

Report of the Asian Christianity Study Group

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The Asian Christianity Study Group was made up of 25 people from 16 different countries. We met together and first developed a list of issues which we thought were of greatest importance for the understanding of Christianity in Asia today. We carried on this discussion with the realization that Asia is more like a whole world, not a single unified continent. The number of cultures, languages, religions and people, not to mention the size of the land area, make it very difficult to generalize or to discuss something as vast as “Christianity in Asia.” The topics we identified are as follows:

1. Poverty and affluence
2. Asian theologizing (or self-theologizing)
3. Theological education in Asia
4. Asian Christian ethics
5. Responses to Christianity in Asia (from people of other faiths)
6. Minorities and indigenous peoples

Most of the time was spent discussing the need to develop an appropriate Asian Christian social ethic and closely related, the process and resources for developing Asian theologies. Basic to the concerns were questions of who does the theologizing (elite, bi-cultural, grass roots leaders, etc.) what resources and themes they call upon (Confucianism, “harmony,” principles of yin/yang, “romantic” views of Asia, modern Asia, etc.), how the theologizing is done (systematically, as narrative, poetry and music, etc.) and the need for an ongoing missional engagement, or what we called “self-theologizing” (the “fourth,” self principle).

On our second day we had people interested in issues of Christianity in China meet separately. The China group, one of the few times many of us had met with representatives from both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches (along with outsider church partners) reported back on their discussions regarding the difficulty of educating leaders fast enough for the growing Christian communities in China. It was generally agreed that most of the challenges facing the churches in China revolve around the development of leadership initiatives (books, tuition for students, academic standing of applicants, etc.). We then heard and discussed two papers that were delivered to the larger group: Roger Hedland read his paper, “The Witness of New Christian Movements in India,” and Sebastian Kim gave a paper entitled, “Mission and the Integrity of the Church: Reflections on the Christian Response to Poverty in Post-War Korea.” Both papers are available on the IAMS web site.

In preparing our report it was decided that our contribution to IAMS would be to apply some of our concerns and issues that surfaced (regarding Asian contexts) to the upcoming conference Edinburgh, 2010; the centennial celebration of the Edinburgh 1910 conference. What follows is a brief listing of issues which were raised that we feel should be considered for the Edinburgh 2010 conference:

1. Education and formation for leadership. One of the most desperate needs throughout Asia is for Christian leadership development. It was felt that what is needed is leadership formation that is truly Asian, keeping the spiritual development and academic together. In addition patterns of formation should be developed that resist the older western patterns which have proven inadequate.
2. Partnership and mutuality in mission: The dominant new paradigm for mission involvement, and a major shift in the past century is the search for authentic partnership or mutuality in mission. There is much confusion about what partnership is, and still today many partnership patterns are simply a veneer over older patterns of dependence. Partnership needs to be more than two-way relationships, but should involve multiple partners serving the most needy regions and most needy people. Rather than two-way partnerships, which often become a partnership of weak and strong, what are needed are webs of mutuality in mission.
3. Indigenous Christian movements: A major contrast to the 1910 conference is the explosion of indigenous Christian movements. What was predicted at 1910, the triumph of the missionary movement, did not exactly occur. Instead what we have seen is the flowering of indigenous Christianity. This is something to celebrate at 2010.
4. Evaluate the experience of the last 100 years. Just like 1910, there is a need look back and evaluate what has happened: to understand theologically and politically the trajectory of Christianity in the world. In our group we quickly listed some major themes or trends of 20th century Christianity which should be placed on the agenda: pentecostal and charismatic movements, rise of 2/3rds world missions, ecumenical movement, indigenous Christian movements and theologies (liberation, minjung, etc.). century of persecution, mission in reverse, transformation of the African religious map, and newer forms of colonialism.
5. Analyze contemporary historic contexts and their challenges. As with Edinburgh 1910, there should be well-prepared reports on the contemporary global context for Christian mission. Surveys should be used, but they must be carefully envisioned and carried through. Reports should be submitted prior to the meeting with opportunities during the meeting to critique the “context reports.”
6. How mission contributes to the unity of the church, but also its role in bringing about divisions. We are amazed in the Asian contexts the degree to which both themes are played out in mission in Asia. The conference should reflect on the odd fact that mission has fired the imagination of ecumenical leaders to bring about greater unity, and has aided in the divisions of the church we now accept as normal.
7. Studies on religions. These studies must be both classical studies of the great religions as well as the newer religious movements. These studies should not be just at the textual level, but also (some would say especially) should study religions at the popular level. We are concerned to study Muslims as people, not Islam as a textbook faith. The studies should keep in view theological concerns such as reconciliation, peace and faithful witness.
8. China: There should be a study of the experience of China and the sudden impact of Christianity upon Chinese society. We believe the China experience of

Christianity in the 20th century is unique to Christian history. We must look at the missiological implications, themes and tensions.

9. Persecution and suffering: What has happened regarding persecution in the last century and what does this say about and to the church in mission? How do we reflect on this theologically? The importance of testimonies in suffering (witness) should be considered in this section.
10. The importance of self-theologizing (in each context). The theological implications for the growth concerning the global Christian movement as well as the shift to the South. The asymmetry of the growth (non-Western) and the power centers (academic and financial still in the West) need to be studied.
11. Majority of non western participation and leadership In 1910 most of the Christians in the world lived around the Northern Atlantic countries. Today most of the Christians live in “Lafriasia.” Are there creative ways that the conference could honor this new reality: video feeds to and from all six continents? Would it be possible to decentralize the conference by having five centers?
12. Central Asia and Middle East must be covered, even though they may not be dominant places of Christian activity today.

Finally, the Asian Christianity group decided that it would be good to make a more specific contribution toward the 2010 conference by pulling together essays that would look at the upcoming conference from Asia, looking west. Dr. Sebastian Kim of Cambridge has agreed to help to coordinate a volume on this topic: *Themes in World Christianity in the 20th century: Toward Edinburgh 2010* (Edited by Sebastian Kim and centered in the Center for the Study of Christianity in Asia).

We will start with the themes mentioned above. The idea is to build upon what we have discovered in our time together and present the material for a larger critical audience.

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