

Asian Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

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In this article we consider the effects of the global pandemic from the Asian perspective. Deputy Leader, Claire TC Chong draws on data collected from conversations among Asia Christian leaders concerning the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of the Church in Asia. The pandemic exposed afresh areas of concern including unhealthy reliance on resources external to local churches, the loss of relevance to the next generation of the Church and theologies unhelpfully framed by a Euro-centric perspective. Claire argues for a greater degree of sensitivity towards others, a wider perspective on the Holy Spirit's activities today, and a commitment to Christian unity in the midst of diversity via a deeper appreciation of context.

Short-term mission trips have come to a grinding halt. For the church in Singapore, this has 'forced' us to STOP from our never-ending busyness and THINK, critically, about the way we have been doing missions. Over the past 15 months, the Singapore Centre for Global Missions (SCGM) has organised several forums, engaging Christian leaders in Singapore with those in our region in dialogue, to better understand the concerns and issues of church and mission in Asia. While the pandemic has emptied church buildings, it has brought the Church—the people of God—together in a new, 'borderless' way: in cyberspace. Here, I offer a glimpse into some of the conversations we have been having and of an emerging direction for the Church in Asia.

1. Issues of Concern

This essay gleans from numerous dialogues among Christian leaders, including a research study involving 40 local pastors and missions workers in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand; a roundtable discussion between some of these regional leaders and about 60 Singapore church and missions leaders, followed by a series of 6 in-depth focus group discussions. In addition to these, SCGM organised four other forums with Asian thought leaders, from Japan to India, and also participated in regional meetings such as the Asia2020/21 Congress monthly webinars and a Lausanne Movement 'Listening Call' involving 50 Southeast Asian leaders.

The selection of issues mentioned here are really long-standing concerns for the Church in Asia, but during this time of crisis the problems, which were swept under the carpet or suppressed, re-surfaced and those that were already brewing, were exacerbated.

1.1 Unsustainable and Irreproducible Missions

From the research study among Southeast Asian pastors, one of the greatest worries, especially during this worldwide crisis, is their continued reliance on financial support from foreign sources.

A budget is a reflection of the way an organisation operates. It is apparent that the way many churches in these developing countries function—its structures, systems, and activities—are largely modelled after churches in developed countries and therefore cannot be sustained by local resources and are reliant on foreign aid. Foreign, resource-laden models of church planting are viable only for communities that are more affluent. We see a clear correlation between the problem of unsustainability and the adoption of methods that are not appropriate to the socio-economic reality of local churches in impoverished contexts.

A missions worker noted, "churches got shut down and Christianity stopped, but not Buddhism, because Buddhists don't worship congregationally in large numbers." It was also noted by a few local pastors that house churches or churches with healthy cell structures are not as affected by the pandemic restrictions. The life of these churches—worship, evangelism, and discipleship—is decentralised, organic, simple and in the hands of the laity. This contrasts with those that revolve around a centralised building, with organised high-budget activities led by a few skilled leaders trained to handle specialised programs that would not be manageable and reproducible by devoted lay Christians



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The saying 'Don't give them fish but teach them to fish' may be true, but what fishing methods are we teaching?

The Church in Asia needs to be allowed to reinvent herself in order to flourish in Asian contexts. The Cambodian head of a denomination recognised that "the crisis has been a challenge, but at the same time, it is also an opportunity for the church to explore new ways of doing ministry." These "new" ways are, ironically, 'old' customary ways of the local people that the church had never been given an opportunity to explore.

1.2 Insular and Irrelevant Discipleship

Another key issue of local pastors from the research study, and also raised at the Lausanne Movement gathering, concerned inadequate discipleship. Pastors are anxious about the spiritual well-being of their members, especially during this crisis. However, the problem does not lie so much in the quantitative lack of discipleship as a qualitative mismatch of the mode of learning and the content of discipleship with the people's ways of life.

A missionary in Laos spoke in a way that might seem radical to some, "the problem is that we think that discipleship is Bible study. Discipleship is not Bible study." Jesus did not sit around with his disciples and read and analyse text; He was in the fishing boat, harvest fields, or at a well in the mid-afternoon sun, talking to others about faith and life, where they were and from what they were doing. Much of the current discipleship approaches employ literacy methods which are not suitable for oral learners, who instead 'catch on' and 'absorb' the essence of truth through song, chants, meditation, rituals, and various art forms.

Furthermore, much of the translated follow up and discipleship materials are largely theological and about doctrines and personal piety. A leader from Myanmar lamented, "Christianity... does not deal with the everyday, real-life problems of people and the problems of society. Religion and everyday life are two separate things." The dissonance in understanding what faith is, and thus the kind of discipleship Asian Christians need, may be felt in this honest comment. One of our participants recalled speaking with a Buddhist monk.

When the monk was asked about what he found difficult to understand in Christianity, he replied that he struggled to understand the way Christians define sin. In his understanding, sin in Christianity was failing to believe in certain doctrinal beliefs. In Buddhism, sin is greed, ill-will and delusional pride—the wrong that is committed in thought, speech and actions. Conversion from sin is change of behaviour, unlike conversion in Christianity which is perceived to be a change from one religion to other simply by saying that one agrees with a

different set of beliefs. In Asian mindsets, the locus of faith and discipleship is life. Religious teaching that revolves around abstract doctrines makes no sense.

This dissonance leads to a profound disconnect. Shallow discipleship results in syncretism and high turnover rates, and worryingly, the abandonment of faith by young people, as pointed out in the next paragraph.

1.3 Disengaged and Disenfranchised NextGen

This point was a main issue raised at the Lausanne Movement 'Listening Call'. Several Christian leaders voiced our concern over the inability of the Church to engage and keep even our own Christian children, who are not being discipled as followers of Christ by the Church but as followers of the world through social media.

It was recognised that leaders had to make more effort in listening and understanding the young and the things they are concerned about. However, I think the stumbling block lies in Christian leaders' obsessions about the supposed "pristine purity of the Christian faith" (a phrase used by an Indonesian leader). The older generations see themselves as guardians of doctrinal 'Truth' and tradition—both of which the young, particularly the Gen Zs, regard as 'oppressive.' So, the very thing that is cherished as sacred to one is deemed as evil to another.

Two Millennials who work closely with Gen Zs explained to me that the Gen Zs are children who were born into the Age of Social Media. They held onto devices from their early infancy, and they have been nurtured in a world of subtle but intense power-plays that affect their sense of security. They are thus particularly sensitive to the issues of imbalance and abuse of power and the plight of the marginalised and victimised. Ideals of liberalism and feminism resonate well with them. Therefore, the Church's stand on issues such as LGBTQs or liberalising of certain laws, or rather the Church's approach in dealing with such issues, comes across to the Gen Zs as hypocrisy, bigotry, abuse and oppression. To engage the Gen Zs, the church may need to appreciate what is noble and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8) in some of these postmodern ideologies, relate to them in that language and re-construct a more gracious and compassionate response.

Just as there is a great gulf between the older and younger generation, there is also a huge chasm between the world of Christians and the world of non-Christians of the same people group.

1.4 Foreign and Unamicable Christianity

This has been a perennial problem. Christianity in Asia has been considered for centuries as a 'white man's

religion.’ Many authors have described the alienness of Christianity in cultural anthropological categories, and how Christian faith and practice needs to be expressed in culturally sensitive ways. The foreignness of Christianity and its socio-political implications deserves further discussion.

From our research study, it was noted that local churches with foreign connections tend to have weaker relations with their local communities and local authorities, and during times of crisis, it becomes a problem. The insecurities and fears arising from the current pandemic have precipitated more pronounced ethnic and religious tensions and heightened nationalistic sentiments. The Church is commonly perceived by the non-Christian community and authorities as a foreign entity on Asian soil, and in some places, an undesired foreign element. Christianity is unhelpfully intertwined with certain mannerisms and politically-charged agendas that are not congruent with Asian identities, core values and philosophies of social order. It is thus seen through a xenophobic lens.

At two of the Asia2020/21 webinars, an Indian Christian thought-leader suggested that Hindunization, and possibly Sinicization as well, is a backlash from perceived antagonisms and threats to national identity, culture and social stability. Another speaker from Middle East/North Africa insightfully pointed out that Christianity is a minority group in many Asian countries, and we need a ‘theology of the minority’ to guide our relations with the majority. Asian Christians need to learn what it means to be good, patriotic, Christian citizens, living and behaving humbly and peaceably as minorities, in the places God has ordained for us to be. We should avoid contending imprudently against indigenous policies of social order, therefore unwittingly coming across as “minions of a Western agenda”. Can the Christian faith not transcend political ideologies? Jesus said, “Give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar,” and “My Kingdom is not of this world,” to which, the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, unthreatened by Jesus, found no fault in Him.

2. A Way Forward

A profound change in the way Asian Christians view our own social, economic, and national cultures and a more nuanced approach of contextualization are seen as possible ways to resolve some of the issues. Models and methods of doing church need to be contextualized to local resources and methods. Discipleship needs to be relevant to local issues that people face, and it needs to be administered through local modes of learning. For the younger generation, a contextualised gospel could show how Christ liberates the imprisoned, frees the

oppressed, protects the rights to life of the prostitute condemned by the religious institution. The church needs to be re-envisioned as an integral part, a cooperative partner and an agent of transformation within the socio-political framework of Asian societies.

How might Asian Christians do contextualization? Reading from Acts 15, at least four lessons may be drawn out from this classic example of contextualization.

2.1 Listen to and Empathise with the Other

The Jerusalem Council accepted that circumcision “troubled their [Gentile] minds” (vs 24) and made it “difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (vs 19). They had listened, appreciated and empathized with the non-Jews. Doing ‘critical’ contextualization and exegeting culture is more than intellectually analysing doctrinal meanings and functions of symbols, customs or rituals. We need to intuitively capture the affective meanings as well—the psychological, familial, social, and moral implications. Rather than coming with an evaluative mentality, assessing what is right and wrong, appreciating the culture of another needs to be approached with gentleness, humility and compassion.

2.2 Discern the Moving of the Holy Spirit

Barnabas and Paul could not deny the hand of God at work, through signs and wonders, among the Gentiles (vs 12). It was evident that God was willing to embrace the Gentiles as Gentiles, uncircumcised, and in all their cultural Gentile-ness. Peter validated this and recognised God’s initiative in reaching out to the Gentiles (vs 7-9). James, similarly, discerned the movement of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles (vs 13, 15, 17, 28). See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland (Isa 43:19). Contextualization calls for prayerful discernment of God at work in unfamiliar yet creative and exciting new ways.

2.3 Renew Our Theological Interpretations

Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James saw that God was doing something new, and what they saw renewed their hermeneutical paradigm. Re-reading an old prophecy from Amos 9:11-12 in an illuminating new way, James radically redefined what ‘people of God’ meant—from one that was ethnocentric, exclusively referring to Israel as God’s chosen, to one that includes “the rest of mankind” and “all the Gentiles” (Acts 15:17). Similarly, Paul had a different theological interpretation of the Jewish doctrine of circumcision (Gal 1-2, 1 Cor 7:18-19, Phil 3:2-3). He emphasized on the spirit of the law, rather than its letter, censured the legalistic interpretation of the law of physical circumcision and

preached about the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Rom 2:25-29). In both these cases, instead of imposing predetermined theological conceptions, the Jerusalem Church allowed God to transform their long-established theological ideas. The hermeneutical process that we see here is one that oscillates between text and context, one that is sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in the present and God's continued authorship in writing history.

2.4 Safekeeping the Unity of the Body

Reimagining Christian Practices In Asia

Contextualization of Christian faith and practice in Asian contexts cannot be tokenistic; it is not just donning of exotic externalities, or linguistically transposing theological compositions from a Western to an Asian key. A Korean theologian exhorts Asian Christians not to be "too enamoured by Western theologies," instead, we should "read Scriptures through raw Asian eyes" and re-interpret the Bible through the paradigms of the great philosophical traditions of Asia. Theologizing within Asian worldviews will lay the foundation for a more profound engagement with Asian core values and local wisdom, even those that underlie ideologies of social order, progress and polity, and this will allow for the re-imagination and re-creation of Christian practices that would make more sense to Asian minds and would tug Asian hearts. It will also strengthen the Church's resilience in the midst of crisis and stimulate the growth of the Church across the generations and in all parts of society.

The Council did not just 'repeal' the law of circumcision for the Gentiles, they negotiated a holistic response.

They recommended that the Gentiles continued to follow certain purity codes, so as to mark out their identity as followers of Christ and also to maintain the unity of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. The Council exercised the principle of 1 Cor 10:32-33 of not being a stumbling block to anyone—Jews, Gentiles or the Church of God. Contextualization involves a complex negotiation among different parties. It is not just a theological exercise; it is a relational endeavour.