



SANGGUNIANG PAMBANSA NG MGA SIMBAHAN SA PILIPINAS

National Council of Churches in the Philippines

✉ 879 Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, West Triangle, Quezon City, 1104 Philippines
PO BOX 2639 Quezon City; E-mail: library@nccphilippines.org
☎ (632) 9293745 / 9251797 FAX: (632) 9267076

MEMBER CHURCHES

- ✚ Convention of
Philippine Baptist Churches
- ✚ Episcopal Church in
the Philippines
- ✚ Iglesia Evangelica
Metodista en Las Islas
Filipinas
- ✚ Iglesia Filipina
Independiente
- ✚ Iglesia Unida
Ekyumenikal
- ✚ United Church of
Christ in the Philippines
- ✚ The United Methodist
Church
- ✚ Lutheran Church in the
Philippines
- ✚ The Salvation Army
- ✚ Apostolic Catholic
Church

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

- Association of Christian
Schools, Colleges and
Universities
- Philippine Bible Society
- Union Church of Manila
- Consortium of Christian
Organizations in Urban
Development
- Kaisahang Buhay
Foundation
- Manila Community
Services, Inc.
- Student Christian
Movement of the Philippines
- Ecumenical Church Loan
Fund, Inc.
- Lingap
Pangkabataan, Inc.

EAA/NCCP Advocacy Capacity Strengthening Workshop
Legend Villas, Mandaluyong City, Philippines
November 28, 2012

KEYNOTE / THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Let me first thank the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) for even considering the Philippines as a venue for this workshop. That it was eventually held here is a bonus. I wish we had planned other events for Peter Prove to take advantage of his presence here. It is not an overstatement to say that in those critical moments of the campaign to stop the killings in the Philippines [2006-2009] by the Ecumenical Voice for Peace and Human Rights at the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council, two Australians would play important roles. One of them was Peter in his capacity then as an executive in the Lutheran World Federation for the moral and logistical boosts he gave the first time we engaged the UN UPR mechanism. The other was Prof. Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur for extrajudicial killings and summary executions whom the Philippine mission in Geneva called an “ungrateful guest” for his report that put the Philippine government to task for its poor human rights record.

As well, I wish to reiterate that you do not only know how much your presence here means to us. The NCCP awaits the outcome of this workshop. Our constituency know that this is taking place. The long weeks NCCP thru Minnie and Edward spent preparing, since we were advised that this would take place here, to ensure that you would focus on the agenda and not worry about other details of your visit here is of naught when we consider your presence here as an act of solidarity with us. And more. We view this as an opportunity for advocates in South Asia and Southeast Asia to weave a tapestry out of our divergent threads so we can stand more united and effective “not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, authorities and powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). The voice of the global south must seek to be solid, amidst our diversity, in order to be heard and with credibility. The new affirmation of the World Council of Churches on Mission and Evangelism, following the mission event here in Manila in March this year declares:

“We affirm that today mission movements are emerging from the global South and East which are multi-directional and many faceted. The shifting centre of gravity of Christianity to the global South and East challenges us to explore missiological expressions that are rooted in these contexts, cultures and spiritualities. We need to develop further mutuality and partnership and affirm interdependence within mission and the ecumenical movement.”

Our mission practice should show solidarity with suffering peoples and harmony with nature. Evangelism is done in self-emptying humility, with respect towards others and in dialogue with people of different cultures and faith. It should, in this landscape, also involve confronting structures and cultures of oppression and dehumanization that are in contradiction to the values of God’s reign.”

Having quoted what seems like an epistle addressed to the churches in Asia, I hasten to add that today's subheading in this workshop is "Moving Forward". Allow me then to share with you some of the biblical imperatives that shape NCCP's work in a broken world.

A. "I am the bread of life"

In the town where I was born and grew up, among the valleys of the Cordillera mountain range far up north from here, we harvest rice once a year. For as long as the rice supply of a year's harvest lasted, we pounded rice during the week-ends sufficient for the following week's supply. Others did it on a daily basis. For the remaining part of the year, rice supply came from the neighbouring town which grew more rice than my town. There were two rice mills but rarely would people patronize these. Those who did were preparing for a community feast such as a wedding or when death occurs and more rice is needed than usual. The grains were much larger, tastier and more nutritious. Until the so-called commercial variety came along, that was the best rice I ever had. That variety is gone. Asia is abundant providentially. We were self-sufficient in fact and our spirituality told us that such sufficiency and providence came from a far more superior maker. This perspective may sound sentimental. But, there is something here that we need to reclaim. What is at issue also is that when big business began to tamper with the natural order of things in the name of technological advance, it was James 4.1-3 again and again and it was never the same again. How are the majority of the people in Asia appreciating Jesus as the bread of life? Will they even believe this deprived as they are? This is a theological question that we need to ask again and again in the face of unjust structures and oppressive powers. Would that the care of souls also mean the care of bodies. How can the network of EAA radiate the common witness of Jesus as the bread of life? Can EAA and its allies create the space for farmers to come together and share their stories? We are faced with principalities and powers who have all the time and the resources to plot out their strategies to sustain the oppression. Can the churches and the EAA be mechanisms for this marginalized group to also plot out their strategies together amidst the forces that negate such? We also found instructive the regular conduct of church-peasant dialogues. For one, it keeps the churchpeople's theological footing squarely on the ground. Then it provides a solid opportunity for church people to exercise the pastoral responsibility of listening intently to people who are hurting providing thereby the motivation for appropriate response.

B. "Feed them!"

Most often, I ask myself the questions what can we do among so many or where can we acquire food to feed these? It could be mind-boggling when I receive letters from rural areas in the Philippines - and that refers to farmers - who request for assistance because the land they occupy and their source of food and therefor their life will be converted into something else, or that the whole area is a potential for mining or that they have been forcibly evacuated because the military was sent there in the name of the war against terror or in the name of the state's anti-insurgency campaign. It does not help that we also recall stories in Scripture about people being turned away, of the inhospitality that Mary and Joseph experienced, of people passing by or of people standing by. How can Christian hospitality pervade in a situation where its own language is being slowly subsumed in the language of business, of control and of domination? And what of sharing? One day in an agricultural community, a boy approached me and said please keep on visiting us. I asked him why he said that. He said, "when we do not have visitors, my father would not prepare chicken for a meal. We would eat to survive and for the energy to work on the ricefields. When visitors come it is a feast in our house." On one hand I wanted to honor the boy's invitation. On the other hand, I was very disturbed. Can the church reclaim this value as

"that all may be one"
(John 17:21)

affirmed in the practice of the early church recorded in Acts? Hospitality and sharing are what make us Christian rather than obligations or impositions of our being Christian. The command to “feed them” is directed towards the churches to look into their resources and the nature of their partnerships so that these are accessible and in the service of those in need not only as an act of charity but also as an act of self-emptying for complete solidarity or communion if you may. This also calls for the churches to take a second look at the nature of their partnerships with those who wield power and be more prophetic. This is easier said than done. But, it is not impossible. Roman Catholics and Protestants in this country are not very discordant in calling for genuine agrarian reform in this country. That is almost an impossible task considering that our lawmakers are themselves the landlords. But, the constant beckoning of farmers also provides the impetus. In this sense is it also a struggle and in our context a long protracted one. To be sure there are success stories of farmers finally taking control of the land they till. So it is not impossible. Certainly, it is a serious and continuing theological question that those who produce food are themselves deliberately deprived of food and strangers in their own land. Perhaps, when Jesus was writing on the ground while confronted by the violence done to a woman, was it not possible that he was also trying to sharpen his social analysis to go beyond the often easy and convenient stop-gap measures? Some body is denying someone the food and the land. The church with all its moral and ethical standards can easily identify who and should unmask that somebody. Can churches identify capitalism as a factor of human misery and to courageously stand by that act of identification?

C. *“He who wants to be great must be your servant”*

Today, a priest is marching with some 120 farmers on a 350- kilometre stretch on the way to the national capital region to insist on the integrity of land and demand a stop to destructive land conversion of agricultural lands. From our perspective in the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, addressing the issue of power in relation to the continuing suffering of the majority stems from our understanding and appreciation of Jesus’ words, “he who wants to be great must first be your servant.” We can thus more fully internalize that in the struggle for human dignity and the preservation of civil liberties, we have to drink of the cup. How far have churches in Asia been bold enough to drink more fully of that cup? We hold no illusion that it is easy faced as we are by the viciousness and impunity of a system that determines who will die and the manner of their death, who will determine who will disappear and whether they will ever surface again. The extrajudicial killings, the enforced disappearances, the militarization of the countryside and the subtle repression of principled dissent in this country as in many countries in Asia generate a climate of fear. And indeed, it has its numbing effects. There is every reason to be very afraid and fearful. But it is precisely why we must fear in order that we will overcome fear. The church has its faith reserves and the undying faith of those who suffer in hope of the ultimate triumph of peace and justice to build on. It is not suffering for suffering’s sake. It is an eschatological vision that has been made available in the present. Taking the brunt of the brazen impunity are farmers, workers, students, indigenous people, and church people. But we need to engage because even in our silence the impunity goes on.

I offer to you the engagement of the NCCP in various national and international mechanisms on human rights such as the UPR of the UNHRC. We have documented this in a book “Let the stones cry out”. We have seen how it worked beyond our expectations. But, we know that this is not the sole means. We have the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform which brings together the three largest Christian aggrupations in this country – the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines and the NCCP and some other smaller ecumenical formations to push for the peace process in this country. In doing so, the contending parties will resolve the roots of this war in our country. This too is not the sole

*“that all may be one”
(John 17:21)*

means. None can yet match the unquenchable desire of those who struggle for freedom and the churches can break out from the danger of becoming monuments to become movements for genuine reform and renewal by making the people's struggle as its own. We recognize the reality of ideologies. Yet, for the church, beyond ideologies is "the new heaven and the new earth". Anything that negates the attainment of the Biblical promise of abundant life, especially God's providence of land and food is a human right violation. And a human right violation in the Philippines is a human right violation anywhere. The defense of human rights here is the defense of human rights everywhere.

On my table, I maintain a list of victims of extrajudicial killings and take it along with me each time I travel out of town. It is a list that is burdensome and begs for more shoulders to carry it and more importantly of more people who will stop the list from growing longer for in this list are the names of indigenous peoples and farmers, young and old, men and women, whose blood cry out from the ground for justice. To others this list is what it is – a list, a statistic. But for people of faith and those who uphold human dignity this list is a reminder of the questions God continues to ask: "Where is your brother/sister?" and "What have you done? Behold, your brother's/sister's blood cries out from the ground."

Mabuhay po kayo!



REV. FR. REX B. REYES, JR.
General Secretary

"that all may be one"
(John 17:21)