

The Southern Church and Global Christianity: An Interview with Wonsuk Ma

Asian Christian Review has interviewed Rev. Dr. Wonsuk Ma, the Executive Secretary of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS), Oxford, UK. Together with his wife Dr. Julie Ma, Dr. Ma was a missionary to the Philippines and also served as a faculty member of Asia Pacific Theological Seminary for many years before he takes up the current position.



Asian Christian Review (ACR): Dr Ma, you have been the Executive Director of the OCMS since Sept 2006. Could you briefly explain what the Centre does and what you as the Director do?

Ma: There are many aspects of the Centre which I can speak about, but I will select two. As a higher education institution—we have currently 125 PhD students, which we expect to reach 150 by the end of the year 2008 and about 200 in three years' time—our goal is very specific. Our target is the growing non-Western churches which I call the 'Southern' churches, namely, the churches of the "global South"—although we all know that terms like these are very challenging. Our goal is to train the top-level leaders of these churches so that they will not only lead communities in their own continents and regions, but also exercise leadership in global Christianity. This is based on the conviction that the centre of gravity of global Christianity is already in the hands of the Southern churches, not only in terms of numbers, but also of the very creative engagement with cultural and social issues. And this [shift of the centre] will open a brand new Christian engagement because theology is no longer for a Christian society or for a church but is for equipping the church to take its mission seriously and advocate what I call the "public role" of the Christian gospel [within often non-Christian context]. Even in places where Christianity is less than 1%, the church is the sign and a part of the Kingdom of God. The very fact that the church exists in a specific community testifies that there is a public role. So we take the training of the top, global level leaders of the Southern churches very seriously.

The second aspect is what is called the "holistic mission." In the past all social engagements such as issues of justice, poverty, HIV/AIDS, women, etc., at least in Protestant Christianity, were left in the hands of our brothers and sisters of more liberal camps, while Evangelicals have become more and more narrow in their focus of what I call the "life-after-death" mission. However, God has called us to live our lives in this world as the Kingdom people with a

very significant mission calling. So, we [Pentecostals/Evangelicals] also need to include in our mission agenda what I call the “life-before-death” mission. But, unlike our liberal brothers and sisters, we want to pay serious attention to the Scriptures and the Christian truth so that the primacy of and the conviction in our faith will be the basis of our engagement. This school has been advocating a holistic mission based on *Evangelical* conviction and we have produced at least 70 PhD dissertations on various topics.

However, the school is an incredibly ecumenical community. There are students from Catholic, Orthodox and mainline [Protestant] churches, and there are also Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists etc. It is a very wonderful place.

ACR: Are you perhaps the first Pentecostal to be the Director?

Ma: Yes, I am. The previous directors were all Anglicans.

ACR: You have been the Director for about one-and-a half years. How has it been? How would you describe this past one-and-a-half years? Do you find it challenging, rewarding...?

Ma: The school had been doing already very well with its unique contribution and strong academic program. So I did not have to change much. I have been carefully and prayerfully looking for areas in the community that I can strengthen so that we can enhance our contribution. A part of it is networking with world Christian bodies. Institutionally, I have been linking with the World Council of Churches, the Global Christian Forum, the Lausanne [Committee for World Evangelization] and the Edinburgh Centenary. This is an intentional networking with the conviction that our community is a gift from the Lord to the wider church.

ACR: What are your plans and visions for the Oxford Centre?

Ma: I would like to significantly increase the enrolment so that more and more people, especially from the global South, will prepare themselves in this incredibly international, multi-cultural and ecumenical environment where academic excellence is the key. Now another thing I need to stress is that we are preparing mission *practitioners* to engage in an academic exercise. I believe that this is a characteristic of the leaders from the Southern church. You do not have just a theologian or a mission practitioner, but very often, a leader who combines these two roles. They are front-line practitioners, but they are theologically leaders as they are involved in local congregations. We would like to present a new model of Christian leadership. It is too ambitious, of course, but I think that it is a strong contribution that the Southern church can make to global Christianity because often in the past, theological communities are separated from the pastoral or mission setting. That is not an ideal situation,

and we would like to improve it. With the launch of our new Professional PhD program, we now have a mechanism to groom such leaders.

Another important feature is the spirituality that becomes the basis of our academic engagement. This [i.e., promotion of spirituality] is a very difficult job in the UK higher education system because often faith is not regarded as a scientific subject. But we have successfully accomplished 70 PhD dissertations, so I think it is possible.

We would also like to increase the output of our publications. We have Regnum Books International and in addition to our mission series which has already made an incredible contribution to holistic mission thinking, we have just started a new series called Global Theological Voices. This new series brings the theological reflections of the global South to the international platform so that the whole world will know some of the issues that the churches in the global South are struggling with and how we interpret our understanding of the Gospel which is uniquely different from the West.

Also I would like to see that churches in the South take this leadership role far more seriously than before. What I have found out here is that most of the financial support in the past has come from the West, while we are committed to train leaders from the South. It is fine that we continue to work with Western Christians, but it is also important that churches in the South will invest, however small a contribution, to demonstrate that they are serious too. I am from East Asia where God has blessed the churches, so I would like to see [their contribution growing as well]... In fact, my faculty told me that we had to increase our enrolment from East Asia. We have a lot of Indian students but not many East Asians.

ACR: You are one of the main speakers at the Global Christian Forum held in Limuru last November. What was your experience there? How did the audience react to your speech?

Ma: First of all, I firmly believe that church unity is critical in presenting the Christian message in the mission setting. If the church is divided, the first thing is we would begin to lose our influence. Even though I grew up as a Pentecostal, I knew that the Holy Spirit came to bring all people together, not to divide.

Now we can discuss how to accomplish church unity. For the past 50 years, the World Council of Churches has been trying hard. I criticized some of their approaches already in my paper.¹ Nonetheless, I praise their efforts as they are the ones who have consistently kept raising the issue of church unity. For that reason, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have begun to reflect *very* seriously on our mission practices. For example, if we try to evangelize everybody including fellow Christians, that is not really building up the Kingdom of God.

¹[**Editor's note:** This paper of his presented at the Global Christian Forum is included in this issue.]

Nonetheless, I felt, like many people, that our ecumenical initiative has to change. We saw that the approaches that WCC has made until now, in spite of some positive effects, have not exerted the kind of influence that we have hoped for. For example, WCC has less than one-quarter of the world churches as its members. It shows that, be it the structure or philosophy or approach, there is something that is not acceptable to many other churches. Therefore, I was very impressed by the decision of WCC to explore other platforms for ecumenical dialogue. Global Christian Forum was not a creation of WCC. But there is no doubt that WCC initiated accessing the Forum and we believe that this is an important effort. GCF participants include not only WCC, but also the Vatican, the Orthodox, the Pentecostal Communion, etc. It is very exciting because finally, you see almost every Christian family from the world [present there]. That itself is a significant breakthrough in [building] church unity.

Now in a conference, you [tend to] hope that something can be improved such as facilities, etc.... Nonetheless the overall evaluation of the process has been very positive. In fact, most of ecumenical dialogues I participated in were more like a theological society meeting, full of theological papers, evaluations, discussions etc. I argued in my paper that our Christian unity should start from Christian fellowship. We need to enjoy each other's company and learn from each other, simply having fun. That is important to establish our Christian unity. Forget everything and just have a nice meal together, sit around the table and spend three hours talking about your family and your church. You would find that a lot could be accomplished just with that. That is why I believe that youth is very important as they are the ones who do not have a lot of historical and theological baggage. If we can put youth from different cultures and churches together and let them enjoy, learn and explore, I think this would create an important impact..... I am sure that the WCC, the Vatican and others will be open to this because we know that youth is the key for the future as we have learnt unfortunately from the Nazis and the Communists. So in GCF, we were broken down into smaller groups, basically for fellowship, dialogue and learning from one another. It was a new approach and everybody felt very good about it.

Another avenue I proposed that can contribute to church unity is a common mission. That is where I use the analogy of a bicycle. It is not that you have to accomplish church unity so that you can do mission, but just like a bicycle, you have to ride in order to maintain the balance. When there is a disaster like a tsunami or an HIV epidemic, we are not talking about which church, but basic human lives. If your generator breaks down, and if you know there is another Catholic NGO next door doing something similar in another village, you can run to these guys and say, "hey, do you have a spark plug?" I think it would be wonderful, and a lot of things can be done. This also shows that the *laity* holds an important key to church unity. So, we are saying that if we can intentionally

identify some of the missions, and if we carefully form a mission strategy, drawing resources from all different church families and put them together, it would be another wonderful opportunity when ecumenism can take place. Mine is a more organic and practical ecumenism than, let's say, [a pursuit of] visible unity. I am very sure that you can put a lot of churches together but if hearts are not united, you do not really accomplish unity there.

ACR: That's true. Your analogy of a bicycle or having a meal together is indeed a powerful imagery of unity. So, you have some reservation about the WCC's approach, namely, an institutionalized effort for unity...

Ma: But I am not naïve. We cannot wait for everything to come spontaneously. We need a structure, a program. I am not necessarily denying organized, structured initiatives. What I am trying to say is, as a mission practitioner and theologian, sometimes I felt a little uncomfortable about what started at the Edinburgh conference where mission was the overarching theme and [where] church unity, missionary approaches, theological education and everything else came under mission, became exactly the opposite in WCC, where church unity comes as the overarching theme and mission is only one of the many programs there... And I am not the only one. I read Ralph Winter's analysis and he pointed this out as well.

ACR: In this same address of yours at GCF, you described yourself in the past as hostile to ecumenism. I am just curious, how did this change of attitude come about? How did you come to embrace ecumenism?

Ma: Let me qualify first. I wasn't really hostile, I was just a typically narrow-minded Evangelical/Pentecostal missionary. That is a more fair description. I was open to what other churches were doing. In fact in my Bible College days, I had a good friend, a Methodist, who took me to a WCC workshop. So I was not necessarily hostile to ecumenical initiatives. [It is just that] I did not have enough exposure. Now when it comes to the 'paradigm shift,' I have to say that exposure becomes critical. I did my PhD at Fuller [Theological Seminary], and that has opened a lot of new opportunities and that was where I found out that Christianity comes in all different shapes and colours and that no form is less valuable than another. Each group is a very special gift of God to the world church, and often each church is God's response to specific historical, social and spiritual needs. No church may have the fullness of the Christian expression, but [what each church has is] not just a half truth, but a part of the full truth. They are genuine expressions and genuine gifts from God to the world church. A paradigm shift comes inevitably when we expose our younger leaders to different multi-church traditional settings. That is where I started, and then again, a good friend of mine, Cecil M. Robeck, who has been leading several Pentecostal dialogues with other church bodies including the Vatican,

Reformed Church, Lutheran etc., opened doors for me and my wife, Julie, to participate in some of the multi-church functions. I have participated in WCC-Pentecostal meetings and Reformed-Pentecostal dialogues for about 7 years, and I also joined in the WCC's Mission Conference in Athens as well as GCF. My experience has been continually expanding.

ACR: As you see it, is this attitude, i.e., this openness to ecumenism becoming the mainstream in Pentecostalism?

Ma: No, it is not, especially among the classical Pentecostals who are still very suspicious of WCC. That is why I feel it is unfair to expect them to join WCC one day. WCC also has its own problem. It is partly their fault that other churches, not only Pentecostals or Baptists, do not approach [them]. That is why new initiatives like GCF are important platforms where people feel comfortable and not threatened. Having said this, it is important to note that some Pentecostal churches, especially from the non-Western continents, are more open to church unity, and they even join national councils and world councils [of churches]. For example, the Korean Assembly of God, including David Yonggi Cho, is a member of the National Council of Churches. When this decision was made quite a few years ago, there was a lot of pressure from sister organizations in the West. It is the same [with others], like Dr Robeck, a member of a classical Pentecostal denomination in the West, who always come under pressure and criticism from their own denominations not to engage in ecumenical dialogue. But we have had some wonderful people who see that the blessing of the Holy Spirit is far more than for one church. I should say that many Pentecostal churches in Africa and some in Latin America are also part of WCC.

ACR: So the openness to ecumenism is coming faster in the [Pentecostal/ Evangelical] Southern churches...

Ma: The global Christian trend in the future is in the hands of the Southern churches, and not only is an openness to ecumenism coming faster among them, but also the theological engagement with poverty, racial tensions, and environmental issues. Increasing industrialization, some times coupled with relocated industries from the West resulted in serious environmental challenges in the global South. Water is polluted, and people are dying because of contamination. What is the role of the church [there]? [When] business communities do not like to raise their voices, and governments do not like to hurt the economy, who cares for the people and the environment? So, it is a theological engagement. It is an important area that the Southern church can contribute, as they face such struggle on a daily basis.

[Another] example is interreligious dialogue. Here in UK they talk about this because when they send their missionaries abroad they encounter Hinduism,

Daoism, etc., [and] they need to learn about other religions. But we [Southern Christians] live with other religious groups every day. We live with them, do business with them, or sometimes struggle with them, and we are called to be citizens of one country. What is then the role of the church? How do we view other religions? We will shed new light because we are part of this struggle. That is why inevitably theological reflections from the South will be experiential and practical. It is not just ecumenism, but mission engagements and theological engagements, so that everything will be very different. I hope that the churches in the South will see this specific calling from God.

ACR: You were born in Korea, grew up there and have spent many years in the Philippines, does your Asian background inform or influence your faith, especially now that you are in the Western world?

Ma: Yes, it has. Just like every church tradition is a special gift of God to the world church, so is each culture. I would not say that there is a *proper* or perfect culture. Especially in Asia and Africa, culture is deeply intermingled with religious beliefs. We all know about this and we are not naïve about culture. Nonetheless, culture can become a rich resource for our theological formulations.

I think what is important when it comes to culture is that non-Western culture in general sees the spiritual world as a reality. It is very different from how the West perceives the world. Therefore, Christianity is not just an intellectual agreement with certain propositions, but is an engagement with spiritual reality as well as the physical/material reality. That is why the churches in the South have a very significant contribution to make.

Also non-Western cultures have more communal orientation. We all know that our society is rapidly changing. But how has Western Christianity become so individualistic to the point that some theology promotes egocentric Christianity? This is for me against the basic Christian principles. I hope that we will be able to bring the communal aspect of the Christian experience to our theological understanding. And not only culture, but our social context is also a very rich deposit of our theological engagement.

ACR: The last question. You have already been touching on it, but once again, what do you think would be the contribution of Asian Christianity or Southern churches to world Christianity?

Ma: Yes [I have already been discussing it], so let me focus on East Asia now [where I am from and have worked for long]. I expected that when Pentecostalism, a spiritual dynamic movement which used to be anti-intellectual, reaches East Asia, there must be very interesting developments because we are talking about a culture where learning is very highly treasured. When I was a part of the Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, in a way I tried to

visualize the interactions between spiritual dynamism and intellectual enquiry. I think that East Asians in particular have a strong potential to embrace both of them [spiritual dynamism and theological enquiry] at the same time. You can say that Korea shows that example. In the Philippines, I started several graduate programs on Pentecostal studies and an academic journal as well as publishing several books.

I hope that you will understand that I am referring only to Pentecostalism. I believe that because of the unique world view, the experiential level and the socio-cultural dynamic of the global South, Christianity, if it is indigenous to the South, will embrace important parts of Pentecostalism, whether in recognizing dreams and visions as legitimate ways of revelation or healing as a part of the Christian expectation, or mission as a very natural consequence of the conversion experience. All of this, for me, will become inevitably charismatic. That is why I like the title of a book that WCC published “The Church is Charismatic”—if you do not interfere. If we look at Chinese Christianity then for a whole generation, there was no outside interference, no missionaries, nothing. When we began to see at last the church in China, what was it? It was incredibly close to the early church, praying for healing and regularly expecting God’s miracles. They receive God’s revelation through prayers, dreams, visions and also prophecies, speaking in tongues etc. So I am not talking about the denomination of Pentecostalism but about the restoration of the early church—even though I am not idealizing the Chinese church, which has its own problems.

Another example is the African-initiated churches. This is a movement against the mission churches which the British and Belgians [among others] established. These churches, including the Catholics, were highly liturgical. Then Africans found that this is not the kind of Christianity that suits them. So African-initiated churches emerged not out of an organized effort but spontaneously. And in the majority of these you see the prophecies, visions and healings of a very dynamic Christian spirituality. Again, I am not idealizing these churches. There is a place for theological education and formulation, and I am not denying it. What I am trying to say is that the churches in the South have this dynamism and that places like East Asia have an inherent ability to embrace not only spiritual dynamism but also theological reflections.

If we can identify specifically these churches and encourage them to grow to be global leaders, then I will be very pleased. This is one specific calling of OCMS.