

Communiqué

Interfaith Consultation “Religious Life and Public Space in Asia”

Lutheran World Federation/ Tao Fong Shan Christian Center/ Areopagos

September, 3-7, 2015, Hong Kong

The fundamental question discussed was how the church can exercise its prophetic voice and active participation in public venues. How can the church and individual Christians listen deeply, learn carefully, and speak influentially from their theological and spiritual resources, addressing the compelling issues specific to the context in which they exist? This question has taken on greater urgency in the 21st century, with its vibrant media cultures, and it seems clear that the church cannot restrict its role and place to the personal, individual, private sphere, abdicating its responsibility for the public, communal, political realms. The simple reason for this is that being Christian does not affect merely one part of an individual; instead, our relationship to God affects all of who we are. Therefore, the church must engage in all aspects of human life and society.

Why Hong Kong?

Because of its history and its location, Hong Kong has a dynamic hybrid identity. A key factor for choosing Hong Kong for this consultation was the Umbrella Movement and its lingering effects. This movement began in September 2014, as a form of protest, demanding that the Chinese government honor its promise to implement universal suffrage. In this context, “suffrage” does not refer to the right to vote, but to the candidates themselves, and the government’s promise that in the election there would be a genuinely diverse slate of candidates without screening. The emphasis here is on democracy and the demand for the democratization of the political process in Hong Kong.

In the face of this unprecedented protest, the churches in Hong Kong had to react, and many individual congregations struggled to get involved. The churches were divided, different denominations or even individuals within a specific congregation had a wide range of responses: positive, negative or indifferent. This was true for other religious communities as well; and these diverse responses made clear how important it is for the church to wrestle with its role and place in

public discourses, and the nature of its response to contested political and social issues.

Key Points

In light of this, one of the salient questions raised concerned the relationship between religious communities, political authorities, and society at large. Obviously, this relationship varies greatly from country to country, and different religions have different legal and social standings. For example, vulnerable migrant communities often do not share the privileges of the predominant populations. Often this is due to legal constraints imposed by governments.

Looking at the Christian context in particular, while some Christians argue that the church must be active in the political sphere, the temptation of churches to identify with the powers of the state must also be acknowledged. This is an important challenge that the church needs to wrestle with in every context: What is its relationship to the state, and how does it engage constructively and faithfully in the political sphere? A balance must be struck between working collaboratively with political structures, while also maintaining a critical stance and a prophetic witness. Also, the church does not speak in public spaces on its own, but stands with other religions; there is a need to negotiate interfaith relationships in public spaces as well. One positive example of this comes from the Indian context in the constructive interreligious response to the increased violence against women, including challenging the use of rape as a tool of shame and terror.

We recognize the need to be more creative theologically and look deeply into our own traditions to find relevant theological and spiritual resources that can be used to build bridges with other religions, rather than dividing us. An example of this was a conversation around the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Such work encourages a holistic view of salvation that facilitates and promotes Christian engagement with society and with other religions. This includes conversation with individuals who do not self-identify with any specific religious tradition but still want to be part of the conversation.

We affirm the importance of what has been called a “dialogue of life.” This dialogue occurs spontaneously at the grassroots level, and brings community members together around specific social issues. These dialogues can challenge or

confront violence, xenophobia, racism, discrimination, corruption and climate change, particularly when we learn from victims who suffer from such injustices. These dialogues enable disadvantaged populations to claim their voice and influence the discourse. In this process, we make neighbors out of strangers in spite of very different religious beliefs.

Even though many churches and individuals value harmony, we also acknowledge the reality that sometimes conflict can be an opportunity, sparking theological creativity and depth. In some cases, queer readings of Scripture can empower marginalized communities (as well as the religious majorities) to see God at work in their midst. These readings themselves can be examples of conflict that invite more profound understandings of Scripture. In other cases, when religious communities defend the rights of religious others in situations of controversy as citizens of a shared public space, they transcend ethno-religious centrism by reimagining solidarity.

We affirm the commitment to interreligious dialogue; therefore, the consultation also included visits to a local mosque, gurdwara and Chinese temple, as well as conversations with local Daoist, Muslim and Confucian leaders. We were shown great hospitality and generosity, reminding us of the importance of these virtues in public discourse. This consultation provided an open forum for conversation, intentionally including youth voices, which is particularly valuable in the Asian context. We support the creation of other open, safe places around the world where transformative conversations can continue. Finally, we also were reminded of the urgency of doing theology not only with our heads but with our hearts and bodies, fully engaged in the world.

The thirty participants in the consultation came from China, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Norway, Philippines, Sweden and United States of America.