

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ECUMENICAL
MOVEMENT IN MYANMAR

By

Khaw Thein

A Thesis Presented to:

The Faculty of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology
(SEAGST)

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Theology

The Divinity School, Silliman University, Dumaguete City Philippines

(Candidate's Resident School)

2002

ABSTRACT

This historical bibliographic research sought to dig out the roots and understand the development of the Ecumenical Movement in Myanmar in order to have a clear historical understanding of the Movement, and to be able to identify and analyze problems, and subsequently, offer recommendations to enable it to work, according the objectives upon which it was conceived.

This research seeks to discover the roots or springs of the ecumenical spirit in Myanmar, and to offer a descriptive analysis of how it sprang up and overcame the conflicts and divisions that plagued the fellowship of the Christian community. This research presents a history of the Ecumenical Movement in Myanmar and seeks to discover the historical context out of which arose the problems and conflicts between the various bodies in Myanmar. Subsequently, it asks whether these problems were abetted by socio-economic, political, cultural and tribal factors or were inherent in the way Christian missions in Myanmar were communicated and practiced by the different denominational missionaries.

This research attempts to discern the presence of the spirit of the Ecumenical Movement among the churches in Myanmar and to identify concrete expressions of it in terms of institutional organizations, relationships, and other ecumenical endeavors, and to identify problems the churches have

encountered, and the means they have proposed for solving them. And this research seeks to explore approaches the churches took to give expression to the one body of Christ, and to prescribe forms of ecumenical praxis that may deepen the spirit of oneness and unity that animate the life and ministry of the churches in Myanmar.

This research focuses on the historical events that happened in Myanmar churches within the period between 1800 and 2000. Particularly, the study looks into three basic areas, namely:

- (1) the historical background of Myanmar and Christianity from the beginning to 2000;
- (2) the history--- the roots or springs --- and the movement of the Myanmar Council of Churches from 1914 up to 2000;
- (3) the development of the Ecumenical Movement based on historical experiences or events that are relevant to the Myanmar Council of Churches.

The Myanmar Council of Churches was officially organized in 1914 by the different denominations and societies, namely: Baptist, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutheran, the Bible Society, the YMCA, and the YWCA. The main function of the Council is to serve as an ecumenical body that would coordinate all the member churches to work together as a unified force or voice, in delivering the Gospel (Good News) to the people of Myanmar.

Historical events and records have shown that through the 86 years of its existence from 1914 to 2000, the MCC, which is composed of 21 Regional Councils of Churches, has gone through difficulties, particularly involving inter-faith conflicts and pressures from a militarized government. However, in spite of all the problems, the Council has stood throughout these years. It certainly needs all the support and encouragement from all seekers who share the vision of its organizations and the spirit of ecumenism. Toward such support and encouragement, this researcher puts forth the following recommendations.

- (1) That opportunities for ecumenical apprenticeship be provided, not only to the clergy, but also to lay members who show potential for leadership;
- (2) That the MCC offer assistance in nation building to the government in a most prudent and circumspect manner, without political motivation or bias;
- (3) That the MCC explore other forms of learning that would foster better ecumenical unity among congregations, involving both the clergy and lay members;
- (4) That the Urban-Rural Mission (URM) program be strengthened, by empowering the people through its unified voice and continue to oversee the people's freedom;

- (5) That the MCC experiment with interdenominational practices through exchange of pulpits to have a more unified view about “Word” and “Sacrament;”
- (6) That the MCC foster inter-faith dialogue. This will substantiate the ecumenical claim that God is “not confined in the Bible and Christianity” but “God is in all things and with all humankind.”

Finally the writer hopes to discern a changed attitude in the MCC, perhaps, beginning with an appropriate approach toward understanding and cooperation with the Buddhist neighbors in creating a society in which justice, love, and compassion would prevail.

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