

ASPAC

ZONE



AUS	Australia, New Zealand, Thailand & Myanmar
BGD	Bangladesh
IDE	Indonesia
IDJ	Indonesia
IDR	Indonesia
IDT	Indonesia
INC	India
INE	India
ING	India
INH	India
INM	India
JPN	Japan
KOR	South Korea
PHC	Philippines
PHN	Philippines
PHS	Philippines
PNG	Papua New Guinea
SIN	Mainland China, Hongkong, Macau & Taiwan
TLS	Timor Leste
VIE	Vietnam

HOPES AND CONCERNS: ASPAC

1. Introduction

After six years of being a Zonal Coordinator for the Asia-Pacific Zone (ASPAC), what do I understand of the SVD life, mission and its future? Within its vast territory and geographical terrain of oceans and islands, continents and sub-continents, the Asia Pacific Region is known for its ancient civilizations and long histories. It is truly a melting pot of races and cultures. More than 60% of the world's population inhabits this part of the globe. This region is known for its youthfulness and vitality. Three important characteristics mark this region as a unique combination of contrasts, namely, its cultures, religions and poverty. Amazing and disturbing contradictions coexist in this zone. It is known for its racial and linguistic variety; rural and urban mixture; economically rich and poor contrasts. Almost all the world religions were born in Asia and they are still very active and alive and influence the people in their everyday life. Everything from simple religious piety to outstanding religious intolerance is visible in the everyday life of the people. Several political ideologies shape the life of the people. The zone is marked by large territories of land and hundreds of islands.

In this vast geographical region of the globe, the presence of the SVDs is minuscule but it is signi-

ficant and without it this region and the Society would be much poorer, not in an economic sense but in all other dimensions of our SVD Society, its mission, membership and spirituality.

Before we go further, let us situate ourselves in the socio-political life of this region.

2. Socio-Political Situation

This region is also experiencing political, ideological, religious and ethnic conflicts in different places. These include ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan; between South and North Korea; between Taiwan and China; and within the Philippines with Muslim separatists, where deep-rooted issues of sovereignty and self-determination are at the core of the problem. Insurgency, violence, and poverty in various places in Asia have resulted in the increasing migration of people, with internally displaced people and refugees, both in economic and political senses.

As in many other parts of the world, Asia is also experiencing a shift of population by migration from rural to urban areas, from poor to emerging economies in the South, from countries of the South to countries of the North. In 2017, it is estimated, there are 244 million international migrants and 65 million refugees. Today, one

in fifty people on earth are living outside their home countries, while an estimated 25 million have been forcibly displaced within their own countries. A vulnerable economic situation in Asia, conflict between neighboring countries, and human right violations seem to be the most important factors in this migration.

Another important concern in this region is the environmental destruction. Since most Asian and Pacific countries are still dependent on primary economic activities, this pressure is creating over-exploitation and depletion of land, water, forest and other ecosystems. The existence of mass poverty is accelerating the destruction of natural resources.

Regarding issues of justice in Asia, the human rights issues still remain the priority of the people here. As a result of unjust practices, many ordinary people have been unnecessarily subjected to threat, torture, imprisonment and loss of life, such as in the Philippines, Pakistan and in India where many of the Church's workers, pastors and journalists have been intimidated and sometimes killed by the military's atrocities and by other government agencies.

3. SVD Presence in this Zone

The Society of the Divine Word spread to this part of the world very quickly from its very foundation in 1875. There are several provinces in the zone which have celebrated the centenary of their presence in their respective countries. SVD missionary service in China began in 1882, in

PNG in 1896, in the Philippines in 1909, and in Indonesia in 1913. Gradually we spread to many other countries in the zone. Today, there are 19 SVD provinces and regions in the ASPAC Zone. The Society decided to expand its presence in Myanmar and Bangladesh in 2018.

There are a variety of missionary involvements of the SVDs. Many confreres are involved in the ministry of social communications, justice and peace issues, biblical and retreat apostolates, family and migrant ministries. In short, we can say that pastoral care, education, JPIC related activities, communication and formation dominate the SVD presence. Working among the tribals and indigenous people is a special concern in the zone especially in Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, India and in Taiwan.

4. Unique Characteristics

Indeed, the ASPAC Zone has now become a primary source of missionaries in the SVD. In recent years more than two-thirds of those receiving first assignments in the Society have come from ASPAC. Of these, about 53 per cent received first assignments outside their home countries. Today, there are some 800 Asian missionaries working outside of their home countries in Europe, the US, Latin America, Africa and other parts of Asia.

The ASPAC Zone has six major universities, having their presence in Papua New Guinea, Japan, the Philippines and Indonesia. Hence we have a

coordinator for the universities. The Asia Pacific region is also a major mission territory where all major religions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam are very active and alive. Therefore, the zone is required to be engaged in research on mission and education. To fulfill this dimension of our concern we have Mission, Education and Research (MER) coordination.

5. Implementation of the XVII General Chapter's Resolutions and Recommendations

After the completion of the general chapter in July 2012, the first one and half years were spent in prioritizing and preparing the vision, mission and action plan of the Congregational Directions by each province and region in the ASPAC Zone. The implementation of the action plan of the vision and mission according to the four Characteristic Dimensions of our Society needs further coordination and collaboration.

Though the ASPAC Zone has the largest number of young confreres, yet, the aging SVD population is increasing. To keep up the youthfulness of the Society in the zone requires a concerted vocation promotion to our Society. Those young people who join our Society must be given foundational formation about our Society and also a deep theological and experiential spiritual formation to face the challenges of the emerging world. Formation programs are constantly to be reviewed and updated in order to be relevant to changing circumstances and times.

6. Historical Origin of the Zonal Structure in the Society and Its Functioning Today

It was around the mid-1970s that the zones began to develop in the Society. In this regard the SVD was really just following a trend in the Church after Vatican II, whereby Episcopal Conferences and conferences of religious in the same geographical region came together for greater collaboration, coordination and collegial leadership. What is significant about the zones is that they emerged from the grassroots and were not imposed from above.

A few provincials of Asia and Oceania and a limited number of delegates assembled in Tagaytay in December 1979 and discussed the formation of an Asia-Pacific Zone for the Society of the Divine Word. This gathering met with such widespread approval that similar ones were very much recommended for the future.

The reasons for this new development can be traced back to the missionary objectives and tasks of the Society, namely: To search for common strategies for the inculturation of our lives as religious, for the process of formation and the different apostolates, within a specific geographical and cultural context.

To foster mutual cooperation among the provinces and regions in areas of common interest.

To share concerns and programs of actions in the context of the local Churches within a particular continent.

To facilitate good communication to and from the generalate, the provinces, and regions.

The zonal structure has existed in the Society for about forty years. But if we ask a question about whether the above objectives are being progressively realized, we may say, “not very much”. While it is true that the zonal structure is a platform for the provincials and regionals to come together to share information about their respective province and region, many other objectives of the zone are still to be realized. There is an urgent need for a restructuring of the zonal functioning with regard to the work of Area Coordinators and province/region coordinators. The financial aspect of the zonal gatherings in proportion to the results is often questioned by the confreres in the PRMs. The general administration must take some serious steps towards the effective functioning of the zonal structure regarding its objectives.

Our experience is that the subzone of the Philippines, Indonesia and India work very well according to the objectives of the zonal vision. Due to cultural, historical and geographical reasons it is very difficult for the provinces in East Asia such as China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan, as well as the provinces in the Pacific, such as PNG and Australia, to work as subzones.

7. Major Concerns

The present SVD leadership team at the generalate chose the motto “*Inter Gentes* – Putting the

Last First” to give a direction to its leadership and administration. It emphasized that we, SVD missionaries have to come closer to the people and get involved in the joys and sorrows of their life. It has been also pointing out that our presence is vital to the people of the margins and also how much the Church needs those at the margins. This vision is expressed by the leadership team by using the term “*Inter Gentes*” to emphasize that we, as missionaries, should live among and be close to the people and work with the people.

To realize this vision of the general leadership, it is very important to revitalize, to motivate and animate our confreres in the provinces and regions of the zone. A lot is done in the provinces and regions, but much more is yet to be done.

The post-modern, post-truth and new-age culture is very much affecting our members. Comfort and consumeristic culture and individualism are slowly seeping into our life-style. To face this challenge and to be a witnessing community, spiritual animation, through recollections, retreats and seminars, must be promoted.

Though most of our provinces and regions are multicultural in nature, building an intercultural community is a process and it involves a lot of sacrifice and motivation towards a high goal of mission commitment. Due to its political situation, India is not able to make their communities international. Lately, Indonesia has opened its door to others. Efforts are being

made to find ways to make these communities international.

Formation of young confreres is another major concern in the zone. Since this zone is characterized by sending missionaries to other zones,

Amazing and disturbing contradictions coexist in this zone.

promotion of vocations is vital. Dwindling of vocations is marked in many sub-zones. Hence vocation promotion will be a major concern for the future. Giving proper and adequate formation by reading into the signs of the time

is very vital. Many formation houses are in this zone. Training an adequate number of skilled formators will be a big challenge for the zone.

Though the ASPAC Zone has a good number of brothers, their number is reducing. Due to cultural and religious bias, the brothers in the Society feel that much more could be done to empower them. In the future we need a continuous recruitment process and a good formation of our brother candidates.

Aging confreres are increasing in the zone. Looking after their needs and giving proper health facilities have become major concerns for the provinces in the zone. Financial self-sufficiency

and creative use of resources with proper planning is also very important for the zone.

8. The Future

The ASPAC Zone is extremely large with much complexity and variety. Zonal Assemblies play an important role to get acquainted with each other and to exchange ideas. But real mutual help and solidarity between the provinces and regions are not happening much. We need to find a new structure to revitalize the coordination between Area Coordinators and province/region coordinators of four Characteristic Dimensions and formation. Our universities need young and qualified confreres. With the decreasing of religious vocations, it is becoming difficult to find suitable and committed confreres for this ministry. An exchange of professors and formators between sub-zones is still a far off dream due to financial and other constraints. Deepening the spiritual heritage of our Society and handing it over to the young generation in the post-modern, post-truth and new age world is a big challenge for the future. It is believed that the forthcoming XVIII general chapter with its vision, *“The Love of Christ Impels Us”: Rooted in the Word, Committed to His Mission* will deliberate on the above points and may give some concrete direction to face the challenges of the future.

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