

Written interview with Pastor Dr. Soritua Albert Ernst Nababan
on December 24, 2018

What were the motivations for founding an international community of churches?

In the first half of the 1960s, there were two international events that helped churches around the world to review their understanding of mission and develop their ecumenical international relations.

In 1961, the International Missionary Conference (IMC) was integrated into the World Council of Churches (WCC) during its General Assembly in New Delhi. This was the result of a long series of Bible studies and negotiations that made it clear that mission is central to the life of the church and should therefore not be left to individuals or private foundations. Until then, most of the mission agencies in the West, which had been founded mainly in the 19th century by individuals and/or groups outside church structures, had been united in the IMA. To ensure that mission was not neglected, the 1961 General Assembly in New Delhi established a *Commission on World Mission and Evangelism* (CWME) to address the concerns of member churches in the areas of mission and evangelism. The General Assembly appealed to all member churches and mission agencies that mission in each country should be integrated into the structure of the churches. In practice, this would mean that independent mission agencies would be dissolved and mission would be carried out by the churches. The key issue was *integration*. It was aimed primarily at churches and mission agencies in the West. This is because, in general, churches in the South, such as the HKBP, have embedded mission in their structures from the outset.

The second event was the WCC World Mission Conference, which took place in Mexico in 1963. The most important insight of the World Conference was a broader understanding of mission, reflected in its theme "*Mission in Six Continents*," which means that every continent is a mission field. This change in understanding and paradigm put an end to the old view that mission only goes from West to East or from North to South. It was also emphasized that mission begins with God. The term *missio dei* was coined to emphasize that mission does not originate from human initiatives, but from God. These findings were presented to the WCC Central Committee, which in turn forwarded the recommendations to all member churches. The most important message of the World Mission Conference was the realization that all continents are "mission fields." *The whole church* is called and sent to proclaim *the whole gospel* throughout the *whole world*. The key issue is *holistic understanding*.

From the second half of the 1960s onwards, I was fully involved in the ecumenical movement. *At the national level*, I was elected General Secretary of the then Council of Churches in Indonesia (DGI) in 1967 and held this office until 1984. In 1984, the DGI was transformed into the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) (), and I was elected its first full-time General Chair until I was appointed and elected full-time Ephorus by the General Synod of the HKBP in 1987. From 1987 to 1994, I continued to serve as one of the three part-time chairs of the PGI.

At the international level, in 1968 I was elected by the WCC Central Committee as Vice-Chair of the CWME and later as its Moderator until 1983, then by the General Assembly as a member of the WCC Central Committee and in 1991 as Vice-Moderator of the CC-WCC until 1998. The General Assembly in Porto Allegre in 2006 re-elected me as one of its presidents, a position I held until 2013. At the regional level in Asia, I was the first full-time youth secretary of the then East Asia Christian Conference (EACC) (since 1972 Christian Conference of Asia (CCA)) from 1963 to 1968 and its president from 1990 to 1995.

I mention these commitments in ecumenical bodies because in these functions I was also able to observe the practical relationships of the churches, especially in Asia and Africa, with their "partners" in the North. My 15 years of service in the CWME also gave me the opportunity to get to know many mission agencies around the world. I paid particular attention to the mission agencies in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the USA that maintain relationships with churches in Indonesia. Later, I focused on churches in Asia and Africa that have relationships with mission agencies in Germany. The so-called "partners" are not the member churches that are also member churches of the WCC, but a mission organization called RMG/UEM and other mission organizations that still exist. It was simply a continuation of the old relationship with the mission organization that was considered by many to be their "mother church." At that time, many church leaders in Asia and Africa were unaware that they were not communicating with churches in Germany, but with mission organizations that had actually brought the gospel to their countries. There was virtually no direct relationship with churches in the West. And this relationship is characterized by paternalism and one-way traffic, in the worst case as recipients and donors, as beggars and benefactors.

It is important to mention that not all missionary societies in the world were willing to integrate into the structures of their respective churches. The main reason was hesitation and fear that integration would demean the mission, absorb it into the routines of the church, and ultimately cause it to be forgotten. Those who rejected integration met at a congress in Lausanne in 1974, identified themselves as *evangelicals*, and founded a new

movement and organization that later became known as the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).

But the integration process has also taken a different form in some countries. What I observed with regard to Barmen was the following. Integration did not take place in Germany. The transformation of the RMG into the UEM in 1972 was only half a step. Although the mission leadership was composed of church officials appointed by some of the churches and even part of its budget came from church funds, the fundamentals and, in particular, the understanding of mission and the practice of relations with the churches in Asia and Africa remained the same. I have the impression that the churches in Germany did not make every effort to correct the understanding of mission, especially at the congregational level, and to comply with the recommendations of the 1963 World Mission Conference in Mexico. I have experienced it myself on several occasions that when *singing "Now, come ye heathens, cease your mourning..."* in a Sunday service, the people sitting next to me immediately turned their heads and looked at me! When high-ranking church leaders from Asia or Africa visited "their partners" in Germany, they did not meet with the top leaders of the churches in Germany, but only with the leaders and, above all, the staff of the mission agencies. When they visited congregations, it was usually only "mission friends" with the intention of arousing interest and gaining support for the mission, as in the past (usually "guests" from the South are asked to report on conversions in the South). There was never any mutual exchange about the problems of the churches in their own countries and no discussion about how the churches should work together to strengthen each other.

As an elected member of the Central Board of the HKBP (*Parhalado Pusat*) in 1968, I used this opportunity to draw the attention of the leadership of the HKBP and later the leadership of the other churches in Indonesia that are historically connected to Barmen (RMG) to the recommendations of the 1961 WCC Assembly in New Delhi and the 1963 World Mission Conference in Mexico, with the approval of the DGI Executive Committee. At the same time, I tried to approach two WCC member churches in Germany, the EKIR and the EKvW, and inquire to what extent they were implementing the 1961 New Delhi recommendation on the integration of mission and adopting the understanding of "mission in six continents."

After careful preparation, in 1974 the DGI Executive Committee invited official representatives of all DGI member churches with a connection to Barmen, official representatives of the EKIR and EKvW, and representatives of the RMG/VEM to a theological consultation in Cibogo, which later became known as the CIBOGO Consultation. The theme of the consultation was *growing together into a mature*

ecumenical relationship. There was agreement that paternalism must end. The churches are called upon to relearn how to relate directly to one another. The EKIR and EKvW were challenged to what extent they are implementing the integration of mission, and all participating churches to what extent they recognize the impact of the new paradigm of mission in six continents. It is emphasized that the churches must accept one another as equal partners in order to grow together. The churches in Indonesia must learn to give and not just receive, and the churches in the West must learn to receive and not just give. No church is so small, weak, or poor that it cannot share something. The reciprocity of giving and receiving must be faithfully observed. In Germany in particular, the hope was expressed that mission should not be limited to "mission friends," but that the whole church must become "mission friends" and at the same time be prepared to see Germany as a mission field.

When the Theological Consultation took place in Bethel in 1978, attended by representatives of all churches affiliated with Barmen from Germany, Asia, and Africa, a representative of the DGI () was also invited. The Cibogo Consultation submitted a contribution to the Bethel Consultation with an appeal that all be prepared to grow together into a mature relationship. A small working group of four people (one from Germany, one from Africa, one from Asia, and the mission director) was set up to follow up on the results of the consultation. I was asked to chair the group. In the following years, we tried to create an atmosphere that opened up opportunities for new initiatives and encouraged joint actions and programs, such as collecting and exchanging spiritual songs, sending three "evangelism teams" (one Asian, one African, and one German) to various countries, promoting the exchange of experiences in diaconal work, mutual visits by church members, including between Asia and Africa, etc.

After 10 years, at the consultation of representatives of the churches from Asia, Africa, and Germany in Mühlheim in 1988, the "cooperation" was expanded and a new executive committee was established, replacing the "working group" formed in Bethel in 1978 and consisting of three people from each continent, with the mission director acting as secretary. I was also asked to chair the Executive Committee until the 1993 General Assembly in Ramatea. From the outset, we never intended to expand or "internationalize" the UEM of 1972, but rather to create a new organization that would include all churches in Germany, Asia, and Africa that are historically connected to Barmen. For this reason, we called it a *community of churches on three continents united in mission.*

What hopes were associated with the founding of an international church community?

From the beginning, we never used the term "international community of churches," but rather a "community of churches on three continents." We deliberately avoided using the term "international" because we wanted to refer specifically to Germany, Asia, and Africa. The main hope in founding a church fellowship was to encourage the German churches affiliated with the UEM, especially the EKIR and the EKvW, to see and accept that the German churches are ready to enter into a fellowship as equal partners with the churches that have emerged from the work of the RMG in Asia and Africa, which are jointly called to mission in Africa, Asia, and Germany. The emphasis is on the communion of churches. This would be in line with the recommendations of New Delhi in 1961 and Mexico in 1963. In practical terms, this means replacing the UEM of 1972 and not "internationalizing" it. Only in a new framework, in a community of churches, can paternalism be overcome and equal cooperation in mission on the three continents be developed and united. We have understood that history in mission has brought the churches together and called them to fulfill the mission on the three continents together. At the same time, there is hope that the community of churches will help all members of the member churches to participate in the calling of the whole Church to proclaim the whole Gospel to the whole world. In other words, the whole Church must be missionary.

Have you noticed any resistance to the idea of the UEM? If so, from which side?

The resistance came in various forms. When I suggested in Ramateia that we should work together to find a new name for the community of churches, the German representatives appealed to keep the same abbreviation, UEM, "for the sake of the mission friends in Germany." They argued that a name change would cause them to lose the support of the "mission friends" in the congregations. Although I tried to appeal to them that this was a good opportunity to help all members in the congregations gain a holistic understanding of mission, they remained adamantly opposed. Realizing that there was no chance of getting a new name, and in order not to lose the opportunity to make progress and fall back into the old situation, I finally agreed to accept the name *Vereinte Evangelische Mission* (VEM or UEM) on the condition that it should be written in full **as United Evangelical Mission in Three Continents**. The addition of "in Three Continents" is intended to help people understand that this is no longer a mission from Germany to Asia and Africa, but a mission in the three continents, including Germany. I also expressed the hope that in the coming years a new name for the community of churches would be found to replace the old one.

The other form of resistance is the insistence that the establishment of the community of churches in the three continents should be subject to German law. I understand that the old UEM was subject to German law, but that the new organization should not be subject to it in the same way as the old UEM. Historically, the new organization was founded in Ramatea in 1993 and should be registered accordingly. This means that this year, 2018, we are celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Were there any complications in implementing the project?

The fact that the name remained the same, the office was still in Barmen, all organizational regulations were still subject to German law, etc., made it very difficult to achieve what we wanted. For example, if you keep the old name VEM, you cannot expect the understanding, awareness, and mission paradigm of the congregations in Germany to change. They still regard the new VEM in Three Continents as the same old RMG/VEM.

Another example: the 8-year term of office of the General Secretary is the same as that of the old mission directors. In all other ecumenical bodies such as the WCC, LWF, WAC, CCA, AACC, etc., the term of office of the General Secretary is 5 years. The reasons: in the rapidly developing and changing situation in the world, eight years is a long period of time; there is a temptation for a general secretary to become fed up and jaded or to view their job as a possession. If the incumbent is doing a good job, the five-year term can be extended for another five years. There is also a need for new leadership so that other countries and churches have the opportunity to propose candidates.

The fact that the new organization was founded by all the churches in Asia, Africa, and Germany should give all churches the opportunity to shape their new way of communicating and working together—and that is the organization—rather than just taking over the old one and making small changes according to the needs of the German partners.

What is your interim conclusion in assessing the current UEM? Is the UEM on the right track?

There is a need to read and write history together. An example: it is very important that all member churches agree that the UEM was founded on three continents in 1993 in Ramatea and not in 1996 in Bielefeld. Official delegates from all churches participated in the General Assembly in Ramatea, and the constitution was officially adopted. The 1996

assembly in Bielefeld was the first assembly held in accordance with the constitution, but that does not mean that the UEM was founded in Bielefeld.

Just as in Asia: in 1957, official delegates from the churches attended the conference, decided to establish a new organization, and adopted a constitution. The first General Assembly of the EACC (later CCA) in accordance with the constitution took place in Kuala Lumpur in 1960. However, the date of the founding of the EACC/CCA is officially set at 1957 in Parapat. The sixtieth anniversary of the EACC/CCA was celebrated in Yangon, Myanmar, in 2017.

The joint recognition of the founding of the VEM in Ramatea in 1993 will also confirm that the "UEM on three continents" is a new organization and not just a continuation of the old VEM or an "internationalization of the UEM." The refusal of VEM staff to acknowledge that 2018 is 25th anniversary of the UEM is further proof of how powerful UEM staff are over the churches, just like the old RMG staff.

Therefore, the UEM Board of Directors must be prepared to review history and, where necessary, reach a common understanding. Especially now that we are living in the fourth industrial revolution, churches must be sensitive to the challenges of the times. What does mission mean in this new era? And the most crucial factor for the future and usefulness of the UEM is whether all churches have a stronger sense of mission and are willing to work together in mission. If the UEM believes that nothing needs to be changed and things will continue as usual, the UEM could become redundant in the life of the churches.

Is the UEM a role model for others? If so, why?

In the early stages, when churches united by their missionary history came together to grapple with the question of how they could live and work together to advance the mission, the UEM was a good example. But as things have developed, I hesitate to say the same thing, because what the UEM is today was not what I personally dreamed of and imagined when I took the initiative in the early 1970s.

What are your visions and hopes for the future of the UEM?

Fellowship and communication between churches that have come into contact with each other through a shared missionary history can still be justified if the churches are simultaneously willing to review their involvement in many other ecumenical bodies. One

example: the HKBP is a member church of PGI, CCA, WCC, LWF, and VEM. It is high time to examine what these memberships mean for the future.

The most urgent demand is for all ecumenical bodies to encourage and help all churches to influence their countries to strive for justice and work for balance. In concrete terms, this means that those who collect a lot should not have too much, and those who collect little should not have too little. Redirecting as much as possible from the "wealthy" part to the "needy" part in every country, on every continent, and in the world is the urgent task of all ecumenical bodies, including the UEM.

Do you have a message for the UEM?

Yes, please read the past correctly and take the necessary measures to help all churches be more faithful to their calling in this new era of the fourth industrial revolution. In the 1970s, we tried to respond faithfully to the challenges of that time. Now, almost 50 years later, this generation is called to respond to Christ's call in the midst of this rapidly developing and changing world.

Ephorus e.m. Dr SAE Nababan, UEM Moderator (1996-2000)