

Ecumenical Vision of Myanmar Council of Churches

James Ngun Hlei¹

Introduction

Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) is a main ecumenical body in Myanmar. It is registered and recognized by the State. MCC is normally understood as the most important Christian fellowship organization representing most of the churches in Myanmar. It has changed its name over the years following the transformation of its nature.

During the Missionary period, while India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Myanmar were together under the same National Christian Council, the Burma Representative Council of Mission (BRCM) was formed in 1913 in order to coordinate and to work hand in hand in resolving the problems in mission concerns of churches and Christian organizations in Myanmar (then Burma). BRCM was changed into the Christian Council in Burma (CCB) in 1923, aiming at the unity of all churches and Christian organizations in Myanmar, and the preparation of national leadership in the churches. When Myanmar became an independent country in 1948, CCB changed its name and formed the Burma Christian Council (BCC), following basically the political changes. Again, the Burma Christian Council changed its name into the Burma Council of Churches (BCC) at the Annual Meeting in Mawlamyaing, on 16-19 May 1972. The Constitution of the Council was drawn out and confirmed at the Maymyo (Pyin Oo Lwin) Annual Meeting on 14 May 1974. Change to the present name, Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC), happened in 1990 when the government changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. (*The Historical Record of MCC 1919-1989*)

So the Myanmar Council of Churches comprises churches and Christian organizations which come voluntarily for unity of the church, and for coordinating church matters such as faith and order. Though the BRCM was formed with 7 organizations – such as American Baptist Mission (ABM), S.P.G (Anglican), Wesleyan Methodist Mission, Episcopal Methodist Mission, Lutheran Mission, YMCA and the Bible Society at the beginning, now there are 14 member churches, 11 cooperating ecumenical bodies, and 21 Regional Councils of Churches. There are six departments and 8 Bilateral Project Programmes. (*A booklet: Myanmar Council of Churches, 2004*)

MCC is a member of the Christian Conference of Asia and relates with the World Council of Churches. There are many Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches in Myanmar outside the MCC. Relationship between MCC and the non-MCC member churches has become much better than before. MCC has links with the Catholic Church through the MCC-CBCM Joint Commission.

¹ The Rev. Dr. James Ngun Hlei serves as Associate General Secretary of the Myanmar Council of Churches. He presented this paper at the South East Asian consultation on "Churches and Seminaries: Appraising our Ecumenical Vision in Today's World," in Manila, Philippines, 24-29 November 2008.

Objectives of MCC

The main objective of MCC is for the unity of the churches in Myanmar through:

- Mutual fellowship and mutual understanding.
- Mutual acceptance and recognition in faith and practices of different churches.
- Coordination and cooperation in common concerns of the churches.
- Persistent endeavor towards organic unity of the churches.

Vision and Mission of MCC

The vision of MCC is for all the Churches to join hand in hand and serve together in God's mission in Myanmar context for the unity of all the Churches in Myanmar, the unity of all humankind and the fullness of life in the world.

Our Mission Statement states: The Myanmar Council of Churches is an ecumenical body basically formed by the Churches in Myanmar. The MCC commits to strive for the unity of all the Churches and Christian organizations in Myanmar, Spirituality, Holistic Mission, Reconciliation, Peace, Justice, Promotion of Human Dignity, Gender Equality, Service and Christian Witness, Interfaith Harmony and Cooperation. It will engage in these tasks through mutual recognition of faith and order, capacity building and empowerment, dialogue, sharing of local and international resources, partnership, and coordination and cooperation. *(2008 Annual Report of MCC)*

Programs of MCC

As MCC has the vision of holistic mission, the programs taken are widely varied. Here are the significant programs taken by MCC, classified according to areas:

- Ecumenical Awareness Area: includes Evangelism and Mission, Ecumenical Institute, Dialogue, Faith and Order.
- Social Service Area: includes development, relief, water, Urban Rural Mission, rural development, displaced people, Disabled People, micro-finance, functional literacy, elderly persons, legal aid, facts for life, child protection.
- Health area: includes medical supply, malaria, HIV/AIDS.

Gradual Transformation of Programs

Before 1985, all departments of MCC freely contacted their relevant partner organizations and managed themselves separately. But after 1985, MCC decided on an integrated budget system. Some partners whose policy was not in accord with MCC system ended their partnership with MCC. The MCC programming structure was also changed from department to unit in 1987, stepping toward more stability.

In 1992, the MCC Round Table was started through the leadership of the Asia Desk of WCC. The aim was to coordinate the partnership of MCC with ecumenical organizations. The integrated budget system was mainly provided by this Round Table.

The unexpected financial crisis of MCC in 2005 challenged MCC to review and restructure. Accordingly, the evaluation and restructuring of MCC was done within 2006-2007. It was advised to promote the systematic staffing, the solidity of programs and the transformation of structure. Now MCC has formulated a new structure, a new constitution and personnel system. MCC is proceeding now to take practical change gradually.

MCC in its Political Context

As we know, the military government has ruled the country for a long time. The understanding of human rights in Myanmar is still poor. Although confirmation was made on the new constitution, it is not yet practiced now. The national election will be held in 2010. Opposition groups are trying to work for change but they are not able to do anything so far. As economy goes down, life in the country becomes poorer. Many people leave the country because of fear and poverty.

The Myanmar Council of Churches has, as expected by some, to do something in this situation. But it has not done so because MCC has traditionally kept friendship with any Myanmar government. So MCC normally avoids doing things that are against the government. The CBCM (the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar) and MCC Joint Commission usually jointly write letters to the government, e.g. during the Golden Yellow crisis in 2007, requesting the government to find peaceful way of resolving the problem of the country.

Moreover, the Buddhist concept of "monk" has influenced the government policy in Myanmar in that it regards monks as *Sang Ga* (holy). This concept includes all religious leaders such as priests, even though Christianity has a different understanding of the human being. In this concept, all the holy ones (monks and priests) should stay apart from politics. Therefore, religious leaders or priests have no right to say anything against the government or participate in any political election. They have to keep quiet in the midst of any political issue. The Churches in Myanmar celebrate yearly in September the Week of Prayer for Peace and Reconciliation. Indeed, we need unceasing hope for a better future.

MCC in the Midst of Plurality

Like other countries, Myanmar has religious, racial and cultural plurality. The Buddhists constitute 85% of the population, Christians 6.2% and the rest are Muslim, Hindu and others. The population of the country is estimated at 57 million (7 May 2008 *Asia Times* online news). There are about 135 groups of nationalities. The most dominant group is the Bama (Burmese). This plurality also affects the Christian community. In the spirit of ecumenism, any plurality could be seen as the beauty of the society. MCC has launched a dialogue program, but it has not been very effective yet. There are still many Christians who misunderstand interfaith dialogue. Anyhow, MCC is to serve the Lord, listening to the will of God in this plural context.

Seminaries and MCC

There is a fellowship of theological seminaries known as ATEM (Association for Theological Education in Myanmar), to which MCC had given birth. Now it stands separately as cooperating body of MCC. MCC has advocated the teaching of some subjects such as Ecumenism, Gender, and Dialogue among the ATEM member seminaries. But only a few seminaries have made the effort so far to respond positively.

There are many theological seminaries and colleges in Myanmar. In Yangon city alone, there are about 108 theological colleges and seminaries. MCC can approach only the ATEM member seminaries, which are mainly of the MCC member churches. MCC provides scholarship programs to ATEM member theological seminaries. But many seminaries in Myanmar still remain out of reach of MCC.

Now the Myanmar Ecumenical Institute (MEI) program of MCC is dreamed to become an Ecumenical Institute of South East Asia. It is a big challenge to the CCA brothers and sisters, as well, to cooperate in this vision of establishing a special ecumenical training centre.

Decade to Unity

The 2006 Biennial General Meeting of MCC drew out plans to reach visible unity in 2014 when MCC celebrates its centennial anniversary. Four steps are planned: (1) To reach to the local Churches; (2) Public movement; (3) Evaluation; and (4) Celebration

Recommendation

1. Since Ecumenism is defined as the unity into the Global Family, including other faiths and also the environment or all the creation, there should be a wider opening of the door to any Churches to come into the ecumenical activity. So we have to check our rules of membership to see whether there are barriers or not. The Myanmar Council of Churches has a new Mission Statement, affirming this vision of wider arms stretching to Churches in Myanmar to serve the Lord hand in hand.
2. MCC is stationed by God in the midst of a pluralistic country. We have to stand firm in our faith in God while we are to encounter our environments. We have to promote our spirituality to keep alive the living hope in any difficulty. We have to encourage those who are distressed by fear and poverty. We need to think the worse and hope for the best.
3. Theological Seminary/College is where Church leaders are educated. It would be helpful if the same ecumenical text book was published by CCA for seminaries all over Asia.
4. As the MCC General Secretary, Mr. Saw Shwe Lin, mentioned in his message to MCC Program Planning Workshop 2008 in Lashio, the MCC should promote change in our financial situation, constitution, bye-laws, programming and staffing in accord with the changes in the political, social, economic rules and regulations of the country and the current world atmosphere.

5. It is a fact that ecumenism is understood and played only at the level of the ecumenical leadership. Even many ecumenical member churches are not penetrated by what is agreed at the top. We ought to bring ecumenism down to the lowest level of the Church. We ought to budget more for this.
6. Finally, ecumenism is a gift from God and a divine task. Whether we can do it completely or not is not a matter. To do it as long as we can is our task. Jesus is praying always and even now for the unity of the Church.