

AREA DESK FOR ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

INTRODUCTION

Economic performance in Asia and in the Middle East region remained strong in 2006, despite security problems in some countries. Economic growth in the Middle East continued to outpace global growth. The strong economic performance in early 2006 raised concerns that China's government would take stricter measures to moderate economic growth in the short term. India is like a fast moving train; those onboard do not realize how fast they are moving. 2006 was described as the "India Year" in both industrial and GDP growth. The emerging markets of Southeast Asia also experienced fast growth with an average five percent increase in GDP in 2006.

Conflicts and a worsening security situation in Asia, however, had a broader impact on the regional economy. Global developments could also affect regional growth. Asia is a region very vulnerable to natural disasters, and the intensity of natural disasters might be more and more affected by climate change. Some areas in the region are at risk from rising sea levels and weather-related disasters. Steps need to be taken to strengthen their disaster preparedness. Health crises also have the potential to threaten the region's commerce, trade and security.

These issues continue to challenge the life of the churches in Asia. Churches are challenged to promote a coordinated approach, which includes capacity building, technical assistance and strategic planning. They are also challenged to promote common plans and communication among themselves to reduce the impact of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. In view of the experience of Asian countries which have suffered extensively in recent years from the devastation of large scale tsunamis, hurricanes and earthquakes, churches need to intensify cooperation in the area of emergency preparedness.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Seminar on Dialogue in Life Medan, Indonesia, June 27-30

The seminar was a follow-up to the recommendation of the LWF Mission Team which visited Indonesia in January 2005 in relation to the tsunami disaster. The team recommended that a seminar on inter-faith relations should be organized by LWF in Indonesia, in light of the post-tsunami friendship, cooperation and mutual help among religious groups. The seminar was attended by about 85 participants (men and women), Muslims and Christians from Aceh and Nias, representatives from other countries which were affected by the tsunami/earthquake, i.e. India, Thailand and Malaysia (the Sri Lankan representative was not able to join the seminar due to a visa issue). Representatives of relief agencies and ecumenical guests in North Sumatra were also invited to attend the seminar.

Participants discussed the theme Dialogue in Life, which focused on diapraxis. The seminar created a community of conversation, relationships and friendship while participants discussed how to live together and face life's challenges together. The participants were pleased to receive greetings from Bishop Mark Hanson, president of the Lutheran World Federation. In his greetings, Bishop Hanson emphasized that people should not misuse the Christian/Church's contributions to the victims. He reassured the Muslims that the LWF never proselytizes or tries to convert disaster victims from Islam to Christianity in exchange for its help. Relationships can only be built by learning more about each other. He said that this kind of seminar is one of the instruments to build such a relationship between Muslims and Christians.

The participants affirmed that diversity of religions is a fact of our time, and that dialogue should not only be the spoken word but includes meeting between people. It is in the human encounter with its sorrows and joys, struggles and fellowship, that human beings become true. The participants of the seminar were requested to think of how the seminar could be followed up in different events with the aim of assessing the outcomes of this first event.

**2nd Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religion
Astana, Kazakhstan, September 12-14**

The Area Secretary for Asia was invited to join a team of LWF delegates led by the General Secretary for this event. This congress was a continuation of the 1st congress, which was held in Astana in September 2003. Such a congress is very interesting as the leaders of the world and traditional religions really try to promote dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions.



A Leader of Muslim from Aceh, Bishop of AMIN Church from Nias, Ecumenical and Mission Partners



Asia Secretary presented a visible sign of solidarity to Muslim society when participants visited Aceh for learning practical action.

The main theme of this Congress was Religion, Society and International Security. Based on the theme, two important points were discussed during the Congress; Freedom of Religions and Recognition of Others, and the Role of Religious Leaders in Enhancing International Security. The LWF General Secretary, Dr. Ishmael Noko, presented a paper entitled Freedom of Religion and Recognition of Others. It was well accepted.

Visit to Lutheran churches in Myanmar September 20-24

The visit was part of a goodwill mission to Myanmar to discuss and encourage a better relationship between the four Lutheran churches in Myanmar. In addition, the visit was also to prepare for the planned Mekong Mission Forum (MMF) in Yangon in 2007, hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Myanmar (ELCM) an LWF member church. It also aimed at learning about the situation of the other three Lutheran Churches (non-LWF members) in Myanmar, the Upper Myanmar Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church of Myanmar and Myanmar Lutheran Church.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Myanmar (ELCM) - LWF member church

A discussion with the president of the ELCM, Rev. Andrews Jensen Rajan, revealed that the other three Lutheran Churches (non-LWF members) still need more time to assess their situations before the LWF processes their membership applications. Rev. Rajan also expressed his willingness to host the MMF meeting in 2007 and to establish a good relationship with other Lutheran churches.

Upper Myanmar Evangelical Lutheran Church (UMELC)

The UMELC was founded on April 17, 1999 in Khenmancikhamyo, Chin State with 127 members. Now this church has 5,630 members with eight ordained pastors and 22 lay workers in 56 areas. The church runs three elementary schools with about 100 pupils. A membership application has been sent to the LWF and UMELC president, Rev. Pau Za Khen Tombing expressed that members of the church will be very happy if UMELC can become a member of LWF. The area is in the Chin State, where no foreign visitors are permitted to travel, due to the political situation. The church has applied to become a member of the Myanmar Council of Churches and this is still in the process. The wish to establish good relationship with the other Lutheran churches was also strongly expressed.

Lutheran Church of Myanmar (LCM)

The president of LCM, Rev. Lal Sawi Thanga, accompanied by the mission director of the church, expressed their desire to work together in a close partnership and cooperation with all the Lutheran churches in Myanmar, including the ELCM, in whatever ways possible. The LCM was established on January 1, 2000. Today it has 850 members in eight congregations with 12 pastors. The areas where the congregations are located are restricted to foreigners, but opportunities for outreach and expansion are excellent. The LCM is preparing to become a member of MCC and the Lutheran World Federation.

Myanmar Lutheran Church (MLC)

Rev. Andrew Mang Lone, the president of the Myanmar Lutheran Church, informed us that the MLC was officially established in 1998. It has now 1,850 members in ten parishes with two ordained pastors and 35 evangelists. It now runs an orphanage and radio broadcasting ministries. The construction of a new church building is ongoing in Yangon with the support of the Lutheran Church in Malaysia and Singapore (LCMS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria. The MLC is open to having a good relationship with all Lutheran churches in Myanmar

The three Lutheran churches (non-LWF members) understood the advice given to them that LWF still needs time to learn more about the situation of the churches according to the procedures and requirements for LWF membership application. Ways to visit even part of their congregations next time were discussed.

LCP Convention and 60th Celebration Baguio City, Philippines, November 22-26

The National Convention of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines (LCP) was held in conjunction with the celebration of the LCP 60th anniversary. The events brought together representatives of LCP congregations, dioceses and mission partners. The convention thoroughly discussed the possibility of achieving reconciliation and unity within the LCP. In his keynote address based on II Corinthians 5:17-19, DMD director Dr. Kjell Nordstokke emphasized that reconciliation is at the core of Christian faith and a key concept in understanding God's salvific action in Jesus Christ.

One of the resolutions of the convention was that the LCP leaders or Board of Directors was mandated by the LCP to pursue peace, reconciliation and unity with the other group of the LCP through meaningful dialogue at national, district and congregational levels. To follow up on the resolution, the bishop of the LCP approached the president of the other group and jointly agreed to organize a dialogue among members of the Boards of Directors of the two groups, the district bishops/presidents and lay leaders. The main goal of such a dialogue is to get more commitments among the leaders of the LCP who will be advocates of peace and unity, and plan a joint convention for the unity of the church.

It was realized, however, that since the conflict has been going on for many years, it is not easy for the LCP Board of Directors to deal with peace and reconciliation efforts. There are so many factors that may come into play. The Lutheran World Federation will



*Filipino traditional dances at the LCP
60th Celebration*

continue to accompany the LCP in the process of pursuing the path of reconciliation and unity within the Lutheran Church in the Philippines despite the challenges along the way.

**Round Table meeting –ACT, LWF, YTBI, Ecumenical partners
Bali, November 28-29**

A Round Table Meeting (RTM) between ACT, LWF, YTBI and Ecumenical partners was organized by YTBI (a foundation dealing with humanitarian work in Indonesia). YTBI functions as facilitator for partner organizations and networks. It works on a participatory basis to meet the needs of the people. It is a church-based organization and manages its activities based on human values taking place in 11 areas of Indonesia through 60 church partners (including Lutheran churches), networks and secular partners.

About 30 participants, representing ACT, LWF, YTBI and Indonesian churches attended the meeting. DMD Asia Secretary and DWS Adv. Fund Raising represented the LWF. The purpose of the meeting was to empower the capacity of churches and communities in Indonesia because of their inadequate knowledge and skill in disaster management. The participants discussed building capacity together, strengthening the ecumenical contributions to disaster risk and preparedness in Indonesia. The RTM explored ways of coordinating and collaborating on capacity building efforts through sharing experiences and exploring possibilities together.

Prior to the RTM the Asia Secretary facilitated a meeting between mission partners and leaders of Lutheran churches in Indonesia to discuss the need to coordinate and support mutual efforts in the areas of emergency response and development/diakonia works in cooperation with YTBI and mission partners. It was decided that LWF-DMD, Australian Lutheran World Service, United in Mission (Wuppertal) and the ELCA will jointly work on building capacity of the Lutheran churches in Indonesia for disaster management and preparedness.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The socio-political, economic and religious problems in Asia have naturally posed challenges to the churches. In spite of their minority status in the region, churches are increasingly challenged to be instruments for change and to be the light to dispel injustice and oppression. The Asian churches are challenged to be witnesses to truth, justice and human dignity in the context of socio-political and economic upheavals. In responding to humanitarian needs, churches are called on to play a role far beyond those humanitarian services. They should not only participate in service to the needy but also to become courageous witnesses to truth, advocates for the poor and defenders of justice.

The multi-religious situation in Asia demands dialogue as indispensable for the future of the Asian churches. Churches are challenged to promote a common and complimentary (moral and religious) foundation as well as an active inter-religious collaboration in their struggle towards liberation and wholeness. Dialogue, understood and undertaken as communication and sharing of divine life, as journeying together in a common search of the work of the Spirit, removes prejudices and helps mutual understanding and enrichment.



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