

Ecumenical Vision of Seminaries in Myanmar

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With 6.2% from the 57 million people of Myanmar, Christianity belongs to the minority religious group. Cultural and religious differences make Christianity in Myanmar very cautious and self-critical about its role in a society which is predominantly Buddhist. Thanks to the ecumenical leadership of many generations, the Myanmar Council of Churches, established since 1914, still maintains its respected role in constructive relationship with the government. Undoubtedly, the backbones of the churches are the seminaries which train and educate the present and future leaders of the churches. Globalization, political and economic crisis, deteriorating educational standards (generally), and migration characterize the situation in which the seminaries in Myanmar locate themselves.

Description of Myanmar Seminaries

Most of the seminaries in Myanmar are church-based and are run by their respective churches, conventions and ethnic associations. They aim at producing efficient ministers and lay leaders, equipping them with academic knowledge, pastoral skills and missionary zeal for the ministry and the mission of God. Most of them focus their training on denominational values and needs while few seminaries are more academically and ecumenically oriented. The member churches of the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) have their seminaries cooperating and working together under the Association for Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM) which is the cooperating body of MCC and established in 1986. In other words, ATEM was born out of the ecumenical endeavour and now it exists independently. ATEM is comprised of thirty-three seminaries representing the eleven major denominations all across the country. Its mission and objectives are as follows:

Mission:

“To help upgrade theological institutions and promote relevant theological education that will help equip God’s people for the mission and ministry.”

Objectives:

- To upgrade theological institutions
- To develop faculty
- To promote theological education that is relevant and contextual
- To provide theological literature
- To run postgraduate studies
- To develop contextual theology
- To work towards Union Theological College or Theological Union

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Programs and Activities

In order to achieve its mission and objectives, ATEM carries out the following programs and activities:

- Inter-seminary Students Fellowship (organized every four years; participants from all member schools of ATEM)
- Fellowship with the Catholic Seminary (one-day program; participants from the Anglican, Baptist and Catholic seminaries)
- Cooperating together in national SEAGST (South East Asia Graduate School of Theology) program undertaken by four major seminaries (for the faculty development)
- Faculty development program cooperating with the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Chung Chi Divinity School (Hong Kong), and Trinity Theological College (Singapore)
- Fellowship with the churches which are not members of MCC, such as Myanmar Christian Evangelical Fellowship and Myanmar Christ Mission Cooperation Board (exchange of views and working together for common and challenging issues)
- Myanmar Theologians Fellowship (building fellowship, unity and mutuality among theologians)
- Providing ecumenical courses for church leaders and seminary staffs in cooperation with the Myanmar Ecumenical Institute (MEI) since 2002.
- HIV and AIDS awareness program

Challenges and Opportunities

Increasing number of seminaries with different church and organizational backgrounds makes the work of ATEM not much easier. Such circumstances call for the credible theological education and unity in theological education among the seminaries. ATEM is now trying to form a national accreditation team and standardize the curriculum among its members.

The anti-ecumenical movement is not strong anymore nowadays. But mutual understanding and cooperation with other non-MCC churches together with their seminaries becomes important for the common witness in the society.

The seminaries nowadays are rethinking about spirituality that is transformative in and outside of the church. Their capacities in fulfilling the needs of the church are also being challenged. There seems to be some gaps between the churches and the seminaries in their understanding of spirituality. The churches expect from the seminaries some sort of spirituality that is applicable and oriented to the real needs of the grassroot churches. At the same time a spirituality that is empowering and promoting the active social involvement must also be emphasized.

Contextually relevant theological education seems to be imperative nowadays. Theological education must be aware of the socio-political context of the society, responding and actively engaging in the issues and challenges of the context, always keeping in touch with the changing context. Theology alienated from the society must be replaced with one which is rooted in and born out of context.

Born out of the ecumenical endeavour, the foundation of ATEM was, is and will always be the ecumenical spirit. The essence of ecumenism lies in showing mutual respect, valuing each other's distinctiveness and striving together for common witness in the world. The problems and challenges nowadays emerge in the global form that should and can only be solved by cooperative effort among different denominations, different religions, different ideological communities, different nations, etc. The recent Nargis cyclone devastation in Myanmar also reminds us that holistic approach to ecumenism, including the well-being of the earth and its living beings must be imperative and put into practice sooner. Widening the horizon of ecumenism from the micro to macro level is a necessary step to be taken in today's pluralistic and globalized world.

Last but the most challenging thing would be the role and contributions of seminaries in helping the council of churches to materialize the ecumenical spirit and action not just at the national level but also at the grassroots.