

## **Statement of Asian Theology Conference Ecclesia in Asia (EA) & Church's Service to Asia**

### **Introduction**

1. We are 40 theologians from different Asian countries who have come together to reflect on the document EA. We are grateful to the document for challenging us to rethink and revision what it means to be Church in Asia. EA brings into focus the importance of an inculturated theology. We acknowledge the need of being Church in a holistic way that recognizes human needs in an Asian context. At the same time, we realize that we have too easily absorbed even dehumanizing elements. We confess our shortcomings. We remain in great part a clerical Church in which patriarchy, inequality based on caste differentiation, gender insensitivity and an unhealthy spirit of proselytization continue to disfigure the countenance of the Church in Asia. Yet we discover God's saving action and the presence of the divine in the many faces of the Churches in Asia as well as in other faith persuasions.

2. To be Church in the Asia of our times is to be listening to the voice of God in the different religions and in the poor; to be a pluriform community in the differing and diverse contexts of our world; to be a kenotic Church that finds its true identity in selfless service to others. In most Asian countries, the Church is a "little flock" and as such has learnt to live among other religions. We note that in some parts of Asia, the Church has to contend with persecution due to various factors, yet it continues to take to its heart the hopes and aspirations of Asia. A primary characteristic of the Asian Church is that it has made experience the basis of its identity and continues to realize itself in dialogue with other religions.

### **Challenges**

3. The newness of the Asian context invites the Church to recognize questions and issues that established churches in other parts of the world do not face. In the first place, there is the experience of religious and cultural pluralism that invites us to discard any single viewpoint from which one passes judgment on other religions, customs, practices, and others' ways of thinking and perceiving the world.

4. Secondly, the cultural and religious richness of the peoples of Asia goes together with an enforced poverty and a systemic injustice that still oppress and dehumanize vast masses of our peoples. Stark inequalities marginalize a multitude of vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples,

Dalits, the landless, migrants, and the displaced. Today, predatory and/or exploitative globalization complicates and aggravates this situation, betraying the promise of a better and more just world. The destruction and the destabilization of the eco-systems adversely affect the poor, women and the marginalized more than the beneficiaries whose life-style is the main cause of the environmental degradation in Asia.

5. Thirdly, violence has increasingly corrupted the atmosphere in many countries of Asia. Though the root causes are usually economic and political, many of these countries are racked with communal violence. Many conflicts have taken on an inter-ethnic and inter-religious dimension. Religious fanaticism and extremism become manifest when groups of people lose confidence in civil society's ability to preserve a just social order and freedom for all peoples to charter their legitimate destiny. Neither can we ignore the manifold violence to which children in Asia are subjected.

6. Fourthly, in a world that is becoming increasingly globalised, many people in Asia are uprooted both geographically and culturally, and are used as commodities. This makes them lose their religious and cultural moorings. Such erosion and loss lead to a crisis of identity and a lack of universal values. People thus become vulnerable to manipulation by extremists' groups and /or are enmeshed in a consumerist culture of instant gratification. Many are even tempted to self-destructive behaviour.

7. Fifthly, women experience discrimination on different fronts and suffer because of gender-based myths and stereotypes that unjustly marginalise women from the centre stage of life. By excluding half of the baptised members from Church leadership and governance, the patriarchal-hierarchical Church legitimizes gender inequality and injustice. Thus women's voices, views and decisions are absent in all major deliberations concerning Church life and order.

## **Responses**

8. In the context of cultural and religious pluralism, the Church increasingly sees herself as a co-pilgrim with other religions in a common effort to achieve wholeness in persons and societies. In the shared journey, the Church comes face to face with many cultures that for good or bad affect each other. In such a symbiotic situation, we feel the need to discern and discard the elements that dehumanize people so as to identify with those that lead to healing and wholeness. When dealing with religious experience, pluralism requires us to stress mutuality and the existence of different faith perspectives. In the context of pluralism and the values of wholeness and harmony, compassion and justice, we appreciate the experiential and symbolic approach of Asia.

9. The option for the poor that has characterized the efforts of the Church during the past few years brings human dignity to persons and offers support

to those fighting for the rights of the marginalized including children denied the benefits of their childhood. A primary goal of the Church's efforts would be to build up communities of peace and reconciliation that would cut across all social, cultural and religious barriers.

10. In its efforts to enhance the integrity of creation, the Church joins hands with those organizations and movements that are engaged in the struggle against ecological destruction. Efforts to evolve a theological and philosophical education that is sensitive to the well-being of the earth, will result in the linking of social justice to eco-justice as well as gender justice so that the option for the poor will also include the earth that has become the 'new poor.'

11. The Church has made efforts to relinquish its patriarchal structure and culture of dominance and discrimination. Through a process of gender-sensitivity, she makes a preferential option of concern for the silenced and invisible women in order to restore their rightful identity, dignity, place and role. To foster a participatory Church in Asia that is at the service of all Asian people, she empowers women to be co-workers and co-leaders of the Church community where all work as equal partners of the Kingdom mission.

## **Signs of Hope**

11. Christians in different parts of Asia have shown remarkable courage in the face of past and continuing persecution and government harassment. There is a faith dimension and robust dynamism present in the Churches of Asia that is responsible for dialogue with others, the constructing of Asian theologies (Dalit, Minjung, Feminist) and the active presence of the laity, especially women, in movements that liberate.

12. The presence of small interfaith communities at the grassroots furthers the cause of the poor and responds to their needs. Churches are increasingly collaborating with each other, with peoples' movements and with NGOs. Modern secular developments promote many liberating and universal values such as democracy, human rights and women's liberation.

## **A New Way of Being Church in Asia**

13. As a "little flock" in a Diaspora situation, we see ourselves as committed to a way of life in the Church that is called to be more of a movement than an institution. As followers of Jesus, we recognize the Spirit at work in other faith traditions. Hence we are called to be a listening Church that discovers rather than proclaims the Christ of Asia. Eschewing a minority syndrome as well as an obsession with numbers, we feel called to be "salt" and "light" to the peoples of Asia and the world. The Asian Churches have a special responsibility to build bridges between cultures and polities of the East and West. We also realize that the ineffable mystery of God is

both the beginning and end of our mission. This implies our being led by the Spirit in a theologizing mode that emphasizes not only the Christological but also underscores the Pneumatological .

## **Conclusion**

14. The Spirit of God, sovereign and all-encompassing, manifests herself in all of creation. She is at work in peoples of all ages, in the different and diverse cultures of the world and in the histories of nations. Recognizing the Spirit at work in her diverse forms and effects is the task of the Churches in Asia. The scope of the task is immense and so needs to be undertaken in collaboration and association with the different cultural and religious groupings in Asia. This is Asia's gift to the Church that calls for a response that is discerning, dynamic and dialogical. This is our hope and our dream.

*JDV, Pune 411014*

*Nov. 15-19, 2001*