

**Living Together
in The Household of God**
Bible Studies



14th GENERAL ASSEMBLY
CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA
Jakarta - Indonesia, 20 - 27 May 2015



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Contents

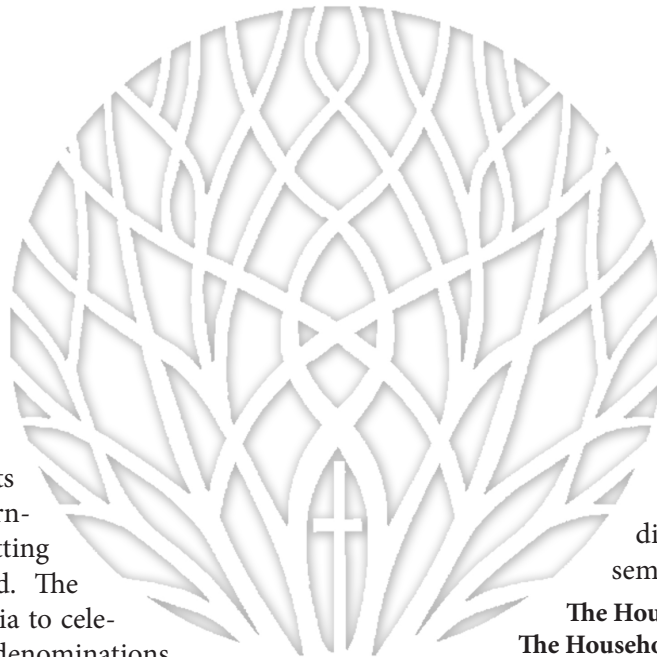
Foreward	4		
<i>Rev. Dr. Henriette Hutabarat Lebang</i>			
Focus I: The Household of God: Witnessing Together as Asian Churches			
Witnessing Together as Asian Churches	9		
<i>Metropolitan Dr. Kuriakose Mar Theophilose</i>			
How Shall We Stand Before the Living God?	17		
<i>Rev. Dr. Gloria Mapangdol</i>			
We all belong to Christ	23		
<i>Rev. Dr. Kim Ho-Gyung</i>			
One in Christ	27		
<i>Fr. William Bill LaRousse</i>			
Focus II: The Household of God: Moving Beyond the Boundaries of Church			
Many Mansions	35		
A Study of John 14:2			
<i>Rev. Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling</i>			
Moving Beyond Boundaries of the Church	41		
<i>Rev. Dr. Jeaneth Harris Faller</i>			
II.3 Arise and Shine!	47		
<i>Rev. Dr. Binsar Pakpahan</i>			
		Focus III: The Household of God: Managing with Responsibility	
		Citizen of the Household of God	57
		<i>Bishop Philip Huggins</i>	
		To Preach	65
		<i>Rev. Supina Nakaisulan</i>	
		Peace of God and God of Peace	71
		<i>Rev. Dr. Jerome Sahabandhu</i>	
		Placing Children at the Centre of Mission	77
		<i>Ms. Sanjana Das</i>	
		Focus IV: The Household of God: Sustaining God's Creation	
		Sustaining God's Creation	87
		<i>Dr. Haskarlianus Pasang</i>	

Foreword

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God.” (Psalm 42:1-2)

Bible Study is one of the important components of the 14th CCA General Assembly 2015. Every morning the activities will start with worshipping and sitting together in fellowship, focusing on the Word of God. The Assembly will be an opportunity for churches in Asia to celebrate Christian fellowship and unity in a diversity of denominations and church traditions; to reflect biblically and theologically on the Asian situation; and to contemplate on what is the true meaning of “being church” in the midst of challenges and opportunities emerging from the rapid changes in Asian pluralistic society today. Bible study in a community invites us to come in the presence of the living God, to listen to what God wants us to do in our daily life for the fullness of life for all. It is envisaged that the biblical reflection in the context of Asian realities will permeate the deliberations throughout the Assembly. It is also our sincere hope that such reflections will take place in the life of local congregations and Christian communities beyond the Assembly hall.

It is a joy to share with you this Bible Study book, which is a compilation of Bible Studies related to the theme of the 14th CCA



General Assembly, “Living Together in the Household of God.” It contains Bible Studies and theological reflections prepared by theologians and church leaders, writing from the perspective of contemporary situations in different contexts, covering a wide range of Asian experiences. It is organized in 4 (four) different but interrelated perspectives or foci of the Assembly theme, will be discussed each day, namely:

The Household of God: Witnessing Together as Asian Churches
The Household of God: Moving Beyond the Boundaries of Church
The Household of God: Managing with Responsibility
The Household of God: Sustaining God’s Creation

At the Assembly, Bible Study will be in groups with a facilitator. In case there are more Bible Studies under a particular sub-theme, Bible Study facilitators may select a Bible study of their choice.

For use in the local congregations, we will appreciate the efforts of local church leaders to adapt the Bible Study to their context to ensure better understanding, genuine conversations and relevant reflections.

Let me use this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to my esteemed friends who have contributed to this collection of Bible Studies. I record my sincere gratitude to Dr. Hope Antone who

tirelessly gave her time for editing, and to Mr. MJA Nashir for his assistance in designing the lay out.

May the Spirit of God guide us in our spiritual journey, lead us to understand the will of God and renew our commitment to be co-workers of God in making the world a safe abiding place or the 'house' where all God's creation lives together in peace and harmony.

With prayer,



Henriette Hutabarat Lebang
General Secretary



Witnessing Together as Asian Churches

Dr. Kuriakose Theophilose¹

Scripture

“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.” (John 17:20-23)

The Text in its Original Context

John 17 is generally known as the “high priestly prayer” (the title was first used by a Lutheran theologian David Chytraeus). It is not an everyday prayer, but a part of the farewell discourse of Jesus. In Judaism (in the OT, Apocalyptic Literature, and Hermetic Literature), it was common for those who were making a farewell speech to

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conclude with a prayer that God would bless the children or people they were leaving behind (Gen.49, Deut 33, 1 Kings 2:1-12, 2 Bar 48, Poimandres 1:30-32).

The original setting (*sitz im leben*) of the prayer, preferably accepted by the scholars, is the last supper and the materials of the farewell discourse will themselves have been frequently employed in celebration of the last supper.² Much discussion has taken place regarding the structure of the prayer. One structural analysis that is widely accepted (Schnackenburg) classifies the periscope into four:

- 17:1-5 Jesus' prayer for the glory of the Son that he may give life to those given to him
- 17:6-19 prayer for the disciples
- 17:20-23 prayer that all believers may be one or the prayer for the unity of the whole church
- 17: 24-26 prayer that believers may be perfected in the glory of Jesus.³

Analysis of the Text

This section is an expansion of verse 11 (“And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one”), for the unity of the disciples. The foundation and goal of unity are well expressed in these verses. Verse 20 begins with a new horizon of unity. In the previous verses (1-19), Jesus' concern was the disciples only but in verse 20, Jesus includes the future believers, who will be the fruits of the labor of the disciples.

In verse 21, the base and the perfect model of unity is projected: “that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me”. The parallelism in verses 21 and 22, 23 are significant.

v.21 ... that they all may be one as you father in me and I in you so that they may be one in us	v.22, 23 ... that they may be one as we are one I in them and you in them so that they may be perfect in unity so that the world may know that you have sent me.....
so that the world may believe that you have sent me	

The essence and effect of unity are clearly expressed in these verses. “Being one” is the characteristic of the relationship between the Father and the Son. It must be the characteristic of the relationship in the community of the believers. The unity between the Father and the Son becomes the ideal model for the unity between disciples. It is a model and it is an extension from Father and Son to the disciples (in v. 23 it is clearly visualized: “I in them and thou in me). The inner coherence and mutual indwelling between the Father and the Son and the disciples make the unity of the disciples perfect and the perfection of this unity leads to mission (that the world may believe...know...). The distinctiveness of the unity between the Father and the Son is that it is mystical on the one hand and it is manifested in mutual love and personal relationship. In the same way, the unity among the followers should be mystical in its essence and expressive in its goal, which are the witness and mission.

It is interesting that the phrase, “that you have sent me,” is twice used in verses 21-23. The positive effect of Unity of the disciples is that it attests to the authenticity of Jesus' person, his sending from the Father and his gospel. And the terrible consequence of disunity will be the scandalizing of the sending of the Son by the Father, credibility of the incarnation of Jesus and his gospel and the very existence of the church itself. In other words, the disunity of the disciples affects the image of God, the Father, Jesus the Son of God, and the church. It also blocks humanity from its chance to enter into the church and the communion.

2 Beasley-Murray George R., John, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol.36, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1999, p.294.

3 Schnackenburg Rudolf, “Stukturanalyse von Joh 17” BZ 17, 1973, pp.67-78.

Implication of the Text in our Context

When Jesus prays that “all may be one,” he is not referring to the ecumenical problem. The evangelist does not seem to address individual believers or even a divided community. Jesus prays that when his community expands there will be no division or disunity among the members. His attribute “all” implies all the present and future followers.⁴ His intention is to show the mystery of the communion of the followers, the unity that shapes the Christian community on the model of the life of the Father and the Son. For John, unity is not to be minimized with good team work or mere harmony among the members of a community; it is more than that. It is the essential character of God. It is His way of being a communion. It is integrally and inseparably rooted in Love. Therefore it is a gift given to the Christian community in Christ, to be lived out and extended to others.

Uniqueness of the Unity which Jesus Speaks About

The unity which Jesus speaks about is not a goal but a reality. It is not something we have to strive for but to recognize and make a reality in our life. So we are left not with the responsibility to unite ourselves, but with the freedom to participate in the unity that already exists; the unity of the expression and reverberation of the unity between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The unity is not uniformity or unanimity. It is the Trinitarian perichorosis, the mutual indwelling preserving the distinctiveness of the divine persons. In this model the different socio-cultural elements, traditional backgrounds, plurality and differences of different churches become richness rather than a threat.

Missiological Implication of Unity

The internal unity of the church has to do with an external mission in the world. Jesus’ prayer for unity took place just before his departure. His words “I am no longer in the world” should be seen

4 Kanagaraj Jey.J. The Gospel of John. A Commentary. OM Books, AP, 2005, p.562.

as Jesus’ preparatory work. In other words Jesus wants to continue his mission through his followers, the church, in this world. The church becomes thus the presence of Christ in the world, the image of Christ in the world. His words, “whoever has seen me seen the Father” and “I in them and you in me,” indicate that whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father and whoever has seen the church has seen Jesus and thus seen the Father. So the church is the continuation of the incarnation in its mission. Only as we are united in Christ, expressed in mutual love for one another, can we show the world who Jesus is.

Biblically, the unity of the church is in obedience to Christ’s aspiration and prayer that all may be one. Theologically, it is recognizing that the life of the church is grounded in the vision of the life of the Trinity, a life of unity in diversity and sharing. Doxologically, it is in obedience to God and to the praise and glory of God, who wills that God’s people be one. Ecclesiologically, it is in recognition of the fact that harmful divisions between churches are wounds in the body of Christ. Missiologically, the disunity contradicts the will of Jesus and scandalizes the gospel and duplicates the efforts of witnessing Christ in the World.⁵

The present day reality can be portrayed as three dimensional: inner church or inter church, religious plural, and human existential. The multiplicity of denominations and fragmentation within church families, denominationalism, confessionalism and sometimes the attempts at proselytism, issues based on our theological conviction, missiological understanding, confessional identities, ecclesiastical structures, etc. compel us to ask ourselves how far we are able to fulfill the prayer of Jesus for unity and witness. How far can a divided church be authentic and fruitful in building peace and justice in society and how can we invite others to be part of the body of Christ?

Unity in Asian Context

Asia has a long history of Christianity and Christian presence.

5 Thomas F. Best, “From Seoul to Santiago: The Unity of the Church and JPIC”, Between the Flood and the Rainbow, interpreting the Conciliar Process of Mutual Commitment (Covenant) to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, WCC, Geneva, 1992, p.129.

Unlike many parts of the world, Christianity entered and got rooted in the multi-religious soil of Asia. Centuries of co-existence of Christianity with other religions are a reality in Asia. But factors like growing religious fundamentalism, human rights violations, increasing violence against the marginalized and weaker sections in society and women, poverty and injustice, challenge the churches in Asia and remind them of their calling for unity and witness. The church needs to be united –

- a) for her own survival
- b) for the ministry of reconciliation
- c) to give prophetic witness
- d) to stand for peace and justice
- e) to nurture indigenous mission
- f) to ensure the unity of humanity and
- g) to preserve the integrity of the whole creation.⁶

The prayer of Jesus narrated in the gospel according to St. John is the very essence of ecumenism and ecumenical endowers. On the one hand, it is an expression of Jesus' wish. On the other hand, it is a call for action. The initiatives of CCA have been to fulfill the wish of Jesus for unity and to act to materialize the call through its member churches in Asia so that "they" all may be one and majority of the non-Christian world in Asia may feel the presence of Jesus Christ through the church in Asia.

Prayer for Unity

*You, the one
from whom on different paths
All of us have come.
To whom on different paths
all of us are going.
Make strong in our hearts what unites us.
Build bridges across all that divides us;
United make us rejoice in our diversity.*

*At one in our witness to your peace,
A rainbow of your glory.
Amen.⁷*

Questions for Discussion

1. What kind of Unity is meant by Jesus in his prayer and what is Jesus' desire for the church community?
2. How can the unity be achieved and practiced in our local parish situations and national and global level?
3. Are we one in Christ for Others?
4. Is diversity a hindrance to unity?
5. Can a harmfully divided and broken church give authentic witness in a religious plural world and can it exist to build peace and justice in the world?

⁶ Mathews George Chunakkara, Called to be Prophetic in the Oikoumene, CLS, Thiruvalla, 2014, p.26-32.

⁷ Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB

How Shall We Stand Before the Living God?

Rev. Dr. Gloria Mapangdol¹

Scripture

1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. 2 Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3 Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 6 Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to our-

¹ Rev. Dr. Gloria Mapangdol, President and Professor of New Testament at St. Andrew Theological Seminary in the Philippines, is an ordained Minister of the Anglican Church.

selves. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."

*12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.
(Romans 14:1-12)*

We pride ourselves of being Christians and yet issues threatening unity, justice, and peace continue to confront us in our daily lives. What seems to be wrong with us and with the world around us?

The theme of this CCA General Assembly, "Living Together in the Household of God," is an indication that we have not fully resolved (and maybe never will) what we ought to be doing as people living in the household of God. Or perhaps we have focused so much on our own households that we have neglected "other" households or the wider household for that matter. The theme challenges us to look at the quality of our participation and the significance of the roles we play as members of the household of God. Have we maximized our potentials for the good of everyone in the household (animal and plant kingdoms and the environment included)? Or have we been using these to build our own households independent of and/or contrary to the endeavors of the household of the one true God?

Romans 14:1-12 challenges us with a question: How are we standing before the Living God? As a member of the household of God, how is our relationship with the head of the household and with others living in this household? I believe that Romans 14:1-12 is a general reminder for us Christians as we continue to live in the household of God. What lessons can we draw from this text?

The first is the importance of becoming a welcoming community/household and refraining from inviting others to quarrel with them over opinions. The second is Paul's reminder that differences, be it in terms of the food we eat, the practices or rituals we do, opinions, etc., must be resolved by the fact that Christ died for our sake without judging each of us. The third is Paul's advice against judging each other because in the end each of us is accountable to God who is the ultimate judge.

Religious pluralism is common in Asian countries. In the so-called Christian country like the Philippines, Christianity in itself has also become very diverse. Sometimes it is not merely an issue of having many Christian denominations or sects. I believe there is still unity in diversity. However, this diversity can be abused. For instance, in some small villages, there are as many as five to ten Christian denominations or sects. Some of these mushrooming groups die a natural death, but new ones take their place and they compete with existing groups resulting to misunderstanding and disunity. If there are misunderstandings in one group, they are either resolved or left unresolved by one's transferring membership to another group. These pressures are taking a toll on the lives of the members of the household. How can we welcome each other and unite to do mission together without necessarily competing with each other? After all, we are preaching the same good news, that is, Jesus Christ.

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) has helped bridge the gaps and strengthen fellowships between the denominational churches. Even this, however, has its own challenges and limitations. First, not all denominations or sects are members of this organization. Second, the level of cooperation and understanding among leaders of the member churches is not necessarily reflected in the same manner in the grassroots level. In many instances, constituents of member churches are not aware of the fellowship and mutual understanding they share with other denominations. Third, members are not so much keen on learning about the doctrines or beliefs and practices of other denominations or sects. Perhaps this practice is educational and enlightening to many, but some may

equate this to a conversion tactic or perhaps a threat to the already established denomination. The challenge of maintaining one's status quo and not losing one's membership to the other church may be part of the people's anxieties. Despite such challenges, however, the NCCP continues to strengthen unity and mutual understanding among its member churches. This Christian unity is strengthened by the commitment to be vigilant to anything that threatens God's gift of life, therefore, denouncing injustice, corruption, environmental degradation, and others. Differences in doctrines, in practices, in opinions, and others still abound, but those are not the common grounds for coming together to participate in God's mission.

If despite our commonalities, Christians may still encounter misunderstandings, what are our expectations when we speak of our relationship with people of other faiths? We do not lose hope if we focus more on what unites instead of what divides. Even Paul, whose missionary strategies are respected to this day, knows that quarreling over opinions creates barriers: "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." We can also add that considering the other as a weaker party is a stumbling block. These serve as reminders in relating to others in the household and building bridges in whichever trajectory (in relation with other Christians or Muslims, etc.).

On the one hand, in relating with fellow Christians, we have a model in Jesus Christ who never discriminated in his acts of kindness and justice. In his commentary on Romans 14, Robert Karris says, "Any problem with regard to indifferent things, such as eating or not eating certain foods, should be solved in faith, with love, in the interests of edification because Christ did not please himself and because Christians must accept one another as Christ has accepted them."² We may never agree on what the right practice is, but as Christians, we cannot ignore Christ's example.

On the other hand, in relating with people of other faith/reli-

gion, we are also encouraged by our common hope for a household where peace and justice reign and where reconciliation and forgiveness are practiced. This would require humility from each of us to respect the other, recognize the good in each other, and embrace each other with compassion and love (regardless of race, religion, social and economic status, etc.). I remember the words of Miroslav Volf when I was a student at Trinity Theological College (Singapore). He says that being a Christian in itself is reason enough to work for peace and reconciliation, not only in our own household, but also in the wider household of God. He also warns against categorizing the grace of God as this is an obvious obstacle to peace!³ A similar thought may be read in Romans 14:10 when Paul advised against passing judgments on anybody because on judgment day, each of us will be standing before the living God.

While I was preparing this reflection, Pope Francis was visiting the Philippines. This holy man of God repeatedly expressed his solidarity, especially with the poor people who were devastated by typhoon Haiyan (November 2013). He delivered a number of homilies and speeches, but what I appreciated most is his concern for social justice and human dignity amidst injustice and oppression. He challenged everyone to "reject every form of corruption which diverts resources from the poor, and to make concerted efforts to ensure the inclusion of every man and woman and child in the life of the community."⁴ Let us be encouraged to support each other and pray for each other anytime, anyplace and in whatever situation we are in. Indeed, selfishness, greed, and any kind of injustice and discrimination (race, status, religion, etc.) have no place in our quest to live fully. In the same manner, quarreling, destructive competition, and not respecting the uniqueness of the other are detrimental to unity in God's household. In Romans 14:7-8, Paul reminds the Christians in Rome of the reality that they do not live to themselves and they do not die to themselves. Accountability to God and to God's people is a necessary ingredient in our life within the household.

² Robert J. Karris, "Romans 14:1-15:13 and the Occasion of Romans," in *The Romans Debate* (Edited by Karl P. Donfried, Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 84.

³ Miroslav Volf, TTC Lecture, March 25, 2009.

⁴ GMA News: Pope Francis' speech at Malacañang, January 16, 2015.

Let us then continue to be in solidarity with each other as we discover better ways of respecting our differences and celebrating our commonalities in God's household. Paul encourages us to live our lives according to God's will, without judging or discriminating others. Let us be reminded that in the end, we shall all be standing before the living God, whose grace is unfathomable!

Suggested Questions:

1. What are some barriers to unity in your communities?
2. How do you (as an individual or as a church/group) help break the barriers?
3. Can you participate in building bridges or live with others in the household (with other Christians or people of other faith) without compromising your own faith/core beliefs?
 - If YES, How?
 - If NO, Why not?

We all belong to Christ

Rev. Dr. Kim Ho-Gyung¹

Scripture

“... whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.”
(1 Cor. 3:22-23)

The First Epistle to the Corinthians shows some problems which the community was facing. Several people from Chloe's family reported to Paul that community members kept arguing with each other. People claimed personally to follow Paul, Apollos, Peter, or Christ. Such claims divided the community into different sects. Paul admonished the community in 1 Corinthians 1-4 to live together in the Household of God. He asked,

“Has Christ been divided up? Was I nailed to a cross for you? Were you baptized in my name? I thank God that I didn't baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius.”
(1 Cor. 1:13-14)

¹ Rev. Dr. Kim Ho-Gyung is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Korea and currently teaching New Testament at the Seoul Jangsin University.

The sects probably developed around the issue of baptism. The members understood their affiliation and attributed authority to whoever baptized them. Based on their baptizer – i.e. Paul, Apollos or Peter – they claimed to be wiser and holier than others. Hence, the Corinthian community faced many conflicts.

Paul reminded them of the need to have right relationship in two respects: (a) between God and the person (1:18-2:16); and (b) between the person and people (3:1). The core of the relationship between God and a person is the cross of Jesus Christ. Believers in Jesus Christ should only follow the way of the cross. Thus, if the sects emerged from and caused conflicts between them, there must be a problem in their discipleship.

On the relationships between people, Paul explained the relationships between leaders, and between leaders and the members. He said, “Apollos and I are merely servants who helped you to have faith. It was the Lord who made it all happen. I planted the seeds, Apollos watered them, but God made them sprout and grow”(3:5-6). Paul changed the members’ concern for measuring the size of the visible authorities to understanding the authority’s role.

Paul and Apollos undertook different roles which did not represent a hierarchy of importance. What mattered was how well they carried out their own roles. Paul said, “What matters is not who planted or watered, but God who made the plants grow” (3:7). This statement implies that all authority belongs to God. Paul’s understanding about servants extended to the relations between leaders and members. He told the Corinthian community who subordinated themselves to Paul or Apollos or Peter: “Paul and Apollos and Peter all belong to you. In fact, everything is yours, including the world, life, death, the present, and the future. Everything belongs to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (3:22-23). The members thought that they belonged to Paul, Apollos or Peter, and boasted about it. But Paul overturned their thoughts. The members don’t belong to Paul, Apollos or Peter; rather, it is Paul, Apollos or Peter who belongs to the members of Corinthian community. It is

an amazing reversal which countered their thinking that created the sects around their central figures, e.g. Paul, Apollos or Peter. They did not follow God but human beings and it would be difficult for a community to be called a church if it followed human beings rather than God.

Paul asked the members of the Corinthian community: “Are you already satisfied? Are you now rich? Have you become kings while we are still nobodies” (4:8a)? He asked those who took advantage of the moment when Paul and Apollos were gone and shouted at each other on behalf of them because their desire to become kings had divided the community. Paul tried to point out that the possibility to become kings with all apostles did not only lie with special members of the community but with all members. He said, “I wish you were kings. Then we could have a share in your kingdom” (4:8b). Paul’s statement means that all are positioned equally in Christ before God.

“The king in Christ” isn’t any special person; it can be anyone following Christ. It is very unique how they could become kings in Christ for their kingship emerges through modesty and hardship in the way of Christ (4:9-13). Saying “let’s become kings together”, Paul shows a miserable life of the apostles. Therefore, Paul was saying this to people aspiring to be like him (4:16). The greatest obstacle to living together is the desire to grab more power. At the moment a person thinks he is greater than others the human instinct to dominate them starts to operate. As soon as a person tries to dominate others, the community faces confrontations and conflicts. Of course, the community needs a system and structure but it doesn’t have to be a hierarchy of powers.

What were Paul’s solutions? Paul dismantled all relations and systems that people were used to. Paul said that belonging to a specific leader wasn’t the right way. Rather, God’s way was that the famous leaders belonged to “the members of the Corinth community.” This order was possible only if people stood equally before God. For Paul, God’s order tears down distinction, discrimination and bound-

ary made by people. There is no discrimination between the apostles and the members of community, between the rich and the poor, between men and women, or between nationals and gentiles. There is no discrimination at all in Christ Jesus and before God!

Although each person has different roles, positions, and functions, there is no reason for discrimination. Everyone has the same identity: he or she belongs to God, no matter who he or she is, where he or she lives, and what kind of job or position he or she has.

How can we live together in the household of God? It is to recognize clearly to whom we belong. The truth that we belong to God eliminates any borders or distinctions. We all are the people of God, created in God's own image. We all are the servants of Christ and kings in Jesus Christ. Of course, to become a king, like Jesus, we have to take the way of the cross.

May this truth inspire the people of Asia to be one. It does not matter if we differ in nationality, gender or social position. Since we all belong to Christ, we must follow his way of humility. This means learning to be accepting and understanding of each other, sharing our love with each other, regarding each other as a king in Christ. Then we can truly live together in the household of God. The House of God will overflow with joy from meeting brothers and sisters, and with devotion to fulfill the needs of one another.

Questions for Discussion

1. Does your church face similar problems as division? What are the causes of division in your church community?
2. How is conflict and division dealt with?
3. How can the church live out being part of the Household of God?

One in Christ

Fr. William Bill LaRousse, MM¹

Scripture

11 "Therefore, remember that at one time you, Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by those called the circumcision, which is done in the flesh by human hands, 12 were at that time without Christ, alienated from the community of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, 15 through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, 16 in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, 18 for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

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19 So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. 21 Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; 22 in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:11-22)

As we prepare for an assembly that addresses the issue of Christian unity, we are called to be one in Christ. We know this. But we are painfully aware of the divisions in the body of Christ. We know that this is against the will of Christ himself. He himself prayed that we might all be one. But we are not. It confuses the world that we profess faith in Jesus Christ but are divided among ourselves. The world does not have to take us seriously due to our divisions. Our division is an obstacle to others to be drawn to Christ. We continue to see an increase in our divisions. Particularly here in Asia where all Christians together are a minority, our divisions offer confusion and we can easily be dismissed as irrelevant. We are troubled by our reality. We are saddened by our divisions.

Paul tells us that God’s love and God’s mercy towards us which comes from the very being of God comes to us as pure gift. St. John tells us that God is love (1 Jn 4:8). Faith is a gift and unity in Christ is a gift. Unity in Christ, he is our peace, in him we are one. He makes us one. This is a gift given to us. These gifts originate in the love of God who is love itself.

Paul tells us that now in Christ we who were far off are now brought near. He also emphasizes that this happens because of the blood of Christ. The gift of the blood of Christ enables us to be brought near, but even more than just being brought near we are fellow citizens with the holy ones and we are members of God’s own household.

Two major points for our consideration are that (1) through the cross of Christ we are made one and reconciled and (2) Jesus him-

self is the capstone that holds us all together.

Through Christ all religious barriers between Jews and Gentiles have been transcended by the abolition of the Mosaic covenant-law for the sake of uniting Jew and Gentile into a single religious community. While Paul here is speaking of Jews and Gentiles, the meaning of Christ being our peace and making us one should be read in much broader terms. Christ the Good Shepherd wants that there be one flock. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). This unity is for all people to be the one flock. The unity of the human race is God’s intention. The gift of God’s grace is made visible in the plan of God who wishes to bring humanity to salvation and unity in Christ. The mystery of God’s wisdom and goodness draws the whole human family and indeed the whole of creation into unity with himself in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

We have our experiences of unity. We have experiences of being a family and one household. We know what it means to be welcomed and of being at home with others. But we also experience divisions, rejection and feeling that we are not valued as persons and communities. We know mistrust from our lived experience. Our reality of division, different ethnic groups, different languages, different cultures, different ways of understanding the world, different religions, divisions among those who are all Christians, together with violence against those who are different, confront us continuously. We have experienced and continue to experience the dividing wall of hostility that splits us apart from one another.

St. Paul tells us that Christ is our peace and that he has broken down this dividing wall of hostility. Christ has broken this wall down through his own flesh, so that in himself, in his person, he can bring together in one person those divided by hostility. Christ establishes peace and reconciles us to God in his body through the cross. The violence of the cross and the crucified body of Christ on the cross makes him our source of unity and makes us one and reconciles us

to God and to one another. The cross puts to death the hostility that divides us. The cross destroys the hostility or the enmity but not the person who was considered as an enemy.

We need to stand before the cross of Christ our peace. It is the cross of Christ that unites us. We are not divided by that cross but it is the source of our unity, our reconciliation. The blood of Christ enables us to be united. It is the source of a new unity for those previously divided, not a source of victory of one over the other. It is that which had divided us that is destroyed. In him through his cross we are made into one new person.

We need to stand before the cross of Christ our peace and gaze upon that cross. Jesus said: “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.” (Jn 12:32) It is to Christ lifted up on the cross that the whole human race will be drawn. How can the cross of Christ be seen today so that it may be that source of reconciliation and peace? Here we look to his disciples, his followers, who too are to carry crosses. “Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:24-25). To deny oneself is to renounce oneself as the center of one’s existence. We deny our self and lose our life joyfully because Christ is the center of our existence. We do this for his sake. We are called to live as witnesses to the reconciling power of the cross and of the blood of Christ. Our self-denial, our carrying of our crosses humbly testifies to the power of the blood of Christ to be our peace. But we must do this as one body, for our witnessing lacks credibility as we remain divided.

We must do something to be worthy of speaking of peace and of Jesus who is our peace and reconciliation. If he can make one the Jews and Gentiles with their huge differences, he can make us one who together who share the name Christian. How can we Christians say that we are promoters of peace and unity if we quarrel among ourselves? We are close to one another as Christians, yet we are far apart.

The newness of the reconciliation brought by the cross of Christ makes us members of God’s own household. We are built on the foundation of the apostles of Jesus and Jesus himself is the capstone of the structure. The Greek word used here can mean either a cornerstone or a capstone. At times it can refer to a cornerstone of a building. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Lk 20:17). But here Paul has already said that the foundation is the apostles and the prophets. Christ Jesus is the capstone or the keystone on this structure. The capstone or keystone is the central stone of a larger structure that locks all the other stones in place and allows the whole to be self-supporting. Without the capstone the structure would fall in upon itself. A stone arch has a stone placed in the center at the top, holding the whole arch together. It is the focal point of the arch. It is what holds the arch together. Without the capstone, the arch would crumble. This is what Jesus is – as the capstone of the church. He is at the top and in the center. He holds the church together and in himself allows the other stones to help support one another.

How can we stand before the cross of Christ and prayerfully ask for the grace to be united as one in Him through the Spirit? How can our self-denial and carrying our crosses open us to the grace to be reconciled to God and one another? How can we be witnesses to Christ’s peace and reconciliation living together in the household of God here in Asia?

Based on the fact that God’s household is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, how can we make Christ more and more the center and focal point of our lives? How can we focus more on him, make him the center of our existence so that he can hold the whole structure together and enable us to be more fixed on him so as to support one another?



FOCUS II
**THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD:
MOVING BEYOND
THE BOUNDARIES OF CHURCH**

Many Mansions

A Study of John 14:2

Rev. Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling¹

Scripture

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2)

Introduction

In the Old Testament period, the house or household of God was understood to mean “dwelling together” or as one family (Exodus. 2:1, 23:19; 34:26). The place where the peoples of God gather and worship together – whether it is a home, temple or tabernacle – has been understood as the house of God. In the New Testament period, Christians worshipped first in the temple, then the synagogue, and they also met in private homes (Acts 1:13; 2:2, 46). Special buildings for Christian churches were not seen in the New Testament. The house church was common during Paul’s ministry (Rom. 16:5, I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15). This reflects the fact that the house of God in OT and NT has no boundary.

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The House of God as the Church Universal

The theological vision of our theme, “the household of God,” rests on the conviction that we belong to one household of God and that the church is God’s universal church. Ecumenically we believe in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Eph.4:4-5). Christ has made us his people and he is not divided. This oneness, as presented in the New Testament, is not a self-evident or easy unity. It is the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, those whom the world called enemies. It is also the reconciliation of master and slave, of male and female, and of Christian and non-Christian. It is neither a cheap nor an abstract unity. It calls for repentance for our sins of separation, exclusion, alienation, tension, hatred and animosity in order to come together at the communion table of the Lord in the household of God. The household of God implies solidarity, which means a reconciled life of all creation – that the world may know that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all. Solidarity does not consist in the agreement of minds or the consent of wills. We enjoy solidarity because we are all objects of the love and grace of God.

The Church is one because it is God who binds it to Godself by Word and Spirit as the one creator and redeemer who makes the Church a foretaste and instrument for the redemption of all created reality. It is holy because God is the holy one who in Jesus Christ has overcome all un-holiness, sanctifying the Church by his word of forgiveness in the Holy Spirit and making it his own, the body of Christ. It is catholic because God is the fullness of life who through the Word and Spirit makes the Church the place and instrument of his saving, life-giving, fulfilling presence wherever it is, thereby offering the fullness of the revealed Word, all the means of salvation to people of every nation, race, class, sex and culture. It is apostolic because the Word of God that creates and sustains the Church is the Gospel which primarily and normatively has been borne witness to by the apostles, making the communion of the faithful a community that lives in and is responsible for the succession of the apostolic truth

throughout the ages.²

Neighbors as Insiders in the Household of God (Luke 10:25-37)

The term ‘neighbor’ in Hebrew is ‘rea,’ which has a range of meanings such as friend, lover, paramour, companion, comrade, and fellow human.³ The Jews interpreted this word in terms of members of the same people and religious community, fellow-Jews, thereby excluding Samaritans and foreigners. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), the lawyer’s concept of neighbor could be understood as that of fellow-Jew or fellow-member of the covenant, i.e. the insiders of the faith community. But Jesus wanted to show through this parable the larger community beyond the covenant. Jesus wanted the Jews to go beyond their cultural and religious boundaries and to create a new community built on the basis of love, God’s great commandment the implication of which could be found in Leviticus 19:34.

The concept of ‘neighborhood’ carries not only the idea of ‘near-ness’ but also the meaning of sharing life with one another. Mutual recognition, mutual acceptance and mutual relations are characteristics of the nature of neighborhood. From a humanitarian perspective, it is basic to shared-community building, which is against competition and rivalry. When two equal persons compete with each other, neither of them can love the other. The philosophy of competition does not teach about being a good neighbor to the other. Being a good neighbor to the other is not an easy task. It is a full commitment of one’s life to and for the other. Sometimes, one can be a good neighbor to the other while he or she may remain politically an alien or enemy. Geographically I may be a good neighbor to another but racially I may be a stranger. Regionally you may be a close neighbor but religiously a foreign partner.

² World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (November 1998).

³ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, edited by Gerhard Friedrich, and trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmanns Publishing Comp., 1977, reprint), 313.

Wesley Ariarajah wrote in his book, *Not Without My Neighbor*,⁴ “I would not want to be in a heaven where our neighbors were not.” In the same manner, we cannot live fully without having meaningful relationships with our neighbors who are Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Shintoists, Taoists, and so on. The true meaning of fullness of life has to do with living meaningfully and harmoniously together with all our neighbors, sharing resources together, caring for each other, working together for the common good and common security. The concept of neighbors can extensively be inclusive of all creation.

Mansions beyond Church-bound Mansions

In the introduction of his book, *Many Mansions: A Christians Encounter with Other Faiths, with a New Introduction* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), Harvey Cox tried to expound the meaning of “many mansions” in John 14:2 and the verse “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man comes unto the Father but by me” in John 14:6. He said “these verses stand only a few lines away from each other in the same chapter of the same Gospel. But they have traditionally supplied both the dialogic universalists and the anti-dialogic particularists with their favorite proof texts. Those who look with appreciation on other faiths frequently cite John 14:2 and suggest that the many mansions may refer to the heavenly places in which Hindus and Buddhists will dwell alongside Christians in the hereafter. Those who accept that all others must accept Christ or that Jesus alone is the one true way to salvation would cite John 14:6. He concluded his introduction by saying, “From Jesus, I have learned both that he is the Way and that in God’s house there are many mansions.”⁵ The Asian churches’ understanding of God’s mansions is confined too narrowly to the church boundary and hence it had created among the Asian churches the so-called mission-compound mentalities and exclusive mission concepts. Actually, the mansions which Jesus Christ mentioned are rather inclusively prepared for all peoples in the universal

household of God. Asian churches are called out to serve and manifest God’s diverse gifts of unity, inclusivity, diversity and fullness of life for all regardless of color, race, ethnicity, religion and gender. Today Asian churches are faced with a lot of challenges such as ethnic rivalries, religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, separatist movements, mistrust, hostility, enmity and conflicts among religious and ethnic groups. In the wake of so much injustice and lack of peace, Asian churches are called to continue working for peace, justice, freedom, security, reconciliation, democracy, and reunification in Asian region.

We are called out to trumpet their prophetic voices against all kinds of evil, injustice, discrimination, violence and conflict, promoting what is just and true. As Asian churches constitute a small minority group in Asia, it is important for them to network with one another and share with others their visions for peace and justice and fullness of life for all in Asia. Our Oikoumene, the whole inhabited world, must be inclusively re-interpreted not only for the visible unity of the churches but also significantly for the invisible unity of all religious communities and all creation. We need to go beyond traditional understanding of the mansions of God and find new ways of understanding the whole inhabited world based on openness to our neighbors, inclusive of all peoples.

⁴ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbor: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 13.

⁵ Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions: A Christians Encounter with Other Faiths, with a New Introduction* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1992), 10.

Moving Beyond Boundaries of the Church

Rev. Dr. Jeaneth Harris-Faller¹

Scripture

1 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— 2 although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. 3 So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. 4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. 7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked

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him and he would have given you living water.” 11 “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?” 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” 13 Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” 16 He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” 17 “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” 19 “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” 21 “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” 25 The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” 26 Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” 27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” 28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went

back to the town and said to the people, 29 “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” 30 They came out of the town and made their way toward him. 31 Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” 33 Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?” 34 “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. 35 Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. 36 Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. 37 Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. 38 I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.” 39 Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed. (John 4:1-40)

The Text in Its Context

The story of the nameless Samaritan woman at the well is found in the gospel according to John. This is a very revealing story, full of powerful lessons for people professing different faiths. According to historical data, there was an enmity between the Samaritans and the Jews. However, it did not stop Jesus from passing through Samaria to go to Galilee. It did not hinder Jesus from stopping at the well where there was a Samaritan woman who was known for her so-called sinfulness. Instead, Jesus conversed with this lone woman who had come to fetch water from what was known as Jacob’s well, located about a half mile from the city of Sychar in Samaria.

The Samaritans were descendants from two groups of people – the remnant native Israelites who were not deported after the fall of

the northern Kingdom in 722 BCE and the foreign colonists brought in from Babylonia and Media by the Assyrian conquerors. The enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans was brought about by the refusal of the Samaritans to worship in Jerusalem. In addition, after the exile, the Samaritans blocked the Jewish restoration of Jerusalem. Furthermore, in the 2nd century BCE, the Samaritans supported the Syrians in their wars against the Jews. In retaliation, the Jewish high priest burned the temple of Mt. Gerazim.

The Samaritan woman at the well was an extraordinary woman not only because she belonged to a race of people that the Jews utterly despised as having no claim on their God. She was also regarded as an outcast and looked down upon by her own people. In biblical times, drawing water and chatting at the well was the social highpoint of a woman's day. The woman's going to the well at noon might tell us something about her status. She must have been ostracized and marked as immoral.

Jesus and his disciples travelled from Jerusalem in the south to Galilee in the north by taking the quickest route which was through Samaria. Tired and thirsty, Jesus sat by Jacob's well, while his disciples went to the village of Sychar, about a half mile away, to buy food. It was about noon, the hottest part of the day, and a Samaritan woman came to the well at this inconvenient time to draw water. Jesus shocked the woman by conversing with her. In view of the ethnic-religious rift, no Jewish person was expected to talk with a Samaritan. What more a Jewish man talking with a Samaritan woman! To the woman's amazement, Jesus did not just converse with her; he offered her acceptance, forgiveness and the gift of "the living water" that would bring healing to her physical body and her whole being. The woman was more surprised when Jesus told her that he knew she had five husbands and was now living with a man who was not her husband. Jesus' response was not condemnation or judgment but an offering of total healing by promising the woman a different kind of life, a life which was acceptable to God and to the society. However, in doing this Jesus himself had to break the traditions and customs of his own people. First, he spoke to a woman, a stranger, of a different

faith, and supposedly a sinner. Second, he spoke not only to a woman but to a Samaritan woman, who belonged to a group the Jews traditionally despised. Third, he asked her for a drink of water, using her jar, which would have made him ceremonially unclean.

The Text in Our Context

The church has been taught to be welcoming, accepting, forgiving and open to all peoples. The church is to be caring and loving even to those who do not deserve to be loved and accepted. The church professes and accepts that her role in this world is to be a foretaste of God's Kingdom. Yet, the church is oftentimes hindered from doing her role because of her traditions, theologies, teachings, practices, etc. The church forgets who she is in relation to people of other faiths. She tends to be exclusivist to the extent of separating herself from people of other faiths. Yet, in order for the Church, particularly in Asia, to survive, she cannot help but mingle, struggle and relate with those of other faiths for she is in their very midst. Hence, church people have to learn to co-exist with people of other faiths. The church has to move beyond her boundaries by living out Jesus' example of reaching out to those who are others, those considered enemy, outcast, or despised.

Learning from Jesus: Moving Beyond Boundaries

- **Dialogue** - this led to the sharing of individual faiths. Neither be afraid nor hesitate to discuss your faith with people of other faiths for the purpose of sharing and learning from each other.
- **Shocking** - shaking and breaking the foundations of our traditions that are conflict-ridden and enslaving. The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For the Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) When the disciples returned, they were equally shocked to find him speaking to a woman.
- **Going Back** - go back to your own people and invite them

to see and listen to the teachings of other faiths. The woman returned to her town, inviting the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.” (John 4:29, ESV)

- **Know more about each other - to appreciate and accept each other.** Excited by what the woman told them, the Samaritans came from Sychar and begged Jesus to stay with them.
- **Openness and willingness to share what you have - led to a better understanding.** So Jesus stayed two days, teaching the Samaritan people about the Kingdom of God. When he left, the people told the woman, “we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” (John 4:42, ESV). Healing is not only an individual but also a communal experience.

Questions for Discussion

1. Imagine you are the Samaritan woman. What are your feelings at different points of your encounter with Jesus?
2. In today’s church, what are the reasons why we shun/reject or welcome/accept people of other faiths? What are our ways to welcome, accept, or connect with them?
3. Why was it easy for the outcast (Samaritans) to recognize and accept Jesus’ teachings than those who knew him well already, like the disciples?
4. Our human tendency is to judge others because of stereotypes, customs or prejudices. Jesus treats people as individuals, accepting them with love and compassion. Do we dismiss certain people as lost causes, or do we see them as valuable in their own right, worthy of what they believe in?

Arise and Shine!

Rev. Dr. Binsar Jonathan Pakpahan¹

Scripture

*1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
2 For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you. (Isaiah 60:1-5)*

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Introduction

For most Asian countries with wet and dry seasons, the sun rises and sets at a particular time. This is not the case for people in a four-season climate.

Barrow, the city in North Slope Borough in northern Alaska, is one of the coldest places in the world, with an average temperature of -12.5°C. Its population of around 4,212 experiences a temperature above freezing point in April, May, June, and part of July. Snow comes in October and melts in April of the following year. The last sunset is on November 18 while the next sunrise is on January 24. This means the people of Barrow will have 65 “sunless” days with only 3 hours of twilight during the day. Some people leave Barrow during those days for fear of winter depression. The whole town will come out to celebrate the first glimpse of sunrise on January 24. So the people of Barrow will personally understand this text, which is usually read during epiphany time in January, “Arise and shine!”

For Batak people, “arise and shine” also has great significance. The Batak word for sunrise is *binsar*. In Batak tradition, *binsar* depicts hope and light in the darkness. Many Batak traditional sayings use the word “binsar” as sunrise or light, such as:

*“Adong na tuat sian dolok; Adong na nangkok sian toruan; Adong na ro sian habinsaran; Adong na sian hasundutan; Manumpak ma Debata; Dilehon di hamu pasupuasan.”*²

*“Sahat solu, sahat di parbinsar ni ari; Leleng ma hamu mangolu jala di iring-iring Tuhan ganup ari; Mangula ma pangula, dipasae duhut-duhut.”*³

In these two sayings, *binsar* is connected with God’s blessings. The rising of the sun is often used in proverbs to explain God’s blessings. Children are believed to be God’s blessings, their presence seen

² Literal translation: Some come from the mountain, some come from the downstream; some come from east (*habinsaran*), and some come from the west; May God bless you and keep you.

³ Literal translation: when the boat comes until the sun rises (*binsar*), may you live long in God’s everyday blessings; and let all workers do their work well.

as new hope and light.⁴ While *binsar* is understood as blessing to a family or group, it is also expected to bring light to others.

Context of the Scripture

Our context influences how we read and understand the text. So when reading Isaiah 56-66, we need to differentiate the readers on three levels: (a) the immediate reader/listener, (b) the reader in Jesus’ time, and (c) we, the distant/future reader. For the first type of reader, i.e. the people of Israel who just returned from their exile, this text functioned as an assurance of God’s help. There is a shift in focus – from Babylon in Isaiah 40-55 to Jerusalem (56-66). Special attention was given to the issue of justice, the temple of God, offerings, and prayers. For the second type of reader, i.e. those in Jesus’ time, this text was a message of the coming of the Messiah. Some readers understand it as the coming of the wise men to see baby Jesus. For us, the distant reader, this text is often seen as a promise of God’s light in bringing justice and peace to the world.

Isaiah 60 pictures the audience as a woman since most of the Hebrew verbs are in feminine form. Isaiah 51:17-52:2 depicts Jerusalem as a woman. Since the people of Israel were returning from exile (from the darkness), the message was to encourage Israel to restore and rebuild the temple (to the light). The words “arise” (*qū-mî*) and “shine” (*ō-w-ri*) are to highlight the coming of the light of God (Isa. 40:10). In chapter 59, God’s presence is symbolized as light (compare Isa. 9:1 where light will come from the descendant of King David). Verses 19-20 give a clear example that the light does not come from the sun or the moon; rather, God is the source of everlasting light.

Isaiah often pictures the promise of salvation to the people of Israel with the words “arise and shine.” Isaiah 40:10 describes the coming deliverance of God’s people and the restoration of the land as God’s light. The coming of light is also used as a symbol of God’s pres-

⁴ “*Binsar ma mata ni ari, poltak ma matani bulan; Tubu ma boru na malo mencari jala boi pangalu aluan.*” Literal translation: The sun rises (*binsar*), the moon shines, may a baby girl be given to you; that will be able to find good job and will be a place of comfort. “*Binsar matani ari, poltak matani bulan; Horas ma anak lahi lahi, songoni anak parompuan.*” Literal translation: The sun rises (*binsar*), the moon shines; may the son be well, as does the daughter.

ence in chapter 59 (vv 19-20). The contrast between light and darkness is used to portray the importance of light, especially to a people who feel they are in darkness. God's light is bright, very bright, that the nations will come to it. This verse (3) can be seen as a hope of showing and bringing God's light to the nations, who are waiting for justice, peace, and deliverance from oppression (Isa 49:6; 58:6-12). When God's people are touched by the light (which derives from the same Hebrew word "shine"), they also shine the light to others.

Explanation of the Text

Isaiah wants to picture the coming of the light. The present perfect tense "has come" (v. 1) means God's light is already here. Thus, the people of Israel are asked to rise and shine for the light is meant to be shared. One commentary mentioned that the first verse is a reminder of Israel's first deliverance from Egypt.

The return to the future tense in v. 2, i.e. "will arise" and "will appear," seems to show that after the first deliverance, God's people returned to the state of darkness. The darkness could be their confusion at being back in their land with no idea of what to do there. But the promise of God's light would give them new light to shine to other nations.

In verse 3, the new light would be so bright to be visible and attractive to the people. The metaphor of "kings to the brightness of your dawn" has been connected to the coming of wise men to see Jesus. When the light shines brightly, everyone will be able to see it. The term "your light" shows that Israel or God's people will shine light that attracts other kings to come. God's light comes, and now the people are reflecting that light to other nations. For the people of Israel at Isaiah's time, this message would have been seen as an assurance that Jerusalem would be back on her feet and will arise from her rubbles.

In verses 4-5, Isaiah shows that the glory of the rising sun will invite people to come and fear the name of the Lord (see Isa. 59:19). Jerusalem is asked to stop her grieving and see the many who would

come or return to her, i.e. the people in diaspora (compare Isa. 49:17-18). Barnes' commentaries mentioned that the coming of "the daughters that are carried on their nurses' arm" means "to stay, to sustain, support; to bear or carry a child" (Numbers 11:12), hence, "to be faithful, firm." It is not certain that it is used in the sense of nursing; but it more probably means here, they shall be borne." For the readers in Jesus time, this text seems to refer to the apostles and disciples who would spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. It is also seen as the embrace of the gospel by the nations.

The Text in Our Context

First, what does "the light that shines so brightly defeats the darkness" mean for us today? While reading the theological challenges and political-economic situation in Asia, I thought there are a few differences between the problems of the 1970s and 2015. The escalating conflicts, threatened peace and human securities, problems in the areas of social justice and welfare are still there. Our challenges have increased with environmental issues, bioethical questions, global warming, and the value of life. However, I would argue that the world is heading towards a better place, when compared to the situation in 1957 when churches in Asia gathered in Parapat and started our ecumenical movement. Nowadays, Asia is one of the leading regions in economic growth, where democracy has largely been adopted in different styles and contexts, and where advanced communication technology has excelled.

Second, what does "when the Light comes to the people, the people will also radiate that light to others" mean for us today? Using the metaphor of Isaiah, we can say that God has come and brought the light to God's people. Hence, we, as churches in Asia, are called to be messengers of this good news in the midst of the challenging and depressing realities of today. Our light should radiate towards others. The household of God in the Assembly theme is a reminder for us to move beyond the boundaries of the church. Isaiah reminds us that the light reaches everyone and will be seen by people who are in the darkness. God's love moves beyond our boundaries, especially

when we radiate that light towards others. The household of God is large enough and God's light is bright enough to reach all creation. As Psalm 145:9 puts it: "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made."

Third, what does "nations will come and seek for the light" mean for us today? The wise men from the east travelled a great distance to come towards the light (Mt. 2:11). It seems that people are willing to travel the distance, across uncertain terrain, to find the light that promises certainty and hope. The wise men from the east represented the traveler, people from the distance who also saw the light. So the light also shines for other people outside of Israel, and those who believe will walk towards it. Another group of people who came to meet the baby Jesus were the shepherds (Lk. 2:16). They represented the people from the neighborhood, the people who worked at night, the outcast. So the light of Christ shines across boundaries, and invites all people to travel the distance to meet with the light.

While the light knows no boundaries, it is often the people who set the limitations. Barack Obama once said that "Sunday morning is the most segregated hour." Churches have grown immensely in Asia in the last three decades but such a church growth portrays how segregated we are as Christians. Indeed, many of us have participated in erecting higher and stronger walls which segregate and hinder people from genuinely communicating with each other across boundaries of class, caste, creed. Indeed, fault-lines that demarcate minority groups based on religious, linguistic and ethnic differences habitually divide and fragment humanity. It is time to move beyond these boundaries, seen and unseen, real and imagined. Our calling is to connect, include, and embrace all God's creation, in love, compassion and the joy of fellowship. When the church shines God's light towards others, people who have been searching for the light will come. We do not necessarily interpret the coming of nations towards the light as conversion to Christianity, but rather as sharing the light towards God's creation and reaching out to those who are still searching. After all, we are living together in the household of God.

Questions for Reflection

1. What words do you use for sunrise in your language? Share a story about the importance of the morning light (sunrise) in your context.
2. The text talks about the light that shines so brightly that it defeats the darkness. What are some situations of darkness in our own context and how can we "arise and shine"?
3. The text talks that when the Light comes to the people, the people will also radiate that light to others. What hindrances block God's light to shine from our church and our lives towards others?
4. The text talks about nations that will come and seek for the light. How can we share God's light to others without building boundaries?



FOCUS III
**THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD:
MANAGING WITH RESPONSIBILITY**

Citizen of the Household of God

Bishop Philip Huggins¹

Colossians 1:15-20

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In this poetic passage, Paul conveys who is head of the household of God. Paul is thought to have written this letter from Rome about 60AD, during his first imprisonment. He writes to exalt Christ

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in whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and “who is the head of every ruler and authority” (2:9-10). Our Saviour Jesus Christ is “image of the unseen God” and “Head of the Body, that is, the Church” (v18). All fullness dwells in Him, “to reconcile all things to Him, everything in Heaven and everything on Earth”.

These are high and wonderful statements of the divine purpose. As one of our prayer books proclaims,

“Out of nothing, God created a universe of beauty and splendour,”

and now, under the Lordship of Christ Jesus, all are to be brought into Communion with God, reconciled and reconciling. As Paul goes on to convey, we are offered life-giving union with the glorified Christ and so are encouraged, as we do in this Bible study, to

“let your thoughts be on things above, not on things that are on the earth” (Colossians 3:2).

Recently, meditating with our National Council of Churches in Australia, I quoted, from the World Council of Churches’ Uppsala 1968 Assembly, “The Church is bold in speaking of itself as a sign of the **coming unity** of humankind”. Imagine that – the unity of all humankind!

What a high calling is ours! How important is our Unity! How important thus, too, is the spiritual health of our Christian Conference of Asia! Praying, living in the Spirit of “the one in whom all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

The first thing that flows from this reflection is the importance of nurturing our spiritual life so we stay as close to Jesus as we can. Can we share what we have learned that helps us stay close to the “One in whom all things hold together”?

We know from our deep Christian traditions what has helped the Saints who have come before us:

- i. **Bible study** – letting the Word of God dwell in us richly. Can you share these moments of illumination from your discipleship of Jesus? Moments when the Word and Spirit have intersected and God has spoken to you?
- ii. **Traditions of Prayer and Meditation.** For myself, the Jesus Prayer has been central to my discipleship for some decades. I pray over “Jesus have mercy” in all circumstances. The prayer occurs in me now. I am prayed by the prayer. It is ‘prayer of the heart’. Whatever our pattern of prayer, we learn the important linkage between how what we think shapes what we say and do. Hence, the importance of “letting our thoughts be on things above”. There is no better way than letting the Name of Jesus be our thought. There is such power and beauty in the divine Name. There is a wonderful connection between Name and Presence, ‘Jesus in our midst’. Whenever we speak the name of our Saviour, can we let our tone of voice convey all our love and reverence for Jesus? This can be a powerful witness to others. They then see the depth of our relationship with our Risen Lord. Indeed, what we think, say and do shape our character and destiny. What other ways have we learned to help us stay close to Jesus, “living and walking in Holy Spirit”?
- ii. **‘Holy Communion’** is the beautiful description, for many Churches, of what Jesus told us to do. As we reverently remember what took place at the Last Supper, so do we experience His “real presence.” What is your experience of this?
- iv. **Belonging to a local Church**, we know, also gives us encouragement and support in our discipleship of Jesus. We sometimes speak of the “mystery of the Church” to capture the reality of people from different generations and backgrounds, with diverse personalities, gifts (and eccentricities) who come to make up a local congregation. Drawn together, we hear each Sunday the Command to love God and love one another. Hence, our response in encouragement and support of one another. We either lift each

other up or drag each other down! As we all know, it is not a straightforward matter to be the 'holy people of God!' Those congregations which display the 'fruits of the Spirit' - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22, 23) are attractive expressions of the "Household of God". 'A sign of the coming Unity of humankind'!

Group Discussion:

You may like to share about the character of your local Church: What are your current joys and struggles? How have you been encouraged while in your discipleship of Jesus?

Matthew 25:31-46

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." 37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,

you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" 45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Often called "The Judgment of the Nations", verses 31-46 have also been called "The Parable of the Sheep and Goats" because of its parabolic twists and turns. Just as a parable surprises us with a sudden curve as it comes across the plate, Jesus surprises the righteous (vv. 37-39) and the unrighteous (v. 45) with his judgment. However, this is not really a parable but is instead an eschatological (end of time) vision that describes a real future event.

Note the contrast between Jesus' first and second comings. In his first coming, Jesus emptied himself, coming into this world as a servant (Philippians 2:5-11). Conceived by an unmarried woman, he was born in a stable and cradled in a manger. As a man, he had no place to lay his head (8:20). There was purpose in these humble beginnings -- that he might dwell among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14) and draw us to himself (John 12:32). In his second coming, however, the time for wooing and winning will be past, so no further purpose would be served by humble circumstances. Jesus, therefore, will come in all of his glory -- with all of his angels -- sitting on a throne -- with all the nations assembled before him....

"Jesus told a rich man to sell all that he had and to give the money to the poor (19:21), but there is no such overarching demand

here. The kinds of mercies that Jesus rewards here are within the reach of every person. They do not require great sacrifice on the part of the mercy-giver, but they do alleviate great pain for the mercy-receiver.” (http://www.lectionary.org/EXEG_Engl_WEB/NT/01-Matt-WEB/Matt%2025.31-46.htm)

In essence, through this teaching, Jesus makes vivid to us his identification with those in need. “Insofar as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” The text is unambiguous and compelling.

Recently I visited our Women’s Prison in Melbourne to take some Services. At the daunting entrance, I had a most profound conversation with a male prison guard. Originally from Africa, he is one of those who have made a new home in Australia, after a traumatic refugee experience. He took the initiative in our conversation, referring to the dignity and respect he seeks to accord every person in prison. We reflected theologically on the scripture that all are made in the divine image and thus are to be accorded what we know as “human rights”. One could see how this warden’s depth of character would set a gracious and respectful tone amidst people who often feel demeaned, judged, ignored and humiliated by others who treat them harshly. We remember Jesus with Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10); the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) and many other beautiful Gospel encounters.

Questions for Discussion

- i. Pause and ask each other which Gospel passage has touched and inspired you as you see Jesus live His teaching in Matthew 25:31-16.
- ii. As we gather in Assembly as the Christian Conference of Asia, we also bring before us serious matters we must together “**Manage with Responsibility**”. For example, last year I was part of a CCA/WCC meeting in Sri Lanka as regards People-Trafficking. My contribution was about Australia’s treatment of asylum-seekers and the Church’s sustained advocacy on their behalf. Others spoke out of

their work protecting others: migrant workers in the Middle East; rural youngsters sold into prostitutions and slavery; the abuse of organ harvesting; and much more. Brave, passionate Asian disciples of Jesus are living Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25 whilst others will face the “dread judgement of Christ” and hear Him say “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” What is your experience of these realities of people-trafficking? How do your Churches’ services, research and advocacy intersect to make a difference? What do you think we can better do together as CCA to awaken people afresh to the beauty and truth of Jesus’ teaching? Certainly we need more people like my African Prison Warder in Melbourne: a true citizen of the Household of God!

- iii. Finally, and poignantly, **what of children in Jesus’ teaching?** A Collect for St Nicholas prays: “Almighty God, in your love you gave your servant Nicholas of Myra a perpetual name for deeds of kindness both on land and sea: Grant, we pray, that your Church may never cease to work for the happiness of children: the relief of the poor, and the help of those tossed by tempests of doubt or grief; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Praying for grace to go with our best efforts, may we never cease to work for the happiness of children! Jesus speaks to us about how the angels of each child are continually communicating with God about their well-being. “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in Heaven.” (Mt .18:10). We contemplate this word of Jesus, His love for all, His yearning that “not one of these little ones should perish” (Mt .18: 12-14), in relation to the violence and suffering affecting children. Our best way to express our relief and gratitude is to live as Jesus teaches, to help the poor and grieving through our aid agencies and to pray as we are bidden. In the Holy

Spirit, let us imagine, as we pray, a world in which every child is safe, free of fear. Free from the fear of violence, war, hunger and dis-ease of any kind. Free to play, study, learn, flourish in the Household of God, adults managing to create this setting for all children! Imagine that! Imagine if all policies - Government policies too - were designed through the eyes of children, so their happiness was the clear focus. Imagine thus the joy of the angels who “always see the face of my Father who is in Heaven.”

May it be so. Amen and Amen...

Question:

Can you prayerfully imagine what this would look like in your community? What needs to change? What can we do through our CCA to manage this responsibility towards children more beautifully and truly? You may like to each share one matter for prayer together. Please support each other thus in offering these prayers. As we offer these prayers we know why Paul also prayed that we might have strength in the household of God, to fully comprehend the profound love of Christ for all.

This prayer from Ephesians encompasses our theme in this Assembly. Let's conclude our Bible Study with this prayer:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19)

To Preach

Rev. Supina Nakaisulan¹

Scripture

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. (Isaiah
61:1-3)
14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have*

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not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" 16 But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" 17 So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. 18 But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." (Romans 10:14-18)

The Israelites were once singing sadly about being strangers in a foreign land (Psalm 137) while in captivity in Babylon. They were desperately longing for healing and freedom. In Isaiah 61:1-3 we see the released exiles of Israel listening to Isaiah proclaiming the power of God that would bring them healing and restoration. Jesus Christ once quoted this Scripture (Luke 4:18-19) to declare to the Jews that he would serve the weak and the wounded and manifest the will of God by his actions.

In Romans 10:14-18, Paul integrates Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 52:7, 53:1) and Psalms (Psalm 19: 4). Paul tells the Jewish people that God has made Godself known to them, yet they still refuse salvation. Their refusal is due to their misunderstanding of the nature of their election. They do not know that they exist because God chose them. They forget to respond with faith in God. They think that they have inherited their election and everything will be fine as long as they obey God's laws (Romans 9:1-29). Paul criticized their attitude for they had misunderstood their election.

"The Spirit of God is with me" is the process of preparation before action. To receive the anointing of God means to be willing to be sent and to be empowered. For Isaiah, the revelation and anointing of God is not only an idea, or an inspired knowledge, or an emotion. Rather, it is a sure experience of God's presence and calling. God's

anointing enables Isaiah to have self-affirmation and to be dedicated to the work that God has given him. With God's presence, Isaiah was confident and empowered that the poor, sad, exiled, captive, depressed and sorrowful would be transformed and given new, glorious lives. This not only applies to the ministry of Isaiah, but also to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Today it also applies to the ministry of every church and Christian.

Are people dissatisfied with today's churches? What is the reason for their dissatisfaction? Could it be because churches have committed the same error as the Christians in Rome and misinterpreted the meaning of salvation? Paul points out to these Christians that there is something wrong with their organization. He tells them that they are not merely an earthly organization but an organization in the business of salvation. Furthermore, this organization based on salvation has been given an important responsibility – showing Christ-likeness. This organization should not become a powerful force that oppresses its members. It is not called to merely become influential so that its members are in turn devoted to it. If that were so, then, it would hamper members from living a life of service resembling the life of Christ. If that were so, then, they would be contradicting the salvation that Christ came to bring. More importantly, if this organization served people with such un-Christ-like attitude, it would be a sign of unbelief on the part of its members. Though these people may tout that they have a legitimate hold on salvation, status, and power, they have no part in the salvation and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The two scriptures emphasize the word "preach" – a word that makes the good news of God's kingdom more vivid – for the essence of preaching the gospel of God's kingdom is "action". Jesus Christ is concerned that the justice, righteousness and peace of God's kingdom is realized and shared everywhere. He is willing to pay the cost of opposing societies and systems to see this realized. Jesus Christ, inspired by the spirit of the Old Testament prophets, used action to bring forth revelation. His teachings emanate not only from the words he preached, but also from the actions he took. We are to imitate his actions.

The challenges facing Asian churches today center mostly on political and economic conflict and rivalry between countries. There continues to be a lot of ethnic oppression within countries, disregard or contempt of ethnic minority groups' culture, economy, and sovereignty. A lot of these things go on undetected by much of the world. As God's chosen people, an ecumenical church, Asian churches should be vigilant of these things and be mindful of its prophetic role. It is important for us to re-examine our role and be ready to walk with God and speak out in support of righteousness, to be the witness of salvation.

The rights of minority groups are undeniably prominent issues in Asia. The Church's concern and support for minority groups is a barometer of whether it truly has the heart of Christ and whether it is concerned for God's creation. Those who suffer will not stop crying or struggling just because we do not hear or see their agony. As a group of people symbolizing God's salvation and as people called to serve, we should wisely and determinedly stand in solidarity with suffering people so that we may sing songs of salvation with them.

It is a challenge to spread the gospel in Asia. Evangelism in Asia must overcome barriers and limitations imposed by politics, economics and religions in addition to the influences of globalization, and then preach the gospel actively. At the same time, churches must be attuned to changes in society, distinguishing truth from fallacy, and be brave to speak the truth in faith. Therefore, the church should walk in righteousness and be brave. A church that is well-equipped clearly knows its commitment and its commission. Churches should be sure of the value of their teachings in this ever-changing society. Churches exist not only to gather Christians together, but also to teach, inspire, nurture, and lead Christians to maturity in spirit. Eventually, churches should encourage and send congregations out to "preach" – for that is the ultimate role and responsibility of being a church.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is there any oppression between ethnic groups in your

country? What is your church's response?

2. What is the intention behind our churches' participation in society and ecumenism?
3. What kind of good news are Asian churches preaching to the world? Does the world see us as vibrant trees under the sun? How can our ministry refresh and bring hope to our Asian society?

Peace of God and God of Peace

Rev. Dr. Jerome Sahabandhu¹

Scripture

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” (Philippians 4:7-9)

Woundedness

A reflection on the peace of God may commence with the concept of ‘woundedness’.

I come from a wounded society – Sri Lanka. Over three decades of war and violence in post-colonial Sri Lanka have severely affected our psychology, social fabric and ecology. In 2009 the war

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came to an end, yet peace has not come to my country. The end of the war has not brought peace or prosperity. We as a nation remain a wounded community. People's lives need to be re-built, healed and reconciled. Reconciliation is what is not happening. The state seems to think that the building of the infrastructure would bring normalcy to the community. But people's lives have not been touched or moved. The woundedness remains as a daily matter. There is no clear approach to truth and reconciliation except for a few isolated yet significant cases initiated by some good and concerned persons. Such reconciliation efforts are very vulnerable and are even misunderstood most of the time.

In the Theological College of Lanka, we make an intentional effort to be a reconciled community where Sinhalese and Tamil theological students live together for three to four years in a residential community in Pilimatalawa, Sri Lanka. We try to create a 'safe space' to share our stories – stories of pain and agony, stories of hopes and dreams for a better world.

In a certain way we all are wounded. Look at Asia – we find a wounded Asia! Look at the world! We are a broken community! See our own broken selves, wounded families, wounded communities, wounded academies, broken and divided churches, wounded nations, and the wounded international community. There is a global woundedness and most surely we know that God's creation is heavily wounded.

We need Peace and Healing

Paul's exposition to the Philippians speaks of what is required for peace and healing. First we must understand what peace is not: the world says not to worry, there is peace –

“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. “Peace, peace,” they say, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14).

There was a bogus and false peace at the time when Paul spoke to the Philippians. It was called the 'Pax Romana' – the peace of the

empire, peace that had been obtained by the victories of war, military power that kept order and made sure that countries gave no trouble, there were no riots, and no uprisings ... so they called it peace. In today's context we can reflect on the 'Pax of modern empires' (you name it!). Over against this Pax Romana, Paul suggests another kind of peace – the 'peace of God', the only peace that Paul knew. The world did not know this peace.

Peace of God

This peace in the Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition is called 'Shalom'. Shalom means wholeness, fullness and it is life-giving and life-enhancing. Shalom includes the whole person and the community, humanity and creation, little life to all life.

The first aspect of God's peace (Shalom) speaks of evenness of heart and mind, an unshakeable freedom of mind, a state of inner equipoise that cannot be upset by worldly gains and losses, honour and dishonour, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. It is indifferent only to the demands of the self with its craving for pleasure and position, not the well-being of one's fellow human beings. In Buddhist spirituality this aspect of peace is called *upekkha* (equanimity) that includes boundless loving-kindness, compassion, and altruistic joy.

The second aspect of the peace of God essentially involves justice: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). There is no peace without justice. “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Psalm 85:10). In other words, the peace of God means nothing but the justice of God. Paul speaks of a different culture based on justice.

The fundamental cause of most of the conflicts and violence that we experienced in the last century and through the beginning of the first two decades of the 21st century is the quest for justice. Without addressing the root causes of injustice and wickedness there cannot be peace in the society, or peace in the hearts of the peoples.

The third dimension of God's peace is reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation go together. Forgiveness is not forgetting everything. Forgiveness means that we remember the past but yet we will have a new life that is forgiven and forgiving. This is a hard task. That is why reconciliation always becomes a costly affair.

Peace in the heart, justice and reconciliation – all at the same time – is called God's Shalom. God is creating this Shalom, and "blessed are the artisans of peace, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Paul speaks of that peace of God that surpasses all human understanding and keeps our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). This is a prayer. It means that the Shalom of God should guard our hearts and minds. This is related to formation of our character, formation of our communities. And while this is happening, Paul wishes that the God of Peace be with us always.

Thinking of the God of Peace, we can think of the characteristics of God – e.g. self-giving, self-emptying and self-sacrificing. We cannot think of a God who empowers unless we think of a God of Justice. We always think of God who is ever reconciling.

Wounded Healers

We are wounded but we are also the healers. Our task is to be wounded healers and broken reconcilers in the world. This is the hope. While recognizing that we are wounded persons and communities, we cannot stop there. We must go beyond that and become engaged with the woundedness in the world. We are called to be wounded healers for ourselves, for the communities and for nations to bring healing, reconciliation and wholeness of LIFE. The God of Peace empowers all of us to bring the peace of God wherever we are called to serve.

Asian Christian communities certainly can play a leading role in peace-making for 'living together in the household of God'.

Questions for Reflection

1. Identify the PaxRomana or peace of the empire in today's context and reflect on how we can create a counter-culture and alternative communities.
2. How can we engage in a more critical social analysis on the "woundedness of our communities"?
3. "Blessed are the Artisans of Peace – they shall be called Children of God." How can we fulfil this Gospel task of peace-building as local congregations, national churches and as councils of churches more intentionally in a divided social fabric?
4. What concrete steps can we take to empower peoples to become wounded healers for koinonia of the household of God?

Placing Children at the Centre of Mission

Ms. Sanjana Das¹

Scripture

Some time passed. David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. 2 Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. 3 But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. 4 He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." 5 Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" 6 So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please

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let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand."

7 Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." 8 So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. 9 Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. 10 Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. 11 But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." 12 She answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! 13 As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." 14 But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.

15 Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, "Get out!" 16 But she said to him, "No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me." But he would not listen to her. 17 He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her." 18 (Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.) So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her. 19 But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went.

20 Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house. 21 When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. 22 But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar. (2 Samuel 13:1-22)

"Didi², I am not sure if I have AIDS. Will I die? What will happen to my dreams? How can I bring my brother out of that hell from my father's house and from the clutches of my step mom? I want to live my dreams, I don't want to die. I want to live a life, work, earn, and have a family and kids. Please help me. Please save me."

I still remember these words by Rekha (name changed) in a shelter home in Delhi, India. I met her in 2009, a few weeks after she was rescued from the infamous G. B. Road³ of Delhi, India. Suffering from trauma of living in the brothels for two years, Rekha needed complete healing, both psychosocial and physical. While trauma troubled her mind, STDs⁴ pained her body. She was just 9 years old when her mother, herself a victim of domestic violence, left their home to live with another man. Rekha and her younger brother were left behind with their alcoholic father. Her father re-married soon, and Rekha's life became a nightmare in the hands of her stepmother. She was made to do all household chores and forced to quit school. Suffering violence from her abusive stepmother and with no care and support from her father, Rekha was an easy prey to traffickers. When a sympathetic aunt from the neighbourhood promised her a better life away from the misery of her home, Rekha was only eager to get away. Along with the will to rescue herself, she was also excited to

² Didi is an expression to address an elder sister

³ G.B. Road is the world's second largest red-light district in Delhi, India. It is an area with several hundred multistory and estimated over 12,000 sex workers. It is lined with two or three-storey buildings that have shop on the ground floor. Around 20 of these buildings have about 100 brothels on the first floor that comes alive at night after the shops at ground level close.

⁴ STD stands for Sexually Transmitted Diseases

see the world beyond the Himalayan mountains in Kurseong. Traveling in a bus thrilled her, glimpses of the different villages and towns excited her. Finally, getting into a train made her feel that her life was on its way to progress as much as the speed of the train.

Unaware of how her life would take an ugly turn, she was handed over to a man in the narrow crowded lanes of G. B. Road in Delhi. She was raped and broken, brutally forced into prostitution at the age of 13. The man she first encountered was more than 180 cm tall, weighed 180 pounds while she was barely 50 pounds. This child⁵ was broken into several hundred times. Catering to 6-8 clients a day, with bruises on her body and soul, Rekha would be quiet when awake and for the rest of the time she would fall asleep. She later learned that she was being drugged. From a beautiful carefree girl on the mountains of the Himalayas, Rekha was enslaved for life. The different events in her very young life left her with no hope and desire for freedom. She felt numb and unable to think. At 15, Rekha was unsure when she was being rescued. Once out, Rekha started understanding what it meant to be free. With proper food, care, counselling and life skills training, Rekha was only harbouring a dream to live a full life with dignity.

This is not an isolated life, but a representational life of millions of children in Asia and worldwide. Violence against children is real. It takes place everywhere, right within the domains of their families, in schools, institutions, workplaces and communities. The abuse of power upon children results in violence against children which affects the overall well-being of a child and hinders their normal developmental process. Children seem to have become indispensable – from labour, prostitution and conflict. They are being exploited for political, economic and oppressive socio-cultural gains.

Deprivation from quality education, health care, play and leisure; lack of peace and harmony at home, schools and communities; denial to quality life and a life of dignity; have marred the image of

⁵ According to the United Nation on the Rights of the Child (1989), "a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".

children in their own eyes and have pushed them further to the margins. Human trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal activities in the world making an estimated \$32 billion each year from its exploited victims. It is the second most lucrative crime in the world. Violations of human rights are both a cause and consequence of human trafficking. The majority of female trafficking victims are forced into the sex industry. About 1.2 million children are trafficked⁶ worldwide each year. Statistics estimate that every 26 seconds a child is trafficked. Protecting children⁷ from all forms of harm, abuse and exploitation is our responsibility. All children have the right to protection. They have the right to survive, to be safe, to be heard, to receive adequate care and to grow up in a protective environment.

The Story of Tamar

This story contains the contextual realities that victims of child trafficking are faced with. This text talks about sexual violence, rape. Amnon is socialized to be an abuser, deceiving Tamar. Many people play a role in Amnon's plan: Jonadab, David, Amnon's attendants. There is a striking similarity to the web of traffickers. Demand is made by certain countries, fulfilled by other countries. Jonadab helped Amnon think up a rape plan. Amnon's plan to rape is made in a social environment that favours the victimizer's interests. Amnon is nurtured by the society around him to assist him in raping Tamar. He is after all the firstborn son of the king, he has immunity, and when father can get away with a similar case, why can't he?

For Amnon, Tamar is a commodity. Amnon must have stalked Tamar, stared at her body, while she worked for him. Tamar's re-

⁶ UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Person defines "trafficking in persons" as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of person, by means of threat, force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments of benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery, servitude or removal of organs.

⁷ UNICEF uses the term "child protection" to refer to preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children - including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child labour and harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage. UNICEF's child protection programmes target children who are uniquely vulnerable to these abuses, such as when living without parental care, in conflict with the law and in armed conflict.

sponse to Amnon's advancement is not respected. Her 'no' has no value. Tamar says, "Where shall I carry my shame?" It means that she has not lived up to the social expectations of those around her. The state of shame influences "who she is." Shame decreases honour and lowers status. Uncertainty about her future resembles that of Rekha. Rape victims suffer physical and psychological effects. Rape victims experience loss of physical and mental dignity. Tamar and Rekha are together in this. Both exhibit the body language of pain. Their bodies are the sites of violence.

Rekha was silenced by drugs. Tamar was silenced by her brother in the name of family honour. King David responded by becoming "very angry." But he joined the conspiracy of silence. The process of achieving justice was taken out of her hand entirely and carried forward by her brother. The end of Tamar's story happens without her. Her rights are violated, her future taken of her hands.

In Matthew 18:2-5, Jesus placed a child in the midst of them and then spoke of what it would mean to place children in the "midst". In reality, we are already placing children in the midst, but in the midst of violence, in the midst of abuse and in the midst of trafficking. What would it mean to place the child in the midst of theology, of biblical reflection, in the midst of the church? In fact, Sunday school becomes a place where children are baby sat while the adults do the real thing!

Placing children in the midst would mean reorienting our lives, our economies and our politics. Prevailing wisdom is that children are little adults who are waiting to grow up. We do not treat them as persons in their own right. Jesus calls on us to place the child in the midst; that is to say that we must learn from children. The complaint of most parents is that their children do not listen to them. Jesus kind of turns this around and calls on us to listen to children. They are the ones we have to learn from. This theology of Jesus is very different from the theology of Paul. Paul calls not to be like children but to grow up. Jesus on the other hand calls us to listen to children and to be like them.

What does it mean for us to listen to children? It means that we reorient our families so that they will be places that are directed towards the needs of the children. Often we interpret these in a gender specific way to indicate that women need to give up their lives and careers for the sake of the children. This is not what I mean. What it does mean is that men have to reorient their lives to be involved in the process of child rearing and child care. More importantly it means that families are not places where children are spoken to, told what to do, but places where children are listened to, that their opinions are taken in decisions that affect them.

The God we encounter in the Bible is a God of Justice. God's final purpose is the establishment of God's peace, 'Shalom'. It is characterized by the presence of God's justice, the establishment of right relations with one another, with God and with nature (Isaiah 65:17-25). So, God is continuously at work, enabling Shalom to become a reality everywhere. Therefore, the prophets condemn the priests for their false utterances of 'peace' without healing the brokenness of the people (Jer. 6:14; Ezek. 13:10) and announce the divine call 'to be just and do justice'.

Through its people, the church has the greatest resources – love, faith, concern, and professional skills, besides the mandate to liberate the captives and to work for just peace. These resources can be mobilized to fight violence against children including child trafficking and to bring healing to survivors. As a community, the Church can play a supportive role and caring community where survivors can find hope, faith, support, and a new life.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. Is child trafficking or child abuse an issue in your community? If it is, how is the church addressing such an issue?
2. How should the church break the culture of silence on such an issue?
3. What steps should the Church take to restore dignity of children and protect them from all forms of violations?



FOCUS IV
**THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD:
SUSTAINING GOD'S CREATION**

Sustaining God's Creation

Dr. Haskarlianus Pasang¹

Scripture

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. 5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, 6 but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. 7 Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. 8 Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 10 A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. 11 The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah,

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where there is gold. 12 (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) 13 The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. 14 The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. 15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." 18 The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." 19 Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 21 So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." 24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." (Genesis 2: 4-25)

1. Listening to Asian environmental realities

Psalm 24:1 declares that

"the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

But in reality, millions of hectares of lowland tropical forests in South East Asia – including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and

Papua New Guinea – have disappeared due to extensive agricultural, industrial and urban development.

Psalm 19:1 says

"the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Yet air pollution is prevalent in China, India and other Asian countries. According to the United Nations and Asian Development Bank (2012), the high economic growth rate in Asia and the Pacific is accompanied by intensive resource use, rising energy cost, climate change and declines in the ability of ecosystems to provide critical ecosystem services. Consequently, these are increasing the environmental, economic and social vulnerabilities and uncertainties.

The following issues are directly related to the environmental crisis in Asia: population, depletion of natural resources, climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution, soil erosion and deforestation. The population of Asia is estimated to be 4.4 billion, compared to 4.3 billion in 2013. Asians live in more than 50 countries in the largest continent on earth, covering 44,579,000 sq. kilometers, which is about 30% of the earth's land area. Thus, we do not only need more resources to feed people, land to build houses, energy to run devices. We also need to manage waste, treat pollution in air and water, and mitigate the impact of climate change.

2. Listening to biblical text

In the last three decades, solutions to environmental crisis have largely been through technological or regulatory approaches. However, there is a great need to acknowledge the problem at hand, especially from a biblical perspective. According to Our Father's World (Brown 2008), a large part of the stress we put on God's creation is caused by our sins. Following Brown's suggestion, we need to conduct a diagnosis to find the root cause of the problem in order to come up with the right solution. As Genesis 2:4-25 will be the main tool in performing the diagnosis, we will conduct four levels of assessment: the gift of life (see vss 7, 21-22), the gift of good creation

(vss 4-6, 8-14), the gift of work (vss 15-17), and the gift of suitable helper (vss 18-25).

2.1. The gift of life (Gen 2: 7, 21-22)

The creation process of the first human being was: “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground” (v 7a) and, “the LORD God made a woman...” (v 22). We are part of the Lord’s creation just as much as God’s other creation, including animals (Gen 1:24-31). What makes us different is that “the man became a living being” because “God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen 2:7b). More importantly, as Genesis 1:26 points out, “we are created in the image of God.” It is clear that our life is a gift from God and its worth comes from God’s Spirit, not from our achievements or abilities. God values our lives as we are created in God’s own image and God chooses to give us the miraculous gift of life. Do you value your life as God does?

2.2. The gift of good creation (Gen 2:4-6, 8-14)

Adam and Eve were placed in a garden given by the Creator – it was a place of beauty, bounty and peace. The fact that God made good creation is a central theme of the Old Testament (Gen 1:9, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 2:9) as well as the New Testament. Ron Eldson (1992) in his book, *Green House Theology*, suggested five meanings of good creation. First, creation represents its Creator, therefore we can see and experience God’s presence through God’s creation. Second, God created God’s creation with diversity and interdependence among creation. Third, God’s creation is beautiful. Fourth, creation brings joy to its Creator. Fifth, creation fulfills human needs. It is interesting that Genesis 2:8-14 not only mentions food (v 9) and water (v 10), but also mineral resources – ‘gold, aromatic resin and onyx’ (v 11-12). Do you value the creation as highly as its Creator does?

2.3. The gift of work (Gen 2: 15-17)

God’s purpose in creating us is to care for the rest of God’s creation. We were represented by Adam and Eve in the garden of

Eden, ‘to work it and to take care of it’ (v 15). This is the gift of God. Here we are presented with a picture of our first parents as ‘gardeners’ of the Earth; God’s garden. According to Sir John Houghton (1997), in his paper, *Christians and Environment*, we too as gardeners have the responsibility to take care of God’s creation because, first, a garden provides food and water and other minerals to sustain life in all its forms and human industry. The Earth provides resources for humans to use. Second, a garden is to be maintained as a place of beauty. We are to live in harmony with the rest of creation and to appreciate the value of all parts of creation. Third, a garden is a place where humans can be creative to increase its beauty and productivity. Fourth, a garden is to be kept in such a way that it will benefit the future generations. Do you enjoy your work as the gift of God?

2.4. The gift of suitable helper (Gen 2:18-25)

From the beginning, God saw that “it is not good for the man to be alone” (v 18), therefore God made “a helper suitable for him.” The creation of Eve to be a helper for Adam stresses the importance of diversity, complementarity, companionship, mutual support and fellowship. That the man and his suitable helper are “one flesh” (v 24) and “felt no shame” (v 25) indicates that they have very open and mutual relationship as well as a productive partnership in exercising their responsibility to work and to take care of creation that was entrusted to them. Thus, they work hand in hand in sustaining God’s creation. They also have an intimate fellowship with God, their Creator and the owner of Eden. Do you have an intimate relationship with your wife/husband, ministry team members, and with God?

3. Reflecting on the role of the church

During the last ten years, GKI Bogor Baru in Bogor, Indonesia has established various environmental programs. These include a recycling center, optimising the church’s land for organic farming. It has dedicated the whole month of June as Environmental Month during which sermons, bible study, car free day and other activities

related to our responsibility for the environment are observed. Also, there is an annual program with the local government. However, much work remains to be done in order to transform individual and church lifestyles to take care of the environment and put into practice an example set by Jesus Christ.

As far as environmental issues are concerned, it seems we lack the capability to carry out what we have preached and committed to act upon. There is too much preaching with too little action! The church has long ignored the earth and the environment, and neglected the importance of creation and its place in the overall Christian message. If the church is able to introduce these themes and its role in sustaining the creation in a relevant way, it could make a difference in its context. A strong challenge for the church, therefore, is to include environmental concerns as part of its mission.

At least three aspects need to be considered in terms of the church's role in sustaining God's creation. First, the church's educational programs should instill Christian values and attitudes in line with the Word of God as our Creator and owner of the Earth. Second, the church's lifestyle must reflect its commitment to the environment through full utilization of its properties in an environmentally responsible way. Examples are implementing energy saving measures such as rain water collection for internal use, initiating conservation program, allowing neighbours to use church properties for parking or other community activities. Third, the church should help provide leadership in society in this area, by speaking with a clear voice, showing action, and leading by example.

4. Question for discussion

1. The local church is a representation of Godself and what God is most concerned about. What kinds of programs has your church done in relation to caring for God's creation?
2. What other programs should your church do or can do better in order to sustain God's creation?



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