

Interview with Hope S. Antone

Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) is an umbrella organization for the majority of Protestant and Orthodox churches in the region, comprising nearly 100 churches and 16 national councils of churches.

Asian Christian Review has interviewed one of its executive staffs, Dr. Hope S. Antone, Joint Executive Secretary for the Faith, Mission and Unity program area.



Asian Christian Review (ACR): Dr. Antone, could you explain a little bit about your job, or what your unit does, especially for readers who are not familiar with the work of CCA?

Antone: Faith, Mission and Unity (FMU) program area is what used to be separate program units of Theological Concerns, Urban and Rural Mission, and Mission and Evangelism. CCA has decided to merge them into one unit at the eleventh general assembly in 2000 as a part of its structural reform. To these, we also added the fourth component, Ecumenical Theological Education. I am basically in charge of Theological Concerns and Mission and Evangelism combined. My job here is promoting Asian Christian theologies using Asian resources as well as intra-faith and inter-faith cooperation. My desk is also in charge of relating with Catholics, and now we are expanding that relationship to the Evangelicals and Pentecostals...so it's very broad!

ACR: Did you always want to work for CCA, or something happened and changed the course of your life? Why did you end up in CCA?

Antone: I was a teacher before, a seminary teacher...half-time. The other half of my time was with a school of communication. I earned my first degree in mass-communication. I have always dreamt to teach, but after sometime, because I got married and my husband's assignment was outside [the Philippines], we ended up in Hong Kong. He was the youth [desk] secretary for CCA then. I was working part-time for the Asia-Pacific Region of the World Student Christian Federation in the headquarters [in Hong Kong], but I somehow got connected with CCA indirectly because my husband's colleagues used to invite me to help as a resource person in various women's meetings and to conduct bible studies. After he finished his term with CCA, I went for further study in the US. When we came back for research for my dissertation, there was an opening for a communication consultant... I started out as a communication consultant. I was doing *CCA News* and much of the editing of various publications.

ACR: You were the first communication consultant for CCA.

Antone: Yes. There was a communication desk before when CCA was bigger,

but then they scrapped it... In the time of [General Secretary] Ahn Jae Wong, I was asked to help him as a communication consultant, which I did for about 2 years, and then there was a vacancy in FMU. But even before the vacancy was official, I was already asked to take over the preparation for CATS IV [the Fourth Congress of Asian Theologians], which was a part of FMU's duties. And of course, I think they recognized that it was high time also for CCA to have a *woman* to manage the theology desk!

ACR: Coming back to FMU, in your opinion, what difference has FMU made, or what difference does it wish to make among the life of churches in Asia?

Antone: Ok, "wish to make" then, because I have not really assessed our work yet; I officially began with FMU only in August 2003 when CATS [IV] was being held. It must also be pointed out that FMU works very closely with the other program areas of CCA and we all strive to achieve our common vision together.

What I really want to see happening are 4 shifts in theologizing, which I believe are necessary for churches to be truly ecumenical, and yet truly grounded in our faith. When I use the word "ecumenical," by the way, it does not simply mean intra-Christian relationship. I take the original meaning of the "whole household of God," which really includes all people, no matter what their faith is. I prefer such a broad definition of ecumenism, although I know that that the movement was originally about intra-Christian dialogue. And, I feel that we need 4 shifts in order for the broader definition of ecumenism to be owned by our constituency.

First, a shift from competition to cooperation among denominations. Because, we still have competition even among Protestants. We [Protestants] are still very denomination-centered. Instead of going for more activities that make us work together, all our Protestant denominations tend to do mission with our denominational flags and labels. That is what I call "resurgence of denominationalism." It is an obstacle to ecumenism...even the narrow meaning of ecumenism. So hopefully, ecumenical cooperation can go beyond [the discord among] the so-called mainstream, mainline Protestant denominations, and even to include Evangelicals and Pentecostals. And of course Catholics, because even in the Philippines, many of us still think that Catholics should be converted! I feel that we need to learn and broaden our thinking, otherwise we look at other denominations as an enemy or object of conversion.

The second is a shift from condemnation to dialogue among different religions in Asia. There is still a tendency to try to convert the so-called "heathens" or "pagans." I want to promote among Asian theologians an attitude of affirmation that *to be Asian is to be interreligious*. All religious traditions in Asia are something that we can learn from. So the first shift is intra-faith and

now the second one is more of inter-faith. We [FMU and other program areas of CCA] are doing this through inviting our neighboring faith communities to some of our meetings, and through undertaking inter-faith operations on certain issues like gender justice, globalization, HIV/AIDS. We are seeking inter-faith cooperation, not just through FMU, but also through the whole CCA.

The third one, from isolation to collaboration with civil society. The trend of many of our churches is to shy away from working with groups that are ideological rather than religious. In Asia, especially in the Philippines, there is still strong stigmatization of groups engaged in peace and justice work, which are labeled as “communist.” We know in the Philippines that this is really a cover-up for the government’s continuing alliance with the American government. This is to scare people, so that they will not fight for their rights. Part of the stigmatization is the scare that when you join these people who fight for rights, truth and justice, you are communist and godless. I think it is also a vestige of the cold war between USA and USSR. We are just continuing what is already over. URM [Urban and Rural Mission within FMU] has more programs on this area, bringing together the church and civil society groups so that our spirituality can be enriched. Our spirituality should not be just about “going to heaven,” and escaping the problems of the world. We should be really getting woven in the world and to experience heaven right here!

The fourth one is—which we try to incorporate also in the other program areas, since FMU is to provide theological foundation for the other units/desks of CCA— a shift from disintegration to integration of the whole creation. We do not know much about what it really means to be stewards of God’s creation. There is very little theologizing in terms of ecological issues, sustainable development, and the like. There is a lot from other groups, such as “green” or environmental groups. But the church does not seem to be strong in this. So hopefully, the church can reclaim its God-ordained responsibility of being stewards of God’s creation by striving to bring about harmony and interconnectedness of all that God created, which, for me, is the picture of a wider ecumenism, the broader ecumenism as the household of God.

ACR: From your point of view, what are the urgent issues, challenges for the churches in Asia today?

Antone: There are so many. I think right now the biggest one is the rise of fundamentalisms, in plural, which is connected to the global realities. Fundamentalisms in all religions. We have to address this as Christians. We always think it is only a Muslim or Hindu issue, but we must begin with the big problem of fundamentalism within Christianity.

And of course, there is the massive poverty in Asia. Even if there is a sign of wealth in some segments of various countries of Asia, there is also massive

poverty. And yet deep spirituality is also there. I am not able to see it clearly yet, how these two can go together: massive poverty and deep spirituality. Do they go together? Do they breed each other? Do they encourage each other? There are many other problems, and all are connected to this basic problem of poverty. So what does our spirituality say about this? Does it condone the poverty because there is anyway an afterlife?

Another issue is our cultural religious diversity. How do we turn this into a positive force? How can our diversity in religiosity, spirituality, cultures be a positive force that will make us flourish as a region?

ACR: You are also an expert in religious education. You earned a doctorate in Education from Union Theological Seminary and PSCE (Presbyterian School of Christian Education), and authored a book entitled “Religious Education in context of Plurality and Pluralism.” What is your background as educator?

Antone: I taught Christian education, feminist theology, religious education, and of course, communication. In our seminary, Christian education is a part of a department called “practical ministry.” We try to train our would-be pastors to be also educators because their primary role is to be able to educate the members of churches, not just preaching and conducting worship, so that they [members of the churches] can also educate their family members, and one another. When I say religious education, I mean something broader because it is not just preparing people for our community of faith as Christians but also preparing them for a wider dialogue or conversation with people of other faiths. That is why I thought of expanding from *Christian* education to *religious* education. When we say Christian education, it is to enrich our people to be grounded in our faith, so that they know exactly who we are, as Christians. It is to show what we hope to become with our lives in relation to others. But when we say religious education, we also mean what it means to be “religious” without ceasing to be Christians. In my book, I try to show a kind of methodology of equipping our people to be grounded in our faith, but also open to the wider conversation with people of other faiths.

ACR: It seems that you are endorsing this “wider ecumenism” including other faiths. How is your call for wider ecumenism being received in various parts of Asia? Do you feel it is well accepted? Or you feel a strong resistance?

Antone: Very good question! I can see an excitement among some people. But I noticed there is also resistance from some sections of our constituency. They are strong member churches, but they have fear, especially about relating with people of other faiths. Fear that we might compromise. Fear that we might lose our identity. Fear that we are giving up our mission, which is really the

traditional meaning of mission. So I try to help them to see that we have to revisit our understanding of mission because mission is not that we bring God there because God is already there.

When I was giving an input at my colleague's program in Chiang Mai, I could sense some excitement through the faces and interactions of some people. But there was still a dissenting voice, not quite ready yet to give up this notion of converting the other. I called it the conquest, imperialist approach of mission. So I just said, "You know, the so-called great commission is not really 'the' only commission from Jesus, and the label 'the greatest commission' came much later." A simple statement like that can be shocking to and can turn off certain people.

ACR: Last question. CCA as the regional umbrella organization collaborates with other regional organizations and World Council of Churches. Do you think Asian churches have distinct contribution to global Christianity? If so, what are they? If the question is too wide, you can take an example of the general assembly of WCC (held in January 2006, at Porto Alegre, Brazil) which you have attended.

Antone: Among the regional ecumenical organizations, I think the staff of CCA got a 100% invitation to attend and participate in different *mutiraos* (workshops) and ecumenical conversations at the WCC assembly. That was a sign for me and for us in CCA that WCC acknowledged our work and therefore wanted us to provide inputs at the general assembly. What I gathered there in various conversations was that they were looking towards us in Asia in terms of what models we have of relating with peoples of other faith, of addressing issues of terrorism and fundamentalism, of overcoming violence and injustice, and of working together to address issues across the different religions and ethnic groups. We should really broaden our understanding of ecumenism because we tend to keep the old, narrow definition which we learned from seminary long ago. The global church is looking towards us, Asians, for that special or unique contribution of theologizing in the midst of plurality, poverty and powerlessness. Now, with a growing concern about globalization and terrorism, Asia has become the site of all these problems and issues. How do we live out our faith and spirituality in the midst of these?

If we Christians—I'm talking about Protestants—continue to follow the traditional model of mother missionary churches, which have nothing to do with the wealth of Asian spirituality and wisdom, if we are just a continuation of Western Christianity, we have no relevance [to Asia]. So I would like to go back to what Asian theologians are always saying now. How do we affirm that *to be Asian is to be interreligious*? And to use this as a wealth, tool, instrument, or a force, to address all our problems. For me this is a big thing.

Another area where I find ourselves making a significant contribution to

global Christianity is through our type of feminism and feminist theologizing in Asia. With the glaring situation of oppression of the majority of Asian women by our patriarchal religions and cultures, our feminism and feminist theologizing have to deal with the interlinking issues of sexism, classism, racism, casteism, religious chauvinism, and anthropocentrism. This being part of my passion is very much integral to my work at FMU as I strive to promote Asian contextual theologizing.

ACR: Very interesting. Thank you very much.