



International Consultation on Ecumenism in Asia: Emerging Ecclesial Landscapes and Ecumenical Paradigms

The ecclesial landscape in many parts of the world is undergoing significant change. Marked by the multiplicity of Christian denominations and increased ecclesial diversity, new forms of ecclesial identity are emerging and spreading across continents. Asia, too, is witnessing significant change in its ecclesial landscape. At the same time, ecumenical engagement among churches faces mounting challenges, similar to those experienced in other regions. The ecclesial landscape in Asia has long been diverse, encompassing a wide range of Christian confessional traditions. Asia is often described as the cradle of Christianity, yet Christians remain a minority across much of the continent. While this reality is widely recognised, there is an urgent need to underscore ecclesial unity among churches of different traditions and denominational identities if Christianity is to have a meaningful impact on the continent.

The missionary movements patronised by churches from the West introduced new phases of Christian denominational identity in many Asian countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While these movements initially brought denominational fragmentation, they also contributed significantly to the shaping of ecclesial unity in Asia. Cooperation among churches became necessary to coordinate missionary engagements and enhance the effectiveness of evangelisation in new mission fields. However, despite these efforts, Asian churches have remained fragmented along denominational and confessional lines, revealing the enduring need to strengthen ecclesial unity. Missionary competition and divisiveness in the mission fields eventually paved the way for national-level ecumenical organisations, such as National Missionary Councils and National Christian Councils, as collective expressions of the aspiration for visible unity. These efforts proved instrumental in sowing the seeds of ecumenical theological thought and in shaping the evolution of the ecumenical movement at different levels in Asia.

For more than a century, Asian churches have contributed significantly to the strengthening of ecumenism in diverse ways. These contributions have been widely recognised at the global level, with Asian churches often serving as forerunners of the ecumenical movement. Asian contributions have provided fresh insights into ecumenical theology, missiology, ecclesiology, and new approaches to socio-political engagement. Asian church leaders have also provided profound leadership within the global ecumenical movement. However, in contemporary global discussions on the nature of ecumenism and the future of the ecumenical movement, Asian contributions have become minimal or less visible.

The Church in Asia exists within a region of immense cultural, religious, and historical richness. Asia is the birthplace of many of the world's major religions. Yet today, the continent faces serious challenges to religious tolerance due to increasing polarisation and multiple forms of turmoil. These challenges manifest differently across national and sub-regional contexts and include the rise of religious fundamentalism and extremism, growing intolerance, the politicisation of religion, authoritarian and repressive regimes, and hegemonic power structures among nations. These have led to persistent human rights violations, with religious minorities, women and children becoming the primary victims.

Amidst these emerging crises, the mission and witness of churches in Asia face innumerable challenges that demand urgent attention. However, insufficient attention has been given to the importance of inter-religious dialogue, inter-faith cooperation, and expanding human rights advocacy. Additional

challenges include declining participation of young people in the ecumenical movement, a lack of visionary leadership, the seeming loss of ecumenical memory, and Asia's failure to determine and set its own agenda. Asian churches, therefore, must not only assess the current ecumenical landscape but also articulate new visions that can renew and energise ecumenism in rapidly changing contexts.

There is a strong desire for new paradigms and models of ecumenical engagement, grounded in the recognition that ecumenism cannot be divorced from the wider social realities of Asia. The Church in Asia is called to focus on several interconnected priorities: reclaiming spirituality as central to ecumenical initiatives; strengthening inter-religious dialogue and solidarity; continuing work for peace, reconciliation and people's security based on justice; actively participating in people's movements and struggles; encouraging ecumenical engagement at the local and congregational levels; sustaining commitment to human rights, particularly for minorities, women and youth; developing relevant and visionary ecumenical leadership; and reclaiming prophetic witness and the vision of the reign of God as essentials of ecumenism.

Although the ecumenical movement has historically provided platforms for inter-generational dialogue, the present Asian reality reveals the emergence of new "ecumenical archipelagos". Former mission agencies from the West have resurfaced under the banner of mission and evangelism, creating parallel structures in Asia in the name of ecumenism or ecumenical collaboration. At the same time, economic development and increased connectivity have enabled some Asian churches to expand missionary activities beyond national borders. While these developments have generated new missionary energy, they have also intensified denominational proliferation, aggressive evangelisation, and self-glorification based on confessional identities.

As the ecclesial landscape in Asia continues to change drastically, these developments are reshaping ecumenism and the ecumenical movement itself, in many cases weakening the conciliar fellowships and conciliar unity efforts of local churches. Emerging ecclesiological paradigms increasingly share features with its ecumenical counterparts, particularly in their emphasis on shared praxis.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), the world's first regional ecumenical organisation founded in 1957, will complete 70 years of its existence in 2027.

The proposed Consultation will be a prelude to reflecting on an ecumenical vision and agenda for shaping the future of the Asian ecumenical movement, as well as to reviewing the changing ecclesial and ecumenical landscapes in Asia and assessing their implications for the future of the ecumenical movement in the region.

The deliberations of the consultation will focus on identifying emerging challenges to ecclesial unity, ecclesial visibility amidst diverse identity, challenges to conciliar unity and conciliar fellowship, the prophetic witness of Asian churches and the ecumenical movement, receptive ecumenism, and new ecumenical paradigms. The Consultation will also aim to identify priorities for developing an ecumenical agenda to revitalise the ecumenical movement in Asia.

The Consultation will bring together fifty selected church and ecumenical leaders, along with specially invited representatives of mission and ecumenical organisations.

The Consultation will be held from 31 May to 3 June 2026 (arrival on 31 May and departure on 3 June) at the CCA headquarters located on the ,Payap University Campus in Chiang Mai, Thailand.