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Track Discussion: The Mission of the Church in the Multi-Faith Contexts

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I. Introduction

Welcome to this track discussion group. Our theme is “The Mission of the Church in the Multi-faith Contexts.” The role assigned to me for this discussion group is a “stater” in one document, “starter” according to the daily program. I have no problem with the role as a “starter.” But the word “stater” is new to me. As I was giving thoughts in preparing for this discussion, I was not very sure what is exactly I am supposed to do. Do I just state and describe the issue? Should I point out some of the questions, or concerns, or challenges related to the topic? I guess as a stater, my job is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. That means I am not expected to give answer to the questions or challenges raised. Perhaps the answers and insights are already among us and in the experiences of our respective Asian Lutheran church as we have been encountering the reality of multi-faith for a long period of time. If I don’t miss the mark, I think it is safe that I approach my role as a starter and a catalyst that facilitates the discussion, the sharing of experiences , and the insights to meet the challenges.

II. Key Words and Related Questions

A. Church:

What do we mean by “church”? Do we mean specifically Lutheran communion or church universal? Do we focus on the Asian Lutheran churches? What unique features do the Asians Lutheran churches have which might lead us to a distinctive approach to the tasks and challenges of mission?

B. Mission

What is our understanding of mission? Do we have a basic core of understanding among us? Do we have a common conviction and commitment? What is our order of priority in mission?

C. Inter-faith Context

What do we intend by “faith”? How do we perceive our own “faith” in the midst or light of other “faiths”? What are the assumptions that underlie our faith?

Can we take them for granted? Must we not examine and even challenge our own assumptions? In the inter-faith context how we see ourselves in relation to the people of other faiths? Where do we stand? What mentality and attitude do we have possess and carry as we live and work together with the people of other faiths, and as we enter into dialogue with them? Are mission and dialogue, mission and partnership with the people of other faith compatible? Are there risks or temptations that the church may weaken its own identity or compromise its own mission mandate as they move into the inter-faith dialogue or cooperation?

III. Five Areas of Mission in the Multi-faith Contexts

A. Proclamation

According to the Great Commission issued by the risen Christ the most urgent and important mission of the Church is to “make disciples of all nations” through the proclamation of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the instruction of all the Word Christ had entrusted His followers to observe. In the process of carrying out faithfully this Commission Christ promised to be with His Church till the end of the earth.

How do we understand this mandate of Christ today? Is our understanding of it different from that of the apostles and the early churches? When we proclaim, how do we see ourselves? A truthful witness, a humble messenger, and a sincere sharer of the Good News, or a supreme judge, a zealous crusader, a triumphant victor, a guardian of the absolute truth, and a sole possessor of the divine revelation? When we proclaim, do we first listen? If we are not listening, how do we know that the answer we give has any bearing with the questions the people of other faiths are raising? As we preach the Gospel, are we imposing the message upon the hearers or do we let the Spirit of God open their eyes and hearts so that their response to the Word of God comes from their initiative? Moreover, when we proclaim the Gospel of the cross, do we also prepare the believers to be the bearers of the Cross? Do we distinguish proclamation and proselytization? Are we calling people to follow the crucified and risen Christ or to join our religious affiliation?

To proclaim in the context of multi-faiths we inevitably encounter the apostolic testimony of the Lordship of Christ. To acknowledge the

Lordship of Christ implies there is only one mediator between God and sinners, that is, Jesus Christ our Lord. And there is no other Name by which we are saved, and no other atonement through which we are justified. Can we shun or make concession to this claim and still consider ourselves faithful to the New Testament testimony? Is it a life and death conviction or negotiable merchandise?

B. Dialogue

The planet on which we are living has become a global village. It is not possible for one group of people nowadays to live in total isolation from the other. Religious pluralism is a unique phenomenon and daily reality in Asia. Now even the so-called Christian West is increasingly becoming pluralistic in religions. To avoid misunderstanding and to prevent conflict and hostility dialogue is the most effective means. On the positive side dialogue enhances mutual understanding and reciprocal trust.

When we engage in genuine dialogue we are on an equal footing with our partner. There is no place for dogmatism, sense of superiority, deceitfulness, or even hidden agenda. If dialogue is to be fruitful, each partner must be open, humble, respectful, receptive, patient in listening, capable of mirroring understanding, ready to ask questions of clarification, and able to appreciate what is authentic and noble in our partner's tradition, aspiration, and religious experiences. The goal of dialogue is not necessary consensus, but mutual understanding, which includes the respect of each other's differences.

The mission of the church should not be carried out in isolation and monologue, but in reaching out and dialogue. By way of dialogue we will have a chance not only to raise questions and to challenge, but also to be questioned and challenged. This would expose us and put us in a vulnerable position. However, such exposure and experience of being confronted is healthy to the church and individual Christians because it compels us to clarify our understanding of faith, to lay aside the questionable assumptions and blind prejudices, and to gain a clearer and stronger sense of our identity, and a real and fuller understanding of other faith. As a result of our renewal in identity, our mission will also be renewed and transformed.

C. Diaconia

People of different faiths may not share with the same tenet of faith, but we nevertheless live on the same planet, share the same environment and resources, and sometimes suffer the same disaster, and have the same needs. For examples, the care of the handicapped, the aged, the HIV/AIDS carriers and their families, the battered women and children, the enhancement of the community health, the common effort in ecological preservation, and in the building up of a just society etc., all these can be done in altruistic way and in pulling the available resources together for the healing and making of a better community, and for the individual welfare and common good.

To engage in good spirit of cooperation with the people of other faiths the church also needs to be open, humble, sensitive, unselfish, and communicative. With these qualities the cooperation with the people of other faiths will be more fruitful and able to build up a lasting friendship.

D. Reconciliation

The Gospel calls us to be reconciled with God, as well as with our fellow human beings. In Asia there are a number of regions, which are characterized by the tension caused by the religious conflicts. There is a Chinese saying that *yuan yi jie buyi jie*, which means “Better to dismantle enmity than to build it up.” The so-called clash of civilizations has much to do with that of religions. The church as a recipient of reconciliation can also be an agent of reconciliation between the Christians and the people of other faiths, or between the people of different faiths. This will never be an easy task. Nevertheless, we are called to be peacemaker. Through humility, sensibility, prayer and wisdom we could be an instrument of God’s peace in our own community and among the different religious communities.

E. Transformation

In the Acts Chapter 10 Peter was invited to Cornelius’ house to speak to a group of people who belonged to a different faith. Peter carried with him a stereotyped attitude toward the people of other religions. But when he came

into direct contact of Cornelius' house members, and saw how hunger and thirst they are for the Gospel, and how the Spirit had descended and worked among them, it made such an impact upon him that he not only saw the surprising response of the Cornelius' household to his preaching, but also experienced the inner transformation, which simultaneously took place within him. Cornelius was transformed by the message Peter brought to his household. At the same time Peter himself and his partners were also transformed by the way the Holy Spirit had called and prepared people of other faiths to response to the message of the Gospel.

More than often, when a person or a community engages in mission, and in a real encounter with the people of other faith, they find their perception and understanding of the people of other faith significantly and sometimes radically changed. They become less presumptuous, more humble and thoughtful, and finally transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever the church is involved in proclamation, dialogue, diaconia, and reconciliation, we are not only testifying in word and deed the Gospel of the transforming love of God in Jesus Christ, but also finding ourselves renewed and transformed by the marvel of God's work and our experiences with the people of other faiths..

V. Two Cases in Taiwan

A. The CLS' Dialogue with the Modern Zen Society

China Lutheran Seminary (CLS) established the Research Center for the Traditional Chinese Religions and New Religious Movements in 1995. Its task has been to take up the study of the focused group or concerned issue for the purpose of sharing with the congregations in Taiwan. For the first four years we focused on the issues related to Chinese ancestral rite and folk funeral. In the last three years our attention has been shifted from traditional Chinese religions to the new religious movements in Taiwan. According to a survey done by the Seneca Academia there are more than 250 new religions in Taiwan. Such study awakened us to the often-neglected reality that Taiwan after the lift of the marshal law in 1984 has become the most fertile soil for the burgeoning of all varieties of new religious movements.

In November of 1999 our research center sponsored a seminar on the theme of NEW MISSION CHALLENGES FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM: THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN TAIWAN. One of the seminar speakers was our former researcher, Ms. Hellen Cheng, whose topic was “The New Faces of the Chinese Zen.” During the study her interest was drawn to a young, energetic and courageous new Buddhist movement, i.e. the Modern Zen Society (MZS). Ms. Cheng was a Buddhist master for 23 years. She used to serve as Dean of Studies for two Buddhist seminaries in Taiwan. She came to Christian faith about five years ago. What motivated her to visit the MZS was due to her acquaintance of a former Buddhist nun who then joined the MZS and became an active member in the movement.

The day she made the visit she was met with an unexpected welcome. The MZS community received her warmly, and listened to her with great curiosity and wondered how she found her way into the commitment to Christian faith. During the visit she introduced her work in China Lutheran Seminary (CLS) and the experiences of our community life. When she came back she brought with her the cordial invitation from Master Li Yuan-song, the founder of the MZS, for us to visit them.

Master Li is a self-taught Zen master. He is in his forties, keen in mind, warm in heart, candid in interaction, and amazingly open to the search for the ultimate truth. The chief goal of the MZS is to establish a pure Buddhist community in Taiwan with a view to cultivating modern Zen masters that follow the paths of ancient sages and virtuous people. The teaching of the MZS differs from the traditional Zen in the following eight points:

1. The MZS insists on the principle of empiricism.
2. The MZS especially emphasizes the capacity of modern spirit.
3. The MZS advocates that all practices should begin with the fulfillment of one’s responsibilities and duties.
4. The MZS does not overemphasize the old vinaya rules of discipline transmitted from India.
5. The MZS takes an affirmative position with respect to sensual passions and desires.
6. The MZS upholds sentiments and a sense of what is right, and the spirit of a heroic and Chivalrous Robin Hood-style.
7. The MZS stresses on living in the present moment with the full force of the

entire universe as the essential method of the practice of meditative concentration.

8. The MZS teaches widely the Zn method of directly pointing to human Mind, and prospers a style of Zen equal to that of the forerunners in Tang and Sung Dynasty.

The MZS not only forms its own system of religious thought, but also establishes a Hsiang-shan Practitioners' Community. The community consists of artists, prosecutors, physicians, scholars, judges, teachers, lawyers, journalists, poets, painters, engineers, bakery owners, housewives, cement workers, vendors, veterinarians, and college students. The community is democratic, open, caring, equal in gender and role, and earnest in learning and practicing the mind-Dharma of Zen. Their pedagogy is critical and dialogical. And they publish almost everything that had been documented, either in print or on internet. Their web site is very rich and up to date. And for a little more than 12 years old society it is amazing to see that they should run a web site with Standard and Simplified Chinese, English, German, and recently Japanese languages.

Before I went with our two researchers for a courtesy visit of the Hsiang-shan Practitioners' Community my knowledge of the MZS was extremely limited. To be frank, as we departed for the visit we had no idea what was going to happen. When we approached the place, we were caught by surprise that Master Li and his practitioners were out in line to welcome us. As soon as we were ushered into the spacious meeting room, I saw there were about seventy people present. Having instructed to seat I saw a number of tape recorders and microphones spreading out on the table. And I was told that if we didn't mind, our conversation would be fully recorded. This was how we were initiated into the "dialogue" with the MZS. And I must admit that I was not at all prepared for the ensuing three hours of uninterrupted dialogue.

In the dialogue we were given full freedom to share what and in whom we believe, and how our life has been changed. As one shared, the other listened with respect and attentiveness. Once in a while, when some rather pointed questions were raised, each side did not evade but tried to respond as candid as we could. Though it was the first time we encountered each other, both sensed an unusual degree of mutual trust and a humility to learn from each other. As a result, we found our first dialogue a real joy in knowing and discovering each other's deepest core of faith and how it reflected in our view and way of life.

After each visit the conversation was transcribed into the written text. The text was sent to us for proofreading, and having made the minimal editing it was posted on our respective web site for public review. Last October, the MZS with our consent published a book in Chinese, titled *A CONTACT BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY: DIALOGUE BETWEEN MODERN ZEN SOCIETY AND CHINA LUTHERAN SEMINARY*. The book documented three dialogues we had, and all the correspondences the MZS with our seminary in the past two and half years. The book is now available in all major bookstores in Taiwan as well as in China.

Frankly, our dialogue with MZS was not all-smooth sailing. Sometime we ran into the points of tension. Even so, we neither criticized nor withdrew. Instead, we sought to clarify and to understand. And we did not try to push our view, or to seek cheap compromise. Despite our differences we continue to respect each other's integrity and to seek the further light of the truth. One thing I learned from Master Li in the pilgrimage of dialogue is that a collision of views and thoughts is not necessary bad. Rather, its sparks might open up a new level and depth of encounter, which will lead us into a fresh understanding of the truth.

After our first visit we continue to cherish our bond of friendship and pilgrimage of dialogue. The two communities keep our correspondences and exchange greetings from time to time. The unplanned dialogue not only brought us unexpected joy of knowing and learning from each other, but also deepens our common search for faith, hope, truth, and the lasting meaning of life.

B. The Death of the Writer Liu Hsia

Next I would like to share with you the story of a very well known Christian woman writer in Taiwan. Her name was Liu Hsia. She died last month at the age of 61 in a Taipei hospital after she was allegedly attacked and dragged from her bed by her Indonesian maid.

At the age of 12 Liu contracted rheumatoid arthritis, a chronic disease that confined her to a wheelchair. The disease destroyed the functioning of nearly 90% of her joints, and brought her, day and night, unbearable and seemingly unending pain. The malady hindered her from being able to move physically, but not from thinking and creating. She had written more than 1,000 short stories and articles.

Most of Liu's articles were inspirational. Though her disease remained incurable, she kept a strong sense of humor and an inspirational attitude toward life. She called her "a walking quadriplegic fossil." But when you read her article or listened to her conversation, you cannot but be touched by her warmth, joy, and ever brightening sense of hope.

Despite her own suffering she refused to be self-pitying, but moved out to be with the underprivileged, and to find ways to promote their well-being. In 1980 she established the Eden Social Welfare Foundation to care for the needs of people who suffered from disabilities. The Eden Foundation started with 2 part-time workers in the first. Today it has 500 full-time employees of which 45% are disabled. Now it Operates 40 service centers in 13 cities in Taiwan. Two branch offices were established in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to expand their service to those in need. Eden Foundation has serviced more than 200,000 disabled people in the past twenty years.

Liu's work of advocacy and empowerment has not only won the attention and support from the general public, it also deeply encouraged many sufferers and handicapped people who were disheartened by the deprivation of dignity and the inaccessibility to the needed resources. In recognition of Liu's personal example and social contribution Liu was nominated two years ago by the President Chen Sui-bin as one of his national policy advisors.

Liu endured her ailment for 48 years. The news of her sudden death shocked all who had known her. The unexplained attack of her maid and the dragging her from her bed broke her two legs. The trauma was too much for her already too frail body to bear. When I saw her on the TV news report, she was frighteningly pale and in deep pain. Within two days she passed away due to the heart and lung failure.

The Indonesian maid was arrested for the assault. Later she expressed her apology for what she had done to her employer. When the news of Liu's death reached her, she cried bitterly. After the death of Liu a group of about 100 foreign domestic laborers came to the memorial hall to pay tribute to Liu for her contributions in recent years in promoting their rights and welfare.

Most moving thing was that few days after Liu's death her family who are Christian made known to the public: Though they were deeply saddened by the loss of

their dear family member, they were willing to forgive Liu's maid. I would guess if Liu had a chance to see her maid before her death she would do the same.

Liu's brother said, "Liu Hsia often said, 'Except love, I have nothing.'" One professor from Chung-yuan University, a long time friend of Liu Hsia commented, "I have known her more than 30 years. While her bizarre disease may trap her, it seems to me that it never became an obstacle for her, and never hindered her from writing beautiful articles and caring about the people in need."

With this I would like to end my introduction to this track discussion. I think Liu's testimony of life, faith, hope, and love illustrates vividly what the mission of the church in multi-faith context could do through proclamation, diaconal and reconciliation. Now I invite you to raise further questions, to reflect your thoughts on the topic, and, above all, to share your valuable experiences and insights from your particular context. Thank you.

Suggested Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. The mission of the Church points to and participates in the coming of God's reign. How can every Christian and congregation be empowered to participate in this mission?
2. Reconciliation among people is a key aspect of this mission, especially in multi-faith context. How can this kind of healing occur through such means as dialogue and living and working together? How does this challenge and transform some past mission assumptions and practices?
3. How should this be reflected in the revised mission document and in other LWF work?
4. How could we become less pastor-centered, but without losing the central importance of Word and sacraments?
5. Share your experiences of mission in daily life. What does it mean for a congregation to be in mission?

6. It is the common responsibility of the whole church at all levels to nurture and equip Christians for proclamation, dialogue, reconciliation, and service in multi-faith contexts. What more should the LWF be doing to support member churches in meeting this challenge?
7. How can all people feel and know that they are welcome into an inclusive community? Discuss examples of how congregations, member churches and the LWF have transcended cultural, religious, socio-economic and gender boundaries, and through this have had new experiences of being mutually empowered?
8. Where is reconciliation urgently needed in your society? Between churches? With people of other faiths? How might processes of reconciliation begin or be furthered in these situation?
9. What does the encounter/dialogue between Peter and Cornelius mean for us today?
10. What tensions and questions concerning the relationship between dialogue and mission should the LWF further explore and clarify?
11. Can we pray together with people of other faiths, especially for the Reconciliation and healing of the world?