

Report of

SOLIDARITY VISITS TO CAMBODIA, VIETNAM, BANGLADESH AND NEPAL

Affirming the mission of FTEAP, which is “to foster the ongoing development of contextual theological thought, education, and formation of Christian leaders in Asia and the Pacific,” and strengthening the national program, we visited four countries between March 18 and April 4, 2024. These visits were crucial in understanding these countries' unique challenges and needs and recommending them to the FTEAP Board for future support.

Christian communities in the visited countries face numerous hardships, including anti-conversion laws and Government restrictions. They also confront economic challenges in maintaining theological schools. In the Mekong regions and South Asian countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, formal theological schools have recently been established but need support. In other countries, churches are sustained by lay leadership training programs as formal theological schools have yet to start. Many schools struggle to meet the accreditation standards of ATESEA and Serampore, leading to a lack of ecumenical leadership formation. This solidarity visit to four countries was initiated to explore how FTEAP might accompany them. A few observations and recommendations are offered for our further deliberations.

1. Cambodia & Vietnam Visits – Reports, Observations and Recommendations (Date: March 18–23, Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Mint City)

Team Members: Dr. Wati Longchar and Rev. Jaehyoung Choi

Purpose of Visit: (a) To identify and meet students who plan to study at Union Theological Seminary, Philippines, (b) To listen to the stories of the challenges of theological education in Cambodia and Vietnam, and (c) To identify specific areas of where FTEAP might offer accompaniment.

Our visits to theological schools, meetings with faculty and students (both formally and informally), missionaries, NGO leaders, and church leaders were crucial in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the realities on the ground. This firsthand experience has provided invaluable insights for FTEAP's future actions.

a) Activities in Cambodia (March 18-21)

We organized two leadership training events on “Reading Bible for Social Transformation” for churches related to the Board of Ecumenical Christian Church in Cambodia: (i) The first training was organized in Phnom Penh city on March 19. Altogether 25 pastors attended the training. (ii) the second training was organized at Poudoh village, Kampot Province, on March 20. 35 pastors and lay leaders attended. Rev. Uy Dy, the Vice President of the Board of Ecumenical Christian Church, coordinated the program and interpreted it at all the sessions. This training program was

enriching and also painful as we listened to stories of pastors who are working at the grass-roots. All the participants expressed the need to receive such training to make their ministry effective in the changing context of Cambodia.

We visited three seminaries: (i) Cambodia Presbyterian Theological Institute (CPTI) – attended the chapel, and met with the president and some faculty members. The Institute offers a BTh and lay training programs, and the student enrolment is about 150. (ii) The Cambodia Methodist Bible School (CMBS) is a small Bible College with 35 students. We met Rev. Prak Vuthy, principal of CMBS, and Rev. Andrew Lee, a missionary of Global Ministries, UMC, serving in Cambodia as the country coordinator. (iii) The Phnom Penh Bible School – although we could not meet with Mr. Son Vuthy, the principal of PPBS and students, we did meet Mr. Joseph Martin (a missionary teacher from the US) and the Academic Dean. The school offers a BTh and MA in Practical Theology accredited by ATA. PPBS is the oldest interdenominational theological school, and the school plans to upgrade and offer an MA/MTh program in the future. The conversations were valuable in establishing relationships with them.

Participants of Contextual Bible Reading in Cambodia



We also met Rev. Eric Kwon, a missionary from the Presbyterian Church in Korea serving as an adjunct faculty member of the Cambodia Presbyterian Theological Institute (CPTI). He gave us insightful information about the present state of theological education in Cambodia. He mentioned that all mission agencies should prioritize the development of local leadership as Christian activities are getting more stringent year by year due to government policy.

We felt a great need for ecumenical leadership formation. The churches are growing, and there is a dire need for leadership development, especially ecumenical leadership formation. The church leaders are also eager to learn how to interpret the Word of God to make their preaching more relevant in the contemporary context, but many cannot go for theological studies due to economic constraints and lack of formal theological schools. The churches, divided on the denominational lines, emphasize denominational church growth at the expense of ecumenical formation and depend on mission agencies. There is a lack of cooperation among missionaries due to many factors. Some pastors are paid very little, and many are volunteer workers. The Kambochea

Christian Council (KCC) is defunct now due to a leadership crisis, financial constraints, and property disputes.

While there are a few denominational theological schools, most theological teachers are missionaries with various degrees of familiarity with the context. The enrolment in theological schools is not encouraging due to the lack of job avenues and salaries. Some young people expressed their desire to pursue theological studies, but they are hesitant to go for theological studies due to uncertain placement and low salaries. We were told that pastors' leadership training, contextual reading of the Bible, and skill development courses for income generation are more attractive to church leaders. Some theological teachers even suggested that developing theological curricula geared toward contextual needs, especially focusing on economic sustainability and Christian economic enterprise, would be more relevant.

b) Activities in Vietnam (Date: March 22-23 – Ho Chi Min City)

We were hosted by Rev. Dung Nguyen, the Pastor of Justified Baptist Church. On the morning of March 22, we conducted two sessions on Contextual Bible Reading at the Justified Baptist Church. There were 16 participants. In the afternoon, we visited the space where Rev. Nguyen plans to start a theological extension program for rural church leaders and an NGO center involved in medical ministry with the support of an NGO in the US. Compared to Cambodia, Christian activities in Vietnam are much more restricted. Missionary activities are prohibited, and theological institutions cannot be open without Government registration.

Due to time constraints, we could not visit any theological schools and gather information about theological education in Vietnam. However, we were privileged to meet Revds. Jonathan and Terah Park, missionaries of Global Ministries, UMC, serving in Southeast Asia (V) where Jonathan serves as country director, along with four key church leaders, one of whom leads Christian education. We have established contact and are conversing with them about future activities.

Observations

- Although the Board of Cambodia Christian Church (BCCC) and Justified Baptist Church in Ho Chi Min City are related to the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), the BCCC is not an interdenominational church. The church is supported by the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK), and the Justified Baptist Church is a small independent church. There is a need to relate with a national organization to form a stronger association.

- People are very enthusiastic to learn new interpretations of the Bible but cannot relate to social issues due to the lack of social awareness.

Participants of Leadership Training in Vietnam

Meeting with Church Leaders in Vietnam



- Cambodia has yet to identify students to study at BIT, Thailand, UTS, and the Philippines. It appears that they will not be able to identify the students for this year. We have received one application from Vietnam, and we are in touch with the host institution.

Recommendations

- Encourage and support contextual reading of the Bible from an ecumenical perspective. Along with the introduction of contextual Bible reading methods, basic tools of social analysis will be helpful in both countries. FTEAP can support ecumenical partners like PTCA, Mekong Ecumenical Forum, etc., to help them in such programs. A more structured course will be more beneficial for the pastors.
- While we can still provide scholarships to students at BIT and UTS for faculty development, it will be more beneficial to provide scholarships to deserving students at CPTI, CMBS, and PPBS. We need more conversations on this matter with those colleges.
- One possibility would be for FTEAP to facilitate a National consultation on theological education in partnership with the Evangelical Fellowship in Cambodia (EFC) to include an appropriate organization in Vietnam to help in forming a National consortium for higher theological education.

Jay's observations

- Need to Build Relationships with Church Leaders and Councils:** While I appreciate the hospitality extended to us by Rev. Uy Dy and Rev. Nguyen, it is notable that their ministries are not connected to wider ecumenical church fellowships or councils in the two countries. A primary task for the Leadership Development Initiative in the Mekong region is to identify any existing ecumenical fellowships and establish relationships with them. For example, during our visit, we learned about the Evangelical Fellowship in Cambodia (EFC). It would be beneficial for Wati to introduce FTEAP and strengthen relationships through educational programs tailored to their needs.
- Need to Develop Ecumenical Leaders:** The theological education in Cambodia and Vietnam heavily relies on missionaries, thus not only making them financially dependent

but also limiting their exposure to denominational theologies. It appears vital to make a specific, effective, and long-term investment in developing Christian leaders who are ecumenically oriented with context-driven theology.

- c) **On Scholarships:** It is evident that many young individuals are interested in theological education but are concerned about their livelihoods at the same time. This underscores the importance of providing scholarships that cover tuition and stipends during their studies.
- d) **On School Selection:** Further discussion seems necessary regarding where to send selected students for their studies. Currently, Bangkok Institute of Theology (BIT) and Union Theological Seminary, Philippines (UTS-Phil) are on our list. In Ho Chi Minh City, Jonathan, Methodist missionaries, and local leaders mentioned the possibility of grants for studying at Union University in California (UUC), an online school based in California run by Vietnamese Americans, which offers a Doctor of Ministry degree course. Alongside sending students to BIT and UTS, it might be worth exploring currently available options more thoroughly. The key is to ascertain whether these schools espouse ecumenical theology.
- e) **Gratitude:** I would like to thank the executive committee members and the chair for approving my participation in the trip. I became interested in visiting Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City after reading Wati's report on the Leadership Development Initiative in the Mekong Region, which was prepared for the last executive committee meeting. Despite the tight schedules in both cities and the extremely hot weather, Wati and I successfully completed all the seminars and meetings together.

2. **Bangladesh visit– Reports, Observations, and Recommendations** (Date March 31-April 1, 2024 – Dhaka)

Team Members: (a) FTEAP: Dr. Wati Longchar. (b) Senate of Serampore team: Dr. Limatula Longkumer (Registrar), Dr. Aswathy John (Dean/Research) and Dr. Rodin Mawia Ralte (Dean, Extension Studies)

Purpose of Visit: (a) To listen to the voices of theological educators in Bangladesh (b) To discuss ways to strengthen higher theological education in Bangladesh in partnership with the Senate of Serampore College (Uni), and (c) To assess the impact of FTEAP support to St. Andrew Theological Seminary, Dhaka.

The Current State of Theological Education

The Christian population in Bangladesh is about 0.30% (roughly 500,000 Christians). Despite the challenges, there are a few theological seminaries and leadership training centers. The College of Christian Theology, Bangladesh (CCTB) is the leading institution with about 130 students (both on-campus and off-campus). It is an interdenominational Bible College that offers BTh, MDiv and

certificate courses accredited by ATA. However, the total number of regular MDiv students is less than ten. Bangladesh has no doctoral degree holders and fewer than ten MTh degree holders. Many young people are not interested in pursuing higher theological studies due to fewer job opportunities and incentives. Many churches are dependent on mission support. We hope this can be changed with more collaborative ecumenical accompaniment and more financial giving from churches. All theological colleges face a shortage of qualified teachers, limited Bengali books in the library, financial constraints, and a decline in student admissions. Many young people are not interested in theological studies and have no enthusiastic support for theological formation from the church, etc. However, we are confident that these challenges can be overcome with the collective efforts of all stakeholders.

With Theological Teachers and Church Leaders in Bangladesh and the Senate of Serampore College Officers



Serampore and ATESEA are associated with St. Andrew Theological Seminary, Dhaka. FTEAP has also been supporting St. Andrew. Although there are few students, the Seminary offers a B.Th and BCS Senate programs. Presently, there are only 3 B.Th students on campus and around 20 BCS students (Bachelor of Christian Study – an extension program of Serampore for lay leaders). Most faculty members do not meet the Senate of Serampore College (and ATESEA) qualification standards for teaching in a B.Th college. All faculty members, including the principal, are part-time teachers, and the principal is also involved in pastoral ministry. Notably, all B.Th students belong to non-Bengali tribal communities, though the medium of instruction is Bengali. Additionally, there are no female students enrolled. Moreover, the college's current location is limiting, necessitating the acquisition of a separate campus to sustain substantial growth. Given the Senate's policies, the college lacks the qualified faculty and library to offer B.Th courses. FTEAP support also needs to be reviewed if the seminary is not running a regular degree program.

The Meetings and Observations (recorded by Dr. Ralte)

The meeting was coordinated by St. Andrew Theological Seminary, Dhaka, with 17 theological educators from 4 seminaries and church leaders attending the meeting. Rev. David Das, the General Secretary of NCC, Bangladesh, highlighted the present state of theological education in the country. Some observations are:

- The sponsoring churches must demonstrate greater commitment to the college's development by increasing financial support and encouraging more student enrollment. Currently, the churches' dedication to the college's growth appears insufficient.
- FTEAP can facilitate, in collaboration with Serampore, the formation of a national structure for theological education to offer BD/MDiv in Bangladesh to upgrade to the MTh level after ten years.
- Additionally, it was observed that the inclusion of job-oriented or skill-focused courses along with foundational courses in theology may be encouraged to empower students economically. This will enable pastors to earn income to support their families. As of today, the pastors' salaries are not adequate to support their families.

Recommendations

- Support the national BD/MDiv (or MTh) program instead of supporting an individual theological college like St. Andrew Theological College.
- The Senate of Serampore College, through BTESSC, can assist in Bengali textbook production and provide visiting professors. The college can provide accommodation and cater to their needs during their stay.
- A national theological education consultation can be organized by NCC Bangladesh and Bangladesh Theological Association, representing all theological colleges and church leaders to plan for a national theological consortium for higher theological education in Bangladesh.

3. Nepal Visit – Reports, Observations and Recommendations (Date 2-4 April 2024 – Visited Kathmandu)

Team Members: (a) FTEAP: Dr. Wati Longchar. (b) Senate of Serampore team: Dr. Limatula Longkumer (Registrar), Dr. Aswathy John (Dean/ Research), and Dr. Rodin Mawia Ralte (Dean, Extension Studies).

Special invitee: Dr. Becky Shenton (Visiting Professor from ABC. She serves as Director of Program of AGST-NP)

Aims & Objectives: To foster stronger theological education programs in Nepal in partnership with the Senate of Serampore College (Uni).

Activities: The team visited two colleges and the Central Library in Kathmandu city: (a) Nepal Theological College, sponsored by Assembly of God, is the largest theological college. The total number of students enrolment is 77 this academic year in the BTh and MDiv programs (English) accredited by ATA. NTC also offers diploma courses in Nepali. The college has 7000 books. (b) Reformed Presbyterian Seminary – The college is in a rented building and offers B. Th courses in Nepali accredited by ATA. Currently, there are 40 students. They have a small library. The college also offers a diploma course in Music. (c) Central Library was developed by the Association of Theological Education in Nepal (ATEN) in 2004. It began when a few theological colleges under the leadership of Dr. Ramesh Khatri started the BD program of the Senate of Serampore College but was discontinued after two years due to a lack of students, teachers, and infrastructure. However, the library continues to function today as a national library. The library was developed with the support of the Solidarity Fund of (PTE)ETE/WCC (FTEAP also contributed to ETE for the South Asia Solidarity Fund project). The library now has more than 25,000 volumes in English and about 3000 books in Nepali language. ATEN receives annual membership from 25 Institutions and more than 400 individual scholars. The visits gave an overall picture of theological education in Nepal.

The next day (April 3), the team member met the Asia Graduate School of Theology - Nepal (AGST-NP) to strategize future partnerships. 15 representatives from 7 AGST-NP member colleges in and around Kathmandu attended the meeting. They are:

1. Reformed Presbyterian Seminary
2. Nepal Evangelical Holiness Theological Seminary
3. Nepal Theological College
4. Nepal Presbyterian Theological Seminary
5. Nepal Methodist Theological Seminary
6. Nepal Ebenezer Theological Seminary
7. Nepal Baptist College

Along with the sharing of the current state of theological education in Nepal by Dr. B.K. Sharma and Rev. Amit Karthik, and the Senate of Serampore College officers shared their programs and possible areas of partnership. Currently, AGST-NP offers an MTh degree in two disciplines: (a) Practical/Pastoral Theology and (b) Missiology (Inter-cultural Mission studies) with the support of part-time professors from India, the US, and South Korea.

In Nepal, there are two types of theological schools: (a) Denominational sponsored colleges – almost all the major denominations have one or more theological schools. (b) Individual-sponsored colleges – there are about 25 theological schools/training centers that were started by individuals in partnership with mission agencies. Many of these schools run for a few years and are subsequently closed down. We feel that FTEAP and Serampore could partner with AGST-NP since it is a national program that started five years ago, and their MTh program is accredited by ATA.

Compared to Cambodia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh, Nepal appears to be in a better position. It is observed that Nepal will be in a position to help Bhutan in the near future.

Meeting with Principals and Deans of Theological Colleges in Nepal



Leadership Team of the Senate of Serampore College (Uni)



Observations (recorded by Dr. Aswathy John)

1. Except for three schools, all seminaries are in rented buildings, and they have very little financial resources to buy the land and build buildings.
2. Most students are from poor financial backgrounds and need financial assistance.
3. Except for a few students, the majority are doing certificate or diploma courses. Many people are not interested in higher studies because salaries are poor and cannot meet the needs of their families.
4. The AGST-NP-related colleges are accredited by ATA, and others are independent schools unrelated to theological networks.
5. Some of them wish to affiliate with Serampore but cannot meet Serampore affiliation criteria.
6. The colleges don't have trained librarians, and their library collections are very poor.
7. The ATEN-sponsored library has adequate facilities and books for the BD/MDiv program. However, the library needs improvement before an MTh program can be offered.
8. Faculty needs higher education –Nepal has three doctoral degree holders. They are all full-time workers in their own denominational colleges and are not able to give adequate time for the MTh program.
9. Most of the colleges are focusing on church planting.
10. Faculty needs to be encouraged to pursue higher education.

Dr. Becky Shenton's observation (ABC missionary serving as program director of AGTS-NP was invited to the meeting and she made the following observations)

1. FTEAP & Serampore working through AGST-NP is a good way to accomplish the interdenominational goals. (AGST-NP leaders want more interdenominational collaboration, but denominational leaders do not favor this for many reasons).
2. The AGST-NP consortium may also be able to strengthen relationships between individual colleges, such as the library training programs for the librarians. Library training for librarians would be very helpful.
3. Several seminaries have guest rooms and could easily host visiting lecturers. But the travel and compensation of visiting faculty needs to be taken care of.
4. AGST-NP will need the support of missionary teachers for at least ten years. Serampore and FTEAP can support visiting professors from Serampore-affiliated colleges on a regular basis to bring an ecumenical perspective.
5. Support for a few graduates of AGST-NP to pursue their Doctoral studies under the Serampore Research Centre and other ecumenical institutions in Asia would do much to strengthen theological education.

Recommendations

1. Serampore to support ATEN library by providing publications and connecting with ISPCK and CLS.
2. Serampore is requested to identify visiting professors (at least one each semester) from Serampore-related colleges to teach in AGST-NP and pay for their travels. FTEAP is requested to pay an honorarium of \$500/- per month (2 months). The AGST-NP will provide free housing.
3. AGST-NP, in partnership with the Senate, could organize library training, and FTEAP is requested to support the program. A two-week training program will be beneficial.
4. A national consultation on “Strengthening Theological Education in Nepal: Problems, Challenges, and Prospects” to strategize about ten-year leadership development programs in Nepal. Inviting Nepali scholars from India and ecumenical partners like EMW, Germany, Serampore, and ATESEA will enrich the conversation for future planning. In partnership with AGST-NP, FTEAP is requested to provide financial and logistical support.

Needs further clarity from the Board

1. How do we strengthen undergraduate programs in those countries affirming ecumenical values? One of the Board's recommendations was to strengthen national theological associations to support ecumenical leadership formation programs with an aim to support advanced theological research centers for faculty development, especially in countries like the Mekong region, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Timor Leste, Mongolia, etc. We often assume that “Faculty Development” means graduate studies with high academic research and quality. As you will see in the report, the reality is different. Some countries are struggling even to run basic theological degree programs. We need to study the problems

and challenges of these countries and take appropriate actions to help develop contextually relevant theological education.

2. Transfer of grants is becoming more difficult in many Asian countries. In some countries, Christian activities are not allowed, and bank accounts cannot be opened in the name of a Christian organization/institution. In some countries, bank accounts have been frozen/withdrawn, and in some countries, we cannot transfer money due to economic embargo, etc. How do we work in such a context, especially financial transactions?
3. The needs and challenges in these countries are enormous. We need to collaborate with stronger regional/national theological associations and mission partners like the Asia-Pacific Forum, EMW, Germany, ETE/WCC, CCA, PTCA, AFTM, etc. After careful research on the needs of those countries, a strategic planning meeting to develop a support mechanism will be necessary.

Reported by
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