

## NCC Philippines and Ecumenism

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The National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) is an ecumenical fellowship of 10 mainline Protestant churches and 9 church-related organizations. It was founded in 1963 when seven churches came together to embody the more than six decades of aspirations for unity and common Christian witness. It traces its roots to forerunner organizations which have evolved throughout the years: the Evangelical Union (1910-1929), the National Christian Council (1929-1938), the Philippine Federation of Evangelical Churches (1938-1949), and the Philippine Federation of Christian Churches (1949-1963). Today, the NCCP has grown but still continues its ecumenical work towards the fulfilment of God's Shalom.

NCCP's vision for the Philippines approximates the biblical vision for a new heaven and a new earth: a just, egalitarian, self-reliant and sustainable society, where the marginalized are empowered. NCCP's vision for itself is to be a strong fellowship of members and partners committed to traveling the ecumenical journey together, discerning and responding to the challenges of Philippine society and the world, faithful to the mandates of Jesus Christ to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, healing to the sick and liberation to the oppressed.<sup>2</sup>

NCCP's mission as a fellowship is to work towards deeper understanding of ecumenism and mutual responsibility while growing together in membership. Its mission as a channel for united witness is to continue its witness to the Good News of salvation through its prophetic role on issues affecting the powerless and its active engagement with the people towards the renewal of society. Its mission as an institution is to endeavour to be self-reliant and interdependent in its human and material resources.

This three-pronged undertaking of mission is also NCCP's understanding of what ecumenism is. The NCCP defines ecumenism as the **whole task** of the **whole church** to share the **whole gospel** to the **whole world**. It is a task that is holistic because it involves all human and ecological concerns, not just "religious" matters. It involves the whole church, everyone: children, youth, women, men. It shares of the whole gospel, the good news of total salvation that does not dichotomize between "spiritual" and "material", it is salvation from everything sinful, liberation from all that oppresses. It is good news for the whole world: not only to Christians, not only to people, but to all the created order, the whole oikos. Ecumenism is all about siding with the oppressed and accompanying them in their struggle for just peace and liberation. It is about advocating for them and being in solidarity with them. It is about exercising our preferential option for the poor.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:18.

## **The Context of NCCP's Ministry**

The Philippines is a third world country rich in diverse natural resources. Majority of the people are poor while only a few enjoy the bounty of the land. Those who are in key positions of power do not have the concerns and grievances of the basic masses at heart. Instead, they kow-tow to the whims and caprices of the gods of globalization, of trans-nationals and monopolies of power in government, religious institutions, and socio-economic circles.

We suffer from a national financial crisis, but the government is in a total state of denial of this situation. It even boasts of economic gains, statistical figures that are not felt nor shared by the majority of the suffering poor. What the basic masses feel is a staggering lack of basic social services for health, housing, and education.

Children die of preventable diseases like the common cold and diarrhea. Children do not reach their maximum intellectual potential due to malnutrition. Infant mortality rate is quite high. In a country of 92 million, around 16 million Filipinos cannot read nor write. There are millions of child laborers. Majority of our youth are still not able to afford decent education. Tuition fees remain exorbitant and continue to be hiked. Women still endure unnecessary suffering just because they are women. There is sexual discrimination and gender bias in all spheres of society. Even the church is not always a safe place for women. Women still suffer gender-based violence which includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. Thousands of women leave the country everyday to find green pastures elsewhere. Mothers cannot care for their own children because they are far away caring for other women's children. Women break their backs toiling in fields they do not own, producing food that does not land on their tables. Hundreds of thousands of families still live in abodes that can hardly be called houses. The Philippines numbers 83<sup>rd</sup> among all the countries surveyed by the United Nations in the "quality of life" category, which includes GDP, life expectancy, adult literacy, growth in school enrolment, and environmental protection.

Poverty, hunger, violent demolitions, and lack of social services and basic utilities continue to plague the urban poor, and things are not going to get better any time soon. Minimum wage is less than half the cost of living wage. Around 70 million (80% of population) struggle to survive on P96 (around \$2) or less a day. In 2008, there were already 10.7 million jobless and underemployed. Also last year, the Philippines ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the world when it comes to citizens who have had "little or no food at all." Around 46 million Filipinos go hungry everyday. Hundreds of thousands of Filipino families do not have decent houses. In 2006, the Philippines was adjudged by the Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction (COHRE) as one of three recipients of the Housing Rights Violator Award for its "systematic violation of housing rights and continued failure to abide by their international legal obligations." The same failure goes for other basic social services: the national budget for education this year is P25 per day per student; for health P0.83 per day per Filipino.

The basic human rights of a vast majority of Filipino children are still not upheld: around 83% of children live in poverty, 4.1 million of their parents and elders do not have work, 9.3 million families are hungry, 60% of families do not have good housing, 40% of them cannot send their children to school, 35% of them do not have access to safe drinking water, and

20% of these families have child laborers, engaged mostly in hazardous work. These conditions are not going to see surcease in the near future as the socio-economic and political climate indicates.

The church must work for a just, egalitarian, self-reliant and sustainable society that manifests God's shalom and accompany the basic sectors as they seek a life that is worthy of them that are image-bearers of God, including the special sectors of women, Muslim and indigenous peoples.

More than half of the most affected and struggling masses in the country are women. Unless these women are empowered to critically analyze the roots of their oppression and work towards addressing the roots of injustice, marginalization and discrimination, transformation at home, in the workplace, in the church and communities will never be realized.

There are approximately 4.3 million of our Muslim sisters and brothers in the Philippines or around 5% of the population. Majority of the Muslim population is confined to the southern part of the country – southern and western Mindanao and southern Palawan, regions that are rich in natural, mineral and aquatic resources. Thus, vast tracts of ancestral lands have been placed under military reservations by the Philippine government, disallowing people to fully use their land for productive purposes. Moros have for ages clamored for self-determination, struggled against discriminative resettlement of lands, economic development discrimination, discrimination in governmental participation, among other things. The war that continues to rage in Mindanao has displaced more than 600,000 people.

Indigenous Filipinos number around 6.5 million. Despite a long history of colonization and neo-colonization in the present day, they have retained ways of life that reflect age-old environmental adaptations emphasizing sustainability, coexistence, community consensus, collective effort and communal ownership. The western concept of individual ownership especially of land was and still is shunned. The dominant money economy and oppressive practices against indigenous peoples have greatly affected them. The most glaring manifestation of this development aggression has been the constant expropriation, forced or otherwise, of ancestral lands by the government and foreign and local big businesses for commercial logging, plantations, dam projects and mining concessions. Displacement brought about by these intrusions has altered or even destroyed the traditional economic and social practices of many of the indigenous groups. Although indigenous peoples are willing to try new market-oriented modes of livelihood for their immediate benefit, they see that much of the changes are imposed from above without their consent and participation, and are eroding their traditional ways of life and destroying their resources. Indigenous resistance to such impositions is more often than not met with persecution and outright force.

The environment, along with marginalized children, women and men, has always been a casualty of the war of domination: that which we now call globalization. To advocate for the environment means to advocate for people at the base struggling for self-determination, equity, and the right to live. To say no to irresponsible mining by multi-national and

transnational companies is to say yes to a nation's patrimony, to communities' rights to life and livelihood, and to people's health and sanitation. To say no to illegal and indiscriminate logging is to say yes to indigenous people's rights to their ancestral domain and to children's futures.

Where there is large-scale mining, there are also militarization and human rights violations. The Philippine Mining Act of 1995 hastens the destruction of the environment and negates the patrimony of the Filipino people. Technologies utilized by trans-national companies cause massive deforestation which in turn cause landslides, flashfloods, loss of biodiversity, the lowering of the water table, among other things. The very rich mineral resources of the Philippines are enough for the country to be industrialized and facilitate the payment of foreign debt. But clauses in the mining act allow for profit from these resources to be expropriated and expatriated through a fully liberalized industry, while TNCs enjoy tax holidays and exemptions. The socio-economic costs on the people are therefore quite staggering. Their land is forcibly taken, livelihood destroyed, and the culture desecrated.

When people speak out against these injustices, their voices are silenced. Human rights violations are rampant. The church sector is not exempt from this repression as growing numbers of church and ecumenical leaders are felled by state terrorism. As a matter of fact, some member churches have been branded "enemies of the state," including the National Council of Churches in the Philippines itself.

### **NCCP's Response, NCCP's Ministry**

NCCP provides opportunities to its members for continuing discussions about its prophetic ministry in the light of the Christian faith and for genuine cooperation in the active engagement of the churches with the people's issues and aspirations. Concretely, NCCP engages in 3 broad but interdependent programs: Christian Unity and Ecumenical Relations, Ecumenical Education and Nurture, and Faith, Witness and Service.

### **Christian Unity and Ecumenical Relations**

NCCP through the Program Unit on Christian Unity and Ecumenical Relations (CUER) actively initiates and participates in establishing relations with people of other faiths by working together on common issues. It also takes the perspective of the indigenous peoples and brings their issues and concerns to the Church, and manifests solidarity with them by supporting their initiatives. The CUER also establishes links with various government and non-government agencies to cooperatively work towards shared goals.

### **Ecumenical Education and Nurture**

NCCP through the Program Unit on Ecumenical Education and Nurture aims to develop a community of church people who are ecumenically aware, skilled, committed and actively involved in educating the church constituency in holistic ministry. It seeks to enhance the capacity of current and potential church leaders to respond effectively to contemporary ecumenical challenges, promote just and equitable representation of women, youth and lay

at all levels of church decision-making and to ensure that their gifts and resources are enhanced and fully utilized at all levels of ecumenical engagement. The EEN seeks to provide biblically and ecumenically grounded education that is life-affirming, inclusive, respectful of diverse gifts and traditions, and empowering to counter the negative impact of globalization.

### **Faith, Witness, Service**

NCCP through the Program Unit on Faith, Witness and Service (FWS) initiates development education activities for awareness building and skills training towards strengthening constituencies and networks among the clergy, the laity and the wider public. It engages in advocacy work on current and emerging issues that affect human rights and dignity, justice, peace and environment. The FWS coordinates ecumenical direct services to victims of natural and/or human-made calamities and human rights violations through relief and rehabilitation assistance or solidarity support.

At the end of the day, the NCCP is the cradle of a Christian apostolate that breaks dividing walls and creates spaces where sisters and brothers can dialogue and find common cause, prodded by the liberating spirit of the gospel. Please pray for the National Council of Churches in the Philippines and all of us as we all journey together towards God's reign of peace with justice and abundant life for all.