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## Frontier Internship in Mission

### **A mind full of unlimited compassion**



*By Eddy Cahyana*

ALTHOUGH THERAVADA BUDDHISM is the national religion of Thailand and has been practiced by 90% of the population for the last seven centuries, other minority religions—Mahayana Buddhism, Christianity, Animism, and Islam—are also present. All of these faiths have coexisted peacefully in this country. Mr. Eddy Cahyana, a layman who belongs to the Protestant Christian Church in Bali, carried out his internship on interfaith dialogue and cooperation with the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Eddy explored fundamental principles and practices that nourish both peaceful coexistence and cooperation on social issues among the different religions in Thailand as a way to address exclusive and intolerant religious fundamentalism that is fuelling conflicts in Asia today. To achieve this goal, Eddy met and interviewed key religious leaders and organized workshops and a major event, the Asian Religious Leaders' Conference, which involved representatives from major religions from several Asian countries.

#### **Peace and living in harmony**

Eddy interviewed Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim leaders between January and April 2007. The first interview was held at the Suan Dok Temple with Dr. Pramaha Boonchuey Sirindharo, a Buddhist monk who is Deputy Rector and a lecturer at the Maha Jula Longkorn Racha Wittayalai University in Doi Sutep, Chiang Mai province. This conversation, like those with other religious leaders, explored religious perspectives of peace, harmonious living, and conflict, key issues in Asia.

Dr. Sirindharo said that peace is basically a state of mind full of unlimited compassion, gentleness, and kindness. Individual peace is actually an expression of communal peace. When individuals are at peace, it follows that the community, as a collection of individuals, will also enjoy peace.

The next interviews were conducted at the McGilvary Theological Seminary with Professor Man Pongudam, who provided a Christian perspective on the issue. When everyone lives together harmoniously, lovingly, respectfully, and careful of others, peace becomes a reality. Echoing Dr. Sirindharo, this Christian leader said that peace in individuals' hearts determines peace in the community and society. There is no way for the community to live in peace when individuals are not at peace personally.

The last interviews were carried out at the Chang Klan Mosque with Imam Sorlae Sawang Siriphon, a teacher at The Principle School of Fun Do Ein Chang Klan Mosque, The Principle School of Students of Mosque Baan Hor and a consultant to the Muslim Association in Chiang Mai. He said that if we talk about peace, we actually talk about religion and humanity, because peace, religion, and humanity cannot be separated from one another. Religion teaches about peace and believers must practice what their religions say. Islam is a path to peace and perfection. A Muslim works towards peace in the full sense of the word. Not just an absence of war, peace means wholeness, completeness, beings without defect and inadequacies, being perfect, and being full. Muslim people live in peace and should practice peace as long as they live, he asserted.

The Asian Religious Leaders Conference, entitled 'Being Peacemakers in Asia Today,' was held in November in Thailand. It gathered 55 participants, religious leaders, scholars, and peace advocates from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions. They came to the conference to celebrate Asia's diverse spiritual and cultural heritage. The delegates came from 12 countries in Asia —Pakistan, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, The Philippines, and Japan. There were also representatives from the United States and Switzerland. Eddy took on a major responsibility in organizing this conference, which represented another step towards understanding, fellowship, and cooperation among religious leaders from diverse faith traditions.

"Today we see a politicization of religion that has led to violent eruptions among political and religious groups. This politicization of religion is another manifestation of militant, exclusive, and intolerant religious fundamentalism. Within religious communities, there are those who advocate the idea that the dominant manifestations of religion in Asia today are not the authentic versions expounded by the founders of the faiths. Therefore, it has become important to bring together religious leaders from the major religious groups in Asia to consult with each other and discern truth from falsehood, liberating spirituality from false spirituality and domination from empowerment," affirmed Eddy.

The final statement of the conference affirmed that "a basic thrust of religion is to nurture life and create societies for human beings to live in harmony with one another and nature. In different ways, religions have laid down spiritual bases for a just and moral human order. Religious communities have also kept alive social networks of solidarity with all, including the marginalized, discriminated against, and oppressed."

At the end of the conference, participants committed themselves to being more visible peacemakers in Asia by strengthening inter-religious networks at the local, national and international level; working to empower people of their own religious tradition to become agents of peace and reconciliation; advocating for good governance, respect for human rights—especially women’s and children’s rights and care for the environment; equipping people to stand against communal, religious, ethnic and gender-based violence; and exchanging information among religious communities in order to promote cooperation and solidarity.

### **Facing the HIV/AIDS pandemic: A concrete case of interfaith cooperation**

Another important component of Eddy’s internship was becoming involved in programs and activities of faith-based communities that address the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Thailand, a concrete case of interfaith cooperation.

There was not much a concern among faith based communities in Thailand when the HIV epidemic appeared around 1984. That attitude radically changed when the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS, particularly in Chiang Rai province, grew exponentially. Buddhist monks were the first to become involve in a far-reaching program to teach HIV prevention in the context of religious ceremonies in temples, communities and schools and provide care and support for People with AIDS in hospitals, homes, and communities. Buddhist monks have also used their temples as centers for care and support for people infected with HIV/AIDS. Other faith communities eventually joined efforts with Buddhist monks in a nationwide campaign that substantially reduced new HIV infections.<sup>1</sup>

During his internship, Eddy attended Asian Interfaith Network on HIV/AIDS steering committee and partnership meetings and assisted in organizing workshops and training seminars on ‘Faith Responses to HIV/AIDS.’ Eddy worked closely with some colleges to formulate and develop a specialized HIV/AIDS ministry for students. With representatives from governmental institutions and national NGOs, he was part of the committee that organized AIDS Day, which included a visit to the House of Hope, an orphanage for children whose parents have died of AIDS.

The culmination of these efforts was the International Interfaith Pre-International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific meeting, organized by Asian Interfaith Network on AIDS (AINA), the Christian Conference of Asia, and the World Council of Churches on ‘The Response of Faith Communities to HIV and AIDS - Have We Kept the Promise?’ The meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in August 2006. Representatives from major religions in Asia participated.

In their final statements, the participants in the conference recognized that “the values of our religions compel us to respond to the human suffering caused by HIV and AIDS in our communities. These values also provide a unique and distinctive contribution to the overall response to the AIDS pandemic.” They also agreed that “the response to the pandemic has to be centered in the community. We commit to building caring, equitable communities that lead the way in supporting affected persons, encouraging openness, reducing stigma and discrimination, and addressing social inequities.”

Rerouting ecumenism in Asia

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<sup>1</sup> The number of new HIV infections was reduced from 143,000 in 1991 to 19,000 in 2003.

If interfaith dialogue and cooperation are essential in Asia, the Christian Conference of Asia believes that reawakening ecumenical passion among churches in the region is crucial too. The meeting, ‘Celebrating Life in Asia’s Pain and Struggle,’ held at GBKP Retreat Center, Sukamakmur, North Sumatra, Indonesia in March aimed at analyzing the present social reality and the situation of the organized ecumenical movement, facilitating communication and dialogue between social activists and churches, and looking for alternatives that may strengthen the ecumenical movement.

“This meeting was to promote Asian ecumenism from the perspective of people’s pain and struggles and to foster wider dialogue on Asian ecumenism in the context of globalization. While we were reflecting on the fifty-year journey of CCA in Asia, we also gave a critical view of institution- and development-sponsored ecumenism, while looking for an alternative ecumenism from the perspective of the people,” Eddy underlined.

“We have moved from the colonial to the post-colonial —some may call it post-modern— context, a context in which the global empire and globalization are main players. We are in a new context and are confronted with new challenges. To raise a prophetic voice requires serious engagement in the people’s new context,” said Eddy.

### **CCA fiftieth anniversary**

A highlight of Eddy’ internship was his participation in the events which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Christian Conference of Asia, held in Parapat, Pematang Siantar, and Medan, North Sumatra Indonesia in March 2007. The Parapat seminar was intended for learning and reflecting on the work of CCA through revisiting the past, present, and future; strengthening partnerships; and looking into missiological and ecumenical challenges. Pematang Siantar was the venue for a massive worship and communion to celebrate CCA’s 50th anniversary with local congregations. Finally, there was also a special anniversary worship at Medan and celebration which was attended by the Indonesian Minister of Religion.

“Under the theme ‘Affirming Our Common Mission and Witness,’ the 50th anniversary of CCA was a unique opportunity to thank God and celebrate the long journey of the ecumenical movement in Asia. It was an opportunity not only for ceremony and celebration, but it represented a *kairos* to review and look back, reflecting on our work so we may transform our steps forward,” said Eddy.

### **A preliminary evaluation**

As Eddy packs to return to Bali for his re-entry and postgraduate theological studies, he reflects about his internship with the CCA. “Throughout the process of planning and holding the Asian Religious Leaders Conference, I humbly contributed to strengthening links across national and denomination boundaries, enhancing churches’ capabilities to deal with specific issues such as inter-religious cooperation in peace building. My internship may have also helped people to see new or different perspectives of Asian religious traditions. I understand that this is not the first event concerning this issue, but another effort to improve our awareness together for peace.”

He describes his internship as a learning experience. “Working with the CCA, I learned about organizational and administrative matters, but also the theological and biblical basis for intra-faith and inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. I felt inspired by CCA’s

ecumenical spirit to contribute to forging unity among churches throughout Asia. Unity certainly does not mean being one, but rather working together to carry out our mission in a world which is facing so many challenges, such as poverty, human right violations, environmental degradation, and cultural and religious pluralism. The term unity in diversity is very suitable here.”

“The CCA, the Thai context, and the relationships I established with people of other faiths helped me to understand and become part of the wider ecumenical movement. This internship will be a precious experience for me and my church in Bali in the years to come.”