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CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA DIVISION FOR MISSION AND EVANGELISM  
CONSULTATION ON "MISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF ENDEMIC POVERTY AND  
IN SITUATIONS OF AFFLUENCE", MANILA, DECEMBER 10th-14th, 1982.

Sixteen countries in the South-East Asian region were invited to send delegates to this Conference who had some background experience in the area. I was nominated by the General Secretary of the Australian Council of Churches to represent Australia and I gained great value from the experience. The only other European was a New Zealander identified with the Maori people.

The initial impact of the experience for me was to become involved in the concerns of the Filipino people. This arose out of participation in two human rights rallies, meeting with evicted urban squatters, meeting the wives of political detainees, observing the impact of military dictatorship upon dissidents and, during the time of my visit, the closure of the last free newspaper. This represented the next round of the Marcos government clamping down upon those critical of its activities. At the beginning of 1981 they began with the detention of leading Trade Unionists, in early 1982 many Christians of both Catholic and Protestant Churches were detained and by the end of 1982, the free media came in for similar treatment. Such activities are taking place in the context of contrasting poverty and wealth, side by side, with the government trying to impose its 'development objectives' on the people through military and police measures. No doubt many of the 85 per cent Filipinos still have very traditional approaches to religion, but the Christians I met were people of high calibre with a deep spiritual and political commitment to achieve justice, human rights, and what they call social transformation.

Understandably, I tended to begin with the specific and the empirical (the sad plight of the Filipino people), then to ask questions as to what were the economic, sociological and political causes of such a situation which the Phillipines shares with many other Third World countries in the region. It was later that I then came to reflect theologically on the meaning of these events for Christian mission and I am still struggling with questions of strategy as to what the Christian churches could do in the region.

The Conference:

1) Structure:

The Conference was organised at the Conference Centre of the National Council of Churches of the Phillipines in Quezon City and the 20 participants heard and debated papers from four people, including myself. They then broke up into four task groups to write reports on the issues that had emerged from the Conference papers.

Group A - wrote a report on the politics and internationalisation of poverty, enslavement by economic systems, and the relationship between poverty and militarisation.

Group B - looked at the question of affluence and its emergence and maintenance by the poor, the lifestyle and credibility of exponents for social justice, the envisaging of solutions and organising of resources to overcome the problem.

Group C - looked critically at the question of development and its relationship to mission, considering whether development was a prop to the status quo and then examining how local congregations could come to grips with these larger issues confronting society.

Group D - discussed radical involvement in mission for social change and social justice and considered the motif of reconciliation.

In the next few weeks the Conference proceedings will be published in full as a first step in raising awareness in the Churches in the countries in the South-East Asian region, and copies will be available for perusal of the Australian Council of Churches Executive.

2) Rationale:

The Consultation believes that God's purpose is to liberate, transform, reconcile the world to Himself, as expressions of his love for the world. The Church is called to be a witness to what Jesus said and did, living not for itself but for God's mission. That mission is for and with people who are enmeshed in social, political and economic aspects of their respective cultures. Thus the Church should carry out its mission in ways that are not only faithful to the missionary imperatives of the gospel but are also contextually relevant. Two conditions stand out in Asia and they are endemic poverty and pockets of affluence. The few who are rich improve and maintain their position at the expense of the growing numbers who are poor. The question of justice is therefore an ethical imperative willed by God and part of the Church's mission is to remind people and institutions that they are accountable for these situations of gross injustice. In particular, there is a prophetic task which involves judging practices that divert justice as well as supporting measures to enhance it. Economic justice is rooted in God's promise of abundant life to all. The purpose of economic justice is to liberate the needy from deprivation and the affluent from undue attachment to things.

3) General Comments:

It is very difficult to sum up the impact of such a Conference because the themes are so broad and the task of transformation so difficult.

Three months after the Conference a number of considerations have made an enduring impact upon me personally. The world is confronted with a massive and profound economic problem, against which the present recession in First World countries pales into insignificance. Despite the emphasis upon development since the 1960s, the condition of the majority of people in Asia seems to have worsened as a result of these considerable developmental activities. The pattern of economic growth favours the rich elites in those countries and has frequently dislocated the poor from traditional activities. The bulk of Western capital investment is concentrated in the industrial sector in the belief that rapid industrialisation creates conditions for wider utilisation of the abundant labour available and reduces inequalities in the distribution of income. What has happened in fact is that the industrial sector has achieved considerably more expansion that led to the impoverishment of the traditional sector. The gap between the two has widened and the majority of the population remain outside this development process, often disrupted by it in their personal lives. We are confronted with a massive worldwide system with transnational capital investment which produces economic problems of this kind, and then perpetuates them, leaving the governments of those countries in impossible situations and often forced to achieve law and order by military control. Of the 15 countries present at the Consultation only half had any semblance of democratic institutions. Thus the economic entanglement between nations has been a disaster in many respects, just as Maynard Keynes once warned.

Ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality - these are the things which should by their nature be international. But let goods be homespun wherever it is reasonably possible, and above all let finance be primarily national.

Thus it appears that many of the solutions to the world's economic problems are to encourage nations to become economically more self-sufficient, yet the flow of international capital is pulling them in the opposite direction.

In an attempt to identify the sociological causes of poverty in Asia, Professor Byong-Suh Kim of Korea, identified three major factors.

- i) An economic structure which is beneficial for the local ruling elite in Asian countries and for the developed countries themselves.
- ii) The lifestyles of middle and upper-middle class people and a strong desire on the part of those groups to maintain the status quo in their own living standards.
- iii) Growing militarism and the transfer of capital and technology by multi-national corporations at great cost to Asian countries purchasing them.

Against such a background, it is not surprising to discover that the analyses and proposed solutions of some of the

Conference participants was of a somewhat radical nature. Many of them, particularly the Filipino delegates were much influenced by liberation theology, while the daily Bible studies "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom" had a strongly Marxist orientation, which some of us challenged for being rather onesided in its interpretation.

However, the reality is that many Christians in Asia feel that their society must have a vision, a future, which affirms people's hopes and offers them a concrete social programme which will bring about the desired change in the present political and economic situation. Thus they would argue that the ultimate vision is that of the Kingdom of God, while the long term social programme is that of socialism while the short term intermediate programme is one of national democracy. They would argue that these are necessary steps because it is only when you achieve socialism that you can begin to see beyond it to the broader possibilities of the Kingdom. For us in Australia, these matters are debated particularly because we do not face massive problems of inequality and poverty that are confronting most Third World countries, so their position has to be respected.

One of the important local questions is how can we as a Church and a nation in the region identify more strongly with the people, their hopes and their legitimate aspirations? It will certainly help if we can come out strongly and say that we identify as being a legitimate part of the Asian region and that we want to share in their struggles for justice, freedom and human dignity. We can also do more as churches to promote the concept of mission in appropriate developmental terms which will enhance the total wellbeing of people. At this stage the Australian churches have seen such issues as peripheral to their life, witness the position of Action for World Development and similar other development agencies which are not regarded as part of the mainstream of the Christian church, but rather as peripheral agencies for those with particular enthusiasms and interests in that area. There was a good deal of criticism of agencies like World Vision amongst many Asian Christians who feel that the recipients of aid, are being held up in a paternalistic fashion to donors and potential donors in Western countries, are singled out from other children in their village and are required to present themselves to the donor in a particular way which can cut across the important developmental aspects of Christian mission.

The other big issue for us in Australia is one of awareness raising and probably the most effective way of doing this is direct face-to-face relationships. More could be done with colateral visits or exchanges. It was particularly good to meet up with Fr Don Edwards who was sponsored by the Australian Board of Missions and Ms Mandy Tibby who was sponsored by the Australian Council of Churches, who were both very helpful to me in understanding the Phillipines. Equally, there are excellent people in South-East Asia who would make an outstanding contribution to theological education, pastoral work in parishes and Christian education generally. The quality

of their Christian commitment and courage to follow through their actions despite personal dangers, would be an important witness to the Australian Church, secure as we are in our democratic institutions and our affluent lifestyle.

The other important initiative which must not be forgotten, especially as we approach the Goals for a Just Australian Society theme for next Social Justice Sunday, namely the 'Two million poor in Australian Society'. As I sought to explain to the other delegates, Australia has its own problems of relative poverty, which are particularly difficult for low-income people in a high technology society which leaves them with no other choice than to pay the cost of affluence. The important thing is to tackle poverty at home, but in the framework of international poverty and its causes and effects. At home or abroad, they are essentially the same, and there is a powerful argument to suggest that we need the poor in order to maintain our own affluence. Their contribution to our comfort provides powerful opposition to any programme aimed at reducing the level of poverty. Christians must therefore become a strong ethical force in the community, arguing that change is part of God's demand of justice for all. If one needed any further convincing, then the Phillipines experience serves as a solemn reminder when governments fail to give proper emphasis to human rights and social justice. As the gap between rich and poor widens, people become restive, governments are then forced to take militaristic and authoritarian measures to suppress them, the fabric of society begins to crumble as governments wage war on their own people. Thus more money is spent on militarisation and less on welfare, as dissidents are scapegoated as political agitators. In such a situation there is no doubt where the churches commitments must lie - with the poor, the outcasts and the excluded. At least in Australia we have a chance of avoiding such social conflicts before they worsen any further.

At the level of government some initiatives should also be taken to see whether the Australian Government can modify somewhat its approach to countries like the Phillipines. In 1975 East Timor was sacrificed in the interests of security in the region. If there were to be a serious disruption in the Phillipines, would the Australian Government support the Marcos regime or be sympathetic towards movements of social transformation? It is here that the churches might be able to play a useful role along with other aid and development organisations in urging the Federal Government to review its past practices to see whether some modifications in foreign policy can occur.

Peter Hollingworth,  
15th March, 1983.