

Micah Network Consultation: *Marginalised People – Our Christian Response*

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Malaysia

Call to the Church to Respond to the Marginalised

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Asian Church Today

- With a multitude of many-faceted, profound and unprecedented struggles and changing scenarios, the Asian Church and the nations of Asia, have by His grace, moved into the next challenging.
- We are groping for answers to serious problems facing humankind, the major ones being economic crises affecting quality of life, political turmoil, religious and ethnic conflicts, moral decadence leading to crime and killer diseases, phantom of nuclear holocaust, and ecological abuse threatening the very existence of life.
- The church, in spite of this turbulent 'yo-yo' scenario prevailing persistently for over some decades in Asia, has been able to weather the successive waves of storms and is currently pressing on to face a new phase of contemporary challenges of much complexity and severity.
- With such phenomena threatening human life and institutions, disorder and fear, how is the Church, the "ecclesia" of Jesus Christ, going to face these challenges in these end-times and be the "salt" and "light" and God's agent to reconcile the Asian community with God and bring peace and transformation through the Gospel?

1.2 The Role of the Church

The premise of this paper is that the Church under any and all circumstances has a triple role to play for God's glorification, namely,

- (1) To fulfill God's Great Commission by preaching the gospel in all the world (Mark 16:15),
- (2) To demonstrate God's love through the Good Samaritan-styled social concern ministries to enhance quality of life of the poor and needy (Luke 4:18), and
- (3) To prepare God's people by warning and teaching them "in all wisdom" and presenting them perfect in Christ Jesus at the coming of the Lord (Col. 1:28).

Knowing and believing that "*With God all things are possible*" (Matt. 19:26) and His

ways and thoughts are infinitely superior to those of ours (Isa. 5:8), the Church of Jesus Christ must seek our God who alone has all the answers to the predicaments being faced.

2.0 PURPOSE

This paper proposes to identify challenges facing the marginalized people of Asia and to make submission of possible responses that could help the church meet these challenges

3.0 APPROACH

- 3.1 This paper first provides a background to the Asian turbulent scenario.
- 3.2 The paper then presents the spiritual scene of the church by relating the advent of the Church in Asia, dimensions of its growth and impact on society at large and factors restraining it from further growth.
- 3.3 Finally, I would like to present my views on challenges, contemporary and potential, that have to be addressed by the Asian Church in particular, and the World Church Community in general.
- 3.4 At the same time a revival and renewal has to be generated so that a burning desire for holiness and righteousness in God's people can keep them ardently waiting with confidence for the fulfillment of God's promise that, as Paul says, "*.... He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ*" (Phil 1:6) and that the very God of peace will sanctify the church to "*..be preserved blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Thess.5:23).

4.0 BACKGROUND TO THE TURBULENT SCENARIO IN ASIA

- 4.1 The forces of change can be better understood when viewed in the context of existing commonality and diversity of forces at work within and between countries in the region.
- 4.2 Being a great continent, Asia, comprising 45 countries, is more densely populated than the other continents on the globe.
- 4.3 The majority of the peoples of Asia follow major world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and other related sects or cults.
- 4.4 While most of Asia is under democratic political systems of administration, the communist ideology is significant in China, North Korea, and North Vietnam. Military rule has control of Myanmar and Pakistan.
- 4.5 The Church of Jesus Christ set foot in Asia in AD 52. The Pentecostal movement and missions have since become aggressive in God's Great Commission work, social concern ministries and giving much emphasis on the preparation and readiness for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

5.0 THE ECONOMIES OF ASIAN NATIONS

5.1 The countries with high economic freedom in Asia before the regional economic crisis of 1998 were Hong Kong (now an integral part of China), Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Malaysia.

5.2 In the regional scene, ASEAN and APEC were looked upon as building blocks in the world economy. The need for regional ties in Asia became increasingly important in the wake of the EEC Common Market strategy to protect member countries' interests.

5.3 Situations in some countries turned for the worse with riots becoming commonplace and the ruling governments being accused of corruption, cronyism, nepotism, and mismanagement. Unemployment became rampant, commodity prices soared, and food shortages were painful.

5.4 The breakup of the recent World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle clearly indicates the lack of readiness of some nations for trade liberalization that takes into account and balances the interests of all.

6.0 POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION

6.1 Except for Japan and Thailand, the other Asian nations have had to experience some form of colonial subjection or other. Several of them are today either under military rule, one 'party-guided' democracy or totalitarian rule, while others are under democratic rule.

6.2 Political conflicts in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Western Asia have given rise not merely to economic instability but, more seriously, they have also cut deep and difficult-to-cure wounds that remain fresh in the minds of victims to keep reminding them of deplorable atrocities related to ethnicity and religious strives.

6.3 As for ideological philosophies dictating governments, the fall of the Berlin wall leading to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe has certainly driven a clear message to the world and in particular to peoples still under communist and socialist ideological control.

7.0 HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

7.1 What impact will the fall of the Berlin Wall have had on human rights thinking in Asian countries? The uprising witnessed at the Beijing Tiananmen Square incident demonstrated deep concern for "egalitarian-development" strategies based on earlier struggles for justice and equitable distribution of the country's wealth. Was human rights restored in East Timor? Calls for reformation have been heard in some countries demanding justice, freedom of worship, equality in sharing of wealth and so on.

7.2 A positive note is seen in responses by a few governments to be audible to criticisms, re-examine mistakes and make corrective actions, as evidenced by similar actions by

the legitimized governments in the post-election era in Malaysia and Indonesia (the most recent ones to have had elections).

8.0 SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENT

8.1 Social services in several nations significantly improved the quality of life of the peoples.

Yet, in Asia we see some of the poorest living under miserable conditions. Apart from mismanagement and related factors mentioned earlier, poor endowment of natural resources, natural calamities, lack of education facilities, poor health are other contributory factors for persistence of poverty in Asian populations.

8.2 Women have significantly moved vertically to higher positions in both the private as well as the public sector in recent decades, thereby enhancing their standing in society as well possessing the ability to complement the earnings of the male spouse.

8.3 The population explosion is another fundamental problem. If it continues to increase at the rate of 2% per annum the world's population will double by the end of the century and it will have climbed to about 8 billion persons.

8.4 Clearly the present rate of population growth cannot continue indefinitely. It will have an adverse effect on creation. The environment will be exploited and the natural resources will be depleted. There will be increasing human suffering through hunger and diseases.

8.5 The rapid growth in population is altering the configuration of the population in ethnic and age balance of the world. At the same time, Christian families tend now to be smaller, multiple income and multi-generational.

8.6 Over time, there will be transformation of the population's ethnic configuration especially in the less developed countries in Asia where predominantly non-Christians. The other religious components of the population have been increasing.

9.0 TRANSFORMATION THROUGH INDUSTRIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT

9.1 Western technological innovations made over centuries were assimilated by the Asians within a short period of only 40 years.

9.3 The cyber technology has brought about a revolution that has made the world a global village.

9.4 China, Pakistan, India and North Korea were able to show the world their competency in space technology by their sending missiles.

9.5 While technology improved production, national wealth and quality of life, negative impact has been experienced viz. immorality via internet, video industry, immoral

living, disruptions in family, tensions, organized crime, gambling, tax cheating, drug traffic, pornography, fraud, and computer crime.

9.6 Robotic technology, bringing a breakthrough in heart surgery and Genetic sequencing among other innovations is said to revolutionize health care.

10.0 THE SPIRITUAL SCENE OF THE CHURCH IN ASIA

10.1 The Advent of the Church in Asia

Asia has the largest number of people unreached by the gospel in the world. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam have been experiencing a revival (and with a militant one as seen in Indonesia and India in recent times) that has had a restraining impact on sustenance of 'evangelical' church growth in some Asian nations, the prominent ones being North Korea and the northern region of Vietnam, and Indonesia.

10.2 Restraining Factors in Church Growth

The dismal performance in Asian Church growth could be attributed to several causal factors as below:

- a) The stigma of imperialism that came alongside the colonizing powers - British, Portuguese, Dutch, Americans, French and the like.
- b) The colonial rulers were opposed to evangelism, their priority being the economic and political advancement. This attitude frustrated efforts of missionaries.
- c) The lifestyles of those in the apex of the colonial administration and the soldiers lacked moral standards and were repulsive to the locals. As such Christianity could not be 'sold' easily.
- d) The cultural overtones and 'westernism' and the lack of customization of the new religion into the local cultural and social context did not make Christianity appealing to the local population.
- e) In certain cases, converts have betrayed their calling and through their complacency have done injustice to missionary efforts expended thus far.
- f) Finally, there was the lack of understanding that Asians have a "holistic view" of religion, meaning there is no separation between the sacred and the secular.

Although the above-mentioned factors contributed to making Christianity "offensive", social concern ministries and good works in the form of social, welfare and infrastructure-oriented development programmes have endeared some of the locals to the Christian faith to some extent.

10.3 Contemporary Growth Environment

10.3.1 The churches in Asia are indeed in totality a small entity in a vast continent

overpopulated by multitudes of people and with a large number among them living in poverty and lacking basics of living and indeed plagued by severe socio-economic, political and morality problems.

10.3.2 Economic crises have escalated through soaring inflation, food shortages and rampant unemployment. Natural disasters such as earthquakes in Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia and floods in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and the Philippines have accentuated sufferings of peoples. The Asian churches have to press on under difficult and trying socio-political and economic environments.

10.4 The Recent Phenomenal Church Growth

10.4.1 In terms of propagating the faith, church growth has been most phenomenal and encouraging in Indonesia, South Korea and China where it has doubled to 75 million Christians in the last two decades. The overall increase in the Asian Christian population, too, has doubled in the same period.

10.4.2 The same time cross-cultural missions have begun to take root in the wake of emerging indigenous mission agencies. An estimated 25,000 nationals from Asia are serving in these ministries, they being largely Filipino, Chinese, Korean and Indian missionaries.

10.5 Church Growth Undeterred by Sufferings and Persecutions

10.5.1 In the midst of encouraging expansion of God's kingdom on earth, severe trials had to be faced by churches operating in Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal, Mongolia, Indonesia, China and some Middle-East countries.

10.5.2 The preaching of the Gospel encountered problems varying in severity and magnitude from one country to another.

10.5.3 The bureaucratic wings of Government in several Asian countries have been largely responsible for stifling church growth.

10.6 The Communist Ideological Influence

10.6.1 Communism, a force that has been impeding missionary work in North Korea, China, Vietnam, and Myanmar, seems to be waning in its credibility of uplifting of the poor. The Christian "Good Samaritan" socio-political involvement that is part and parcel of Christian duty has indeed impacted the people under the communist regime.

10.6.2 House churches in contemporary Vietnam, China and North Korea have become popular vehicles of church growth.

11. THE CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES OF THE ASIAN CHURCH

The Church in Asia is beset with a multitude of challenges that are posed not just by political institutions but also by societal imperatives that not only threaten to stifle its growth but also, in certain situations, to bring the Christian faith to extinction.

- a. **Caesar of the modern world – emergence of political newism**
- b. **The Babylonian pursuit – free market capitalism**
- c. **Widening chasm – inequality in economic and wealth distribution**
- d. **Lust of the eyes – temptation of greed**
- e. **The golden calf - seduction of materialism**
- f. **Cry of the heart – the poor and the marginalised**

(i) Asia is gripped with at least three interlocking crises. There is a growing oppressive poverty in the midst of affluence in some segments of society; the serious physical and health stress; and spreading of communal violence as seen in Indonesia and Afghanistan.

(ii) Though some Asian countries are well-off economically and having a significant number of billionaires, a significant number of the world's poorest people live in Asia - and that too in despair and suffering. As Saphir Athyal said, "**In a given country one sees oasis of riches in oceans of poverty.**" The truth, indeed, is that poverty and marginalized community are common pictures in more than one Asian country. Many among the poor and marginalized have surrendered themselves into bonded service. Poverty has driven more to subject themselves to earn a living by immoral means. Crime is rising with the income gaps between the well-off and the poor within widening. This scenario of poverty lying at the doorstep of the church is, indeed, the responsibility of the "relief-arm" of the church. Indeed, it s a challenge to take over the good works of the "colonial" churches in providing welfare and social services.

(iii) The fast changing demographic and urbanisation-related scenario is constantly adding new challenges to the change. Except in city-state nations such as Singapore and Hong Kong and to some extent in South Korea and Malaysia churches are largely situated in the rural areas. They serve the segments of society in poverty and relatively disadvantaged in access to modern facilities - social, welfare and infrastructure-related amenities. But in recent years the scenario has changed the landscape with manufacturing industries moving to the rural areas.

(iv) The 'bread and butter' issue, being a really critical phenomenon and therefore demands that evangelism to be concurrently pursued with good works. Providing relief assistance, food and medical supplies, and other forms of help to farmers and other manual workers can certainly help to somewhat alleviate problems associated with basic needs of the poor and need. Such provisions will further help mission workers gain their confidence and thereby enable the gospel to permeate into the society they are working with. The church has to have this "Good Samaritan" burden to give for the sake of the poor, needy and the lost.

(v) Thus the church has to be equipped in terms of capability to address and move forward to face emerging needs of new dimensions and to address critical

urbanisation-related problems such as Aids/HIV, prostitution (also children), child pregnancy, gangsterism, drug trade and abuse, child abuse and growing social ills - aimless loitering and promiscuity among the youth population. Awareness programmes will have to be expanded and intensified in order to combat these emerging problems. More Christian social workers will have to be mobilised to complement and supplement ongoing ministries by the church workers in these areas.

(vi) With modernisation of the peoples in the rural areas and migration of rural workforce into towns and cities, the rural church has to be equipped to handle the above-mentioned urban-related social ills before it is overtaken by events. Exposure and experiential-learning training is much needed to prepare churches for both 'preventive' and 'curative' ministry. The migrant population too can benefit by 'preventive' knowledge that save them from becoming victims to such negative forces that accompany development.

(vii) Though in Christian compassion and justice we have a powerful antidote to oppressive poverty, yet these 'weapons' remain greatly underused. The Church needs to re-think her social responsibility to cooperate with, and even in some measure act as, agents of God's common grace in meeting this human predicament.

(viii) There is a need to mobilise the Christian human resource in offering health care and medical development especially in the poorer countries where the catastrophe is most prevalent. Christian Relief and Development Agencies need to intensify and strengthen their support and involvement.

(ix) Global stewardship and sharing of resources become paramount in our Christian concern. There is a need for re-distribution of God's harvest in a more dynamic and biblical context.

(x) The Church can play an important role in helping indigenous initiative for transformation. There is a need for appropriate education development, relevant technology and change of social structure.

(xi) The Church needs to present a biblical view on justice and righteousness. The Christian politicians can assist in the development of practical policy approaches and strategies to political issues. They should propose solutions, which both seek to reform and, if necessary, replace institutions and practices that may have adverse effects on the nation.

(xii) The Church must dare to articulate and proclaim the full truth about the injustice and oppression in the face of powerful persons, pressures and institutions, which profit by concealment of the truth. We must be willing to identify and condemn social, political and institutionalised evil, especially when it becomes embedded in systems of authority. Such recognition of hard truths is a first step towards the freedom for which people wait.

(xiii) There is need for global networking of churches and evangelical Christians in sharing of insights and experiences related to socio-political, religious and moral issues, dissemination of information, development of critical approaches and strategic

methods. Working closely with the Religious Liberty Commission of WEF will certainly strengthen the solidarity of the evangelical presence and influence in these restricted nations.

(xiv) Positive networking with those in authority, supplementing Government efforts in providing relief in kind and cash for emergencies and the like can provide a good image that could help minimize opposition to church growth.

- g. Ideological impediment – encounter persecution**
- h. The billiard Christian phenomena – temptation of complacency**
- i. The toothless tiger – the weakness of the church**
- j. Split personalities - disunity**
- k. The theological dictums – theological divide**
- l. The chameleon deception – false teaching**
- m. The awakening lions – emergence of other faiths**
- n. Titanic – population explosion**
- o. The unmeasured asset – leadership needs**

12.0 CONCLUSION

(i) While having to face constraints in terms of limited finances, geographical vastness and communication problems, illiteracy in local languages and dialects, shortage of "labourers" (Church workers) in the midst of plentiful "harvest" of potential souls, political, ethnic and religious impediments and a host of other challenges, the Church of Jesus Christ in Asia has to press on to fulfill its three-prong mission of fulfilling Christ's Great Commission, demonstrating God's love to the poor, lost and the needy, and preparing God's people for the coming of the Lord.

(ii) Based on current and potential challenges ahead, I would like to suggest that the church in Asia seeks God's will, His wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit in facing the challenges and responding accordingly. Here are some thoughts that I would like to humbly submit to this congregation of God chosen people in this forum.

12(a) Maximising Opportunities

Thus, while there are problems affecting the Church now and as we will experience in the beginning of the new decade, there are also prospects and opportunities for us to maximise upon. What is required is continued prayerful vigilance and looking to God for a proper understanding of times, so that like the children of Issachar in the Old

Testament, we will know what we ought do (1 Chron.12:32).

12(b) Seeking God and Understanding Times

Having the understanding of the children of Issachar, the church will have to wage warfare against all forces hindering God's plan for Asia. Prayer chains and rallies (where possible) at individual, church, national and regional levels could be initiated. Concerted prayer efforts (not just seasonal ones) to thwart opposition by 'territorial' and other demonic forces can move this mountain. The power of the Holy Spirit must be manifest. The fire of revival and renewal of the church has to be ongoing with worship that is vibrant and authentic. The churches in the communist (China, North Korea, and North Vietnam) and army-controlled (Pakistan and Myanmar) countries need to networked with and special assistance provided as required by them.

12(c) Paradigm Shift of Worldviews of mission and evangelisation

A paradigm shift in worldviews of mission and evangelism is needed. The approaches by the church have to be contextualised to Asian cultural and spiritual needs. In this context the church has to be also outward looking in terms of grasping events in the political, economic, social, technological and spiritual arenas. These will have to be understood in the context of prophetic scriptures and God's guidance in order that the church can develop a proactive stance and not be caught by surprises. Governments can benefit by wise counsel of Christian leaders working closely with the church. The teaching institutions will have to tailor training of pastors and church workers to understanding the realities and sensitivities out there and developing capabilities in outreach out in line with the paradigm shift. Believers too need training as they can supplement and complement church ministry efforts.

12(d) Maximising Cyber-age Technology for God's Glory

The cyber-age technology must be harnessed and maximised in achieving mission objectives. They can help produce proactive forecasts and other relevant information and statistics for planning and activating church growth. The intelligent use of web-sites on the Internet to subtly counter false claims, reports or opinions on religious matters that affects the church can help build up credibility of the church as a viable force. Evangelism programmes on the internet, radio, and TV (where possible) have to be customised and the cultural and political context to become more acceptable to the local communities.

12(e) Proactive roles of Churches, Christian Organisations and Individuals

The church, national, regional and international Christian business-related organisations and Christian leaders in government and non-governmental agencies will have to discard archaic modes in achieving the mission objectives. Timely and effective feedback of happenings can help them develop corrective action to avoid being overtaken by events.

12(f) Finality of Christ - the Ultimate

(a) As an institution that is integrated into the broad social, economic, political, religious and moral order of the society, the Church of Asia, by her action, could affect the prevailing equilibrium. For this reason, the Church needs to be attentive to the impact of current development and changes in Asia. The Church should be able to offer some meaningful views and much-needed answers to these issues affecting region in general, and our nation in particular, within the broad framework of God's plan for His kingdom. As Christians, we believe that there is a divine plan and purpose in history. To bring about fulfillment of these, God has intervened actively and directly in the present Asian affairs. God's plan in history is revealed in the Scriptures and it is there too that we read how it is being unfolded. Plurality of religions, cultures, traditions and ideologies is a reality that has to be faced by the church. It is mission work in this context that the cross is heaviest to bear. Irrespective of denominational differences the one must be an "exclusivist" pertaining to salvation. The *uniqueness, superiority and finality of Christ* cannot under any situation be compromised with.¹¹

(b) Humankind has spiritual yearnings and aspirations and is truly searching for rest and bliss. The paths used are manifold. To walk on the right way, in the truth and to attain that ultimate bliss, Jesus is the answer. Here is the responsibility to lead them to God's salvation, love and compassion and perfection. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit the church has the responsibility to share faith, hope and love to the Asians out there.

(c) There is no room for spiritual complacency. We need to pray for sensitivity, boldness and faithfulness to His Word, knowing that in God we are a people of substance. As the apostle Paul has exhorted, the church has to "*pray without ceasing*" (1 Thes. 5:17) for God's perfect will to be done for His church in Asia and the world.

MARANATHA!

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