

## Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly commences amidst celebrative worship



The first-ever Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA) organized by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) was opened in a celebrative worship service held at the Presbyterian Bible College (PBC) auditorium in Hsinchu, Taiwan. The Assembly has convened around the theme, 'Arise, Be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation'.

Archbishop Dr Willem Simarmata, CCA Moderator, who opened with a powerful observation stated, "I see the reality of our global Christianity, especially in Asia, that the churches have been transformed into 'churches of women'. The power of women is extraordinary in determining the future direction of Christianity."

In his introductory remarks and welcome address, Dr Mathews George Chunakara, the General Secretary of the CCA said, "Improvements in the status of women are evident in different fields, and these transformations have been made possible by strengthened institutions and legal systems, demographic transitions, and a more dynamic civil society. However, we are on the trajectory towards a less inclusive and more unequal world."

The CCA General Secretary said, "The expected outcome of AEWA is not merely to address or talk about gender representation within churches, but to reflect and strategize ways in which church and society can be further sensitized."

He appealed to the participants of the ecumenical gathering by saying, "It is our collective task to create conditions for identifying, motivating, building, and enabling a diverse range of women leaders to hone their talents and bear formidable challenges."



'Creation and Spirituality', by Hanna C. Varghese (Malaysia). © CCA, 1995.

"To reconcile is to renew and restore relationships. AEWA offers the space to interpret the multiple meanings of the theme and apply them practically in our contemporary contexts," said Dr Mathews George.

Rev Kyrie Kim, the Moderator of the CCA's Programme Committee, and Rev Lyien Chieng-Mei, extended greetings at the opening session.

The opening worship was led by participants from various Asian countries, together with members from the host church, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.

Rev Dr Henriette Hutabarat Lebang, Chairperson of the PGI (Persekutuan Gereja di Indonesia) and former General Secretary of the CCA delivered a homily based on the text Isaiah 32:9-20.

Rev Dr Henriette described the biblical text as a 'disturbing call to repentance', stating that the complexity and interconnectedness of today's problems inherently affect everyone. Due to growing polarization, competition, and pervasive individualism, she said that the 'whole creation is suffering due to the greed of a few people who exploit all others and nature beyond its limit'.

"In this Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly, we are called by the Prophet Isaiah to pause for a while, to look at the face of our world today, the suffering of many people due to injustices," said Dr

Lebang to the participants.

More than 250 women from different denominations and churches are attending the Assembly. ■

# Women in Asia to determine the direction of Christianity

Excerpts from the inaugural address of CCA Moderator Archbishop Willem T.P. Simarmata



I see the reality of our global Christianity especially in Asia that the Asian churches have transformed into the churches of women. The power of women is extraordinary to determine the direction of our present Christianity and in the future...the theme indicates that the Christian women in Asia want to expand their roles, not only to be wives and mothers in their families, nor to reach the leading positions in the Church, nor to take part in church women's ministries but the women realize that our mother earth is groaning as she has been mistreated brutally by her children. In many parts of Asia we found symptoms of the ecological

crisis such as contamination of fresh waters, pollution and acids of oceans with plastics, degradation of land, deforestation, depletion of fish populations, increasing of global carbon emissions, accumulation of greenhouse gases, and much more which I am no longer able to mention further. We heard the cries of the Asian people vulnerable to the effects of the climate change especially the women and children. Therefore, let me use my short time here to appeal to all of you who gather here to pray, talk seriously and act ecumenically, inter-religiously and internationally to take emergency actions to save our planet. ■

# We are called to weave life with the fruits of the Spirit

Excerpts from the homily by Rev Dr Henriette Hutabarat Lebang at the Opening Worship

We are in a so-called 'post-truth' era, where lies tend to be considered as the truth. Indeed, our world suffers due to a lack of love, peace, justice, and truth. Some people enjoy a luxurious life at the expense of the suffering of many others. In such a situation, the words of God come to us: "Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice; you complacent daughters, listen to my speech." (Isaiah 32:9)

In this Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly, we are called by the prophet Isaiah to pause for a while...to look at the face of our world today, the suffering of many people, especially women due to poverty and injustice. Sometimes we are at ease; we do not pay attention to the problems of this world. We are probably even part of the oppressive structure of injustice, deriving benefit from such situations. The basic question for us is: how do we treat other people, especially those who are socially weak? How do we treat nature and the rest of creation? Is it only to satisfy our ego and exploit all to get a maximum profit? We, the women of Asia, are called to wake up from our complacency, to open our eyes to see the challenging realities of today, the signs of death that destroy the sustenance of life on this planet.

The women addressed by Isaiah were part of the unjust structures of their times. They enjoyed comfortable lives while many suffered because of limited resources. Other creatures and nature suffered as well due to the lack of attention and care. We have seen some of these realities in our surroundings.

The realities of our life today – as some have been mentioned above – indicate that people and our planet are longing for love, peace, truth, and justice. We are called to 'Arise' and

'Be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation'. In order to do this and to renew ourselves, first and foremost, we must cleanse our hearts and minds from the tendency of self-interest and self-preservation, and move to work together for justice and peace for all. But, for sure, we cannot fulfill this Call alone! To be able to do this challenging task, we need the Power from Above, the power of Holy Spirit as promised by God.

Our God is the God of love and life; our God is the source of life who unceasingly cares

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22) As people who belong to Christ Jesus, Paul advised us: Let us crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another (Gal. 5:24-26).

We are called to awaken from our complacency, selfishness, unhealthy competition, greed, materialism, consumerism, and disrespect to others, especially those who are different from us. We are called to be renewed



for all life on this planet. Our God is merciful. Therefore, God continues to work for the goodness of all creation and weaves the threads of life into a rich tapestry, just like a woman who lovingly and meticulously weaves the cloth using various colorful threads and yarn. We are called to weave life with the yarns which are the fruits of the Spirit, namely: love, joy, peace,

by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us live in Spirit and continue to ask the Spirit to guide us, so that we truly become the co-workers of God in reconciling, renewing, and restoring the creation. I exhort you to start where you can start; do not wait too long as change can start from yourself; as it is from small things that the world can be transformed. ■

# Asian women are partners of God's mission and catalysts of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration

## Excerpts of CCA General Secretary Dr Mathews George Chunakara's Introductory Remarks at the Opening Session of AEWA

The Asian subcontinent still has much more ground to cover in the journey towards achieving gender parity, a goal that can only be achieved if it takes precedence as a national, cultural, and corporate imperative. There are many cultural barriers which need to be overcome. Unjust expectations about the role of women in society still persist in many areas of Asia, and continue to remain deeply ingrained. This will not change quickly, but it needs to be changed.

trafficking; eliminating harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriages, and so on.

Discriminatory laws and harmful norms prevent women and girls from realizing their full potential, and gender inequality persists in areas such as inheritance and land rights, business regulations, political representation, access to healthcare, and the ability to live a life free from all forms of violence. We are on a trajectory of a less inclusive and more

regional levels in Asia since 2016. AEWA should be seen in this context as a major event or culmination of several initiatives of CCA related to women's programmes.

The theme of this consultation, 'Arise, Be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation' should also be seen in the backdrop of a wide range of issues addressed by CCA.

The Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA) is expected to provide a platform for Asian Christian women to discuss their role as partners in God's mission of healing the wounded and broken world, and to be catalysts of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration.

The outcome of the AEWA is expected not merely to address or only talk about gender representation, but to reflect and strategize on finding ways to sensitize church and society at large. It is our collective task to create conditions for identifying, motivating, building, and enabling a diverse range of women leaders and to bring their talents to take on formidable challenges. We need to believe and agree that our means and measures need to be bettered in order to enhance women's leadership and representation. We need to believe that women's leadership can drive the inclusivity necessary for our economies and society to progress. What we need to ask individually and collectively during the AEWA is, how far we will be able to make progress towards this direction?

It is in this context that the AEWA is anchored on three different dimensions of the theme: 'Be Awake to Reconcile', 'Be Awake to Renew', and 'Be Awake to Restore'. Reconciliation, renewal, and restoration have manifold meanings and manifestations. However, how they are meaningfully and relevantly interpreted and applied in a more practical way in our contemporary context also is more significant. To reconcile is to restore relationships. Reconciliation is made possible and effective only when justice is ensured without any preconditions.

In the Old Testament, reconciliation has to do chiefly with the restoration of Israel's relationship with God. In the New Testament it also signifies the restoration of human relationships. St. Paul's statement that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor 5:19) extends the scope of reconciliation to the whole world. Multidimensional aspects of this theme will be dealt at this Assembly in different segments of the programme. ■

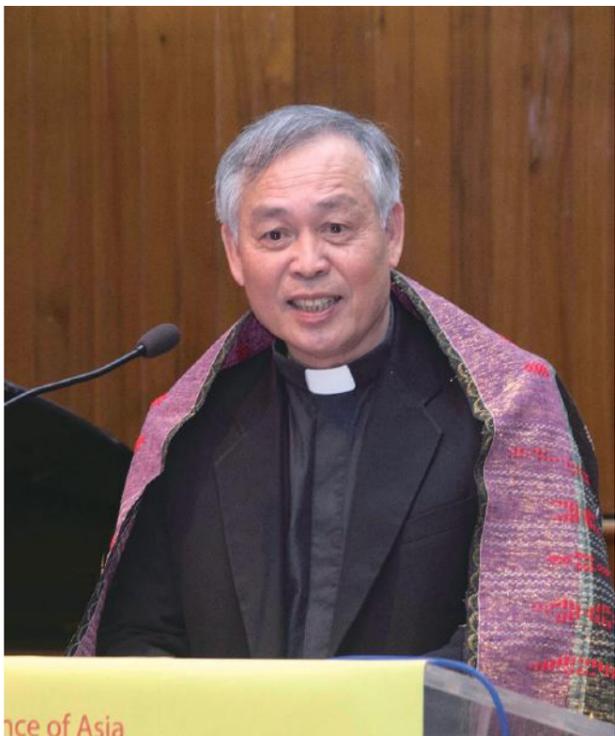


CCA has attempted to achieve several of its objectives and goals as part of the many initiatives undertaken during the past years, such as securing gender equality and empowerment of women, combatting all forms of violence against women and girls in both the public and private spheres; forced

unequal situation in Asia.

During the past three-and-a-half years, CCA has been trying to address some of these issues and concerns. AEWA is the culmination of several conversations that the CCA has enabled through a series of programmes at national, sub-regional, and





# Welcome to Taiwan

Rev Lyim Hong-Tiong PCT General Secretary

The theme of AEWA, 'Arise, and be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation' is a clear manifestation of how addressing gender equality will also lead to the care of wider creation.

In the experience of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan's struggle for ensuring the dignity of all God's people, we find that seeking truth and justice is the key to reconciliation and shalom. For example, the deprivation of the rights and dignity of the indigenous people of Taiwan, especially the women, in the long history of various occupying powers teaches us that transnational justice is essential today

in order to achieve true reconciliation and restoration. Asian women's experiences can contribute towards seeking justice and peace in today's diverse and unjust patriarchal Asian reality, which requires all Christians to be active witnesses to the Kingdom of God."

We are now honoured to extend in the ecumenical spirit our fellowship and warm hospitality to the participants of the first ever Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly(AEWA) of the CCA which will be held at the Presbyterian Bible College in Hsinchu. ■



# Vavauni Ljaljegean says, “Without truth, there is no true reconciliation; without justice, there is no reconciliation”



Women’s Assembly (AEWA).

Delivering AEWA’s first thematic presentation on ‘Arise, Be Awake to Reconcile, Renew, and Restore the Creation’, Evangelist Vavauni demonstrated parallels from the story of the ‘voiceless Tamar in her suffering’ in the Old Testament, and added that the suffering of Tamar should be understood in three perspectives: personal or family perspective, social perspective, and theological perspective.

“Like Tamar, a young lady who had suffered from the loss of dignity, Taiwanese indigenous women suffer. No one hears their crying; even their closest brothers and family wouldn’t hear their cries and voices. These indigenous women are actually marginalized in their families. There is no one caring for their suffering,” thus narrated the forthright woman theologian about the ongoing injustice faced by the Taiwanese indigenous people.

“I call myself ‘Taiwan Indigenous Person’ because this term is a living testimony to how we are stigmatized and associated with words like ‘laziness’, ‘uneducated’, ‘uncivilised’, and ‘immoral’,” Vavauni, who serves as an evangelist of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, shared.

Explaining the systemic and systematic oppression of the indigenous people, Vavauni also visualized the daily realities many indigenous women face as victims of trafficking and forced prostitution.

“Indigenous women experience ‘strongly doubled marginalisation’ and ‘collective stigmatisation’. Their inherent gender coupled with male chauvinism

and outmoded philosophies relegate them as the silent minority. Although the government and civil society have been trying to promote the policy of transitional justice and achieve social reconciliation, I ask, where is the voice of Taiwan Indigenous girls on this journey of justice? Where is their crying in the miserable history of my people? Their voices are still unheard, but their crying is clear to my ears,” Vavauni implored the participants.

Rev Amel Michael Manyon from Australia moderated the session. ■



“As reconciliation is the mission of God, it is God’s positive action directly participating in all broken relations. The aim of reconciliation is to reveal the truth which was covered and obscured, to heal those who suffer from the realities of theinjustice, and to transform those wounded to be recovered in the love of Christ. Therefore, without truth, there is no true reconciliation; without justice, there is no reconciliation,” young Taiwanese indigenous woman theologian Vavauni Ljaljegean, said at the first thematic plenary session of the Asian Ecumenical

## Panelists share perspectives on 'Caring and Sustaining the Creation'

A plenary session addressed by four panelists introduced the theme, ‘Towards Caring and Sustaining the Creation’ from different perspectives.

Ester Damaris Wolla Wunga from Indonesia, in a powerful and moving presentation expounded on the life and position of women in her region Sumba, and the conditions that push many into a life of hardship and misery.

“Women are the most vulnerable to discrimination,

violence, and exploitation in Sumba,” she said.

Wolla Wunga called on the church to break its silence and emphasized the importance of education in empowering women to say ‘No!’ to violence in all its forms, in fighting an oppressive culture, and in being able to speak for themselves.

Suganthenee Niles from Sri Lanka gave a compelling presentation on the threats and problems plaguing the environment in the 21st century, and she

reiterated that humans had a God-given responsibility to be caretakers of the creation and not be destroyers of it.

Lending a unique Buddhist perspective on the theme, Venerable Jeungmoon, a South Korean Buddhist nun spoke of the need to find, reconcile, and redefine the true potential of the self as creation; this was essential in order to better understand the creation around us.

The young Buddhist nun from the Mahayana tradition provided an interesting analogy of a rainbow to understand the self, wherein the seven colours combined created a beautiful phenomenon because each component possessed its own individuality.

In her presentation, Rev Dr Jeaneth Faller from the Philippines affirmed, “To sustain God’s creation, we go beyond merely protecting the physical environment. More importantly, we need to aim at creating a human ecology which makes the existence of every creature more dignified, protecting the radical good of life in all its manifestations, and preparing for future generations and environment closer to that which God planned.”

Rev Dr Faller also spoke about the painfully arrogant and human-centric perspective of people that had led to the degeneration of creation and the disruption of the Circle of Life.

Siniva Vaitohi from New Zealand moderated the panel presentation. ■



# Reconciliation is not just a biblical-traditional category of ecclesial discourse



“Reconciliation has to be understood not just as a biblical-traditional category of ecclesial discourse, but as a principle that guides Christian life and service. Thus, the brokenness of our communities needs to be discerned and tirelessly addressed by women,” said Dr Sawako Fujiwara, a feminist theologian from Japan.

In the second thematic presentation at the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA) on the sub-theme ‘Be Awake to Reconcile’, Dr Sawako called upon the participants to be agents of reconciliation.

Dr Sawako, a prominent young ecumenist from the National Christian Council in Japan (NCCJ) urged the majority women participants ‘to reconcile with their sisters first, then to share what they witness with their brothers, and finally be catalysts for the reconciliation of the whole community’.

“We need to ensure safety and security of all in our communities, and realise the full participation of

all, regardless of gender or sexual identity. We need to properly focus attention on transwomen who too often remain ignored in our society, knowingly or unknowingly,” Dr Sawako articulated.

“Today, we need to listen sincerely to the criticism that our theological movement is too often wrestling with gender-based injustice without seriously considering the sexual orientation of others,” stated Dr Sawako Fujiwara, a feminist theologian who currently teaches at the Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary in Tokyo.

Dr Sawako concluded her presentation by providing positive examples and lauded the development of the Asian feminist theological movement.

Stephannie Joy P Mayores from the Philippines moderated the session. ■

# Renewal stems from hope and trust in faithfulness and power of God

‘Renewal stems from hope and trust in the faithfulness and power of God’ was the essence of the message of the third thematic address delivered by Dr Deidre Palmer at the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA), organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

Delivering an address on the sub-theme ‘Be Awake to Renew’, Dr Palmer, President of the Uniting Church in Australia said, “Many of our churches are inclusive in their theology and approaches to ministry but there are still sisters in Christ, those in other religious communities, and the wider society who experience discrimination.”

“We are called to stand in solidarity with them-advocating for equality and justice for all women, and contributing to the renewal not only of our churches, but our world and the whole creation,” emphasised Dr Palmer.

Dr Palmer elaborated upon the need for renewal of the participation of women as disciples, apostles, and

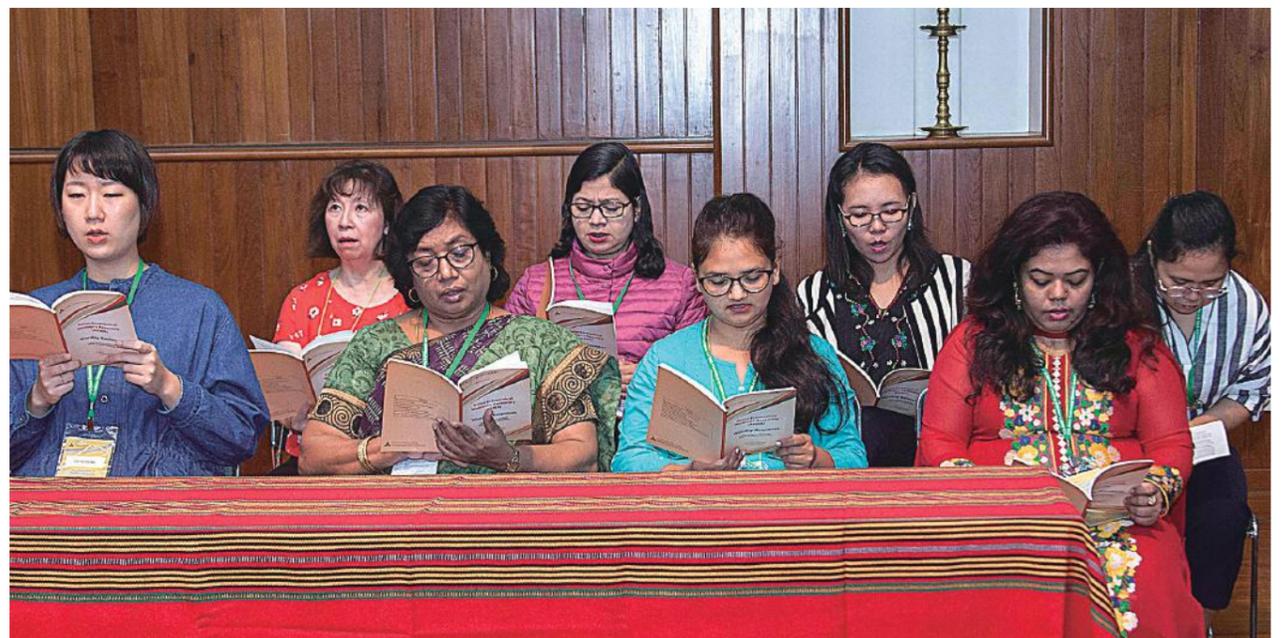
leaders in the Church, which had been present in the Jesus movement and the early years of Christianity.

She stressed that renewal emerged in the partnership of women and men, and that being awake to renewal included listening deeply to one another. She spoke of the significance of an intergenerational community where the young and the old were a source of nurture and encouragement to each other.

“Renewal comes as we hear the voices of children and young people among us- their experience of God, of being members of our churches, and the gifts they bring to shaping and reshaping who we are as Christian communities and the world,” explained Dr Palmer.

She further called on the members of the ecumenical gathering to ‘participate in God's mission of renewal and healing for all people and the whole creation’, as Christians could not be mere spectators in the renewal process.

The session was moderated by Tan Swee Bee from Malaysia. ■



# Interfaith women representatives discuss spirituality and wholeness of life

Women representatives from Asia's four major faiths – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity – affirmed the necessity of spiritual care for the wholeness of life on the second day of the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly (AEWA).

In a special panel presentation focusing on 'Towards Nurturing Spirituality and Wholeness of Life', the four panellists drew from the ethos and values of their respective religious traditions and expressed valuable insights.

Dr Dewi Candraningrum, an Islamic theological scholar, shared her reflections as a feminist Muslim woman. "Feminist spirituality," she shared, "is a grassroots religious movement inside and outside established religion that reclaims power, value, and

reclaiming one's identity.

Sr Elaine Seow, a Roman Catholic nun from Verbum Dei, shared her insights in a series of delightful anecdotes. "The impulse to nurture one's spirituality stems from the human existential need for 'something more', from the longing for something transcendental. In this process, the transformation of the self leads to the transformation of the community."

Sr Elaine noted that reconciliation, renewal, and restoration were stages in achieving higher levels of spirituality, with each stage necessitating one to courageously allow more of God's love to transform oneself. It is in this manner that one feels ultimately fulfilled.

is formed between the heart and the mind. Once an internal harmony is secured, one can then extend compassion and care to the rest of creation.

Venerable Shih Chao-hwei, a Taiwanese Buddhist nun, talked about the Buddhist idea of spirituality. According to Buddhism, the aim of nurturing spirituality was to eliminate suffering and attain happiness.

Venerable Chao-hwei spoke highly of objectivity and detachment as necessary tools in securing the wholeness of life. Though paradoxical, she explained that 'meditation offered the perfect space for demonstrating objectivity and detachment coupled with an extremely high sense of perception and self-awareness'.



dignity of women who strive for equality. It is a commitment to bringing about in oneself and in the world an alternative vision of justice and equality for all."

Dr Dewi explained that a personal spiritual quest is empowering, love-centred, and lies at the heart of human transformation.

According to Dewi, it is personal transformation that helps in healing collective trauma, and she stated this in the context of expressing solidarity with sexually enslaved Indonesian women, who, through art, attempt to make peace with the perpetrators. An inward spiritual transformation was a means of

Dr Ranjini Sampath, a Hindu spiritual practitioner and human rights activist, defined spirituality as the state or quality of being concerned with one's human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.

"The hallmark of a spiritual person is someone whose highest priority is to be loving to the self and others. A spiritual person cares not just for fellow human beings, but for the whole creation. A spiritual person knows that we are all one, and consciously attempts to honour this oneness," she said.

Dr Ranjini explained that spirituality was to be nurtured and cared for such that an unbreakable bond

Chao-hwei said to the participants, "Meditating on the idea of loving kindness is to open channels of one mind with deep observations, to go beyond yourself, and to get through the barrier that lies between yourselves and others, to share your happiness with the whole of creation."

Ruth Mathen from the CCA moderated the session and summarised the insights of the panellists. She said, "It is the Word of God that provides our spiritual nourishment in different ways, and such nourishment is imperative in securing one's sense of self in order to effectively care for our communities and for creation at large." ■



# ASIAN ECUMENICAL WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY 2019 HSINCHU, TAIWAN

