

# Readings on New Religious Movements (NRMs)



**Spirituality  
for these  
Critical  
Times**

United  
Church of  
Christ in the  
Philippines

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*Readings on New Religious Movements* (NRMs)

United Church of Christ in the Philippines  
Faith and Order Commission  
Commission on Church Unity and Union  
2014

## **FOREWORD**

The 2006 General Assembly in Digos had mandated the Faith and Order Commission (FOC) to initiate a study on New Religious Movements (NRMs) then increasingly finding expression in a number of local churches and congregations, and drawing particularly our young people into their fold.

In this handbook are reading materials on unity and NRMs, which we find relevant in our reflection, beginning with the articles that were presented in the consultations, the Policy Statement on NRMs issued by jointly by the Faith and Order Commission and the Commission on Church Unity and Union (CCUU), which together initiated and guided the process of study. We also have the reports from two major consultations: on Unity in 2009, and on Dialogue with Living Faiths in 2002.

I commend the members of both Commissions particularly Bp Erme Camba, Chair of CCUU and missiologist, Dr Noriel Capulong, Chair of FOC and Biblical scholar, and Dr Everett Mendoza, member of the FOC and our theologian. They have been members of these two Commissions that have guided initiatives undertaken on faith and order matters as well as in providing orientation and guidance in our life and work through the setting of the themes and thrusts for each quadrennium. For their passion, commitment, and tireless accompaniment in our journey, we will forever be grateful.

I would also like to commend the other members of these commissions for this quadrenium: FOC – Rev Joseph Agpaoa, Rev Glorilyn Ostoy, Ms Sharon Grace Tomas-Llamzon; CCUU – Ms Lei Garcia-Beschi, Ms Susan Eleanor Claro, Mr James Mante, and Ms Cora Taning-Reyes. Thank you.

May this handbook provide our members and congregations an understanding of the nature of NRMs and serve as a guide in dealing with this acknowledged phenomenon.

For our common edification and in the name of Jesus whose prayer it was **that we may be One**.

**BP REUEL NORMAN O. MARIGZA**

General Secretary

25 April 2014

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# 1

## **Policy Statement on New Religious Movements within the UCCP 2014**

### **I. Introduction**

In compliance to the 2006 General Assembly mandate calling for a consultation and study of the phenomenon of New Religious Movements (NRMs), the UCCP Faith and Order Commission (FOC) and the Commission on Church Unity and Union (CCUU) together with the General Secretary and the incumbent bishops held a series of consultations on the issue.

1. On 7-10 January 2013 at the UCCP Shalom Center on New Religious Movements and the impact on the life and ministry of the UCCP involving the Bishops and elected officers, representatives from the different commissions, selected Conference Ministers and Local Church pastors and resource persons.
2. On 22-24 July 2013 at the National City United Church involving the Bishops and Conference Ministers in an All Leaders Consultation on NRMs.
3. On 7-9 January 2014 at Happy Nest, Merryland Village in Mandaluyong City in the Joint Meeting of the Commissions. The incumbent Bishops and elected officers along with the members of the National Secretariate participated in the meeting.

There were other processes that took place at the Conference level during the quadrennium. In all consultations, resource persons in the national level consultations gave inputs.

This document is a consolidation of the findings from the consultations.

### **II. Initial Observations**

The consultation participants noted the rapid growth of NRMs, which have made substantial inroads in the local churches of the UCCP. This movements focus well on attracting adherents and followers right from within the established churches of the UCCP by presenting a message and program of evangelism that proclaims an image of a mystical, supra-historical Jesus that invites everyone to make an individual, personal faith commitment without due regard to the historical dimension and implication of the gospel that Jesus himself taught to his followers and to all those who decide to follow him (cf. Mark 8:34).

This one dimensional presentation and proclamation of the gospel and of an ahistorical Jesus is carried out and achieved through a systematic and aggressive program of recruitment and training using sophisticated tools and modern technology. Its adherents are also adopting the networking style of reaching out to new contacts and developing and organizing cells in a pattern that resembles the "pyramiding" scheme of marketing new products. This approach is accompanied by the use of youth-oriented gospel music together with the introduction of bands as part of the worship experience in the church.

The music that is introduced, with very simple, highly repetitive lyrics expressive of this simplistic, one dimensional faith reinforces the basic teaching and theology of these movements, focusing on the need for a highly personal, individualized faith relationship with a highly mystical Jesus who has nothing to do with the social and historical context of his time and who has nothing to say and would not summon anyone to involve on any critical contemporary issue and concern of the hour.

### **III. Theological Implication**

Even in the face of seemingly impressive numerical growth in the membership of some churches owing to the efforts of this movement, one alarming effect was the de-emphasis or setting aside of the prophetic dimension of the mission and ministry of the UCCP. The removal of Jesus from his own social and historical context as recorded in the gospels and his being frozen in an image of the divine that is above and beyond time and history resulted in the removal also of the historical and social dimension in the over-all mission, witness and service program of the UCCP.

Here is one unique feature of the life and work and witness of the UCCP, borne out of its historical struggle to be faithful to the gospel and relevant to its own context, which now appears to be in danger of being wiped out by the aggressive inroads of the NRMs in its local churches. The UCCP's unique witness to the whole gospel proclaimed and witnessed to and sacrificed for by Jesus is now threatened with being watered down by an alternative but incomplete gospel proclaimed by the adherents of the NRMs.

### **IV. Practical, Organizational Implication**

A number of concerned members have expressed their alarm over the rather different theological thrust and direction this movement has taken and prescribed for its adherents. Some of those who have been converted to its teachings have begun to express indifference over the recognized programs and thrusts of the UCCP. Some even became openly critical of the UCCP's strong prophetic stance and social witness. This has even led to some serious divisions and split in the churches and conferences of the UCCP.

### **V. The NRMs from a Worldwide Perspective**

The rapid growth and expansion of the NRMs, either as an independently organized evangelical organization, or as a result of a split from the mainline churches, has been duly noted by the consultation. As a worldwide trend, it has even outstripped the growth rate and actual membership of the traditional mainline churches in both Europe and the US most of which have actually suffered substantial declines in their membership.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this is a critical historical and sociological phenomenon which needs to be considered seriously by our church leaders.

This development is also taking place in the context of intensifying commercialization, unchecked materialism, unresolved economic crisis, continuing massive unemployment, unfettered greed and corporate take overs and shut downs and rapid globalization in commerce, communication and transportation. This is accompanied by the rise of migration and the phenomenon of overseas workers, resulting mostly in broken homes, or those traumatized by unending wars and violence in different parts of the world, along with the spate of crimes taking place all over. All these leave the individual with feelings of alienation, insecurity, marginalization, fear of the future and loss of spiritual, psychological and cultural moorings.

It may be conceded that the NRMs may have responded effectively and aggressively to these modern age longings of the individual person and may have opened up rich opportunities for evangelistic campaigns and church expansion in the process. But the UCCP need not be left behind.

### **VI. The Challenge to the UCCP: Recovery of its Rich Faith Traditions**

The UCCP stands on a rich and solid foundation of faithful preaching and witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fullness and holistic dimension and with its significance and implication to the life and faith of the Filipino Christian of today. There has always been that element of robustness, active dynamism and prophetic boldness in the carrying out of this unique tradition of its faith and witness. It has a long and historic tradition of preaching the good news proclaimed by Jesus, which brings

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<sup>1</sup> From actual figures and statistics from official resources shared by Bp. Reuel Marigza.

hope to the poor and the oppressed based on a solid grounding on the Scriptures. This is a dimension of the faith of the UCCP which it need not apologize for nor be defensive about.

As a way of reinforcing this faith posture and its preaching and teaching tradition, some proposals came up which may need the serious consideration of every concerned church member at this point.

1. The UCCP needs to review or redefine its understanding of "Faith in Jesus". Faith does not imply a simple assent or to agree to a set of teachings coming from Jesus or even to accept the idea that Jesus is one's personal Lord and Savior. Faith in its original covenantal context would mean "loyalty" to the demands of a covenant relationship. Faith in Jesus would then mean being a loyal follower of Jesus, living by his teachings, upholding his claims, adhering to the values he had proclaimed, accepting his demands for a life of discipleship which even requires sacrifice and selfless service especially to the kind and class of people whom Jesus first called and ministered to.

It is living by the vision of Jesus for a new and alternative world, one that is governed and shaped by the values and ideals of the kingdom of God, where the last are to be made first, and the first to be made last, where the slaves and the oppressed are to be set free, where the powerless are to be empowered. It is living by this ideal which may even be deemed foolishness in the eyes of this world. *"For God has chosen what is foolish in this world to shame the wise and God chose the weak of this world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God"* (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

It is therefore a faith that cannot be cozy and comfortable with the status quo of this world. Rather, it is a faith that looks forward to the future when Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God finally becomes fulfilled. This is why it is a faith that will always speak and witness to the message of Jesus in a prophetic and rather disturbing manner no matter what sacrifice it may entail. This understanding of faith is what gives the UCCP its unique prophetic edge inspired by an eschatological hope which it should never give up.

2. The UCCP also needs to redefine its understanding of "Evangelism". Evangelism is not solely about increasing one's membership in the church although this is an important dimension of it also. Evangelism is first and foremost about sharing the gospel and witnessing to its liberating truth and power so that others may have the life meant for them by God. It is an essential component of the mission of the church which is simply the continuation of the mission of Jesus which is *"to preach the good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

To think and carry out evangelism as if it is only meant to win out souls who would need to accept the Lord Jesus as their Lord and savior for their own exclusively personal salvation is to offer to the people a distorted, incomplete and truncated gospel. The church must preach to people not the mystical, ahistorical, social unconcerned Jesus, but the Jesus of Nazareth, who walked on this earth with ordinary people, who healed the sick, fed the hungry, forgave the sinners, accepted the unclean and the marginalized, and denounced the hypocrisies and abuses of those in power. This is the Jesus the UCCP has to consistently preach and witness to if it is to remain faithful to its calling and uphold its rich historic faith tradition.

3. The UCCP also has to understand the meaning of spirituality since this is one area which some sectors have accused the UCCP of sorely wanting in or lacking. Spirituality goes beyond having the trappings of pious, prayerful and churchy religiosity although this may be one expression of such. Jesus himself denounced the practice of such kind of pious spirituality by the scribes and Pharisees calling them as outwardly appearing righteous yet are full of hypocrisy and iniquity

within (Matt.23:27). To be a disciple and follower of Jesus would first of all mean to be imbued with the spirituality of Jesus. This is simply being imbued with that spirit of the Lord that has come upon Jesus that empowered him to preach the good news to the poor... (Luke 8:18). It is that spirit that enables the person to obey God's calling for mission to the most ignored and insignificant members of the society.

To be spiritual is to be gifted with the various gifts of the spirit that can be used for the mission and ministry of the church as the body of Christ (I Cor. 12). Yet we are also mindful of the fact that even in the midst of the many gifts of the spirit that one may have received, still what is considered as the greatest gift of the spirit is the spirit of love (I Cor. 13). It is the gift of love for the people and compassion for the suffering, standing in solidarity with the victims of injustice. It is the greatest spiritual gift that one can receive from God. The one who manifests such love for the people, with that spirit of selfless service and compassion therefore is one who can be described as an authentically spiritual person.

## **VII. Some Recommendations**

The continuing presence and influence of the NRMs in the life and work of the UCCP will need to be fully appraised and responded to by the church through programmatic actions and official policies meant to preserve and protect the distinct faith traditions of the UCCP.

The following recommendations were drawn from the series of consultations that took place.

1. All programs of the church that were initiated by NRMs and not by the UCCP must be strictly regulated, supervised and carefully monitored by the church pastor seeking guidance from the conference and jurisdiction officials.
2. The teaching content of such programs must be scrutinized and examined closely by the pastor in consultation with conference and jurisdiction officials for any divergence or teaching that is contrary to established UCCP teaching and doctrines as promulgated in the UCCP Statement of Faith and other official statements made by the church before.
3. The teaching content and materials to be used should also include UCCP teachings on the basic Christian doctrines as promulgated in the Statement of Faith and other officially issued statements of the church.
4. The local churches may adopt with care the methods and tools being prescribed for church growth and development, keeping in mind our own understanding of evangelism and church growth and development.
5. The use of bands for the youth may be allowed at specific times of worship and should use the hymns and songs in the UCCP, NCCP hymnals and other ecumenical sources of church hymns and songs.
6. Regular evaluation of the NRM initiated programs in the church should be conducted in coordination with the conference and jurisdiction officials, so as to determine their strengths and weaknesses and their degree of effectiveness and to determine also the ways and means of adopting into the programs of the church such elements and aspects that may be deemed positive and supportive of the goals and mission of the church.
7. Local church workers are enjoined to keep themselves theologically equipped and prepared to handle the challenge of NRM teachings and inroads in church life and mission. At the same time they are also reminded to live out a lifestyle and uphold a set of values that will serve as a modeling and source of inspiration for the members and especially for the youth to emulate and live by as shepherds who really care for their flock.



In the end, the UCCP may yet emerge stronger and better prepared for mission work as it engages the NRMs right within its own backyard. The church may actually experience a period of renewal and reformation as it emerges from this critical and challenging period of its existence.

## **The Historical and Mystical Streams of the Christian Faith and the Present Challenge of New Religious Movements to the UCCP**

### **Introduction**

There is a new typology that classifies world-wide Christianity today: (1) the mainstream church and the (2) New Religious Movements a.k.a. the emerging church. However, within the mainstream there is a strong expression of the core characteristics of the emerging church that appears to be a major reason for an unprecedented growth of emerging type of churches and the steady decline of mainstream churches. But although this is a contemporary development, *its beginnings date back to the time of the early church and onto the ancient church when Christian dogma began to take a definitive shape.*

- A. The disciples' experience of the Risen Jesus sparks the beginning of the church. The early Christians received the Christian faith through the "apostolic remembering" of the events surrounding Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection. The various pieces said to have originated from the apostolic remembering were gathered (many others rejected), edited and accepted by the whole church as the authorized *deposit of faith* that survived the passing away of the apostles and other eye-witnesses. The historical deposit of faith became the normative content of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the written form of the New Testament and the Ancient Creeds. Two different forms of apostolic remembering emerged as the story of Jesus (gospel) encountered the surrounding religions, particularly Judaism and Greek/Hellenic religions.
  1. Historical-Apocalyptic Remembering nurtured in the Jewish regions and the Diaspora, and rooted in the Old Testament.
    - a. It focused on the earthly works of Jesus and his teachings about how to live rightly before God as his followers await the coming to earth of God's kingdom. The Lord's Prayer captures the essence of the historic remembering (Matt. 6:9 ff.).
    - b. It continued the prophetic tradition of the coming of a new age wherein God's kingdom will reign in the world. In the Day of Judgment, Jesus will return to earth to execute God's judgment first by destroying the wicked powers of this world (specific reference, the Roman Empire) and the establishment of God's reign of Justice (I Cor. 15:24; Rev. 21:1-4). In the meantime, Jesus' followers are urged to adopt and demonstrate a new kind of life that anticipates the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:3-12; Rom. 12; Gal. 5).
    - c. The Ancient church rejected Marcion's project of cutting the Old Testament off from the New Testament and of purging the NT of any Jewish influence, preserving only the letters of Paul. The historic remembering of the resurrection of Jesus emphasizes his return to earth in glory and the vindication and resurrection of those who were martyred by Rome, the evil empire. The new age includes the total renewal of the human body and the whole creation (Rom. 8:19-23).
  2. Mystical-Transcendental Remembering – mysticism came to influence the church via Gnosticism when some Gnostics converted to Christianity among the Gentile churches. From

then on, the apostolic remembering and the composition of the historic deposit of faith ran along two different lines of thought and practice.

- a. The Gnostics denied the real humanity and origin of Jesus and clothed him with the myths of Greek mystery religions. They rejected salvation of the human body and of the earth. In the end, this belief was decisively expunged from memory and its written records forbidden and destroyed. Gnostic Christians emphasized mystical union with a heavenly Christ as the way to redemption from vulnerability to suffering and from mortality. The Gospel of John has retained strong traces of Gnostic beliefs citing Jesus' supernatural divine origin but affirms his true humanity – his vulnerability to real human suffering and his mortality.
  - b. Remembering a mystical Christ begot an ethics of non-involvement in the concrete life of people due to a radical disconnect between Jesus' earthly life and his life in glory and between the manner of his death by execution and the resurrection. The all sufficiency of a mystical union with Christ made social responsibility unimportant, and concern for the well-being and future of the earth inconsequential.
- B. Judging new emerging churches – in the end only the Lord will make the final judgment but this has to be done by the mainstream and historic churches in order to preserve and proclaim the true and whole gospel: new emerging churches today a.k.a. New Religious Movements (NRM) follows the Christian Gnostic mystical remembering of Jesus.
1. The historical remembering of Jesus preserves Jesus' continuity with the Old Testament. It is the more appropriate form of the gospel in view of the UCCP's Statement of Faith and VMG. It carries a specific message that supports the Filipino people's struggle for justice, peace, prosperity and environmental integrity.
  2. On the other hand, the mystical remembering of Christ serves as a counterpoint to prevent the church from collapsing into a mere instrument of historical change and social transformation. The church is a bearer of God's truths about human nature and behind humanistic social projects. In effect, it serves the role of heresies in history that pushed the church to show the truth of the gospel for the times. Thank God for heresies!
  3. The Pauline concept of "being in Christ" is an original datum of the apostolic memory but arises from a historical remembering of Jesus rather than from Gnostic mysticism. It means making one's life attuned to the kind of life that Jesus demonstrated to the disciples, in which the "new creation" appears (*"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"* (2 Cor. 5:17 NRSV).
  4. But following Jesus is the fundamental Christian calling (Mark 8:34) which is derived from a historical-apocalyptic remembering of Jesus. Following Jesus is an impossible command but is a joyful duty for those who are in Christ. Those who are in Christ are internally driven to heed his call to disciple and to follow Jesus his steps towards an inevitable confrontation with the powers of this world which is symbolized by the cross.

# On NRM Piety

It's been observed that NRMs owe their vitality and growth to three emphases: (1) Bible Study networking, (2) aggressive evangelism and (3) "praise and worship" piety. The third emphasis is its more popular public face. The second is their cutting-edge strength while the first is their strategy of consolidation and holding on to their converts. The three church activities respond to three basic religious needs of Christians.

1. On Bible Study – Bible study circles respond to the needs of religious people who ardently seek concrete moral and spiritual guidance especially in a complex, pluralistic and competitive. Bible studies are particularly effective to serve this need when the Bible is touted as the Book that contains specific instructions for every situation and condition of life for all times. This approach to the study of the Bible works very well when led by leaders who claim to have superior and indisputable knowledge and authority to interpret biblical texts for others. This is a built-in advantage of NRMs that the UCCP should not covet.

Presenting the Bible for what it is not is dishonest and opportunistic, which doesn't matter if we are in the business of selling consumer products in order to make money. The UCCP is committed to be truthful and faithful to its historical and theological heritage in the face of conditions that severely challenge its institutional strength and capability, such as the depletion of its membership and financial base. An honest face and a faithful witness cannot be measured by numbers but by an uncompromising and robust defense of the truth of the gospel.

However, this difference between the UCCP and NRMs is not an excuse for not paying attention to the faithful's thirst for moral and spiritual guidance. Bible study classes conducted properly are the right avenue for helping the members struggle and cope with important issues in life. In a Bible study group the participants together confront questions and issues that challenge the Christian faith with honesty and humility – not seeking to hear answers from the leader but discovering and owning truths that emerge from a free exchange of ideas where everyone has equal access to the leading and inspiration of the Spirit. In the process, the participants gain a new perspective and feel better equipped and have more confidence to deal with the specific issues that challenged them.

2. On Evangelism – in the UCCP evangelizing may have suffered from a lack of focus and a bit of fervor but it has not lost its importance in the life of the church. A great deal of confusion may have come from the mistaken notion that if it is not the form of evangelizing exemplified by the early Protestant missionaries and converts then it is not. Of course, the task of evangelizing is carried out in specific forms and by means of specific methodologies but it is always seeking new forms and methodologies that are appropriate to the changing conditions of the world. NRMs have learned to attune their evangelistic programs to the emerging technologies of the times as in Christian pop & rock music, Christian literature targeting special groups and sectors and TV and radio broadcasting. But these contemporary vehicles convey a gospel that is far from being true and faithful the church's historical and theological heritage.

It is extremely challenging to adopt these vehicles of evangelizing because these are tied up to industries whose goals are dictated by financial returns. Behind Christian music and Christian publishing are big corporate entities that have little or nothing to do with religion (example News Corporation owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch). Playing with the market tends to severely compromise proclaiming the truth of the gospel.

If evangelizing basically means telling the story of Jesus as told in the Christian Bible, it can be done in the context giving concrete service to persons and communities in need. People in various situations of vulnerability are not to be cornered or boxed in to hear about Jesus. They

are to hear the gospel in an environment and atmosphere where they are free to make decisions and faith-commitments. The “magic questions” need not be *Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior* but a commitment to listen to Jesus and to follow his way of life.

3. Praise and Worship Celebration of Faith – Some of the most popular and sing-able songs of NRMs have found their way in UCCP list of “singspiration” songs for use before the formal worship services, in informal gatherings of CROs and in annual sessions of Conferences. Worshippers appear not to notice the difference in content or message compared to the selections in the *Hymn for the Faith Journey* and other hymn books of mainline North American churches. Truth to say, hymns and songs are a choice vehicle of the gospel for a good part of the congregation. Sad to say, these songs convey a gospel that is different from what UCCP holds to be true. True to its Protestant color, UCCP is a singing church but choosing the right kind of songs needs to be observed.

The gospel being communicated through NRM *praise and worship* services is a disembodied Christ akin to the Docetic heresy of the ancient period. The kind of prayers heard fails to address the challenge of poverty, social injustice, human rights, peace and ecological integrity. Its net result and impact tend to distract people from facing the realities of day-to-day living as it transports people to a mystical and mythical reality where Jesus is to be encountered. In other words, it provides an escape from reality. This is not the gospel that the UCCP believes to be “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

Ministers of the gospel ought to be vigilant over the flock and guard it against the purveyors of a gospel that is other than what they have received from the beginning. This is the same kind of vigilance that the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Galatians.

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Dr Everett Mendoza  
Faith and Order Commission  
27 April 2014 10

## **The Challenge of New Religious Movements**

### **Introduction**

From the point of view of mainstream churches, the drawing power of NRMs among church members is a serious challenge. Loyalties are shifting in their (NRM) favor, as may be seen not only in the diminishing numbers but in the level of participation in the common life of the church. More alarming is the apparent erosion of trust in the authority and credibility of its institutions. But a more subtle change is taking place at the level of knowledge and understanding of the faith. In the battle for the hearts and minds of the faithful, the historic faith of the church appears to be giving plenty of ground to the “charismatic” and populist religious views of NRMs. Consequently, many pastors are making some very significant adjustments in their message in order to keep the members inside the fold. These churches may continue to retain the traditional appearances of mainline churches but the theology underlying their message and ministry is no longer informed by the church’s historic faith but by views and ideas popularized by NRMs. The challenge is less at the outside but much more in the inner life of the church.

Although the situation is quite complex that requires a multi-faceted approach, it is important to separate its components and give each the attention it deserves. One necessary component in dealing with NRMs concerns the theological aspect, specifically the doctrines of the church. There is

a not-so-visible contention for the loyalty of the faithful between the historic faith of the church and the “charismatic” faith characterizing NRMs.

Historic churches are known for their historical continuity with the Early Church. They are also bound together by a common profession of faith that marks them as a distinct community of faith in relation to others. They manifest a basic sameness in their life and work wherever they are found in different parts of the world. And they express these commonalities in visible ways at various levels of unity and cooperation.

On the other hand, the theology of NRMs is apparently inspired by what it claims to be the spontaneous work of the Spirit as manifested and articulated by their living “prophets.” The title, prophet, is a choice one owing to its biblical etymology and a transcendental sort of authority attributed to them by their followers. Charismatic or non-historic movements usually come and go with the meteoric appearance and demise of their founding prophets but they leave their marks on the church. When they appeared, the church has had to contend with them in historic theological confrontations which have resulted in landmark theological principles that add to the deposit of the church’s historic faith. Thanks to them, the church has grown in its self-understand and practice throughout history.

### **Two Examples from Church History**

It’s almost inevitable that the historic faith of the church got enwrapped in doctrines. It’s quite correct to say that controversy is the mother of church dogma. In the ancient times at the height of the Trinitarian controversy, a Church Father made a caveat as he entered into the fray. He said that silence is the most appropriate thing to do before God’s mystery. But the cost of silence may be the triumph of error over truth. Every period in church history is marked with foundation-shaking controversies. These controversies which appeared to have threatened the very life and integrity of the church have turned out to be opportunities for the church to be renewed and at the end gain a second wind.

In the 5th century Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, sought controversy with a monk named Pelagius, a popular preacher and lay theologian. Pelagius was waging a moral crusade against moral depravity in Roman society. Augustine found it worthwhile as a moral project but right off he recognized that it was anchored on a fatally erroneous understanding of the gospel as he knew it from his study of Scriptures, his wrestling with philosophy and from personal experience. Pelagius claimed that sin is not inherent in human nature hence it is within human power to compel the will to not sin. This view was in consonance with philosophical arguments that helped encourage the Roman Christians to do their best to overcome their immoral proclivities. But for Augustine, that undercut the freedom and sovereignty of God’s grace in that the autonomous power of the human will would render God’s grace redundant. Augustine’s argument was rationally tenuous and contrary to the psychology of the times but he maintained that it would not be gospel with a diluted understanding of divine grace. Augustine prevailed as the church declared Pelagius’ position not of the church (heretical). Augustine’s “theology of grace” was a historic watershed in the development of Christian theology, which was to become foundational in theological construction up to the present.

In the period preceding the Second World War, the Protestant Church of Germany was swayed to the ideology of national progress and racial supremacy espoused by the Nazi Party. But for Karl Barth and the theologians of the Confessing Church, the Protestant Church of Germany erred because it inclined its ears to the Nazi Party more than it listened to the sovereign word of God. The theological dissidents were ordered to silence by the church authorities and got alienated from the broad German population. But their dissenting theology, known as the “theology of the word,” served as the cutting edge of a theological revolution that left an immovable landmark in contemporary theology, both Protestant and Catholic. Although it is hardly spoken in today’s lecture rooms, its influence continues on like a ghost that haunts every time the church appears to be drifting farther out to the spiritual culture of the times.

In both instances, adherence to its historic faith saved and preserved the church from becoming simply moral philosophy or an appendage to political ideology. Since then, new questions that touch on the very roots of the Christian faith have come and gone. But the church has remained church, persevering and holding on to its historic heritage of faith. The challenge of New Religious Movement is both a test of the church's loyalty to its theological heritage and an opportunity to further push the frontiers of its self-understanding. Perhaps, this is a historic moment for the UCCP.

Currently, variants of the same kind of challenge have emerged, prompting the church to call these, New Religious Movements. The motives may be sincere and their ends worthwhile (Pelagius) or they may be insidious and driven by evil motives (Nazism), but in either case the church has to respond in order to protect the faithful from getting confused, misled or fall out of the church. In the process, the church will have the opportunity to grow in the understanding of the faith, achieve higher unity, renew its commitment to the gospel and gain a second wind to carry out its mission in the world.

### **Seeking Doctrinal Controversy with NRMs**

The doctrines of the church are not the same as the fundamentals of its faith. But doctrines are the residual products of the church' continuing efforts to express and communicate the core of its faith under new conditions. If the doctrines of the church fail to address the actual challenges faced by the faithful then the critics are right that the church has made itself irrelevant by its archaic tools and a jaded vision.

The church is often depicted as a boat that preserves the faithful in its journey of life and faith. Like a boat, the UCCP has journeyed through the church's long history. The church's historic faith is the wind blowing behind its sail. Without this wind the church will be tossed to and fro, driven by all kinds of doctrines and flounder in the vast ocean of conflicting religions and ideologies (Eph. 4:14-16).

Today, mainline churches find themselves being fed with the theology of NRMs in the hope of regaining its life and vitality and holding on to their members. But in the long run, this medicine is their poison. It will eventually lead the faithful to a state of spiritual stupor and moral inertness. Instead, the church should engage these pseudo-church movements in theological controversy and let the true doctrines of the historic faith of the church shine forth to inform and heal the benighted minds of the faithful.

The kind of controversy that the church seeks has two aspects. The **first aspect** is a reaffirmation of the historic faith as it has been preserved in the classical doctrines of the church. Some church leaders and leading theologians of the church may find this a backward step. Indeed it is, as it seeks to retrace the early theological journey of the church. But a return to its beginnings is a move towards to a deeper knowledge of one's self. This theological depth is the source of insights, vitality and strength with which to face new storms seeking to wreck the ship of faith. Contending with them at the fronts of religious psychology and contemporary wisdom is a trap that's especially prepared for historic churches. But their claims and reasoning will melt under the light of the wisdom of the church that has been tempered by centuries of controversies.

The **second aspect** is to acquire a correct understanding of the underlying theology of NRM. Their basic articles of faith may be gathered from their worship; content of their message in the sermons, songs and prayers; relationship with other churches and the larger society; idea of the church and their outlook of the world. Having done that, we would be in a position to draw the line between what are right beliefs (orthodoxy) and what are errors (heresies). This is, of course, a very delicate undertaking to be conducted in a disciplined manner.

An inquiry into the theology of new religious movements may include the following subject areas:

1. understanding and use of Scriptures;
2. the role of the Spirit and the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit;

3. idea of the church; and
4. ecumenical relations and social responsibility

So far, these areas have been identified as points of controversy.

A set of methodologies would be needed in the undertaking. A consistent application of a choice methodology keeps the process from being infirm by subjectivism and arbitrariness. A biblical hermeneutics that is sensitive to justice issues is preferred since it would support the UCCP vision-mission statement. In addition, a methodology employed in contextual theologies should enable the church to articulate its faith in the face of current global realities.

### **Towards a More Caring Church**

Another undertaking that runs parallel to the study-research project involves the community life of the church. The apparent vulnerability of churches to the influence of NRM is indicative of a failure in providing adequate pastoral care to the members. It's certainly true that a good chunk of the congregation remains in church due to the care and nurture received through its programs. When pastoral care is overly dependent on the virtuosity of pastors, there is a tendency to lose the right perspective of what the church is, which makes the congregation vulnerable to the sway of charismatic NRM pastors. Pastoral care is not to be confused with secular psychotherapy in a church setting. It is grounded in the love of Christ for the church, but it makes use of the contemporary tools of science for it to be concretely appropriate and effective.

There are religious organizations in Western countries that don't call themselves church and avoid mentioning the word God in their public gathering. They continue to call their leaders pastors but they act more like practitioners of mental wellness. Perhaps leaders and advocates of NRMs are able to attract people through this form of human service but that is not a right model for the pastoral care and nurture in the church. While the mental wellness of members is a goal of the church, it is not an end in itself but an avenue for a closer encounter with God in the midst of life's crises. A tradition-grounded knowledge of God is a means of getting church members genuinely and profoundly connected to God in times of crisis.

### **Thawing a Church Frozen by Time**

There is an over-arching matter concerning the current challenge of New Religious Movements. It has exposed a sociological flaw that has plagued the church throughout its history – becoming an establishment institution wherein the vitality, freshness and dynamism of faith get frozen into formal structures, impersonal rules, forms and rituals. This has prevented the mass of membership from benefiting from the warmth of the inner life of the church. This situation may be seen in the way pastors preside, officiate, administer or perform which fails to convey spontaneity, personal warmth, sincerity, genuineness and accessibility in the exercise of spiritual gifts. Creeds are recited, traditional hymns are repeated, the sacraments are performed, sermons are delivered, prayers are made, and so on and so forth, but minus the eagerness of conviction that warms the soul. The church is supposed to be a live extension of the Incarnation of the Word not an embalmed dead body of Jesus enclosed in an air-conditioned glass box for public viewing.

The church must find a way of rediscovering and re-experience the original impulse of faith that drew people together to become not only a caring but also an outward-looking and mission-oriented community. Perhaps a one-sided preoccupation with the traditioning aspect may have caused the church to become nothing more than a shell of its past. In order to keep tradition a resource for the living of the days, the church must continue to engage the world in things that truly matter to the people more than the things that matter to the church's institutions. This belief is part of the essence of the historic faith of the church – losing one's life that others may live and so, experiences rebirth.

This calls for a thoroughgoing church renewal in all aspects of its life, which is a process of dying and being born again. For, a historic church is not simply aged but constantly goes through a cycle of rebirth in its earthly existence until it finds its end in the kingdom of God.

*To recapitulate*, insulating the church from being encroached upon by new religious movements or accepting it as a model of being a church is not only an exercise in futility but also a missed opportunity for the church to grow in faith and mature in its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Rather, it ought to face the challenge of New Religious Movement as an opportunity to renew itself, achieve greater unity and revive its commitment to serve the gospel under changing circumstances.

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Consultation on NRMs  
Shalom Center  
07-10 January 2013

## **Meeting the Challenge of NRMs**

### **Background**

As offspring of an organic union of various Protestant churches, the UCCP is home to a variety of faith-expressions and practices within the Protestant mainstream. Over the decades of keeping the unity and striving to form a distinct identity alongside other churches in the ecumenical community, some streams of tradition have become more manifest and others lie latent while at the same time allowing ample room for conflicting elements to co-mingle. Owing to its nature as a hospitable church, it is vulnerable to influences and attacks coming from overseas-based religious and para-church groups with an aggressive agenda. These invading groups are collectively called by mainstream churches as New Religious Movements although they come in different forms and act independently of each other. Over the years, some of these groups have gained a foothold in some local churches particularly in the CYF and to some extent the men and women's organizations. But in the last decade, some whole local churches and even Conferences have come under their sway.

### **The Aggression of New Religious Movements**

The UCCP has proved to be ill-prepared and ill-equipped to deal with the onslaught of religious and para-church organizations. It appears that they have prepared for the invasion of mainstream churches for a long time and have armed themselves to the teeth. But they proved to be effective primarily because they are able to locate and strike at a soft spot right in the heart of the UCCP – its **evangelistic program**.

NRMs are basically evangelistic outfits. They come with

1. an evangelistic message
2. a strategy of evangelism
3. a broad range of communication media
4. gifted organizers, and
5. international connections

It is a complete package of evangelistic work that has no parallel in the history of the UCCP.



### The Lure of NRMs: the Message

Their message is not new to the UCCP faithful but it carries a mystifying effect in the sense that it is able to have a grip of a person's whole mind, not just the intellect. Their message introduces a mystical Jesus who has the power to free a person of every spiritual and psychological burden or constraint in life, collectively called *sin*. The believer then experiences a sense of power that makes him/her different, *new*, and superior to others. From thereon the convert goes out under the compulsion to bring in others to offer the same kind of experience called, *discipleship*. The message is certainly part of the UCCP's theological and pietistic heritage but minus the promised surge of power that is associated more with fundamentalist and charismatic movements rather than with the mainstream. It is this partial affinity that enables NRMs to find in the UCCP a home but it is also different and yet requires a level of theological knowledge to discern.

### The Strength of NRMs: its Tools

Learning from the tools of marketing developed in the academe as well as those devised by innovative smaller companies, NRMs employ

1. a strategy based on the concept of "hard sell." Basically, it plays on the deep spiritual and emotional frustrations of church members which conventional church programs fail to satisfy. The strategy delivers instant gratification and success of efforts and can be easily replicated within a short period of time. It is in sharp contrast to the mainstream churches' complicated, slow-burning longitudinal approach (called Christian Education). Some NRMs apply a marketing process broadly known as "networking."
2. The strategy is backed by a complement of media communication resources that make use of cutting-edge technology. The materials reflect close familiarity with the intellectual and religious culture of their intended users. On the other hand, most of UCCP materials come from the desk of so-called experts from theological centers whose faith is informed more by their narrow academic circles than by the greater life in the field. The communication gap is obvious.
3. NRMs come to our shore with a core of charming, enthusiastic and well-trained organizers. They, in turn, do intensive courses in leadership training drawing from among the more intelligent and eager recruits from mainstream churches, mostly student youths and professional young adults and from the rank of pastors. These recruit-leaders get instruction and direction from NRM organizers rather than from their respective local churches.
4. Not to be minimized is role of an international network that monitors, receives feed backs, makes interventions, and doles out rewards, mostly covert, to local NRM leaders. Some recruited pastors, particularly those who experience neglect or conflict in the church, find it more beneficial to join an international NRM organization for the advancement of their professional careers.

### Norms for Measuring NRMs in the Life and Work of UCCP

The presence and influence of NRMs may have shown signs of having revitalized the local church. More members are getting involved in the church's evangelistic work. Individual members show specific evidences of moral change and spiritual awakening. The weekly offering is picking up, and the church may have gained public notice. From these signs alone it is reasonable to make a positive judgment on NRM and to welcome its "invasion."

An honest, fair but committed discernment should be able to see danger signs wherever there are NRMs either at the center or at the periphery of UCCP local churches.

**One**, as regards the message of the gospel, a half-truth may turn out to be a dangerous lie. An exclusively mystical Christ that is sufficient for salvation is, in the mind of the historic church, a *heresy* which will lead the faithful to damnation. The NRM gospel depicts a mystical Christ whose human nature is swallowed up by his divine nature. (This is called *monophysitism* in Christian

doctrine.) Christ's human nature demands believing in a Christ that delivers *historical* salvation as well, such as from poverty and injustice.

Thus, participation in the life of Christ is not complete in a mystical experience alone but in solidarity with the suffering and struggles of the poor as Jesus did in his earthly ministry – “for whatever you do to the least of these [my sisters and brothers] you did it for me” (Matt. 25). In the same parable, Jesus says “I don’t know you” to those who failed to serve the poor. This means that a mystical acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior does not save believers from damnation unless they do Jesus’ work for the poor. Works of justice is not merely a fruit of salvation nor an *and* that follows faith; rather, it is the other half of faith in Christ without which there is no true gospel at all, not just half of it but an insidiously bogus gospel.

**Two**, the NRM strategy of evangelism and church growth is not consistent with the persuasive and well-deliberated approach of evangelism in the UCCP. A methodological shortcut – 3Rs or Five Spiritual Laws – does not do justice to the multi-faceted and historically dynamic nature of the gospel and to the complexity of human motivation. The new life that the gospel brings to the believer is not one-dimensionally moral or a literal replication of the mythical or an experience of varying degrees of altered consciousness which may be achieved like a quick fix. Rather, the new life accounts for the complexity of contemporary living in a fast changing environment. It enables believers to lead a responsible life in a complex of social relationships. A quick fix strategy is in the final analysis, a scam.

From a more practical perspective, the NRM strategy of evangelism is simply unsustainable. In the long run the NRM strategy will fail in the same way that the networking cum pyramiding kind of marketing eventually falls. For, both rely on a hype that simply cannot be sustained. A religious “high” requires constant recharging similar to the use of alcohol, drugs and other forms of addiction. Eventually, it will disappoint and leaves disillusioned believers with a broken or poisoned faith. But NRMs are able to show a facade of sustainability by continuously replacing those who are leaving with a continuous stream of new adherents. In the end, only historic churches endure.

**Three**, NRMs take a lot of life from the UCCP. Under NRM influence, local churches suffer from a cheapened understanding of the gospel and robbed of the richness of its witness. The church has come to a present self-understanding through centuries of proclamation and of ordering its common life to address the needs of the faithful and emerging challenges of the times, all the time punctuated with historic struggles against false teachings. On the other hand, the simplistic and “quickie” gospel of NRMs puts the church in a frozen time zone. The wisdom of the ages distilled from the pages of church tradition is forsaken as the faithful is being mesmerized into a timeless faith that offers a quick fix for the world’s current spiritual woes. The church’s historic witness against the degradation of human life and the natural world disappears under NRMs’ theological radar.

Furthermore, in the pursuit of NRM’s compulsive strategy of evangelism, other programs of local churches tend to suffer from neglect, even discrimination. A large chunk of the church’s finances is diverted to a mono-crop type of church life, sapping the members’ capability for other church concerns. By turning the church organization into a single evangelistic machine, the agenda of continuous growth in quantity lords it over spiritual nurture, pastoral care and social witness. The foreign headquarters of NRMs have the statistics of arithmetical growth but they have no means to measure over-all growth in the quality of the church.

## **Conclusion**

The challenge of NRMs to the UCCP is an aggression that injures the Church in three ways:

**First**, they introduce norms of faith and order that undermine its faith, witness and unity. The historic teachings of the church are being replaced with a conveniently contrived version of the gospel that exploits some of the Church's mistakes, weaknesses and shortcomings.

**Second**, invariably they cause conflicts and disunity within the Church especially at the local church level. Members who are drawn to them tend to have a diminished loyalty and respect for the UCCP while they show a clear preference for NRM personalities for instruction and guidance.

**Third**, unless the continuing influence of NRMs is arrested, a kind of shadow government that runs parallel to the formal structures of the UCCP would gain ascendancy and seize control of the life and mission of the Church. For independent fundamentalist and charismatic religious organizations and para-churches, the UCCP is a prize catch. This is a fight for the soul of the Church. It is also an opportunity for a renewal of the UCCP.

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14 January 2013

## **Consultation on Church Unity**

United Church of Christ in the Philippines  
Shalom Center  
16-17 July 2009

### **A Report**

Twenty-four (24) participants gathered on 16-17 July 2009 in Shalom Center to participate in the *Consultation on Church Unity* – Bishops assigned in the six (6) jurisdictional areas; representatives from the Council of Bishops (COB), the Faith and Order Commission (CCUU), the Theological Education Board (TEB); Conference Ministers, and lay people,

The meeting was convened to provide a space for the sharing of experiences, insights and perspectives on issues and concerns that bear implications on the unity of the Church. The sharing and discussion focused on two (2) main concerns, namely, the current initiatives of some segments of the Church constituency towards “renewal” under the “Jesus Agenda” movement, which has drawn some controversy because of the nature and organization of its meetings, and recently, because of the presence of a government official connected to the military establishment.

The other issue is the lingering problem related to the Philippine Christian University (PCU), a joint venture of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines and the United Methodist Church. In recent years, the university has been confronted with issues on property ownership and questions on leadership and management. Focused on the historical overview of the relationship with the United Methodist Church and the series of events that brought about the current state of the university, the deliberations were not without pain.

Due to the sensitivity of the issues involved and the current processes concerning PCU, this document focuses mainly on some basic theological affirmations on church unity and renewal drawn out from the report of the workshop group.

## Basic Theological Affirmations

### 1. ***Conflict as part of the dynamism of the life of the church.***

The life of the early church as narrated in the Book of Acts, and reflected clearly in First Corinthians 1 and Galatians has always been characterized by conflict and factionalism. And this has always threatened the unity of the church. As the membership of the early church rapidly grew through the missionary efforts of the apostles Paul and Barnabas and many others, most of the new members consisted of those who were Greek speaking Gentiles. They soon outgrew the number of those who were originally Jewish converts or Jewish Christians like Peter and James, and the rest of the original disciples and those coming from the center in Jerusalem (Acts 15). There developed a bitter conflict between the two groups as the Jewish converts insisted that those who have been converted from among the Greek speaking Gentiles must still go through the requirements of the Jewish law such as the circumcision before they can be fully accepted into the new fellowship (Acts 15:5). It was Peter and James, transcending the legalistic framework of their Jewish background who spoke graciously on behalf of the speaking Gentiles and called for their acceptance without the requirement of circumcision.

This picture, however, is reversed in Paul's very own letter to the Galatians in chap. 2:11-12, where he writes of how he personally rebuked Peter for refusing to sit down and eat with the Gentiles for fear of being accused by the Jewish faction to which he belongs. Paul was even very virulent in his denunciation of the group who were insisting on the Jewish requirements for the new converts:

*I am astonished that you are quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ... As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!*

The rather conflicting versions of the same issue in both Acts 15 and Galatians 2 can only point to the long and drawn out process by which the early church tried to confront and resolved the conflict. It must have been a very contentious and polarizing issue at that time and each faction may have had its own version and interpretation of the issue as shown by the two different perspectives reflected in Acts 15 and Galatians 2.

### 2. ***The need for a faithful and wise discernment in the midst of conflict***

Conflict's need not always be considered as bad and destructive for the church. Conflicts can actually result in a strengthened, wized and humbled church. There are conflicts though that can really destroy and damage permanently the unity and the mission and ministry of the church as parties become more hostile and permanently antagonistic to each other, as factions become more polarized and rigidly uncompromising and outright condemnatory of each other's position, and as leaders become more driven by pride, self righteousness, hypocrisy and inability to hear the other side and to admit humbly the possibility of being wrong on one's position and decision making. Paul was so angry at Peter for his hypocrisy in pretending to be accommodating to the Gentiles as shown in Acts 15, and even in Gal. 2:12, and then suddenly withdrawing from them when the Jewish party came. It was as if Peter was playing politics, trying to win the acceptance of the fast growing group of the gentile converts and yet not really willing to stake his own position and deep conviction for their position once the other party comes and begins to confront him.

On the surface, determining which side was on the right or wrong position may not be easily done. But there can be ways and means that may help in equipping the church people in arriving at an informed theological position on the matter. The first comes from the teacher Gamaliel in Acts 5:38-39. There, he spoke in defense of the newly emerging group of Christ's followers who

were then being persecuted by the zealous Jewish officials, among them, Saul (or the later Paul). Gamaliel asserted, "...let them alone; because; if this plan or undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; But it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them- in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"

A second way comes right from the apostle Paul himself in Gal. 1:6-9, as he insists on the rightness of the version of the gospel that he was proclaiming, and that any other group who proclaims a gospel that is contrary that what he has already taught and preached must be considered "accursed!"

To let them be, or, to curse them? Which one mode of response to adopt is something that has to be decided by the church people themselves. But the final arbiter of the rightness or wrongness of one's religious position can only be discerned right from the very model or paradigm revealed by no one else but our Lord Jesus himself in his own earthly ministry. It is this paradigm or model of ministry and mission which may constitute the "Jesus Agenda."

3. ***The Jesus agenda re-examined as the ultimate paradigm for the determining the correct missionary response of the church.***
4. ***The call to be one as a non-negotiable character of the church*** ( John 17:11, 21, 22, 23). Just as there is unity and oneness in both the Father and the Son, so there is always that need to express that unity and oneness of the Father and Son through the unity and oneness of those who believe and worship the Lord in Jesus as the Christ. Such unity then will be the basic witness of the church to the rest of the world on how this one body of Christ comes out in order to manifest the love of God for this suffering and broken world.

5. ***There will always be threats to the unity in the mission of Christ.***

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy". But it is Christ who comes to bring about the abundant life for all (John 10:10). The abundant life however comes at the expense of the good shepherd having to lay down his life for the sake of the life, safety and security of the sheep. If it is not a thief who comes to steal and kill and destroy, it is the wolf who comes "to snatch and scatters them." They are those who act like the thief and the wolf who comes to destroy the life of the sheep right within the sheepfold. The good shepherd then comes to protect and defend his own flock at all cost. In the course of the struggle for the defense and protection of the flock against the thieves and the wolves, the good shepherd is even willing to lay down his very own life in sacrifice just to ensure the safety and security of the flock. In the same manner that the pastor is called to be the good shepherd for his own flock, protecting them from the ravages of the unscrupulous, the wily, the manipulative, the exploitative and the deceptive, even at great cost to his own safety and security, the church then, as the body of Christ is also being called to be a good shepherd for the rest of God's flock in the community of God's world.

6. ***Unity does not necessarily mean uniformity.***

There will always be a variety of expressions of faith and obedience to the call for unity and service which must be upheld and celebrated in thanksgiving (1 Cor. 12). There will always be varied expressions of the gifts of the spirit which are meant to be used for service and witness to the love of God for all people. Each part of the body will have to recognize the uniqueness of the gift of each other for the building up of the whole body of Christ, making it more equipped for the mission of giving witness and service to the people of God in the community where it belongs. The reality of varieties of gifts therefore must give room to a more inclusive, more ecumenical, more accepting and more affirming and non-judgmental nature of the work and ministry of the church. It does not brook nor tolerate attitudes of superiority and self-righteousness, nor does it accept the proposition of having the monopoly of the truth that can save. Rather, it responds to the calling of the Lord for service and witness with a completely

humbled and penitent attitude, embraced by the truth of having been an undeserving but forgiven sinner but given a new opportunity to live life as it is truly meant to be by our God.

The problem begins when one of those who claim to have received a gift of the Spirit begins to claim to have the better knowledge of the faith and the better access to the truth of God and the superior means of achieving salvation and begins to shut off the others. The more serious problem begins when those who believe in possessing the superior knowledge of faith and better access to the truth and salvation in Jesus Christ begin to work, not for unity, but for the division, if not the destruction of the one body to which they also belong. These are among those who could be aptly labelled by Jesus as thieves and wolves out to steal and destroy the flock. These are those described by Paul as trying to foment confusion and division in order to impose its own exclusivist brand of the faith on the rest of the body and therefore are subject to the curse.

**7. *The essence of the Jesus agenda remains attached to the mission program and mission priorities announced by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19.***

This has the elements of proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God whose main beneficiaries are the kinds of people specifically mentioned by Jesus in the text and in many other parallel passages (e.g., Matt. 5:3-11; 11:2-6; Luke 6:20-25). The dawning of the messianic age bringing with it the Spirit of the Lord becomes concretely experienced in the life of the most marginalized sectors of the community. The evidence that the kingdom of God and the messiah has come can be seen in the caring and healing attention being given to those who suffer from poverty, oppression, various illnesses and all forms of alienation and deprivation. It means that the dawning of the kingdom of God and the messianic age comes with a complete and radical transformation of the social, economic, political and spiritual landscape. It comes with a radical but unexpected reversal of relationships between the powerless and the powerful (Luke 1:49-56).

The dawning of the reign of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, is also accompanied by an accompanying call for repentance, a complete turning around or overhaul of one's life's perspectives, values and direction as the gospel of God's kingdom becomes the primary impetus for one to accept and believe in the call of Jesus to become his disciple and missionary (Mark 1:15). It is this message of Jesus concerning the reign of God that is now coming to transform both society and the people and calling on every one to repent, believe in the gospel he is preaching and follow him, which imbues the gospel message with a deep sense of urgency and utmost importance.

**8. *Such mission program and mission priorities of Jesus are the ones expressed in the very program priorities and thrusts of the UCCP in its Vision, Mission and Goals and Strategic Plan.***

It is considered well by the constituency and leadership of the UCCP through the years that such program is expressive of its legacy of faith that is deeply rooted in the Scriptures and faithful to the mission mandate of our Lord.

**9. *In essence, a clear understanding of who Jesus is, and what he did in his life and ministry, the values and priorities he exhibited, and his death and resurrection (Christology), will lead us to a clearer understanding of what the church is and ought to be (ecclesiology).***

A clear understanding of the nature and roots of the church, based on our knowledge of Jesus and his mission will then lead us to a clearer and sharper apprehension of the kind of mission imperatives we should be carrying out as a church body in this part of God's kingdom (*missiology*).

## Policy Recommendations

1. With a carefully prepared VMG and Strategic Plan that was developed through a long period of time, the imperative need for the church at this time is to unite in a more intentional and vigorous implementation of the such strategic plan for the rest of its period of implementation. In short, there should be a renewed focus on the education of the rank and file, the members and all church workers, officers and lay leaders of the church, on both the biblical and theological foundations upon which the mission witness of the UCCP rests.
2. However, in view of the need for a more coherent response to the challenge of the RG, the UCCP would need to be more intentional in coming out a program of action that will put special emphasis on the need for both institutional and self examination, or a period of penitential reflection on the roots and reasons for the phenomenon of the RG to emerge and to persist even at this time. It must ask serious and critical questions addressed to itself, as to what went wrong and what were done wrong and what were the wrong and sinful assumptions that were adopted in the carrying out of some policies and decisions that may have created a negative effect on the other and marginalized sectors of the church. There is need to go back and re-examine the kind of styles of leadership, decision making, consensus raising, reaching out to others and even administrative and financial aspects of church life and work. The present leadership must seek out and address the areas where it finds itself weak and unresponsive and must resolve to undertake the necessary transformative changes needed to renew and recover its mandate for a more faithful and relevant and transparent forms of leadership with a clear sense of attachment and accountability to its own constituency. Perhaps a comprehensive institutional assessment and evaluative retreat and reflection of the leaders and officials of the church may be something urgently needed at this point.

It is important however for the leaders of the church to be always imbued with the theological and pastoral perspective whenever they are confronted with serious and critical decisions to make in order to resolve a critical problem within the church or in her institutions. That is, to think through an issue using the theological, biblical, ethical and pastoral framework first, before resorting to any legal measure. This is to allow the theological and pastoral dimension to become a primary factor more than the legal means of solving and responding to a problem in the church and in its institutions, discerning first whatever theological significance there may be in a particular decision to be made for the rest of the life of the church and her mission and witness. Otherwise, if every problem simply becomes dependent on the legal means of its getting resolved (if it is indeed resolved), then we as a church become reduced to the level of just another secular organization that has become incapable of resolving its own problems and dispute by itself in the manner advocated by its own Lord Jesus himself. Thus, the church loses its unique and distinct witness of a truly different way of living together in the household of God which it could have offered to the community as its own gift from her God.

The church is called by her Lord and Master to live by a different set of ethical and moral standards, a different set of values, norms, perspectives and priorities in life. It is supposed to be the vanguard of what is to become the new community of the kingdom of God inaugurated already by our Lord Jesus Christ. And its leaders are the ones supposed to exemplify such distinct standards for the new life in community through the quality of pastoral and theological leadership they can manifest toward each other and every constituent member of the church.

3. There will always be a need to engage and not give up on the means of dialogue with the parties and any party that has become estranged or alienated from the greater fellowship of the church.
4. At the same time, the existing mechanisms for addressing legitimate grievances of members, church workers and church groups should be fully utilized and the Biblical tenets for the upholding of the values of reconciliation, acceptance of differences in the spirit of inclusiveness and affirmation of each other's distinct gifts should always serve as guiding principles.

5. However, those resolutely bent on dividing the church and undermining its unity and its work and mission must then be subjected to the appropriate disciplinary measures provided for in the constitution and Bylaws of the church, short of course, of invoking the “curse” pronounced by the Apostle Paul.
6. In the meantime, renewed emphasis on the educational program of the church should be carried out in all levels of church membership and in all ranks of the church workers. This means a renewed empowerment for the CEN aspect of the program of the church. That is, new educational materials, Bible studies, SS materials, preaching guides, devotional guides must be produced by the national CEN office and circulated as soon as possible through the various jurisdictions to all churches in the conferences. A church membership that is fully and solidly equipped in the knowledge of the faith, and in the mission imperatives defined by our Lord Jesus can never be shaken from their foundations by any devious or malevolent force intent on stealing them or snaring them away from the flock of the church. They can only be like the house that remains solidly rooted in the rock, no matter how strong the storm and the winds blow on them, they will remain standing no matter the adversities that may come.

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Dr Noriel Capulong  
 For the Commission on Church Unity and Union  
 20 July 2009

## **Participants**

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## **Proclaiming the Gospel in a Pluralist World: Towards a Dialogue of Life**

Faith and Order Committee and the Commission on Church Unity and Union  
Joint Planning Workshop  
Dumaguete City  
01-04 September 2002

### **A Report**

#### **We have come...**

1. We have come together – bishops, pastors, theologians, Muslim, B’laan, Mangyan, ordained and lay people from local churches, the academe, institutions and organizations -- for the first joint planning workshop of the Faith and Order Commission and the Commission on Church Union and Church Unity of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.
2. We have come from our separate lives and from a variety of experiences in different parts of the country so that together we could listen to one another, learn from testimonies from other faith communities, review church policies and programmes pertaining to peoples of other faiths, reflect on our biblico-theological heritage concerning our mission among them, sharpen theological affirmations, identify strategies that will address interfaith concerns, and plan on the vision and mission thrust among peoples of other faiths.
3. Recognizing the Church’s inadequacy in understanding the history and context of the struggles of Muslims and other Indigenous Peoples’ communities, the UCCP considers it its task to proclaim healing and wholeness, and work towards a dialogue of life. It is a bold proclamation of Jesus Christ who breaks all barriers that divide peoples, nations, classes, gender, age, and every barrier that discriminates and enslaves.
4. This planning workshop then augurs a process of self-examination for the UCCP and is expected to inform various other processes that will provide policy direction and programmatic thrusts relative to work among other faith communities.
5. We proceed with repentance because we know that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ can be misconstrued; with humility because we often perceive people of other faiths with a feeling of superiority; with openness to listen because there is much that we do not know; with joy because it is not ourselves that we proclaim but Jesus Christ whom we confess as our Lord and Saviour.

6. In this spirit, we pray that UCCP shall receive the gift of humility and the strength to overcome all boundaries, and to enable us to pursue the fullness of God's reign.

### **A story**

1. We began with a story of one man and a spiritual revolution, which shaped cultures across a growing world civilization and contributed to the preservation of the best of religious, cultural, historical, and philosophical traditions. It is the story of Mohammed and of the spirit of Islam.
2. We affirm the rich heritage of the Islamic faith. We realize that our knowledge of Islam has been obscured by historical misunderstanding.
3. We recognize that Christians and Muslims share a common story – of being born in struggle and constantly shaped by the historical context, of having claims of power, of conquest, and of a quest for destiny.
4. We acknowledge the human tendency for domination, and that the essence of the faith could be corrupted by people in power and could be used to legitimize certain acts.
5. We confess the sins committed against the people over centuries of hostility. This calls for our corporate repentance.
6. We affirm that we need to discover ways of living together amidst differences. We draw inspiration from the experience of the jubilee – of the spirit that moved churches and nations to repentance and confession.

### **Who are you, God, and how do we find you?**

1. We approached God in worship, knowing that things are not right, that the world is full of fear, distrust, hurt, anger and hate. We grieved the disaster, pain and suffering wrought by conflict among peoples of faith – of Muslims carrying out **jihad** in the name of Allah, of Jews defending the Promised Land in the name of El, and of Christians who defend justice in the name of God. We prayed that God will give voice to our confusion and grief, to guide us in the spirit of trust and reconciliation, to inspire us to transform, to move us to create bonds of mutual understanding, to search for true justice, righteousness and peace.
2. We reflected on the order and unity found in creation, the interconnectedness of all things. We were challenged to look again at those from whom we turned our heads when we saw their pain and suffering, to resonate with them, to find empathy and commonality we those we considered as competitors, threats and adversaries. Indeed, to see beyond religion and find the essence of life and relationships, to discover the interconnectedness of all the children of the earth.
3. We prayed for discernment and guidance and once again learn from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ who taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves. We prayed that we could be among those who encircle the world with peace and justice.

### **Our mission with people of other faiths**

1. Today, violence and war, suspicion and mistrust, prejudice and animosity exist between Christians and Muslims. This is contrary to the gospel of peace, unity and harmony. This calls for a review and a rethinking of our mission with people of other faiths.
2. Our Christian mission in the past has presented an institutional euro-centered western Christ, a politically divided Christ. But, we have a Christ who because of his incarnation became human and became one with all human beings. It is a catholic Christ, who embraces the whole of humankind, a universal Christ who is nevertheless real in the lives, religions and cultures of all peoples.

3. We learned that encounters with people of other faiths can provide focus on the human spirit as the seat of cultural identity, worldview, values and meanings. It expresses itself in the diversity of cultures according to diverse historical paths. We recognize that growth to human integrity and growth as communities are key elements to our mission with people of other faiths. People can be bound together by a common human spirit, which enables them to transcend barriers and limitations.
4. We were reminded that God's salvation takes place within the ongoing story of peoples. As God walked with Israel, within their own story and culture, God also walks with other peoples within their own story and culture. Indeed, God belongs to the whole world, to all peoples, to the whole created universe.
5. The Church's mission embraces the whole of humankind. In the same way that God belongs to the whole universe, the Church, also, must belong to the whole human race.
6. We learned that our role as those sent by Christ on his mission is a humble one. It is more like that of John the Baptist who prepared the way of the Lord. We have to be able to create conditions that will allow people to experience the spirit in their person, in their lives and in their relationships.
7. This understanding should enable us to enter into the culture of the other, of those belonging to other faiths, to understand their thoughts, share their feelings, and resonate with their struggles and aspirations.
8. In this process, it is important to know the starting point: the consciousness of our exclusivity and the recognition of the reality of plurality. It requires a bonding together in God's love, to be like Paul who believed we should be everything to all people, to discover ways to share the gospel and bring salvation in all its fullness. It demands a personal understanding, an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. This is the basic task of evangelization, the personal witness, the commitment that we do not only proclaim the good news but that we are ourselves the good news.
9. We recognize that dialogue, a dialogue of life, is a new approach to evangelism, that *to engage in dialogue is to stand in the mystery of the other* (Martin Buber). This involves mutuality, of two people engaging in dialogue. However, our finitude, our standing on our own self-righteousness, and the inequality of human relations often make dialogue difficult. We must have the willingness to engage in a dialogue of life and experience new dimensions of understanding.

### **Testimonies**

1. We listened to testimonies, recollections of historical events and personal encounters, experiences that continue to bring about conflict, hostility and pain. They are stories of people's alienation from the land and their struggle for identity and self-determination, of colonial invasion and oppression and the struggle for nationhood and political sovereignty.
2. For Indigenous Peoples, land is sacred. It is a gift from the ancestors. It is a source of life. It provides everything that is needed to sustain life. Because land is life, it must not be possessed privately because to deny others the access to land is like denying them the right to live. Tribal leaders have long ago spoken against the arrogance of those who want to own land, which outlives individuals and generations. Land symbolizes the people's historical, cultural, and religious identity. It is a symbol of unity. It is preserved for future generations and therefore, cannot be sold, disposed of and destroyed.
3. A country's laws are supposed to regulate social relations that promote stability, equity and peace. But in the experience of Indigenous Peoples, Philippine laws have been used as instruments to deprive them of their land for the enrichment of the few. The Church, even with

programmes intended to improve the living condition of Indigenous Peoples, has done little in this regard.

4. The issue of land is a religious and a political one. It is at the heart of the Indigenous People's struggle for self-determination. It is, therefore, in the context of this struggle that the Church must anchor its mission.
5. For the Muslims, everything between heaven and earth belongs to God.
6. The Moro people continue to suffer from the effects of colonial aggression and, like the Mangyans and the B'laans, of systematic landgrabbing. While the Philippines is considered as the only Christian nation in Asia, it stands accused as a perpetrator of cruel violence with the war that we continue to wage against them. This is a source of shame for us Christians.
7. As a Church, we recognize our complicity in a culture that has and continues to discriminate while perpetuating exclusivity. We have a responsibility to retrace our steps and work towards unity and reconciliation. We need a dialogue of life.

### **Retracing our steps**

1. In retracing our steps, we put into focus some of the initiatives undertaken over the years concerning other communities of faith. This ministry started with the coming of Protestantism in the Philippines at the turn of the century.
2. Long before the United Church of Christ in the Philippines came into being, early Protestant missionaries had established schools and hospitals in the remotest parts of the country. These institutions provided for the educational and health needs of families, including Muslims and tribal communities in depressed areas. Particularly in the Cordilleras, the schools served students coming from surrounding provinces, which necessitated the putting up of dormitories and student centers. Complementary medical and health services, disaster relief, agriculture and livelihood projects benefited whole communities.
3. In Mindanao, the adult literacy programme started by Dr. Frank Laubach among the Maranaos gained international recognition and became a model for an integrated approach to community work. Such mission endeavors undeniably brought Muslims as well as individuals and families belonging to certain tribes – Bagobo, B'laan, Bontoc, Higaonon, Ifugao, Isneg, , Kalinga, Kankanaey, Mangyan, Manobo – into the Christian fold.
4. In the years that followed the formation of the UCCP in 1948, several statements and policy documents helped articulate the Church's positions on issues and concerns affecting the social, economic, and political life of poor families and ordinary people. Evident in these documents is the desire to discern the currents of the time and define the Church's role in society, including how to relate with the "neighbor who is different". There is also the recognition of the Church's responsibility to participate in efforts to bring about the transformation that is needed.
5. Several factors compelled the UCCP to confront these issues and come up with policy statements, among them "the great lack of social justice and evidence of prejudice" as well as "the outbursts of lawlessness and the rampart disregard of order, which disrupt national unity and solidarity" in areas where its churches are, and where its workers and leaders are deeply engaged. The statements encouraged initiating ways and approaches to bring about peace and reconciliation.
6. In areas where there has risen a strain in the relationship of Christians and those of other faiths, we urge the local churches and conferences to take the initiative in bringing about a dialogue, or series of dialogues, where problems are brought into light, and efforts at promoting unity and understanding achieved (**Statement on Missionary Concern, Law, Order and National Unity, 1970**).

7. Several other statements, significantly even in the critical years of Martial Law, affirmed the church's commitment to the concerns of "cultural minorities" and repeatedly advocated the engagement of the churches in "bringing about a dialogue for peace, unity and progress among aggrieved groups" (**Statement on National Issues**, 1974). In 1975, the *Statement on Cultural Communities* reiterated the concern about the inadequacy of the Church's understanding of the history and culture of "cultural communities" at the same time that it affirmed its commitment for justice. Dialogue was encouraged.
8. These statements found concrete expression in programmes and services provided at the national, jurisdictional and conference levels. Exposure programmes, Muslim-Christian dialogues, cross-cultural exchanges, education initiatives, advocacy work, and other such activities provided energy among the constituency.
9. However, in spite of these efforts and initiatives done in the past, problems remain. There is hostility existing among peoples and communities. Government "peace" initiatives, particularly in the Muslim provinces have generated further division and conflict.
10. The UCCP, in the meantime, has been unclear as to how these things might, if at all, relate to evangelism, causing confusion about programme priorities and methods. The Southeast Mindanao Jurisdiction, for example, reported on the Church's contribution of "substantial moral, financial, material, and human resources towards advocacy programmes, but noted the "little impact" of its economic projects.
11. It is evident that the Church still does not have a common understanding of the complexity of the issues involved. The faith perspective has been not been adequately articulated. And, therefore, the responses have simply been reactive, fragmented, and incoherent. On the part of the UCCP constituency, the reliance on foreign funding manifests the lack of understanding and ownership of the process.
12. Social divisions and political conflicts will continue to haunt us. We need to clarify our vision, sharpen our focus, articulate our aspirations, and find ways to carry out dialogue with those belonging to other faiths. We need a dialogue of life.

### **Towards a missiology among people of other faiths**

1. UCCP documents invariably use as starting points descriptions of the mission field from a socio-political and economic perspective: globalization, the domination of the Filipino state and people by a foreign power, and the acknowledgement of the exploitation and struggles of most Filipinos. This approach puts the UCCP clearly in line with contextualized theology and a strong prophetic tradition.
2. Although the worldview of Muslims and those of other faiths make up the subjective reality of the majority of the non-Christian population in the country, it has generally been ignored or repressed in statements and ministries that privilege political and socio-economic interventions. Back to back with this neglect is the persistence of bias among the UCCP constituency against indigenous and Moro peoples. If the Church is to move forward in theology and mission among people of other faiths, it must consider new approaches to plurality, gospel and cultures, and new paradigms of mission.
3. Missiology must consider three main challenges: globalization, cultural and religious plurality, and Bible and theology. Globalization tends to integrate people, nations, and cultures into a one-world system with the "rationality" of the market as its overriding doctrine. Particularly in Asia, multiple identities challenge Christians to search for an adequate theological approach to support the belief in God's creativity and intention for order. Plurality has complex and ambiguous manifestations, is manipulated by power holders, and sets Christianity against the

normative visions of other religions. Theological considerations include the use of the Bible in mission, Trinitarian mission and the Holy Spirit, and the incarnational perspective.

4. Current approaches to the study of religion are based on the notion that religious traditions are social constructs that tend to exclude. Rising from theologians and social scientists of the colonial era, “religion” and “culture” became tools of modernization. It was for the spread of Christianity and Western civilization that both Spain and the US justified their occupation of the Philippines.
5. In the face of pluralism and globalization, the UCCP must clarify its understanding of the centrality of Christ in Christian belief as holding out the promise of salvation in a pluralistic world. Alongside this is the need to see the totality of the saving work of the Spirit.
  - a. *How do we hear God speaking to us?*
  - b. *How, in our relationships with people and in our pastoral relationship with our communities, can we understand what God is saying to us?*
  - c. *How do we relate the two dimensions of understanding – how God understands us (listening) and how we engage in critical and apologetic task of understanding God (speaking) in our view of mission?*
6. The UCCP is challenged to deepen its appreciation of the Biblical message of mission especially in inter-religious settings. In this context, key Biblical passages on mission taken in isolation will not be helpful. No single paradigm of mission is sufficient.
7. In interfaith relations, the appropriate form of engagement has deemed to be dialogue, involvement in justice, peace and creation issues, and daily life. Rather than discuss abstract ideas and dogmas, encounter calls for “commitment to our continued struggle to overcome the forces that threaten the fullness of life.”
8. Recent literature describes dialogue as “a method for theology, not an end in itself or a strategy for dealing with other religions.” Social justice continues to be seen as the primary context for interfaith dialogue and interfaith relations. It is “primarily an encounter of commitments that seeks mutual understanding, enrichment and correction. While dialogue provides the opportunity for all communities to give authentic witness to their normative visions, it also challenges all communities to rethink and restate their faith perspectives in light of religious plurality.”
9. It entails not only a clear assertion of one’s point of view, but also a transformation of the partners in dialogue. Interfaith and inter-contextual dialogues draw upon people’s experience and historical narrative as well as upon the received doctrines of Christian traditions, and addressing issues of justice and love, hope and forgiveness, peace and tolerance, without being not relativistic nor denying the reality of trivial truth claims.
10. The economic and political system that holds power and wealth as ultimate and legitimate goals in life is the context of mission today. The Church is called to proclaim healing and wholeness in the Triune God and must offer as witness in its own collective life, this power to heal, restore, and renew life, and to establish justice in community. Local churches play a key role as they determine what is preached and how it is preached. Helping to refine localized theologies are feminist and indigenous perspectives and practice.

### **Theological affirmations**

1. **On our concept of God:** reaffirming our belief in one creator, redeemer, and sustainer God:
  - As Christians, we need to reaffirm our belief and faith in a Triune God who remains as a loving Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all creation.

- It is this God who is revealed and testified to in the Bible,
  - a God who acts and carries out God's saving will in history, and
  - a God who was most uniquely and decisively revealed in and through the person and ministry of Jesus Christ.
  - This God, however, continues to reveal God's mysterious but gracious and sustaining presence in various ways, among various peoples, cultures, and faith claims. This God continues to express in ways more profound than we can fathom the divine concern and care for the life and future of all peoples, nations, and cultures of the world being its sole Creator and Sustainer. God is the source of the gift of identity, patrimony and even faith of all peoples within their respective cultures.
- It is on this basis that we need to accept and affirm the distinct identities, cultures and faith claims of the Filipino Muslim communities, and the Indigenous Peoples in the country, and accord them the respect and recognition they deserve as fellow brothers and sisters sharing the parenthood of one Creator and Sustainer.

2. **On sin and the need for repentance:** confessing and acknowledging our accountability,

- As part of a Church that has its own ambiguous history and role in society, we need to confess our own accountability in the various manifestations of sin committed against our brothers and sisters who profess another faith and live in another culture.
- We confess that we have been part of a society that has developed a system that engendered a lot of injustice and victimization on the part of these brothers and sisters.
- Our own culture and materialism, which breeds the seeds of greed and covetousness has led to the deprivation, marginalization, and alienation of these peoples from their own ancestral domains, which have already driven them to extreme and violent forms of responses.
- We acknowledge our being dominated by sin and heir tot eh fallen nature of our humanity. We have even used the Gospel as an instrument for domination and as justification of an oppressive system our religion has helped establish.
- We have raised our own faith claims to the level of absolute truth claims that have reinforced attitudes of self-righteousness, triumphalism, prejudice and superiority over peoples of other faiths.
- This is why we now have to humbly ask God for forgiveness as we honestly confess our sins of commission, omission, and participation. In the spirit of Jubilee, we also need to genuinely ask for the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters from these communities as a step towards genuine renewal and reconciliation.

3. **On Christology: recovering and reaffirming the centrality of Christ for Filipino Christians,**

- We acknowledge the need to recover for our own faith tradition the Scripture testimonies about Christ and His incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection as a model for our response and witness to our brothers and sisters in the IP and Muslim communities.
- We need to reaffirm the concreteness of the model of Jesus Christ who revealed God as one who completely identified with and stood in solidarity with the marginalized peoples in His time, who cared and healed people regardless of race, gender and faith beliefs. We need to apprehend the deep implications of the crucifixion as a moment when God chose to sacrifice ultimately on the cross for the sake of God's beloved people.
- At the same time, we need also to be always empowered by the spirit of the resurrected Christ as the one that provides the source of hope, empowerment and vindication of the cause of the victims and the oppressed. The model of Christ therefore calls us a church to

also make our stand in solidarity with the suffering peoples among the Indigenous Peoples and the Muslim communities, even if this may lead to the cross of Calvary for we know we are assured of the eventual vindication of our just and righteous cause.

4. **On the hidden Christ in other faiths and cultures:** discerning the presence of Christ in other faiths and cultures.
  - As Christians we need to make use of the incarnation of God in Christ as a primary motive and model in enabling us to discern the presence of the God whom we can witness to before our brothers and sisters in the IP and Muslim communities.
  - Within the cultures and communities of these peoples and in the midst of their own human ambiguities and their struggles in life and history, God in Christ is also present reigning as Lord being the God and creator of all peoples and cultures. It is a presence through the Holy Spirit that becomes even discernible in critical situations of suffering and victimization. Christ himself becomes manifest in every one of the peoples in these communities who were hungry and were given food, everyone who were sick and broken in spirit but were given healing and hope, everyone who suffers the pains of victimization but were given compassion by their own people. (cf. Matt. 25:35ff). Christ is present in every moment of suffering and sacrifice for the sake of one's people and in every instance when forgiveness and love predominate over hatred and prejudice.
5. **On the need for dialogue**
  - Guided and informed by the Gospel imperatives to witness to the Gospel to all peoples we have to be prepared to enter into a sustained process of dialogue of life with peoples of other faiths and cultures. This is where we can remain open to the possibility and the risk of being transformed and renewed in the same way that our dialogue partner, in full openness of spirit may also be transformed as both partners are then able to arrive at a truly new dimension of understanding each other's faith claims.
  - As Christians we need to remain sensitive to the voices and the pleadings of our dialogue partners which may be resonating with so much hurt and pain and arising from experiences of injustices and oppression committed against them by our fellow Christians throughout history. In the process, we need to be open to the unfathomable mystery of the spirit that continue to move and makes us all human and capable of hearing and caring for each other. It is also this experience, which becomes one of the living manifestations of the Christian faith being a living and dynamic faith, growing and deepening its own roots through living encounters with other faiths in continuing dialogue of life.
6. **On concrete problems arising out of our encounters with peoples of other faiths**
  - As Filipino Christians seriously desiring to respond in faith to the challenges and opportunities arising from the situation of our brothers and sisters in the indigenous and Muslim communities, we need to review the kind of understanding we have concerning particular issues related to their struggle for life and a better future.
  - We need to develop our own theology of land reflecting our own faith understanding of land as a trust and gift from God to be enjoyed by all God's people dwelling and depending on it. We need to recover the Biblical meaning of stewardship of land and its responsible use in community in light of the unceasing process of commercialization and commodification of land taking place these days. We may need also to learn from the indigenous communities their own concept and practices about land and how their faith, life and identity are so intimately linked always to their homeland as a gift of God to their own people.
  - We need to respond as concerned and caring Christians to certain criminal acts committed against the communities of the Indigenous Peoples and our Muslim brothers and sisters



such as land grabbing and uprooting of peoples in the wake of massive militarization of certain areas, the breakdown of human relations and of the family and even of the ecological system as the culture of globalization and its attendant consumerism is made to supplant what ever is left of indigenous cultures in the area. This phenomenon, which amounts to a destruction of a people's culture in itself may be regarded as an act of ethnocide committed against the indigenous communities and perpetrated by the mostly Christian advocates of the culture globalization.

- We need also to voice out our prophetic critique and condemnation of inhuman scientific experiments done on the indigenous peoples whose unique genetic qualities are in the process of being stolen for the purpose of developing disease resistant genes for people who can pay, but at the expense of the poor and unlettered Indigenous Peoples.
- We need to act towards the review and eventual repeal or revision of the many unjust laws concerning land ownership in territories covering the ancestral domains of the Indigenous Peoples and the Muslim communities. As Christians we need to recognize the God given right of these peoples to their own ancestral lands and their right to self-determination in the land they can consider their home.

## **7. On the mission of the Church in the Philippines**

- As a church in a growing pluralistic society we need to rethink our on-going mission programmes undertaken for the peoples with other faith claims. At the same time, we need to be sensitive even more to the voice of God calling us to a kind of missiology, wherein the aspects of sowing as well as reaping the harvest of what God has planted will have their respective programmatic expressions. We continue to acknowledge the need to proclaim the Gospel in all its fullness and integrity. But we also need to carry out our own faithful witness in a way that will not undermine the respect that we ought to give to the integrity of their own faith and belief systems, which have provided the source of meaning and purpose in their life as communities.

### **Fleshing out the affirmations: some strategies**

There are ways through which these theological affirmations may be enfolded.

#### **At the international, national and institutional levels**

1. We reviewed our vision as a Church and felt that it can also stand as an inclusive vision for our quest for a dialogue for life:
  - the aspiration for an abundant life and meaningful life is a
  - common human aspiration not just confined to the Christian
  - adherents but of the rest of humanity of whatever faiths and
  - ideologies or even of those who deny the validity of any
  - religious faiths
  - the communities become responsible, empowered, self-reliant
  - and caring, committed to the pursuit of the transformation of
  - society and institutions of their respective faiths would
  - reverberate in the heart of the Christians, but we feel, equally
  - so in the hearts of peoples of other faiths

2. But in the context of the Philippine experience, where Christians are the majority and belong to the dominant culture, we have asked:
  - How can there be meaningful life for people whose cultures are dominated, if not eradicated, by the mainstream Christian culture?
  - Is our aim to assimilate and/or fully integrate people of minority cultures into the mainstream?
  - In our effort to try to appreciate the diversity of cultural forms, have we not been guilty of being extractive and utilitarian, just picking up elements in the minority culture to enhance and enrich the dominant culture?
  - Should there not be also a respect for the integrity of cultures?
3. A caution was raised over the juxtaposition of globalization and plurality. At a time when globalization is so pervasive, the ecumenical movement and the churches begin to couch its concepts in the same jargon that globalization uses, such as “borderless churches,” particularities are swamped over by our openness to so many other possibilities. It almost sound like we have to deregulate our theology be open and accept the offerings of others even when these may have no direct bearing.

### **In the ministry of the local church**

1. through education and through the teaching ministry of the church on all levels
  - Sunday school lessons, Bible studies
  - seminary formation programs
  - training and preparing local church people for dialogue
  - training local church people in conflict transformation skills
  - learning from Indigenous Peoples on their own traditional peace process, means of justice and reconciliation
  - putting up study centers for the study of the religion of other faiths.
2. through alliances with NGO’s concerned with Indigenous Peoples and Muslim communities, learning to work with them as partner
3. through a relevant liturgical life of the church
  - developing and using more liberating and inclusive forms of worship liturgies
  - ecumenical celebrations
  - ecumenical worship observances
  - adapting songs, poetry from the Muslim and Indigenous People’s communities for worship
  - exploring creative possibilities in worshipping together, how we may be able to join and share in each other’s worship
4. The church should also develop parallel training and service programs aimed at developing and enhancing the capacities of the local churches to become
  - communities of learning concerning indigenous and Muslim communities
  - communities of interpretation of the word of God focused on the study and practice of the word that will enlighten and guide them in their reaching out to indigenous and Muslim communities.

5. At the same time, local churches should be encouraged to tap the gifts of their own members who can contribute to a ministry of healing that can also be extended to the peoples of the IP and Muslim communities.

## **Recommendations**

### **Faith and Order Commission**

1. For the Faith and Order Commission members to undergo the Dialogue and Study Process with some Muslim scholars
  - Mechanics: Invite two or three Muslim scholars to dialogue with FOC members.
  - This can be done in Dumaguete at the Divinity School as there Muslim scholars.
2. From out of the aforementioned experience, to work on a long-term program to help our leaders and constituencies to understand what the Islam faith and its affirmations especially where they intersect with the Christian faith affirmations.
3. To come up with Guidelines for Meaningful Dialogue Process, which should help our constituencies:
  - to understand the theological, philosophical, social and moral foundation and teachings of Islam
  - to structure the process how the above-mentioned aim would be carried out
  - to test out the process.

#### Targets

Seminary students, leaders in the area of Muslim Mindanao and in areas where there is large concentration of Muslims.

#### Programmatic Expression

- This could be introduced as one of the subjects of the FOC Summer Institute.
  - The Ministerial Formation Centers could strengthen the Tri-People Program of the Summer Field Education.
4. Gathering of current/new literature and materials
    - to collect materials dealing with Dialogue with other Faiths
    - an annotated bibliography can be prepared on the books, monographs, articles, etc.

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