

**THE ECUMENICAL EDUCATION
AS AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION
Sientje Merentek-Abram, Executive Director, ATESEA**

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARK

It is really a privilege for me to bring greetings on behalf of the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) and wish for a fruitful Congress of the World Conference of the Association of Theological Institutions (WOCATI). I also would like to congratulate the Ecumenical Theological Education, World Council of Churches for its 50th founding Anniversary and wish for God's continued blessings upon her. The decision to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of ETE, WCC at the time when the representatives of the Associations of Theological Institute from different part of the world gather together here in Thessaloniki, make these two events even more significance.

Responding to the invitation to present a paper to this gathering, I would like to present my paper into two parts: first part is an introduction on ATESEA and the second part is on the issue of Ecumenical Theological Education as Agent of Transformation.

II. THE ASSOCIATION FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH EAST ASIA (ATESEA)

The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia or ATESEA for short was established in Singapore in 1957 with 16 founding schools from the mainline churches. At present, ATESEA has 104 member schools in 16 countries. The member schools consist of approximately 20,700 students and 1100 faculty members. The member schools come from different church backgrounds such as the Protestant, Episcopal, Pentecostal and Adventist churches and this togetherness makes ATESEA one of the largest ecumenical theological associations in the region. Since one of the main purposes of the Association is to create a dynamic fellowship among the member schools and with the churches, some member schools in Australia and New Zealand have joined the ATESEA for fellowship.

Aims

The aims of the ATESEA are as follows:

1. To promote creative relationships among institutions and agencies engaged in theological education and churches in the region.
2. To facilitate regional efforts in theological education in the service of the churches in South East Asia.
3. To set guidelines and standards of theological education and to provide accreditation services to member-institutions and to others requesting it.
4. To work for the improvement and renewal of theological education in the region in such ways as it may deem appropriate.

Programs

ATESEA responds to the changing needs of theological education by running various programs through its member schools located in different places and contexts. The main programs include operating the South East Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST), providing accreditation services, promoting faculty development, theological renewal and contextualization of theology in the light of the Guidelines on Doing Theologies in Asia (GDTA), coordinating regional planning in theological education and publishing the Asia Journal of Theology. Besides these programs, some of its present programs include the improvement in the area of financial, management and administration of schools and Association, the search for a new spirituality in Christian formation, promoting new patterns of theological education, promotion of closer relationship between church and seminary, the search for a more adequate understanding of excellence in theological education and the development of Asian perspectives and insights in Christian theology through the Theological Seminar-Workshops and Trainings. The followings are the programs designed by ATESEA

The South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST)

The SEAGST was opened in 1966. It conducts programs of advanced theological studies at the masteral and doctoral levels and grants the degrees of Master of Theology (M. Theol.) and Doctor of Theology (D. Theol.) 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 students may have the opportunity of continuing their studies within South East Asia. Students from outside of the region can also study at SEAGST.

The specific aims of the Graduate School are, to assist in the intellectual and spiritual development of Asian theologians so that their Christian ministry will be enriched and be more effective, to contribute to the emergence of a contextual and Asia-oriented theology, to further the training of competent teachers and leaders for the theological faculties of the region and for ministry in churches and society, and to promote opportunities for interchange of graduate students and faculty members between participating institutions with a view to enhance both regional consciousness and Christian fellowship across the barriers of race, cultures and theologies.

The SEAGST operates in seven areas, namely, Hong Kong, Eastern Indonesia, Western Indonesia, Malaysia-Singapore-Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines and Taiwan. The Executive Director of ATESEA also serves as the Dean of SEAGST and the Dean is assisted by the Associate Dean and seven Area Deans who run the program in their respective areas. Each area has its participating schools which are expected to meet certain standards in order to be accepted as participating schools of the SEAGST. The students, who pursue their advanced theological study through SEAGST, may choose to do their graduate study in their own areas to study in other areas. Situation and condition in the areas might be varied but SEAGST has basic guidelines for running the graduate study program which have to be followed by all faculty and students of the SEAGST.

SEAGST program continues to be a blessing in the region. It continues to offer the opportunity to Christians from different traditions within the region to advance their theological education. In 2007 alone the School graduated 30 M. Th and 20 D. Th students. The current strength of the students is 130 for M.Th program and 67 for the D. Th program. The SEAGST program has contributed significantly in developing Asian theology through research, thesis and dissertation writings and also by organizing workshops and seminars. One example on how the SEAGST makes significant contribution to the region is in responding critically to the contemporary issues of the church and society. In relation to this, institutes for the SEAGST students on the issues of violence, terrorism, pluralism, gender awareness and HIV/AIDS were held.

ATESEA Accreditation Program

The accreditation is a service of ATESEA to its member schools in order to improve academic quality of programs. It functions under the Accreditation Commission of the Association. The Commission consists of the Executive Committee of ATESEA plus two persons elected by the Association.

The duties of the Accreditation Commission are, to set standards for accreditation and notations, to receive and evaluate applications for accreditation of programs of education from member schools, to recommend accreditation and notations and to receive and evaluate reports from member schools concerning progress in regard to removing notations, and to encourage continuous effort by the schools to improve the quality of their education. Basically, the Commission operates by first assessing the Self-Survey Reports of the applicant school, then an initial Accreditation visit is made after which an annual report by the accredited schools are made based on the accreditation standards and notations of the Commission and finally an octennial review is done after the visit by the accreditation team.

Accreditation is awarded on four levels, namely: licentiate, baccalaureate, masteral and doctoral. To be accredited, a school should apply for membership first. However, not all member schools of ATESEA have been accredited since schools have to meet certain requirements in terms of faculty, library, curriculum, ecumenical relationship, and physical plans. Since 2001, the ATESEA accreditation has been granted only in the L.Th, M. Div, B.D, B. Th, M. Th and D. Th levels in order to maintain certain standard of excellence.

Women Studies

ATESEA gives special and strong emphasis on Women Study. Women have given significant contributions to the church and society in South East Asia from time to time and from region to region. From grass-root to the decision making level, women have shared and continues to share their wisdom in leadership with men. The same situation exists in theological education.

The number of women students and faculty members are increasing giving prolific contributions in doing theology. In some countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Myanmar, female students outnumber male students in several seminaries.

Women students comprise more than 50% of the student body. More and more women are taking up leadership roles in the churches, theological institutions and in the associations. In ATESEA, 3 out of 8 members of the Executive Committee are women. In 1981 General Assembly, there were only two women participants. In the ATESEA 2001 General Assembly 1/3 of participants were women and they gave significant contribution and leadership to the Assembly; and after 44 years of All Men Executive Directors, in 2001 the General Assembly had chosen a woman to serve as the Executive Director. Thanks for the good work of the ATESEA leaders who pave the way towards a more cooperative relationship between men and women and this has resulted in a strong commitment to pursue on the understanding of Women Studies.

However, there are still a big number of women in the region who do not experience this privilege due to poverty, lack of education and other forms of marginalization. Through women study programs, we would like to build awareness among men and women to the significant contribution women are offering and could offer in the church and society. Empowerment of women is one of the concerns in women study. The aim and purpose of the empowerment of women among others is to enable women to be enablers to others and to play constructive roles in the church and society. Learning from the accreditation visit report from time to time, it was so encouraging to learn that more and more member schools offer women study as an integrated course and also as an independent subject.

The ATESEA Commission on Women in Theological Education conducted different seminars and workshops to promote women study among the member schools. There is a plan to hold an International Workshop on More Understanding about the Teaching of Feminist Theology and Its Impact to the life of Churches and Theological Education. Different workshops done and is planning by ATESEA for the women groups proves that Women Studies always deal with the reality of Asia.

Asia Journal of Theology

To stay in tune with the many exciting theological developments in Asia, ATESEA publishes the Asia Journal of Theology bi-annually, in April and October. The Journal attempts to highlight and share some thoughts, ideas and actions that are taking place in Asia. It is an ecumenical publication which ATESEA does in corporation with the Board of Theological Education of the Senate the Serampore College (BTESSC) and the North East Association of Theological Schools (NEATS).

The purpose of the Journal is to:

- Encourage Asian biblical scholarship and theological thinking.
- Relate the Gospel to our cultural, historical, and religious situation in Asia;
- Study problems related to the teaching of theology and aims of theological education in Asia;
- Share news about member schools of the Association; and
- Maintain contact with theology and ministry beyond the region of Asia

This joint publication is a good example of sharing both human and material resources among theological associatiuons.

Contextual Literature

The ATESEA has produced several publications on contextual theology in the form of “ATESA Occasional Papers”, “Doing Theology with Asian Resources “ and the Asia Journal of Theology. Contextual Theology is also being facilitated through the Bahasa Indonesia & Malaysia Theological Education Series (BIMTES) and the Chinese Theological Education Series (CTES). Their main task is to provide literature in Indonesian and Chinese languages.

Contemporary Issues of Asia

As mentioned earlier, the ATESEA also facilitates programs to respond to contemporary issues in South East Asia such as pluralism, migrant workers, HIV/AIDS, war and terrorism, economic justice, etc. We facilitate these programs through SEAGST seminars, workshops and research. There are several workshops and Consultations were held by ATESEA among others are as follows:

1. Workshop on HIV/AIDS and its Challenges to Theological Education
2. Workshop on Peace Building
3. Workshop on Perseverance of Mother Earth as Theological Challenges
4. Consultation on Doing Theology from Disable Perspective

The workshops and Consultations were attended by graduate students, faculties and women. In June 2008, there will be a workshop on Search Methodologies which will be attended by graduate students and in July there will be workshop on Teacher’s Academy for young Faculties (faculties with 5-10 year teaching-experience).

We thank our partners such as ETE, WCC, EMW, Germany, Foundation of Theological Education in South East Asia (FTESEA), Methodist Churches in London and other partners for their continued support which enable us to organize the workshops and Consultation on the Contemporary Issues.

III. Ecumenical Theological Education as Agent of Transformation

ATESEA emphasis on a strong concern on the ecumenical theological education, therefore, we regard our Association as an ecumenical Association. Membership comes from various background of churches. The atmosphere created by various church background of the membership provides rich contribution to the ecumenical life of the Association. Therefore, we continue to encourage our member institutions to respond positively to the need of Ecumenical Theological Education in our the region. Through the above mentioned programs we hold for our member institutions, and through accreditation notation, we try to build awareness on how important and necessary the ecumenical theological education. I fully support Hope Anthone’s idea on the need for the Ecumenical Theological Education when she said that there is definitely a need for revitalizing ecumenicaltheological in Asia.

Wati Longchar underlines that Ecumenical Theological Education is very central to preserve and enhance the present and the future health of the ecumenical movement .

The understanding of ecumenical theological education is wider than merely understanding of an institutional collaboration. Following Simon Oxley, it should be said that the Ecumenical Theological Education is no longer limited to the history of attempts to reunite churches or the growth of ecumenical organization. Rather, according to him, the ecumenical theological education should aim at achieving three visions:

1. to affirm life and relationship/community
2. to inspire rebuilding and diversities, and
3. to reach out beyond the future of church and society and embrace God's entire creation.

Therefore, the vision of ecumenical theological education cannot be narrowly confined to ministerial training programs of the churches alone; rather it involves equipping the whole people of God. It searches to build a just and inclusive community in the context of people of other faiths and ideologies.

consultation and worships during our gatherings such as Annual Meetings and General Assemblies.

I agree very much with Simon Oxley. Ecumenical Theological Education should be our goal in order to build a just and inclusive community. As it has been pointed out, the Ecumenical Theological is an agent of Change, the agent of transformation. The response to these issue vary from school to school, from area to area. However, we continue to discuss this issue in order to widen our ecumenical horizon. So far, it is good to observe that several member schools with denominational basis are now beginning to welcome students and faculty of different backgrounds. In spite of the different understanding of ecumenism which sometimes hinders our togetherness, it is our hope that in the years to come, we will see a positive impact of this development. In our rapid changing world, and particularly in the Asian realities, ecumenical theological education is a hope to promote mutual understanding and mutual support among theological educational institutions in the region and beyond.

The Bible message refers to God as the source of transformation among others are Isaiah 43:19; 48:6; and Revelation 21:5. Transformation is needed for the glory of God and for the sake of people's shalom. If God is about to do new thing, it does not mean it only applies to the newness of color, of style, of form but instead, it deals with the total change, the total renewal, the total transformation. And the ecumenical theological education is called to take part in total transformation.

Challenges

1. The first challenge to the ecumenical theological education in South East Asia is in regard to the different understanding of the ecumenical theological education. Ecumenism has been understood as the collaboration of different institutions and ideologies, and therefore, the idea of ecumenism is regarded as a threat to the life of the individual institution.
2. The second challenge is in relation to the regional issues, especially the issue of conflict and terror and natural calamities which also threaten theological education and churches. Several theological schools in conflict prone areas suffer the threat of conflict and terrorism literally. Many theological education buildings in Myanmar and church buildings in Myanmar and China suffer

total loss after the cyclone and earthquake. How will ecumenical theological education respond to this?

3. The third challenge is financial viability.
4. The wide gap between the church and theological institution/education is a big concern. The relationship between the Church and theological institutions are not often in good accord. Theological educators are often accused by the church leaders as elite groups – indifferent to the needs of the common people. On the other hand, theological educator accuse church leaders of too much interference in the school(s) administration.

Priorities

1. Closer relationship between church and theological education..
2. Re-envisioning theological educational curricula. Ecumenics should be part of the curricula..
3. Developing well equipped and well trained (young) theological educators.
4. To have serious discussions on financial viability, accountability and management of theological institutions. In 1982, the ATESEA conducted a workshop on accountability and management of theological education and this workshop widened our perspective in this area very much. There is a great need to conduct a similar workshop at the earliest possible.

Suggestion for the Network

1. Promoting and sharing resources in theological education. In the case of ATESEA, the North East Association of Theological Schools (NEATS) and the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College (BTESSC) are publishing the Asia Journal of Theology successfully. The purpose of this joint publication is to share resources and to bring common ideas together. This could be done with other program as well such as accreditation visit. In the history of ATESEA, our colleague from the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS) was invited to join ATESEA's accreditation visit..
2. ETE to conduct workshops on ecumenism attended by representatives of the theological associations in Asia and the Pacific.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Huang, Po Ho & Merentek-Abram, Sientje (editors), *2007-2008 ATESEA & SEAGST* (Manila:ATESEA), 2007, pp. 85-91.
2. Longchar, A.Wati (ed), *Ecumenical Theological Education In Changing Context* (India: ETE,WCC), 2004, pp 3-4, 9-10, 29-40.
3. Longchar, A.Wati & Merentek-Abram, Sientje (editors), *Partnership in Training God's Servants For Asia* (India:ATESEA & FTESEA), 2006, pp. 155-161.
4. Oxley, Simon, *Creative Ecumenical Education* (Geneva: WCC), 2002, pp.11-12.

Rev Dr Sientje Merentek-Abram, Executive Director, ATESEA

