel of Luke and its climax is Lk 24:47, "and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Culpepper clearly states, "God's grace is never subject to the limitations and boundaries of any nation, church, group, or race. Those who would exclude others thereby exclude themselves. Human beings may be instruments of God's grace for others, but we are never free to set limits on who may receive that grace. Throughout history, the gospel has always been more radically inclusive than any group, denomination, or church, so we continually struggle for a breadth of love and acceptance that more nearly approximates the breadth of God's love. The paradox of the gospel, therefore, is that the unlimited grace that it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There is no one model which explains everything about the church's understanding and practice of mission. The 2004 LWF document *Mission in Context*, 7-8 has Luke 24:13-49 "as the model that speaks for and enlightens a *hermeneutical spiral approach* to mission, an approach that is reflective of interaction between contexts, theology, and practice. It is also considered to be the best model at this time, to convey the understanding of mission as *accompaniment*."

<sup>12</sup> The word "today" (Greek: *semeron*) is an important word for Luke. In Lk 2:11, the angel says to the shepherds, "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." In Lk 5:26 when Jesus heals a paralytic, the people were amazed and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today." To those who want to follow Jesus, Luke adds to his source the word 'daily': "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). To Zacchaeus Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today" (Lk 19:5). Later when Zacchaeus said to Jesus that half of his possessions he will give to the poor; and if he has defrauded anyone of anything, he will pay back four times as much, then Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Lk 19:9-10). Finally to one of the criminals who were hanged with Jesus who said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom," Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).

<sup>13</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age. A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel, Completely Revised and Expanded* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 107.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX), Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1986), 529.

<sup>15</sup> In Luke the proclamation of the gospel gives a strong emphasis upon the poor: In the Magnificat, Mary praises the Lord for he has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (Lk 1:52-53). In Lk 6:20 Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." In Lk 7:22, to John's disciples Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (see also Lk 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 21:3). There is no reason to doubt the word poor (Greek: *ptochos*) means "the financially poor; but it will certainly include poverty of other kinds."

<sup>16</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 108.

The Latin American Bishops Conference at Puebla (1979) and the World Missionary Conference at Melbourne (1980) “regarded the missionary preferential option for the poor as central.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus in his life and ministry is to seek a just, sustainable and participatory society – a social order that attempts to be inclusive – and pays particular attention to those whom the world regards as the “least of these” (Mt 25: 40; cf. Lk 7:22-23; Mt 11:5-6).

Michael Amaladoss writes:

He [Jesus] sought to free people from oppressive social and personal situations. In a world in conflict, he chose the side of the poor, the powerless, the sinners, and the marginalized of his day, promising them liberation through deed and word (Lk 4:18-21). Following Jesus, our mission is to opt for the poor, and seek to transform the world, thereby ushering in God’s reign.<sup>18</sup>

M. R. Spindler also writes:

Proclamation in word is closely linked with concrete deeds of liberation breaking through the structures of oppression and injustice that force the poor into their situation of poverty and hold them there by violence. Mission thus aims to restructure society as a whole on a global scale. It aims, that is, at the kingdom of God. It is an ambitious program, and it breaks out of the traditional separation of church and the world, church and state, and spiritual and political power.<sup>19</sup>

The issue of poverty was also one of the very important topics discussed at the plenary of the 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil. It has even issued a very important document, “AGAPE: A call to love and action.” The council emphasized that a world without poverty is not only possible, but is in keeping with the grace of God.<sup>20</sup> This document expresses the reality of the suffering, poverty and injustice facing many people of the world today, and I think it is also very true in Asia that many people are suffering the consequences of economic globalization; women, abused children who are denied their rights, those laboring under exploitative conditions, people who live at the margins of society painfully hit by poverty. And, it is important for us to know (and I hope to be committed to...) that in a form of prayer the document says, “...We call each other to respond to your love (ed. God’s love) for all people and for the earth in our own actions and in the witness and service of our churches; to work for the eradication of poverty and the unconditional cancellation of debts; to care for land, water, air – the entire web of life...” The AGAPE call invites us all to act together for transformation of economic injustice and to continue analyzing and reflecting on challenges of economic globalization and link between wealth and poverty.

In line with the above issue of poverty, the Christian Conference of Asia has in the past few years had a very important theme in its deliberations, discussions, seminars and

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<sup>17</sup> M. R. Spindler, “The Biblical Grounding and Orientation of Mission,” in F. J. Verstraelen, Ed., *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Amaladoss, SJ, “Mission,” in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, eds. Virginia Fabella & R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 145.

<sup>19</sup> Spindler, 130.

<sup>20</sup> Luis N. Rivera-Pagan, ed. *God, in Your Grace*, official report of the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 208-223.

celebrations, and that is fullness of life for all. Fullness of life for all has a deep theological meaning and calls for political will of the people in Asia to seriously respond to the reality of our world, not only for the sake of humanity, but also for the sake of God's creation. All people, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, nationality, culture and ideology have the right for the fullness of life, and that the people ought to live in harmony with nature. Thus, the churches in Asia are called to seriously address the destruction of environment, deforestation and illegal logging, extinction of some species of creatures because of human greed, pollution of water, air and earth, and to work hard to find the so-called "eco-solution."

"We need to develop new ways of speaking about mission that name and reject the wrongs of the past, embrace what is good, and respond in new ways to the challenges facing the Asian churches and the modern world... It is felt that any understanding or definition of mission that divides the community into saved/unsaved, reached/unreached and seeks to convert people into a particular understanding of the Christian faith or separated Christian and non-Christian into disparate human communities is inconsistent with the gospel message," says Monica J. Melanchthon.<sup>21</sup> The church is engaged in the *Missio Dei*, "not because it claims to know and have all the truth, but because we as the Church are part of the body of Christ, and mission is part of who we are."<sup>22</sup> The 1988 LWF Mission Document describes participation of the church in God's mission and this theological understanding and conviction is developed further at the Eighth and Ninth LWF Assemblies in Curitiba (1990) and Hong Kong (1997). The LWF Tenth Assembly in Winnipeg (2003) strongly emphasized this theological understanding; in its message it states, "Our participation in the mission of the Triune God involves the three interrelated dimensions, diakonia, proclamation and dialogue, which are integral parts of the mission of the church."

<sup>23</sup> Further the 2004 LWF document *Mission in Context* states: "The reason for the being of the church, as Jesus indicates, is to participate in God's mission: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (John 17:21)... Thus, mission is of the very being of the church. To be in mission is not optional for the church. Mission is constitutive of its being as the 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' church (Nicene Creed)."<sup>24</sup> The participation of the church in God's mission must be "comprehensive and holistic." "Mission is holistic and contextual with regard to its aim, practice, and location. Its aim encompasses the whole of creation (ecological concerns), the whole of life (social, political, economic, and cultural), and the whole human being (i.e., all people and the whole person - spiritual, mental, relational, physical, and environmental need). Its practice calls for the participation of the whole church, women and men, young and old."<sup>25</sup> In the church of Christ the rich and poor alike

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<sup>21</sup> Melanchthon, "Mission in the Asian Context", 2; see also The 2004 LWF document, *Mission in Context*, 31 states, "Competition and the idea of 'conquest,' as well as proselytism (attracting other Christians to one's own denomination), jeopardize and undermine God's mission."

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1; cf. Erme R. Camba, "Athens 2005: Mission as Healing and Reconciliation," (unpublished), 3, writes: "It is about time for us to understand that mission is not ours. For the church actually does not have it[s] own mission apart from the mission of God. Mission, rightly understood, is *missio Dei*, the mission of God ... *Missio Dei* is larger than the Church." The LWF Tenth Assembly also states in its message, "God's mission is wider than the bounds of the church" (*Mission in Context*, 40).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

are to gather on the same basis, without distinction and certainly without favor – slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, black, red, white, or yellow, it is to make no difference. As St. Paul says in Gal 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (see also, 1 Cor 12:13; cf. Col 3:11). This is not the way the church has always been, but this is the way the church ought to be. The church crosses all the boundaries that men and women erect and all natural distinctions and gathers all kinds of people, without exception, into one body.

In Asia, the Christian communities are small minorities, living and operating within multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. The only exceptions are the Philippines and East Timor. Many people of Asia understand Asian churches as being a “foreign import”, as “something alien.”<sup>26</sup> This foreignness is the result, on the one hand, from the fact that the Asian churches are a product of missionary activity originating from Europe or the United States. The missionary enterprise was at its height during the colonial and imperialistic expansion of Western powers in several Asian countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of these missionaries were rather close or even in connivance with colonial powers. Until today churches in some Asian countries are burdened with this colonial mortgage.

Dr Sungkook Park, Joint Executive Secretary of Faith, Mission and Unity of Christian Conference of Asia (FMU-CCA) and as contact person of the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS VI), clearly expresses the history of the churches in Asia:

Knowing that many of the churches in Asia are children of the Western missionary movement, and many of these children are now ardent promoters of mission not only within the region but also outside Asia, the forthcoming congress will be a wide platform for Asian theologians to reflect on our understandings and practices of mission. Although Christianity was born in Asia, the church in Asia is usually seen as a ‘product’ of Western mission. Intensive missionary enterprises throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a European brand are seen as coming via the Western route and alongside with colonialism and colonial powers... The attitudes of moral superiority, exclusive righteousness, monopoly of the truth, and the mere association of Christian missionary work with aggressive imperialism have rendered mission work in Asia suspect among many Asian peoples.<sup>27</sup>

Asian churches are challenged to shed their image of being “foreign implants” and to become communities which feel at home, and which are accepted by the other communities in the country as full-fledged and respected members. Asian Christians, therefore, have

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, “From the sixteenth century, due to historical circumstances, mission became attached to conquest, colonialism, cultural and religious imperialism and the implantation of western Christianity across the globe.”

<sup>27</sup> See also George Evers, “Challenges to the Churches in Asia Today,” in [eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr006/georgevers.htm](http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr006/georgevers.htm) who writes, “Asian theologians are called to respond for the good of the universal Church, namely, witnessing to the mystery of God by developing new forms of a negative theology, thereby reacting and correcting a Western theology, which seems to be too confident that dogmatic concepts are capable of explaining the mystery of God. In Asia we find a widespread strong sense for the mystery and an awareness of the limitations of human language and philosophical concepts, to express the deepest reality of God-world-human person.”

a special responsibility to develop new forms of living together with sisters and brothers of other religious traditions. The churches in Asia must be humble and are being called "to prolong, to make visible, to put flesh unto this mission of Jesus in the contemporary realities in Asia."<sup>28</sup> Meaning, the churches in Asia are not to serve as a substitute for the mission of God. There is "no one Asia" because Asia "is not a uniform reality" and "not only in nostalgic fashion." As Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle writes, "When we talk of the worlds of Asia and the cultures of Asia, it is not just a nostalgic view of culture, the church must confront the fast-changing, dynamically changing cultures that define the worlds of Asia today. Today's Asia must be taken into consideration. In and through contemporary Asian realities the saving mission of Jesus will become more alive in Asia. This means attentiveness to the worlds of Asia"<sup>29</sup> The question is: How can we celebrate the Asian aspect of the Christian faith?

We do not intend to live in isolation in Asia. Asia is part of the universal, globalized world. We need and have to maintain the two dimensions. If we are looking for new models or changing structure of mission in a globalized context, we must ask ourselves what leadership the simple folks of our churches exercise in the affairs of churches in Asia. To whom do we listen?<sup>30</sup> This means that the churches in Asia must be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life and the many issues facing the churches in Asia are not to be treated as separate topics but as aspects of an integrated approach to the churches' mission of love and service. The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) in 1990 envisioned a "new way of being church." This new way of being Church involves a deepening of communion at all levels. "The Church in Asia will have to be a *communion of communities* where laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers."<sup>31</sup> "It is a *participatory* Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful – lay, religious, and cleric alike – are recognized and activated, so that the Church may be built up and its mission realized."<sup>32</sup>

The 2004 LWF document states:

Sharing in joint/ecumenical mission ventures in different parts of the world strengthens the communion of churches. Partnership in mission expressed in commitment with one another and in the sharing of mission resources – be they spiritual, human, material, or financial – removes any sense of superiority, isolation, opportunism, and suspicion. Churches that do mission together are apt to maintain the spirit of unity, mutuality, learning, and sharing from one another and to experience the blessing of life in communion.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Luis Antonio Tagle, "The Challenges of Mission in Asia," in James H. Kroeger, *Asia-Church in Mission* (Quezon City, Phil.: Claretian Publications, 1999), 86.

<sup>30</sup> Sharon Rose Joy Ruiz-Duremdes, "Miriam Shows the Way," in *Living in Oikoumene*, edited by Hope S. Antone (Hong Kong: CCA, 2003), 19-25.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey G.L. Chang, *Communion and Spiritual Leadership in Asia*, 105.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Mission in Context*, 30.

Sam Kobia, then General Secretary of WCC, convincingly affirms that “Life-centered vision will inevitably be a key component of ecumenism in the twenty-first century.”<sup>34</sup> He refers to former WCC General Secretary Konrad Raiser who had already anticipated it, “It has become ever clearer that the perspective on ‘the whole inhabited earth’, based on a traditional human-centered view of the world and of history, is still too limited. One major challenge facing the ecumenical movement is thus the need to develop a life-centered understanding of the *oikoumene* which embraces all of God’s creation.”<sup>35</sup>

In response to religious and ideological pluralism, Asian theologians are called to make their own contributions to a theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, by raising new questions, and finding new answers from their lived experience of religious pluralism, and their intimate knowledge of the other traditions. D. Preman Niles insists on the need to explore a new paradigm and theological basis for mission and proposes the paradigm “people of God in the midst of God’s peoples” as a new way of thinking Christian mission.<sup>36</sup> In other words, as Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro writes, “Christians do not have the monopoly of God and God’s truth. Christians in the third millennium must face this ‘new missionary situation.’ This new situation demands that a new paradigm and theological basis for mission should be explored in order to redirect the course of church history and the story of mission.”<sup>37</sup>

In the past and still today, the Christian faith has spread in only one culturally and historically limited form of Western Christianity. The challenge for the Asian churches is to develop a distinctive form of Asian Christian living of the gospel and of being church. This will be a wonderful contribution towards a true universality of the Christian faith in a communion of churches, living different forms of Christian life in “unity in diversity.” So the churches in Asia must preserve and celebrate the differences among their members as part of the richness of their inheritance. Markus Barth states clearly, “No one among the saints can say he [she] is not equipped or has nothing to contribute, for everyone is given a gift and an appointment.”<sup>38</sup> Further he writes, “The church cannot be one except when it attests to its God-given oneness by proving unity in diversity, and when it ventures to respect diversity in unity. Uniformity would be the alternative – a form of death which is recommended neither by 1 Cor 12, nor by Eph 4, nor by any other of the ecclesiastic passages of the NT.”<sup>39</sup> The 2004 LWF document states, “The whole church (i.e., every

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<sup>34</sup> Sam Kobia, “New Vision and Challenges to Ecumenism in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Windows into Ecumenism, Essays in Honour of Ahn Jae Woong* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2005), 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> D. Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, review of Preman Niles’s book, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission*, in *Silliman Ministry Magazine*, No. 81 (December 2008): 19.

<sup>38</sup> Markus Barth, “Ephesians”, *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 34A (New York, Double Day, 1974), 452.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 466. In Indonesia we have our official national slogan or motto, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” which is old Javanese and is often loosely translated as ‘Unity in Diversity’ but literally it means “(Although) in pieces, yet One”. It is stated in the national symbol, *Garuda Pancasila* (as written on the scroll gripped by Garuda's leg), and in the principal national constitution of Indonesia, *Undang-Undang Dasar Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1945*. For “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhinneka\\_Tunggal\\_Ika](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhinneka_Tunggal_Ika). Indonesia consists of thousands of islands, hundreds

member) participates in mission, for mission is not the prerogative of a few professionals or a few wealthy congregations and churches... Mission is also the calling of the whole church, not only individuals, and thus is the responsibility of the whole household of God, the communion of the sent."<sup>40</sup> The complexity of the changing challenges in mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century calls churches in the North and the South to promote partnership in mission by sharing their resources with one another; but "equal participation and sharing of responsibility" must be the basis of the partnership.<sup>41</sup>

The understanding of partnership in mission is strongly emphasized by the United Evangelical Mission (UEM), a communion of churches in three continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia). Member churches of UEM share money and power, take decisions together, and follow a holistic and inclusive approach to mission. "The aim of the member churches of the UEM is to work together as equal partners between North-South, to strengthen and support each other in their programmes, to share responsibility and experiences with each other, to help people in situations of emergency and conflict and, thereby, to act together in bearing witness to the word of reconciliation in Jesus Christ."<sup>42</sup> I am teaching New Testament at Silliman University Divinity School in the Philippines as a UEM Co-worker, in the framework of the UEM South to South relationship. From my own personal experience, this partnership is challenging but really enriching both sides: HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan) as the sending church and the UCCP (United Church of Christ in the Philippines) as the receiving church. This kind of partnership should be done (continued) or developed in different levels with variety of programs between the Asian Churches and the Western Churches, sharing different resources to strengthen the church in participating in and carrying out God's mission. "Care must be taken, however, that calling cross-cultural witnesses as missionaries, co-workers, or advisers does not divide the communion into 'sender' and 'receiver' churches."<sup>43</sup>

We live in a changing world but the Word is always the same. Mission can no longer be defined in one universal formula, but must be addressed in context. It is the urgent need for and responsibility of Christians to make their response to the Gospel or the Word of God as concrete and lively as possible. Our context influences our understanding of God and the expression of our faith. We can only speak about a theology that makes sense at a certain place and in a certain time. Therefore, the call for the Churches in Asia is to

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of ethnic groups, many local languages, and several different religions. But we are united to become one Indonesian country (*Negara Indonesia*), we have one national language (*Bahasa Indonesia*), and one nation that is *Bangsa Indonesia*. We are one in our diversity or plurality. Unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

<sup>40</sup> *Mission in Context*, 44. Earlier the document states, "Led by the Spirit and endowed with diverse gifts, the whole church is charismatic... A charismatic church uses all the gifts of the spirit for mission: proclamation of the gospel, deliverance from evil powers, prayer for healing, community building service, and advocacy" (32).

<sup>41</sup> Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, in *Silliman Ministry Magazine*. No. 81 (December 2008): 22, even argues that with the new paradigm in mission we need to develop "partnership with the non-human and with the Earth as a whole."

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.vemission.org>

<sup>43</sup> *Mission in Context*, 45.

undertake serious analysis of their mission contexts, practices, and theology.<sup>44</sup> The churches in Asia are called to stand with the victims of injustice and violence and thus expose and denounce evil powers and situations that distort and disrupt creation and dehumanize life in society. The churches in Asia are challenged to develop new goals and see new visions of opportunities for mission in Asia and should:

- a) Revisit and reflect on (our common) vision and understanding of doing mission in Asia today. Does it embrace or address the challenges from our contextual realities?
- b) Appraise and assess our understandings and appropriations of our common vision, especially in view of the challenges and realities of today's context. What are the obstacles to our vision? How do we deal with them or overcome them?
- c) Initiate ways of entering into intra and inter-faith dialogues within the region. What is the relationship between interreligious dialogue and mission? How do we view the problem of conversion – so sensitive in many Asian countries – from a theological perspective, in multi-religious Asia?
- d) Initiate the cultural renewal that provides the space, opportunity, and respect for a) the entry of women into increasingly significant roles in the life of the church and God's mission. The emergence of strong groups of feminist theologians is challenging the hierarchical church to allot them room to contribute to new forms of being church, where women have their rightful places and roles.
- e) Initiate a study on the impact of modern technology and the problems of poverty and aging and their impact on mission and evangelism. How do we respond to the revolution in the communication media of radio, TV and especially of the Internet, which brings about far-reaching changes in social life, in the life of families, in the political, ideological, cultural, and religious fields?
- f) Come up with action plans to incorporate and mainstream our common vision on mission in our life and work as churches in Asia.

Perhaps one recommendation that can be discussed by this Congress is to seek a possible paradigm in developing partnership in doing mission in Asia in order that CATS has concrete initiatives for/at the grassroots level. We should grow together in learning and serving, share gifts and insights, bear witness to the Kingdom of God in striving for justice, peace and fullness of life for all.

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<sup>44</sup> As the 2004 LWF document on *Mission in Context*, clearly states, "the good news can only be communicated effectively to people within their own context through language and actions which are an integral part of that context... Such contextual theology, in turn, promotes and feeds on the praxes of mission that interact with and transform the context. Thus, the church is challenged to embark ever anew on the journey of reexamining its changing context in light of its theology and praxes, deepening the contextualization of its theology and refocusing its praxes. As in the example of the Emmaus road, the church carries out its mission as accompaniment to people in the complexity of their contexts" (8).

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Missio Dei Church is a congregation which believes the advance of God's Kingdom comes not through new ways of doing church, but through the ancient way of faithful preaching and contextualizing of the unchanging Gospel for a changing culture. This podcast features sermons from Sunday worship gatherings at Missio Dei Church, located in Asheville, NC. Find more information about Missio Dei Church online at [www.mdcasheville.org](http://www.mdcasheville.org). Mission as missio Dei necessarily relativizes Western understanding of mission. God cannot be restricted to what has been and is happening in Western cultural Christianity. Chai says that the Evangelical mega-churches in Korea see mission purely in terms of salvation and so suggests that they do not take missio Dei seriously. 42 However, there is increasingly a strong Trinitarian aspect in Evangelical missiology. This is illustrated by the Iguassou declaration: "All the persons of the Godhead are active in God's redeeming mission." The Society of White Fathers started in Northern Algeria by the caring for and educating children orphaned by famine and epidemics in this part of Africa in the years 1867-1868, their activities then spread to cover the Algerian Sahara (1872) and Tunisia (1875) and very soon its mission was enlarged to comprise the evangelization of the far interior of West and East. Cardinal Lavignerie, as Professor of Early Church History at the Sorbonne, knew well that Christianity had had a very long history in Africa due to the existence of the ancient Churches in Egypt, the Roman Africa, Nubia and Ethiopia. A History of the Church in Africa, pp. 84-85. 251.