

REPORT

Melanesians, Indonesians, Australians in Dialogue

*MCC-CCI-ACC Consultation on Church and Society
Dhyana Pura, Bali, November 26-29, 1985.*

The tripartite consultation, held in Bali from November 26 to 29, 1985, was the result of 15 months of planning and negotiation between the Melanesian Council of Churches (MCC) and the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (CCI), with the support of the Australian Council of Churches (ACC). This is not to say that the meeting was the end of our short relationship; rather we believe it to be the beginning of many more consultations, dialogues, and visits, as a means to understand and respect each other as close neighbours. The churches of Papua New Guinea have had historical relationships with Australian and Pacific churches. We have also had some ties with churches in other Asian countries, but, sadly, we have had no formal ecumenical relationship with Indonesian churches. I found that the Roman Catholic church in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands has had more ties with the Catholic church in Indonesia, especially in East Timor and Irian Jaya, than any of us had realised.

Until about June, 1984, MCC was neither informed about the problems of border crossers from Irian Jaya, nor was it involved in extending humanitarian services to them, for which, at that time, we lacked resources. I was able to glean enough information about these issues to prepare a report for the Annual General Meeting of ACC in Melbourne. Most people at the meeting were interested in my report, but it was challenged by a former Deputy General Secretary of the (then) Council of Churches in Indonesia, Dr Wirakotan. As a result of our debate, our ACC friends suggested that consultation would bring mutual understanding and respect, and that joint study programmes would not only help us to know our situation better, but would provide churches outside Indonesia and Papua New Guinea with up-to-date information.

In August, 1984, accompanied by Revd Jim Baital, Chairman of MCC, I was invited to attend the first-ever MCC-CCI-ACC meeting. At this meeting, we agreed on the following points:

- (a) To foster closer relationships through mutual visits – attending each other's church synods and conferences, encouraging exchanges of social and cultural activities.
- (b) To seek to establish, where possible, joint-action programmes to help the border crossers.
- (c) To plan and prepare for a larger inter-church conference in 1985.

Between August, 1984, and November, 1985, we had seven follow-up meetings, both in Papua New Guinea and in Indonesia. These meetings helped to bring us closer together, in a very short time. Many church people, and members of the public, in Papua New Guinea are frightened of Indonesians, thinking that Jayapura, or other places in Indonesia, are unsafe to visit. I found these fears to be based on misconceptions and misunderstandings among our people, as Indonesians are very hospitable and friendly, and you can walk the streets without any fear.

The Bali Consultation

The Australian Council of Churches, as well as our Indonesian counterpart, took this meeting very seriously, because it was the first of its kind in the history of the two countries. While ACC takes a special interest in the relationships between Indonesian and Papua New Guinea churches, it does not see itself as a mediator, nor is its role in any way paternalistic. Seeing the importance of the bilateral ecumenical relationship between the two countries, ACC made it financially possible for MCC to send a representative group of delegates to the Bali meeting, but it left us completely free to use our own discretion as to how and where ACC funds were used, and what we do or say in matters relating to the refugee issue.

Australia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea are all important in this relationship, as we are close neighbours, and our mutual cooperation

in our dealings with each other should be correspondingly close. By the same token, the churches from the three countries agreed to involve themselves in helping to solve the problem of the border crossers in any ways they see fit, although ACC abides by its decision to assist *only through* MCC.

The meeting took place in one of Bali's choice locations, though beyond the reach of foreign tourists. Bishop Mastra of the Kristian Protestant church of Bali, and Mr Budhi, manager of the Dhyana Pura Christian Resort, and his staff, were very hospitable. I found the meeting itself to be open and friendly. We all expressed our disagreements, our fears, and our disappointments, freely, in a friendly and Christian spirit. There were no hard feelings among participants. Everyone played his or her role well, and everyone left feeling happy that we had successfully set out feet on the first step of our walk together towards the future. Some observers said that history had been made.

Every day, each of the three delegations presented papers on one of the following themes (the MCC speakers are mentioned in brackets):

1. General introduction to church and society (Walter Ataembo);
2. Hope and expectation of a modern society (Gagoa Gaigo);
3. Relationship with people of other faiths (Jim Baital),

each in the context of their own society, and under the general consultation theme "Moving Forward Together into the Future". At the end of the consultation, a joint communique was issued (the full text was published in *Catalyst* 16-1 (1986). It has since been ratified by all three participating Councils. The consultation resolved to form a Standing Committee to continue its work, to which each Council would send two delegates. MCC has authorised Revd Jim Baital (Lutheran), Fr Robert Lak (Catholic), and Bishop Gagoa Gaigo (United church) to represent it at these meetings, the first of which was held in Port Moresby on February 6-7, 1986. The communique stipulates that the Standing Committee facilitates, but does not replace, direct correspondence and negotiation between the three Councils themselves.

The process of tripartite dialogue, on which we have embarked, is part of our duty to the welfare, peace, and prosperity of this nation. We need the support of individual Christians, churches, and the government to enable us to do what we agreed to do.

Walter Ataembo, General Secretary,
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