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Uniting People of Asia through a Christian Movement

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Introduction

Although the resolution of the 12th General Assembly to move the central office of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) to Chiang Mai, Thailand is mostly for practical reasons of finance, hardware and security, it is nevertheless an example of active participation of member churches in Thailand in the process of migration. The predictable enhancement of future working relationships of CCA ministries with member churches in Thailand is a significant difference between this move and the previous ones. This is an epoch making occasion and a chance for CCA to reflect on and redirect its nature and function within the ecumenical movement in Asia.

CCA is a regional organization. It exists as an organ and a forum of continuing cooperation among churches and national Christian bodies in Asia within the framework of the wider ecumenical movement. Historically, the formation of CCA is a development of the East Asia Christian Conference founded in Parapat, Indonesia in 1957. The original purpose of bringing life together for the churches in Asia was the desire for ecumenical mission rooted in Asian contexts. A statement from the Bangkok consultation in 1949 reveals this desire and vision as planted in the minds of Asian church leaders at that time:

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We feel strongly that we must find ways and means to enable our churches to discharge their responsibility and to fulfill this truly ecumenical desire. The future of evangelism in Asia must surely be a cooperative evangelism in which all share with each other for the common good, and in which we manifest increasingly our ecumenical unity. What we have is not in the nature of a new mission board or society, for we believe that the responsibility for policy decisions and of use of funds should be transferred to the Asian churches directly. We think rather of an Asian body that will coordinate the work of the churches and missions in East Asia, stimulate their cooperation, encourage interchange between them, and serve as an instrument for helping them to think through the basic issues of evangelistic policy and for the working out of a common strategy.²

As early as the second year after the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, Asian church leaders were strongly concerned about the issue of Asian identity and solidarity. The statement clearly spells out the desires of Asian churches to be independent from the mission boards or societies and to exercise autonomous power for policy making, financial and evangelistic issues. The main arguments for having a regional body were 'cooperative evangelism in which all share with each other for the common good, and manifest ecumenical unity,' and to 'coordinate the work of the churches and missions in East Asia, stimulate their cooperation, encourage interchange, and serve as an instrument for working out evangelistic policy and a common strategy.' In other words, CCA was coming into being with dialectic concerns of universality (going beyond ecumenically) and contextuality (the sense of belonging to Asia).

For almost half a century this organization has endured the struggles of the churches in Asia, but these founding visions are still valid and remain unfulfilled even today. This does not exclude many other important issues that have been added to its mission.

Historical Evolution of the Ecumenical Movement

Chiang Mai, Thailand, in September 2005.

² "The Common Evangelistic Task of the Churches in East Asia", Papers and Minutes of the East Asia Christian Conference, Parapat, Indonesia, p. 5, cited from Ninan Koshy, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia* vol. 1, (Hong Kong: CCA, 2004), p. 126.

One very basic and important part of the nature of the traditional ecumenical movement is to unite Christians and churches by solving the divisive issues through dialogue and cooperation in evangelism and mission. Taking the Catholic expression on the demands of the ecumenical movement from its 'Decree on Ecumenism' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*):

The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided. Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.³

Theologically speaking, the ecumenical movement is an effort to manage and build the household of God, though with different meanings and perceptions in each different stage of ecumenical history. Visser't Hooft wrote:

In the course of history we can distinguish seven meanings of the word "ecumenical".

- (a) pertaining to or representing the whole (inhabited) earth;
- (b) pertaining to or representing the whole of the (Roman) empire;
- (c) pertaining to or representing the whole of the Church;
- (d) that which has universal ecclesiastical validity;
- (e) pertaining to the world missionary outreach of the Church;
- (f) pertaining to the relations between and unity of two or more Churches (or of Christians of various confessions);
- (g) that quality or attitude which expresses the consciousness of and desire for Christian unity.⁴

³ Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), *Documents of II Vatican Council, the Holy See Achieve*.

⁴ Willem Adolf Visser't Hooft, "The Word 'Ecumenical' – Its History and Use", in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. I, Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (eds.), Geneva: World Council of Churches, pp. 735-738, cited from Ninan Koshy, p. 26.

This is a very wide definition. It extends from the relation between individual Christians through unity of denominational churches to integration of political empire and even to the integrity of the whole inhabited earth. All these have common concerns of finding ways to eliminate or overcome divisive elements that prevent the goal of bringing people together.

The formation of the WCC in 1948 can be regarded as the initiation and milestone of contemporary Protestant ecumenical movement. According to its self-understanding of the nature of the organization:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ. It seeks to advance towards this unity, as Jesus prayed for his followers, "so that the world may believe" (John 17:21).⁵

What the WCC pursues is a visible unity of churches and Christian fellowship. With the inspiration of the WCC many regional councils were established. The Christian Conference of Asia, as one of these regional councils, shares the same vision and goal of Christian unity. But concepts of unity vary in different contexts and historical periods as the challenges and concerns of churches continue to shift. I have argued in an earlier paper, "Unity in Diversity", that "when the church faced threats from the outside world, pursuing unity meant solidarity to resist oppression. Jesus, his disciples and Christians in the 1st century lived under pressure from established religious groups and political forces; unity in such circumstances means life sharing and commitment."⁶ This model of life sharing unity becomes the primordial pattern for churches and Christians fighting for their identities in many kinds of oppressive circumstances. This model has an inclusive intention of bringing together churches and Christians all over the world. Yet when the church confronts internal conflicts, its claim of

⁵ WCC website, <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/index-e.html> (2005/9/17).

⁶ Huang Po Ho, "Unity in Diversity – Calvin in our Era: A Challenge of Ecumenism to the Reformed Tradition in the Era of Globalization", in *Theology and Church*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Tainan: Tainan Theological College and Seminary, 2005), 286.

unity becomes authoritative and exclusive. The Council of Nicea faced the controversy between Arius and Athanasius and promulgated the Nicene creed that added additional “marks of the universal church” in order to distinguish the true from the false. The concept of unity in this context is an implicit, exclusive self-justification.⁷ Contemporary churches proceed from a historically divided church, particularly those divisions rooted in the Reformation of the 16th century. This has focused the ecumenical movement onto the organizational or missiological cooperation of different denominations.⁸ After the Second World War, Christians from the Third World gradually rose to become the majority in the Protestant population. Their particular experiences of economic and socio-political marginalization shifted the concept of unity pursued by the ecumenical movement from denominational concerns to issues related to justice and inter-religious affairs.

Asian Challenges to Ecumenical Movement

The ecumenical movement is contextually rooted. Any appraisal of the ecumenical movement must clarify both its target and the divisive elements that hinder harmony. When the WCC was established in 1948, it was a missionary movement based upon the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference. But it soon turned into an institutional church uniting movement (though with emphasis on being a fellowship instead of a church organism). By pursuit of increasing the number of member churches, the WCC related ecumenical movement successfully brings together numerous denominations and creates fraternal fellowship to the world churches. But it has inevitably compromised the gospel spirit of unity and turned the movement into a forum for church politics. The frustrations of marginalized churches from third world countries, the quarrels raised between the Orthodox Church and the WCC, and the decline of the movement after the shrinking of financial support from western European churches, have disclosed the limitation of this “fellowship style” of ecumenical movement. Driven by these challenges, Samuel Kobia wrote:

However, not all convergences of Christians across denominational boundaries are to be called ecumenical. We must ask ourselves about the purposes for which groups are

⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁸ *Ibid.*

coming together. Is unity being sought for the sake of people's own strength and stability, or in the hope of becoming the agent and foretaste of God's *oikoumene* by striving and taking risks to become the voice of the voiceless and the silenced?⁹

Unfortunately, due to recent preoccupations with internal institutional challenges, we seem to have lost some of the spirit that has led us to take risks in the past. Our organizational structures have seemed instead to be embroiled in the task of taking care of internal, institutional and programmatic survival between assemblies. Self-preservation has become our preoccupation, and through an inwardly directed obsession with our own structures we have lost the space for active encounter and creative engagement with the issues and challenges facing our world of today.¹⁰

If this institutional fellowship of denominational churches was (and may still be) important for the western world, it was because the division into denominations happened in Christian history, particularly with the Reformation event of the 16th century which tore apart European society and left opposition and hatred among their people. Solving the division of the church is significant to the unity of people and their societies. But the situation is different in Asia. The different denominations introduced from western countries split communities and, in some cases, ethnic groups. The divisive elements are not so much due to the doctrinal arguments of different denominations but to missionary-imposed denominational identities. Even worse, the minority status of the Christian community in most Asian countries has exposed these divisions as mere Christian internal fuss. Since denominational division in Asia was introduced from outside through missionary activities (not from the inner disputes of faith understanding among Christians and people in society), the way to deal with denominational partition must be different.

The concept 'ecumenical', which comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited earth (*oikoumene*) of God, must be freed from its confinement to concerns around the church's segmentation to issues of people's division. Samuel Kobia has shown appreciation for this distinct aspect of the Asian ecumenical movement:

⁹ Samuel Kobia, "Listening to the Voice of God: New Trends in the Ecumenical Movement", in *CTC Bulletin*, vol. xxi, no. 2 (Hong Kong: CCA 2005), 4.

The Asian ecumenical movement has time and again upheld the conviction that the purpose of the ecumenical movement is not to serve its own interests and those of the institutional structures of the churches, but to serve the causes of justice and peace in the world. The Asian ecumenical movement teaches that it is not only important for the Christian faith to be inculturated on Asian soil but also actively to engage the realities of its context with a view to transform the world through a critical, creative interaction.¹¹

So the Asian ecumenical movement must shift its paradigm from traditional western concepts of ecumenism and take Asian people's experiences of suffering and oppression into account, not just Christian experiences or church's partition.

Pluralistic Yet Divisive Asian World

While it is always a challenge to discern the reality of Asia, there are common threats among the complexities facing the people of this continent. Asia is a rich and plural world with profound traditional heritages of cultures, religions, ethnicities, and natural resources. Unfortunately these riches do not enhance the well being of Asian inhabitants. Asia and its peoples contend with the following types of negative pressure.

First is colonization and neo-colonization. Though many countries in Asia possess long histories and remarkable civilizations, most have experienced foreign colonization. The Asian world, already divided by geographical features and local languages, has been more deeply compartmentalized by colonial boundaries of foreign interests. When political colonization ended, economic dependence (neo-colonization) imposed by super-power countries on the newly independent countries continued the segmented situation of the continent. Colonization created division among people of Asia and by its exploitative nature created massive poor populations. Colonial experience left psychological scars of inferiority which distorted the humanity of people who lost self-confidence through looking up to the westerner and looking down upon fellow Asians. This sentiment needs both psychological

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ Samuel Kobia, *Ibid.*, 1.

and theological healing.

Second is the threat of globalization. A process of transnational integration of economic capitalism, globalization has made deep impacts on Asia since it began in the 1960's¹². Sustained by the ideology of neo-liberalism, globalization does not create wealth through market mechanisms of transparency and free competition, for it is not accountable for the failure to bring prosperity to all. The widening gap between the rich and poor in society has created an unsustainable ethical challenge.

It (globalization) refuses to be only related to economy and finance, generates 'also a normative claim with real implications for social justice. Implicit in this value system is the assurance that neo-liberalism will lift the living standards of millions of people embracing them in a win-win situation rather than a winner-take-all matrix'. But globalization as a global system in which the world's richest 225 persons have a total wealth equal to the income of 2.5 billion, that is nearly half of the world's population, per definition cannot be an ethically – morally and politically – sustainable system. It is impossible to defend the fact that three richest persons have assets that exceed the combined GDP of the 48 least developed countries.¹³

Moreover, under globalization, arms exports and increased military spending have assumed priority. These have left all countries vulnerable to breakdowns in democratic structures. In a world transformed into a global casino, life has become unpredictable.¹⁴ The new world disorder seems to be taking us into a fragmented and dualistic global system. Within each state, globalization forces are dividing localities, regions, and groups into separate communities linked to or de-linked from the global economic, political, social and communication networks. Globalization is privileging the modern and post-modern technocracies of each state while marginalizing the traditional tribal, rural, semi-urban, and

¹² This is in terms of most recent trends of transnational economic globalization process.

¹³ Wolfgang R. Schmidt, "Globalization – Universality – Utopia", in *Theology and Cultures*, vol. 1, no.1 (Tainan: Chang Jung Christian University and Tainan Theological College and Seminary, 2004), 10. Parts of the quotations were cited by original author from J. Mittelman, "Peace & Policy", vol. 6 (Tokyo 2001), 20, and UNDP, Human Development Report (New York, 1998), 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

semi-literate population.¹⁵

Third is terrorism and security problems. Majid Tehranian has convincingly argued that the “social dialectics that globalization is creating are the breeding ground for extremist politics of identity. Against the commodity fetishism of globalization, identity fetishism has become the ideological vehicle of the marginalized groups. Against the market fundamentalism of new-liberalism, religious and ethnic fundamentalism is a new battle cry. Pre-modern kinship and tribal loyalties are the cultural orientation of the peripheries ... the new weapon of shock terrorism is deadly and effective.”¹⁶

Terrorism is essentially the weapon of weak states and groups. While globalization is marginalizing significant sectors of the world’s population both within and among nations, the cold-war distinction of East-West has become irrelevant and North-South must be understood symbolically rather than literally. Every country also has its own symbolic North and South, typified by the elites and the marginalized social classes.¹⁷ Terrorism thus, is globalized and has become a global phenomenon in this era of globalization. No safe-guarded security can be guaranteed to any people, even to those considered under the protection of the strongest state, the United States. The people of Asia are the most affected by the impacts of terrorism or war on terror. As a result, insecurity, fear and anxiety characterize the lives of people across the continent.

Fourth is the new map of geo-politics. With the forceful process of globalization and the military re-deployment of the United States in the name of War on Terror, the world’s geo-political map has been radically redrawn. With the end of the cold war West-East rivals and North-South conflicts are no longer adequate to describe the new world order. One sole empire, the United States, and several imperialistic states exist on different continents. Satellite allies of the empire dominate the world, not without severe competition among themselves.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Majid Tehranian, *Peace & Policy*, vol. 6 (Toda-Institute, Tokyo 2001), 17, quoted from Wolfgang R. Schmidt, *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The new guidelines adopted by the US and Japan to further tighten their alliance in the North East Asia region, the tensions across Taiwan Strait caused by the rise of China in economic, political and military power, the nuclear disputes on the Korean Peninsula and between India and Pakistan are just a few. Add these to the turbulent situation that continues in Middle East. All these make Asia a militarily explosive and a most sensitive place in the world.

The fifth is a “catch-all” category of Violence, Disasters and Diseases. Besides the above macro-analysis of regional common geo-political threats, there exist hazards facing people daily, some particular to Asian people. As James Haire points out, “the culture of violence manifests itself in many different ways. There is negative impact of economic globalisation, which continues to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. There is also the structural violence of domineering or negligent governments in relation to their populations. Corruption and the abuse of power often manifest themselves in violence. In addition in Asia, there are often structural forms of traditional violence, mainly based in patriarchal societies. These result in gender discrimination, forced labour migration, discrimination against young people and those with disabilities, and discrimination based on race, caste, and class. Surrounding our very life is the violence against the environment”.¹⁸

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, cyclones and tsunami continue to claim lives, destroy property and damage societies in many counties of Asia. The problem does not only affect the people who are unprepared to face natural disasters, but also the victims from some relief works which are either performed without knowledge of the context or done with selfish intent.

Diseases caused by sanitary problems and the intensive interactions of people, encouraged by globalization have increased and become widespread. Mutation and variation of diseases such as SARS, HIV and Bird Flu challenge Asian societies not only with physical suffering but also distort traditional cultural values of living together.

The pluralistic reality that Asian people experience is a blessing of richness and a challenge

¹⁸ James Haire, “Building Communities of Peace”, in *CTC Bulletin*, vol. xxi, no. 2 (August 2005), 9.

of division. Too many elements and forces work to divide the Asian world and its people. If a Christian ecumenical movement is to build the household of God (*oikoumene*) in this world, the ecumenical movement in the Asian context must turn its primary purpose and target from uniting churches to uniting people.

Uniting People in Asia through a Christian Movement

Since the divisive forces on people and societies in Asia are primarily socio-political, economic, cultural and military issues of justice, dignity and security, the model of the Asian ecumenical movement can not follow the pattern and motif of the ecumenical movement initiated by Western churches which is to focus attention only on uniting churches, Christians, or denominations. It will have to shift its paradigm from a movement for the unity of churches and Christians to a movement for the unity of people, thereby taking people as the subject of the movement.

The ecumenical movement in Christian history has shifted its focus continually according to the changes of and challenges from its circumstances. Taking the contemporary ecumenical movement as an example, the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910 marked the climax of earlier gatherings through which Protestants had been drawing together to bring the gospel to the world.¹⁹ Originated from the idea of the 1900 conference in New York, the conference was, overwhelmingly Anglo-American. Representatives from Europe were a small minority, and overall there were very few younger church leaders.²⁰ The conference did not immediately do as much to spread the ecumenical spirit among the churches on the continent as it did in the British Isles and the US and among British and American missionaries²¹. It was by nature mainly a missionary movement drawing participation from a particular part of the world. The establishment of the WCC marks the shift of the contemporary ecumenical movement to an institutional church fellowship. As the 1948

¹⁹ Ans J. Vander Bent, "Ecumenical Conferences", in *Dictionary of The Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossdy etc. (Geneva: WCC publications, 1991), 325.

²⁰ *Ibid.* The Edinburgh Conference was attended by 1200 delegates, and the non-whites in this crowd were only 17. Europe was also under-represented. The countrywise division is as follows: Belgium, 1; Denmark, 7; Finland, 5; France, 9; Germany, 99; Holland, 13; Norway, 12; Sweden, 15; Switzerland, 3; special delegates from Europe, 6. They together form less than 10 percent of the total delegates.

²¹ *Ibid.*

inaugural assembly declared: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour."²² Constitutionally, the WCC assembly, held approximately every seven years, is the 'supreme legislative body' of the council. Delegates are appointed by member churches, with the number to which each church is entitled determined by size.²³ Though in 1948 the member churches understood that the WCC was not a church above them, certainly not the church universal or incipient "world church"²⁴, nevertheless, this institutionalized ecumenical movement of the formation of the WCC, inevitably turned its mission emphasis more, though not exclusively, toward institutional concerns. In fact, the WCC in its history has evolved a different emphasis of its mission following each constituent change of its membership. This is particularly true of the increasing participation of third world churches. As a matter of course, we Asian Christians must work out our own ecumenical movement in response to our peoples and our societies at this particular time.

Allow me to make myself clear. The ecumenical movement I am advocating here is still a Christian ecumenical movement in nature. What challenges us in Asia is not the question of the need for Christian presence, but the way and quality of this presence made known to and experienced by the wider community of Asian peoples. Thus, the Asian ecumenical movement has to re-direct its focus and make Christian contributions to the Asian world, not the Asian churches or Christians alone.

Distinctive Mission of Ecumenical Movement in Asia

The formation of the EACC / CCA in 1957 was a landmark of the Asian ecumenical movement. The purposes of its organization have focused on Christians and churches, as the original proposals to establish an East Asia Regional Committee in 1945 stated:

- (1) to promote and give expression to the spirit of Christian unity among the churches of East Asia;
- (2) to promote fellowship and mutual helpfulness among Christians in East Asia

²² Tom Stransky, "World Council of Churches", in *Dictionary of Ecumenical Movement*, 1084.

²³ Ans J. Vender Bent, "WCC Assemblies", in *Dictionary of Ecumenical Movement*, 1090.

through conferences, exchange of delegations and such other measures as may be agreed upon;

- (3) to promote a sense of the responsibility of the churches in East Asia for Christian witness and for the building up of churches in this area;
- (4) to deepen the unity of the churches in East Asia with the world church;
- (5) to bring to the life of the world church the distinctive contribution of the churches in East Asia.²⁵

These initial concerns for the formation of a regional ecumenical body were legitimate then, considering the weakness of being a minority as churches and Christians in Asia and of their divisions inherited from the work of missionary societies of different denominations from outside the region. Though the CCA remains structurally bound by its members' constituencies, with the strengthening of Asian identities contextual theological reflections have been encouraged and have blossomed. Its ministries have moved "from a preoccupation with the Christian prospect to an affirmation of Christian presence and common struggle, a change that tells its own ecumenical story."²⁶ If we take into consideration the themes of the assemblies of EACC/CCA across its history, we can find the distinct character of this Asian movement for ecumenism:

Third (1964) and fourth (1968) assemblies held in Bangkok, the third one addressed the theme "*the Christian Community within the Human Community*", affirming Christian identity but not over against the identities of other religious communities, and thus recognizing the need to be involved in the common search for truly human communities. The fourth (1968) had a biblical theme: "*In Him All Things Hold Together*". The fifth assembly (1973) met in Singapore, its theme was "*Christian Action in Asian Struggle*", it affirmed the need to be involved in the common struggle against poverty and injustice. The sixth assembly (1977) met in Penang and its theme was "*Jesus Christ in Asian Suffering and Hope*". The seventh assembly (Bangkok, 1981) was "*Living in Christ with People*". The eighth (Seoul, 1985) met around the theme: "*Jesus Christ Sets Free to*

²⁴ Tom Stransky, *Ibid.*, 1084-85.

²⁵ Tosh Arai and T. K. Thomas, "Christian Conference of Asia", in *Dictionary of Ecumenical Movement*, 151.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

Serve". The ninth assembly (Manila, 1990) was "*Christ Our Peace: Building a Just Society*".²⁷ The tenth assembly met in Colombo (1995) with the theme "*Hope in God in a Changing Asia*". The 11th assembly met in Tomohon (2000) with theme of "*Time for Fullness of Life for All*". The 12th assembly met in Chiang Mai (2005) with the theme of "*Building Communities of Peace for All*".²⁸

Viewing the themes that guided the CCA mission for about half a century we can conclude that though it originated from the worldwide ecumenical movement of ecclesial concern, and constituted as a church constituent structure, the CCA has from its beginning envisioned its mission and concern as far beyond the church itself.

Reconstructing Asian Ecumenical Movement

However, with the impact of the forceful process of economic globalization that presents a false ecumenism and the shrinkage of funding support from Western churches and funding agencies, worldwide ecumenical movements are mostly facing financial difficulties and are in decline. Almost without exception, all regional and issues-concerned ecumenical organizations face the same situation. This phenomenon discloses some failings of the traditional ecumenical movements:

(1) Lack of accountability within the movement itself and also in participatory bodies, i.e. member churches. The worldwide ecumenical movement that has moved from a missionary movement to a church institutional movement has depended upon too much material resources, and therefore has been dominated by the wishes of Western churches. Third World churches and Christians are the clear majority in today's Christian world. Their delegations in world ecumenical activities form the majority as well. But the headquarters are still located in Rome and Geneva, which are more accessible to Europeans but not to people from other parts of the world. This shows that the structures and rationales behind the operations of ecumenical organizations continually follow the original ideas and theologies shaped by Western churches.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ninan Koshy, 281, 290.

(2) Lack of capacity: the problem of accountability inevitably leads to the lack of capacity. Because the movement is not accountable to the majority of its member churches and Christian populations, when support from Western countries shrunk the movements were not able to gain enough support from their majority member churches and fellow Christians, so the movements began to fail. The lament of Samuel Kobia, the general secretary of WCC, reflects this: "We have, over the years, been able to build ecumenical institutions at various levels, these certainly have made their contributions to nurturing and building the movement. However, we have reached a point in time when the institutional churches are not able to support and sustain these structural expressions of ecumenism. These organizations are coming under intense pressure to stay alive and relevant, as they experience dwindling resources and reduced staff capacities. There also seems to be a set pattern of work on certain issues that every organization embraces. This replication of patterns is not only unsustainable but also a duplication of effort, serving institutional interests rather than the cause."²⁹ He indicates further that consultations held by WCC "have pointed out the need to address the content of ecumenism."³⁰

(3) Lack of transparency. Honestly speaking, even after more than 50 years of endeavors by the WCC and its many associated movements, the spirit of ecumenism has not been planted yet at the local congregation level in most countries of Asia and other parts of the world. The movements continue to be in the hands of church leaders and have not been made known to the Christian en-masse and even less so to the people in our societies.

In view of all this, I propose that CCA, as a distinguished regional ecumenical body in Asia, take the opportunities created by the transition of its leadership and the relocation of its headquarters, to initiate an effort to reconstruct a unique Asian Ecumenical Movement. It should be a Christian movement striving for the unity of all peoples in Asia. In order to achieve this goal of making the ecumenical movement in Asia a Christian movement for the unity of peoples, I suggest the following to the CCA:

²⁹ Samuel Kobia, *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

- (a) Shift the model of operation from 'centralization' to a model 'from below' by establishing networks with local congregations and local ecumenical bodies, even people's action groups in different countries. At the same time make use of local resources by cooperating with these local organizations. In doing this, the CCA has to work out ways to go beyond its current constituent structure.
- (b) Continue efforts to work for de-colonization of churches and Christians in Asia by strengthening contextual theological formation and theological education in the contexts of Asia. At the same time find ways to help people remove their psychological sense of Asian inferiority and construct healthy identities in respect to their own countries and cultures. In so doing, our people will be able to shoulder the responsibilities of our own Asian Ecumenical Movement.
- (c) Strengthen our distinguished tradition in "expressions of discovering and celebrating Christian unity in action around issues directly affecting people's lives,"³¹ making all efforts to accomplish the thematic demands of the 12th general assembly of "building communities of peace for all", particularly (with priority) to peoples in Asia.
- (d) Firmly refute the traditional concept of evangelism, which in the name of spreading the gospel has divided people by denominations and caused violence to society through its dualistic thought and approaches to the world and communities.

Conclusion

The 21st century is said to be an Asian century. However, after a slight taste of the first few years of this century, we are driven to wake up and confront the challenges and threats of globalization to our people in this Asian pluralistic world. "These effects of globalization are what make Asia a continent not so much of diversity but of sharp contrasts where small enclaves of prosperity lie in the midst of widespread poverty and underdevelopment. These sharp contrasts between high growth enclaves and backward countries and, within countries, between those few classes and socio-economic groups that have benefited in some limited

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

way from globalization, and the vast majority that suffer from the adverse effects, are what Asia has inherited from decades of history under globalization.”³² Poverty accompanied with violence and regional imperialistic hegemonies either compete against or join hands with the sole empire of the world to victimize and divide people into all sorts of categories.

An ecumenical movement in Asia, if faithful to its nature of seeking to preserve God’s *oikoumene*, must be a movement which is capable of responding to the peoples’ experiences of suffering and agony. It must be a Christian movement for people which will strive for people’s security instead of the church’s or even the nation’s security. It must seek peace for people instead of peace for the powerful and the rich. I pray that God will help you as members of the General Committee of CCA to work for the peace and blessing of the peoples of Asia through this outstanding ecumenical organization, the CCA.

³² Antonio Tujan, Jr., “A Challenge to Build a Community of Peace for All in Asia”, in *CTC Bulletin*, vol. xxi, no. 2 (August 2005), 28.