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CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH EAST ASIA – CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

– A Case Study of South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST)

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Introduction:

Christian Churches in Asia are considered younger compare to those in Europe, North America, and even Africa, though many Asian historians has demonstrated that Christianity was present in the continent long before the arrival of western missionaries, T.V. Philip has pointed out that whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, St. Thomas was the great Apostle of the East as St. Paul was of the West. He says:

Christianity came to Asia in the first century itself, not through the missionary activities of Antioch and not ecclesiastically dependent upon Antioch. Addai, one of the seventy and a disciple of St. Thomas brought Christianity to Edessa, Aggai and Mari to Persia and St. Thomas to India. It was the Judaistic Christianity which originally spread to Asia, first among the Jewish settlers. Asian Christianity shared in the general characteristics of Jewish Christianity.¹

It is however, the modern western style of institutional theological education exist in Asia only less than two centuries and mostly introduced by the western missionary activities. These have characterized the theological education in Asia with orientations of western, missionary, and dependent. Namely, almost all theological seminaries in Asia are in some degree rooted in western modus of theological education, if not totally a copy of it; most of the seminaries and theological schools in Asia were founded on purpose of helping Christian mission either denominational or interdenominational²; and as well many of these theological schools even today are still heavily depend on the supports from western resources in terms of financial, personnel and curricula. With short history and limit resources for developing their theological education, theological educations in Asia are restrained to lower level of academic degrees, such as B. th., M.A R., and M. Div (B.D.).

¹ T.V. Philip, East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia, taken from website: <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp.title=1553>

² Some seminaries though emphasize more in theological researches it is nevertheless, their founding purposes are closely connected with the mission of developing missionaries with very few exception.

50 years ago (1957) the leaders of theological education in South East Asia countries, came together in Singapore to form the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia (ATSSEA), there were only 16 theological schools as founding members. This Association has grown to one hundred and four (104) member institutions when it celebrated it's 50 years jubilee anniversary. In 1981 the name of Association was changed to The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA).³ The objectives given to and services provided from the Association are, according to the handbook of the Association:

Besides publishing the Asian Journal of Theology, providing accreditation services, operating the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology, and promoting faulty development, theological renewal and contextualization in the light of the critical Asian principle⁴, and coordinating regional planning in theological education, the Association has run programs designed to meet the needs of the theological education in the region. In the past it conducted theological study institutes in various disciplines of the theological spectrum and facilitated faculty exchange. Some of its present programs include the improvement of the management and administration of schools, the search for a new spirituality in Christian formation, the encouragement of experiments in innovative or alternative patterns of theological education, the promotion of closer relationship between seminary and church, the search for a more adequate understanding of excellence in theological education and the development of Asian perspective and insights in Christian theology through theological seminar-workshops⁵.

The Establishment of South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST)

Considering the short and limit experiences and resources the member schools of ATESEA have, to respond to the urgent and common demands of a higher theological education from churches in the region. A consortium style of higher theological education institute, the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST) was established in 1966 under the auspices of the Association of the Theological Schools in South East Asia. In cooperation with and on behalf of member schools of the Association, the Graduate School conducts programs of advanced theological studies at the master and doctoral levels and grants the degree

³ A historical note, The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, Handbook of ATESEA/SEAGST 2007-2008 ,compiled by Huang Po Ho and Sientje Merentek-Abram, published by ATESEA, Philippines. 2007. p. 3.

⁴ The Critical Asian Principle (CAP) was introduced by Dr. Emerito P. Nicpil and was adopted by the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology. It is however, this guiding principle for theological education was replaced by a newly formulated collective work of Guidelines for Doing Theologies in Asia (GDTA) since ATESEA's Jubilee celebration.

⁵ Handbook, ATESEA/SEAGST, Ibid.

of Master of Theology (M. theol.) and Doctor of Theology (D. theol.).⁶ The program makes available to graduates of approved theological schools in South East Asia the combined academic resources of the participating accredited schools so that suitable students may have the opportunity of continuing their studies within South East Asia.⁷

Four specific aims were designed for the Graduate School:

1. To assist in the intellectual and spiritual development of Asian theologians so that their Christian ministry will be enrich and be more effective;
2. To contribute to the emergence of contextual and Asia-oriented theology by providing the facilities, and opportunities of research into, and reflection upon, the Christian faith as it relates to the living faiths, cultures and traditions of Asia, and to contemporary Asian society and its problems;
3. To further the training of competent teachers for the theology faculties of the region and of leaders for Christian ministry in the church and society;
4. To promote opportunities for the interchange of the graduate students and faculty members between the different participating institutions with a view to enhancing both a regional consciousness and Christian fellowship across the barriers of race, cultures and nations.⁸

The SEAGST is a Christian institution, which is entirely ecumenical in doctrine and in its relationships to the churches and participating schools. The faculty and students represent a broad spectrum of Christian belief and denominational affiliation.⁹ The umbrella of the consortium covered 27 participating schools from 7 areas in 9 countries. There are 2 schools from Hong Kong, 9 schools from 2 areas in Indonesia, 4 schools from the area of Malaysia-Singapore-Thailand-Sri Lanka, 4 schools from Myanmar, 5 schools from Philippines and 3 schools from Taiwan. In last 40 years the SEAGST has successfully developed theological scholars and faculties to meet the needs of Asian churches and their theological institutions. There are more than 60 D. Theol. graduates and hundreds of M. theol. alumni, who are serving churches and theological education over Asian countries and beyond.

Critical Asian Principle -- Primary Guidepost for Doing Theology and Theological Education in Asia

In order to carry the vision and objectives of the Graduate School, A phrase of “Critical Asian Principle”(CAP) was introduced to and adopted as basic perspective for establishing and operating the doctoral studies program of the SEAGST in 1972.

⁶ Ibid., p 99

⁷ Ibid.,

⁸ Ibid.,

⁹ Ibid.,

In 1975 at the ATESEA meetings in Taiwan, there was general consensus that the whole graduate school program of ATESEA be carried out in the light of the Critical Asian Principle.¹⁰

It is though without an official statement on the significance of the sense and use of the phrase, to pronounce the common understanding as to its essential meaning and function for theological construction and theological education. The phrase as used in the circle of the ATESEA and SEAGST, seeks to identify what is distinctively Asian, and uses this distinctiveness as a critical principle of judgment on matters dealing with the life and mission of the Christian community, theology, and theological education, in Asia.¹¹ According to an introduction to the Critical Asian Principle prepared by ATESEA and SEAGST, the adoption of this Critical Asian Principle was placed against an understanding of seven features which characterized the region as its background:

First, plurality and diversity in races, peoples, cultures, social institutions, religions, ideologies, etc., characterize this region.

Second, most of the countries in this region have had a colonial experience.

Third, most of the countries in this region are now in the process of nation building, development, and modernization. They want to modernize through the use of science and technology. They want to develop and achieve economic growth, social-justice, and self-reliance.

Fourth, the people of this region want to achieve authentic self-identity and cultural integrity in the context of the modern world.

Fifth, Asia is the home of some of the world's living and nascent religions and these religions have shaped both the culture and consciousness of the vast majority of Asians. They represent alternative ways of life and experience of reality.

Six, Asian peoples are in search for a form of social order beyond the current alternatives. There is an apparent resort to authoritarian forms of government as an emergency measure. There are efforts to revise and reformulate alternative forms of socio-economic systems and adapt them to the Asian context. All this is an indication that the human issues in Asia today are of such a magnitude that none of the current ideological systems seem adequate for dealing with them. And so, like the rest of the peoples of the world, Asians are looking for a form of

¹⁰ Handbook, The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia & The South East Asia Graduate School of Theology, version year 2005-2007. p. 84

¹¹ Ibid.,

social order which would enable them and humankind to live together in dignity in our planetary world.

Seven, and finally, the Christian community is a minority in the vast Asian complex.¹²

The introduction of the document continues to explain:

The characteristics of the Asian situation which are enumerated above raise many questions and imply many issues for us in ATESEA and SEAGST to consider. For example: What does Asian diversity and plurality mean for the life of the Christian community? What does the experience of colonialism mean for the understanding of oppression, injustice, and human indignity, and alternatively for understanding human liberation and development? How does one do theology in the context of modernization and what can it contribute to the search for a new global social order? How does one interpret and communicate the Christian Gospel in relation to alternative patterns of experiencing reality and way of life? What does the experience of being a minority community mean for the life of the Church? These are only a few of the many questions raised by the distinctive features of our situation.¹³

As a frame of reference, the Asian Critical Principle has been taken in four ways for the implementation of theological construction and theological education; they are, according to SEAGST/ATESEA document:

1. As a situational principle, by which we seek to locate where we are and thereby indicate our area of responsibility and concern, namely, the varieties and dynamics of Asian realities.
2. As a hermeneutical principle, suggesting that we are to understand the Gospel and the Christian tradition with these realities. Accordingly we must approach and interpret the Gospel and its traditions in relation to the needs and issues peculiar to the Asian situation. Alternatively, we must approach and understand Asian realities not only through variety of academic disciplines available in study and research, but also in the light of the Gospel and its traditions.
3. As a missiological principle, which aims at the responsibility of equipping people with a missionary commitment that is informed by a missionary theology capable not only of illuminating Asian realities with the flood-light of the Gospel, but also of helping manage and direct the changes now taking place in the region along lines more consonant with the Gospel and its vision for human life in God.
4. And finally as an educational principle which should give shape, content,

¹² Ibid., pp. 84-85

¹³ Ibid., p. 85

direction, and criteria to our educational task in our member-schools and in the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology.¹⁴

From the recognition of the Asian contexts, the concerns expressed of the minority Christian responses toward the life of Christian community, oppression, injustice and human dignity of Asian people, and the struggle of building new social order in Asia, the four ways of critical approach provided by this Critical Asian Principle can be seen a way of doing theology and theological education contextually.

Guidelines for Doing Theologies in Asia – Responses to the Challenges of a New Era

The Critical Asian Principle was criticized its lacking mechanism of implementation. Comments received from a series of general revisit and rethink CAP done recently by the 7 areas of SEAGST have indicated the following critiques:

1. The four principles of CAP are too general and do not specifically address modern day challenges.
2. The usage of the term ‘Critical’ in the context of CAP does not seem critical enough as the four expressed principles are common basic hermeneutic principles.
3. The CAP merely offers a general framework, without saying anything specific about the principles or application methodology. Hence it is seen to be descriptive and lacking in a clear theological perspective.
4. Since the principles are general in nature, the CAP lacks clear direction for doing theology and teaching theology in Asia.
5. The original CAP is inadequate to provide interaction with contemporary issues such as globalization, global empire building, ecological and gender justice issues.
6. A lack is also noted in the areas of pastoral, ministerial and spiritual formation.¹⁵

It is however, the Critical Asian Principle (CAP) had a history, purpose and direction. Since its formulation and implementation about thirty years, we believe it has achieved its purpose reasonably well in assisting the process of doing theology and teaching theology in Asia.

Considering the peculiarities and changing needs of today’s context, ATESEA had launched a series of studies to revisit this Critical Asian Principle in response to its 50 years Jubilee celebration which is considered a new beginning of a stage. I had the privilege to be commissioned to chair a group of theological workers for this project of revisiting CAP and to draft a new document of “Guidelines for Doing Theologies

¹⁴ Ibid., p.86

¹⁵ Handbook, ATESEA/SEAGST version year 2007-2008, p. 86

in Asia”. The document has now been officially adopted by both the Executive Committee of ATESEA, and the senate of SEAGST as their guiding principle for doing theologies and theological education in the region.

In a workshop in Seremban of Malaysia, the group worked on the contributions collected from 7 areas of SEAGST, and reached a consensus of that ‘changing context’ is the key factor which induced the reassessment of the effectiveness, functionality and suitability of the CAP, we need to identify what features colour the changed context of today’s Asia and what paradigm shift has taken place between Bangkok (then) and Singapore (now)¹⁶. The group thus identified the following eleven propositions:

1. **Religious Fundamentalism** – The escalation of tensions between the Muslim world and the West, as well as terrorist activities sponsored by religious sectarian groups in Asia continue to challenge us in the way we think and act as Christians in Asia. The revival of many sects, with a fundamentalist tendency within the living religions of Asia, stand witness to rising religious fundamentalism. Living in a pluralistic community leaves limited alternatives for Asians: either we build bridges or walls.
2. **Gender Justice Issues** – The rising cases of violence against women and children, as well as issues aimed directly at marginalizing women from mainstream activities, the evident gender deficit in organizations and institutions, and the circumvention of women’s quest for equal rights and opportunities have become a growing concern in Asia. Often times the oppression of women in Asia is reinforced by Asian cultures and religions. Gender justice issues compel us to accept the truth that women are human beings created in God’s image.
3. **Ecological Problems, Disease and Disasters** – These ecological and health problems have become common in Asia today. The recent Tsunami, flash floods and earthquakes have taken away thousands of lives and left the living devastated. The outbreak of Avian Flu and the resurgence of diseases (like Tuberculosis, Dengue and Malaria), once thought to have been eradicated in Southeast Asia, have once again resurfaced in epidemic proportions. HIV and AIDS are affecting families, communities and nations and challenge us to re-examine our ministerial formation program. Furthermore, uncontrolled and one-sided exploitative economic development projects have brought with them various ecological crises. “Ecological concerns have often been neglected or conveniently sidelined.”¹⁷ The rape of Mother Earth manifest in uncontrolled logging, indiscriminate use of

¹⁶ The CAP was first adopted in Bangkok meeting by SEAGST senate in 1972, and the working group was commissioned to come up with new guidelines for the ATESEA Jubilee celebration in Singapore in 2007.

¹⁷ Wilfred J Samuel, Review of the Critical Asian Principle –Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore Region, 2006.

chemicals in agriculture, inconsiderate disposal of non-biodegradable waste, and human beings' many other ecocidal acts due to negligence, ignorance or greed destroy the ecosystem.

4. **Globalization and Global Empire Building** – Much of Asia has moved from colonial contexts to a variety of post-colonial and neo-colonial situations where the global empire and the neo-liberal economic scheme of globalization play symbiotic relationships. The greed of the Empire and the neo-liberal globalization threatens and destroys all life, especially the poor and marginalized people and Mother Earth. Thus, economic globalization and the rise of a global empire is a serious concern for Asia today. Such “new realities within the Asian contexts are posing new challenges to our theologizing today. . .”¹⁸
5. **Colonization** – Most Asian countries have a colonial experience. Asia's post colonial realities and emerging neo-colonial attitudes are matters that should be given a renewed emphasis in combating abuse, imperialism and exploitation. “Neo-colonialism is now disguised in the form of economic domination.”¹⁹ Neo-colonialism also employs cultural hegemony in both subtle and glaring ways. The principle of ‘decolonization’ must be implemented in making people “aware of the colonizing command and dominance that is around us and in us. We need to engage consciously and continuously in decolonizing all alienating and imposing influences.”²⁰
6. **Spirituality** – With the increasing influence and impact of materialism, secularism, and liberalism in the post-modern era, Asian countries continue to experience challenges and stagnation in spirituality. These include loss of focus in discipleship and spiritual formation, loss of indigenous wisdom, character and values, and infiltration of western culture and ideology through the neo-Pentecostal and new religious movements influences.
7. **Identity and Power Struggle** - Most communities in Asian countries have experienced identity crisis through history. In the process of post-colonial impact, some experienced a ‘hybrid’ identity.²¹ Similar to this is the question of “what kind of world order is theology going to project that is consistent with its hope for the kingdom of God, as the people of Asia rise to claim their basic rights and rightful place in the world?”²²

¹⁸ Taiwan Area's Critical Response to the Critical Asian Principle (CAP) of ATESEA/SEAGST, Taiwan, 2006.

¹⁹ Emanuel G Singgih, *Critical Asian Principal: A Contextual Theological Evaluation*, Indonesia, 2005.

²⁰ Taiwan Area's Critical Response to the Critical Asian Principle (CAP) of ATESEA/SEAGST, Taiwan, 2006.

²¹ Simon SM Kwan, *A Hong Kong Reflection on the Critical Asian Principle*, CAP Continual Discussion Group Report – 2006. A “meeting place identity” is used to describe this floating nature of identity.

²² Philippine Area Committee Report, *Revisiting the Critical Asian Principle*.

8. **Peoples' Movements and Ecumenism** – In a Christian minority and multi-denominational context enhancing ecumenical unity and cooperation is vital. In seeking to fulfil the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, the Asian Churches need to transcend denominational boundaries and constantly seek to promote wider cooperation. Some Asians see denominationalism as a legacy of Western mission agencies that promotes a particular brand of Christianity. Learning from the past history ecumenism must not be just seen in functional terms but as a dynamic unity ('that they may be one')²³ Ecumenism is about a vision of God's household where the members seek to listen to the variety of Asian theological voices, and to practice intra faith and interfaith dialog in order to promote peace, healing and reconciliation.
9. **Information and Technological Change and Challenges** – "Globalize capitalized economic activities act not only to widen the gap between the rich and the poor, but also weaken the sovereignty of individual nation states by interruption of capital power. Its operation is backed by the information technology and military power, and has led to the decline of the weaker cultures, discrimination against minorities such as aborigines, and exploitation of women and children."²⁴
10. **Social Challenges** – The expression of sin in terms of greed for power and wealth experienced by the peoples of Asia has had a tremendous effect on the community, especially the poor and marginalized. Ethical problems such as corruption, abuse of power, and prostitution; poverty realities such as indentured child labour and population explosion; communal problems such as ethnic conflicts, racial tensions and breakdown of family structures and continued marginalization of women, children, and persons with disabilities continue to rise.
11. **Reclaiming Indigenous Identity and Minority Rights** – Loss of identity, dignity, and loss of good cultural values have resulted from lack of dialogue with the indigenous peoples. Dialogue with them has been hindered by our prejudices and stereotyped views about them that were influenced by western theology and culture. The indigenous has often been equated with being 'backward', 'primitive' and 'irrational.' For these reasons, local cultures and their wisdom has been systematically suppressed and marginalized. However, indigenous wisdom has a valuable character that needs to be rediscovered.

Based upon these identified propositions, a new Guidelines for Doing Theologies in

²³ Wilfred J Samuel, Review of the Critical Asian Principle –Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore Region, 2006.

²⁴ Huang Po Ho, "Covenant with the Churches in Asia – Retargeting Theological Education in Responding to the Life and Death Struggles of the People of Asia," ATESEA General Assembly Meeting, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2005.

Asia was proposed and adopted by both SEAGST senate and ATESEA executive committee, it has also been presented to the assembly of ATESEA in its 50 years Jubilee celebration in Singapore. The Guidelines for Doing Theologies in Asia read²⁵:

The purpose of these guidelines is to allow a redefinition and a retargeting of the role of theological education and its methodology in Asia by addressing the actual situation of a local community and at the same time ensuring it is “biblically based, missiologically oriented, educationally shaped, pastorally advocated and spiritually empowered.”²⁶ Theologies in Asia must be authentically Asian in its content, shape and processes. Thus we propose the following guidelines. Theological education should promote:

1. Responsive engagement with the diverse Asian contexts
2. Critical engagement with indigenous cultures and wisdom for the preservation and sustenance of life
3. Reflective engagement with the sufferings of the Asian people in order to provide hope for the marginalized, women, indigenous people, children, differently-abled people and migrant workers
4. Restoring the inter-connectedness of the whole creation
5. Interfaith dialogue as well as intra faith communion and communication for the fullness of life and the well-being of the society
6. Enhancing capacity building in order to serve people experiencing disaster, conflict, and disease as well as those people who suffer physical, emotional, and mental disabilities
7. Prophetic resistance against the powers of economic imperialism
8. Equipping Christians for witnessing and spreading the gospel of Jesus with loving care and service to fulfil the Christian mission of evangelism.

The guidelines have highlighted 8 areas of concerns for theological construction and theological education in Asia, they are: Asian Contexts, indigenous cultures and wisdom, suffering experiences of the weaker parties, inter-connection of the whole creation, interfaith relations, challenges from natural impacts and social dynamics, economic imperialism and Christian responsibility of mission and evangelism.

In order to make sure the guidelines are taken seriously by the theological workers and theological institutes in Asia, a concrete proposal of implication and implementation was attached:²⁷

1. ATESEA accreditation criteria (notation) should be revised to incorporate the above requirements.

²⁵ Handbook of ATESEA/SEAGST, 2007-2008, pp. 85-91

²⁶ Report on Rethinking Critical Asian Principle, Eastern Indonesia Area,

²⁷ Handbook of ATESEA/SEAGST, 2007-2008, Ibid.

2. ATESEA member schools and SEAGST should reflect the spirit of the above guidelines in their curriculum, ways of teaching and training programs.
3. ATESEA member schools should adopt an inter-disciplinary approach and avoid the departmental approach in teaching of theology.
4. Ongoing faculty development should be given due consideration in developing expertise in the concerned areas mentioned in the guidelines.
5. ATESEA member schools should ensure that proper re-sourcing is done in libraries to enable meaningful academic research, reflection and articulation on current and relevant issues.
6. AJT/ATESEA publications should be encouraged to take the above guidelines into consideration and reflect the spirit of the same guidelines in their publications.
7. Efficient efforts must be undertaken so that ATESEA member schools and Asian theologians take the ideas of the guidelines seriously in theological education, reflection and construction.

SEAGST's Role in the Changing Societies of Asia

SEAGST has journeyed 40 years with the churches and people of Asia which have gone through a rapid changes and transformation in past decades. During these years, it encounters complex demands and expectations as it is continues to serve as an organization of striving to work with churches and theological leaders for a better theological education in Asia. Changes over these recent forty years have been enormous both within the organization and beyond. We can highlight some of them as follows:

1. The irruption of the third world churches has dramatically re-draw the map and scenario of Christian community in terms of population distribution. The desires of self-autonomy from western mission agencies have further encouraged the development of indigenous and contextual theological construction. While encountering with the profundity and complexity of third world cultures and religions, the traditional concepts of Christian missions and theologies that developed on the foundation of Western enlightenment philosophy have been questioned.
2. It is however, the significant growth of membership and the diversity of theological development among member schools of ATESEA have produced challenges to both the association and SEAGST their theological integrity on contextual orientation and their ways of doing theologies and theological education.
3. The political-economical re-mapping of the Asia world under the shadow of globalization, has created unjust societies and resulted the continent the most insecure and explosive situation in the world.²⁸

²⁸ Huang Po Ho, Theological Education in the Changing Societies of Asia, *Ministerial Formation*, WCC,

The rapid increase of member schools of ATESEA in last fifty years indicates the growth in both quantity and quality of the theological education in the region. The SEAGST was established as an advanced theological institute to integrate human and material resources in the region to implement higher degree programs through a theological union model in order to develop theological workers and faculties to meet the demands from the churches and societies of Asia. This idea and action of to establish a consortium style of theological union in the region was because of its short experiences and limit resources in terms of personnel and finances in all individual theological institutes in the region.

In past forty years SEAGST has made meaningful contributions to theological education and contextual theological construction in this region through its faculty development programs of M. theol. and D. theol., and efforts of contextual theological constructions. However, with the rapid transformation of Asian societies, the church's role and mission in the society are severely challenged. The decline of Christian witness in the contemporary Asian world can be seen through the laments of many ecumenical organizations in the region regarding the loss of a dynamic and prophetic message and the shortage of insightful leadership that the churches provide to societies. All these have to do with theological nurture and leadership development. SEAGST as a regional and international advanced theological institute in Asia is expected to respond to the challenges through its efforts of reshaping ways of doing theological education contextually, to bring change to churches and societies in this region.

Some concrete ideas and actions have been proposed and taken by the Executive Committee of ATESEA and Senate meeting of SEAGST:

1. **Strengthening Faculty:** Faculty development is a decisive key issue for reshaping theological education (or any kind of education). SEAGST has functioned to provide faculties to member schools of ATESEA and to consolidate contextual theological education and movements in the region. However, this important research and faculty development mechanism of ATESEA also faces a crisis of losing its integrity and particular theological character that was a founding tenet of SEAGST. Here I identify two areas of challenges faced SEAGST and the tempts being made to respond to these challenges:

- a. **The threat of institutional integrity:** SEAGST was founded to be a theological institute to grow contextual Asian theological scholars and theological faculties. This theological objective is still upheld firmly by the institute. Yet, in reality, due to the fact that SEAGST programs are mainly operated and implemented by area senates, participating schools in each area

are geographically remote and independent from each other, students become very dependent on their instructors or advisors. Since SEAGST does not have clear guidelines for faculty selection in the areas, leaving this function to each area senate.²⁹ Generally speaking, almost all faculties who hold Doctoral degrees in participating schools of SEAGST are automatically included as SEAGST area faculties. The diversity orientations and lack of dialogues among faculties due to the geographical spreading, threatens the integrity of the institution. This results in a crisis of losing original objective of the organization.³⁰

- b. **The threat of quality control:** the privilege of the area setup for SEAGST degree program is that it encourages theological studies carried out in one's own language. This actualizes the contextual orientation in diverse Asian contexts. However, when regional senates constituted by area deans of different areas are not able to assess the outputs and outcomes of its students from different areas due to the language barriers, quality control of theological education becomes largely dependent on area determination.

Actions for correction and improvement:

- 1) An overall curriculum revision for the seagst programs was done to strengthen the regional role for the D. theol. Program by implement a regional level's Theological Methodological Seminar Workshop for all newly admitted D. theol students. This will provide not only a sense of belonging of this academic community, but also to make it coherent in theological orientation and distinct characteristics of the institution.
- 2) A plan for the region to organize a group of regional faculty who can provide teaching services either in the regional level of helping the Theological Methodological Seminar Workshop, or to have a short residential teaching services to the different areas. This group of scholars is also designed to be a Network of Asian Theological Educators within and outside the continent, serving as a theologian's community for continual brainstorming and construction of Asian Theologies³¹.

2. **Reshaping and Transformation Of the Institute:** More important is the problem of its historical status and mission of the organization. As mentioned above, when

²⁹ Since the rule of SEAGST is to have participatory school heads to be members and even area Dean of the area senates, some of these school heads are not agree with contextual theological endeavors, and the faculties appointed to advise students are very much influenced by the schools heads.

³⁰ SEAGST students have a shortcoming of being isolated from advance theological community that results a heavy dependence of students' academic orientation on few advisors if not single one.

³¹ A group of 24 regional faculty team has been formally formed, includes one third from North America and two third from within the region. The first meeting for this faculty group will be supported by FTE and be held in the coming end of June to early July in Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan, Taiwan.

SEAGST was founded 40 years ago most theological schools in this region were not yet ready to offer advanced degree programs. The consortium model of an area-union arrangement of a theological institute like SEAGST was necessary and desirable. But in the light of recent findings through our accreditation visits, many of ATESEA member schools appear now to be able and ready to start advanced degree programs. Some participating schools of SEAGST now offer degrees which parallel those granted through SEAGST on their own, the duplication of program has created confusion and wastes of theological education resources that calls into question of the existence and participation of SEAGST programs for those participating schools.

In order to respond to this challenge, a plan and strategy must be made to help each area of SEAGST and member school of ATESEA to upgrade capacities and abilities to gradually manage their own advanced degrees in accordance to the accreditation criteria of ATESEA. In this way, SEAGST should seek ways to its reshaping and transformation for a new stage's service to the churches and societies of Asia through its distinctive concentration of theological commitment and objectives. It is thus, a special consultation is under plan to be held in July this year in Sabah to look into this issue³².

Academic Excellence Concerns Theological Education

The case of the development of and challenges facing SEAGST is an epitome of history of contextual theological education in Asia. Went through the pass years struggles, the institute though confront challenges continually, yet considerable contributions being made to and recognized by churches and people in Asia and even to the global theological communities.

Through the definition and re-definition of the working references for contextual theologies by the efforts to formulate Critical Asian Principle and Guidelines for Doing Contextual Theologies in Asia, the SEAGST / ATESEA member schools and Asian theological educators have struggled to propose and to shape terms for theological excellence. These efforts are not only for the sake of to affirm the appropriateness of doing contextual theologies in the midst of traditional theologies, but are also considering the challenges of inter-contextual criteria of theological excellence.

SEAGST though is a unique theological institute; it has covered more than 7 areas of 9 countries of Asia. The diversity of languages, cultures and contexts among these participating schools challenges the institute of a credible theological academic criterion, not to say the ATESEA which has increased its member schools from 16 in

³² This consultation will be supported by EMW, and hopefully to draw contributions from experts of different regional theological communities.

the beginning to 104 (out of 16 countries) today. This reality is applicable to global theological education, which affects not only the quality of teaching, the criterion of academic excellence, but also the credibility of theologies.

Besides, recent development of higher education in Asia has a tendency towards openness for the governments and publics to accept theological degrees as one of academic degrees, it is however, the accreditation exercised by the governments or governmental commissioned organization tend to apply traditional university's rule to the newly registered seminaries³³, which resulted severely constrict the space of theological education and theological development, if not distort totally.

It is thus, regional associations for theological education and global organization such as WOCATI are expected to enact in more active role of to networking the member associations and member schools for shaping terms of theological excellence to make impacts to the higher education communities in different countries, to safeguard that a better environment for theological development and theological education be preserved and enjoyed.

Conclusion:

SEAGST is a special product of Asian churches and theological leaders for theological education; it has much strength to be kept and preserved though not without challenges to its continual service to theological education in Asian continent. I am hoping that the on going process of reshaping and transformation efforts will bring new light and creative model of theological education to Asian world and beyond. (Thanks)

³³ Since Christian population in Asia is minority, in many countries, the public policies related to religious issues are mostly made with very little Christian concerns if not totally neglected.