

Affirming Thai Church's Ecumenical Vision

Damrongthai Up-ngern¹

In recent years, I have found myself searching for terms other than “ecumenical” to communicate the meaning of the word “ecumenical”. I have used “Christian unity”, “reconciliation” and “wholeness”. I say that the ecumenical mandate is a quest for healing among Christians and their churches, among other faiths, and that we do this both to be faithful to the gospel and for the sake of the whole creation.

I feel the need for translation because I have encountered so many misperceptions about the word “ecumenical”. Some people talk about their congregation being “ecumenical” because its members come from a variety of Christian traditions – e.g. Presbyterian, Baptist, etc.

I have been in a room when the “continuing tension” flared between “Faith and Order” and “Life and Work” advocates and the results were not pretty. This is not always the case, but there is enough validity to the claim, for whatever reason, that keep us from dismissing the charge out of hand. This in itself should not be a problem if we remember the Apostle Paul’s analogy of the church as the body of Christ in which different members have different roles and responsibilities, but all need each other for the upbuilding of the body and the good of the community.

I suspect that if the assumptions underlying these tensions could be made explicit rather than implicit, we actually might be able to laugh at ourselves, to see our need for the other in light of the whole, and to reclaim the integrating biblical and theological basis which should inform our shared ecumenical ministries.

The ecumenical movement has emphasized repeatedly that our prophecy is strengthened by our unity. The credibility of our Christian witness is undermined when we are divided. This is one of the strong reasons why the ecumenical movement is so important. Even when churches disagree on particular issues, if we can disagree without division, if we can keep our fights within the Christian family, without causing schism, we will model more faithfully to the world around us the reconciling drive at the heart of the Christian gospel.

Furthermore, if our emphasis as member churches in the Church of Christ in Thailand is first on Christ – on serving our common Lord – and only derivatively on each other, then to break whatever minimal fellowship we have achieved is indeed a great scandal. If the Church of Christ in Thailand is formed and rooted in Christ, then that is our foundation, our beginning, from which we cannot stray. All debates should emanate from this starting point. Therefore, we cannot walk away from the conversation and remain faithful to Christ,

¹ The Rev. Dr. Damrongthai Up-ngern is a minister of the Church of Christ in Thailand and teaches at McGilvary College of Divinity of Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. He presented this paper at the South East Asian consultation on “Churches and Seminaries: Appraising our Ecumenical Vision in Today’s World,” in Manila, Philippines, 24-29 November 2008.

let alone to each other, since reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel, and rooted in the fundamental being of the Godhead we know through Jesus Christ.

As God in Christ reconciled God's self with us, so when we come to God in Christ we are reconciled with each other. In some basic sense, this is already an accomplished fact. Our unity is in Christ, not necessarily in each other. What remains for us is to accept this fact and live it out in our personal, interpersonal and corporate lives as best we can. And when we get confused about how to do this, we must beg God – and beg God together – to show us the way.

In conclusion, the following in my opinion constitutes the Thai Church's affirmation of our ecumenical vision:

- Jesus Christ, who has called the Thai Churches to be one, is in our midst! As Christians in Thailand, we give thanks that God has drawn us and our churches closer together in faith and life, witness and service. A fellowship of churches which confesses the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures and therefore seeks to fulfil together its common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- We long for the visible oneness of the body of Christ, affirming the gifts of all, young and old, women and men, lay and ordained.
- We expect the healing of human community, the wholeness of God's entire creation.
- We trust in the liberating power of forgiveness, transforming enmity into friendship and breaking the spiral of violence.
- We open ourselves for a culture of dialogue and solidarity, sharing life with strangers and seeking encounter with those of other faiths.
- We respond to the prayer of Jesus Christ that all may be one in order that the world may believe (John 17:21). We are sustained by the assurance that in God's purpose all things shall be united in Christ – things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10).
- We affirm that what unites us is stronger than what separates us. Neither failures nor uncertainties, neither fears nor threats, will weaken our intention to continue to walk together on the way to unity, welcoming those who would join us on this journey, widening our common vision, discovering new ways of witnessing and acting together in faith.