



Communique

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

‘Inherited Mission’ and its challenges for Asia

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

Christ was born in Asia and Christianity originated in Asia. The first disciples of Jesus had turned to the East to propagate the Lord’s ‘great commission’ (Matthew 28:18-20), and subsequently, the gospel spread to other parts of the world. However, the legacy of Christianity and Christian mission in Asia had been tinted with colonialism and imperialism. Consequently, the Church has been perceived as a foreign religion ‘imported’ by the missionaries who were aligned with the colonizers. The attitude of moral superiority adopted by overseas missionaries alienated people belonging to other Asian religions.

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

Contextual challenges of a Multi-religious Asia

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

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

Keeping in mind how the missionary enterprises in the past enjoyed colonial patronage, we recognize the need for avoiding any link between State and religion in the present times, given the emerging trend of politicization of religion and religionization of politics.

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

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

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

In an age of connectivity, our lack of attention to local congregation-based ministries has also added to intergenerational gaps and breakdown of local neighborhood community models of ministry. The meteoric rise of prosperity theology and its popularity in attracting people to churches and Christian groups which propagate and interpret gospel with a prosperity perspective is a crucial challenge we face in Asia today. The experiences we face in Asia through an 'intra-proselytization' among different Christian churches is not helpful in our common witness to Christ.

Emerging Mission in Asia

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

The focus of evangelization is to change lives and propagate the values and teachings of Jesus Christ. We believe that the message of the gospel can transform our lives and help others also to live like Jesus with the promise of God's abiding love, care, and presence with us amidst all the diverse contexts of Asia. The participation of laity, women, and young people in the Christian witness needs to be ensured in churches' engagement in evangelization and missional witness. The churches in Asia should make deliberate attempts to ensure ample time for deepening reflection on specific areas and priorities within the work of evangelization. We acknowledge that the quality of discipleship should be the primary focus of evangelization rather than increasing membership in congregations. We affirm the need to go back to building genuine relationships as Jesus did. We recognize that our missional witness compels us to build committed loving relationships like Christ did in all areas of life. We are reminded of the need to recommit ourselves to be mindful of the importance of prayer in the task of evangelization because when we share the gospel, it is God who ultimately works in the heart of the people.

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

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

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

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