Support of the Indigenous Peoples to Recover Their Rights and Autonomy

Since the beginning of its missions in 1865, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) has rooted the Christian faith and gospel in the tribes of the indigenous peoples, living and thriving with them. The PCT has witnessed to its Confession of Faith both in both Taiwan and the ecumenical movement that the church is “rooted in this land, identifying with all its inhabitants, and through love and suffering becoming the sign of hope”. We believe strongly that respecting the history and cultures of the indigenous peoples as subjects instead of treating them as objects is key to affirming Taiwan as the subject of history. Taiwan must build a solid foundation around the indigenous peoples’ understanding of the human being and the land as sacred and indivisible to create a new vision that embraces other cultural influences and universal values so that the Taiwanese people will be the sovereign over Taiwan.

Looking back on the missions to the indigenous peoples, the PCT began with itinerant preaching in tribal areas and the translation of the Bible into their languages. In order to train indigenous preachers, Yu-shan Theological College and Seminary was founded in 1946 and is still the only theological institution specifically aimed at training indigenous preachers. In 1980s, the PCT participated in two major campaigns: “Give My Land Back” and “Give My Mother Tongue Back”. In 1987, it issued a statement called the “Common Statement of the 1987 PCT Indigenous Mission Consultation”, saying “we affirm that it is the church’s basic responsibility to recover the autonomy and dignity of the indigenous people and to uphold social justice and to fight for the protection of basic survival rights to be written into the law.” In the 1989 36th General Assembly, it resolved that the term “mountain people” should be changed to “indigenous people”. On May 21, it issued 1992, the “Common Statement on the Fight for Constitutional Indigenous Article.” It adopted an Open Letter to President Lee: Against KMT’s Constitutional Mountain People Article.” In 2010, “Statement of the PCT National Meeting” reiterated that “we respect and protect Taiwan’s diverse tribes and peoples’ cultures and mother tongues and support autonomy according to the self-will of the Taiwanese indigenous peoples”.

However, when we reexamine the indigenous peoples’ mission, we realize that we have made progress in recovering tribal languages and traditional territories and in protecting and raising awareness of their autonomy. However, there remain many instances when the gospel enters the tribes, the cultural artifacts and rituals are arbitrarily deemed evil. These are pejorative concepts and activities. They continue to hurt many indigenous peoples. Through theological reflection, we repent of these mistakes and confess our sins to the nation and to the indigenous peoples.

On August 1st this year, we were pleased that President Tsai apologized to the indigenous peoples and promised to embark on a national process for transitional justice and acknowledged indigenous peoples as the real masters of this land. However, this is just the first step. We appeal to all NGOs and other churches also to monitor governmental policies and to put transitional justice into action. We appeal to the President Tsai’s government to proceed according to the guidelines set by the UN in 2010. We also call on all local churches to strive together for transitional justice and to build a society full of love and justice.

The Reformed tradition, to which the PCT belongs, has traditionally upheld “seeking justice” as a top value. This implies that faith cannot be confined to the satisfaction of subjective personal spiritual needs. Instead, faith should be practiced in the public domain in accordance with the demands of the sovereignty and justice of God. Over the years, the Taiwanese society has shown great interest and expectation for “fairness and justice”. The power of the people is being awakened. There are strong calls in the society for transitional justice, especially around recovering the long-deprived rights of the indigenous peoples. The PCT has resolved to stand with all the indigenous peoples and to commit itself to the huge task of transitional justice with a single-minded determination.

We believe that justice and reconciliation are the two sides of the same coin and therefore are indivisible. The opposite side of reconciliation is “injustice”. The goal of transitional justice is in support of peace and reconciliation. Therefore, we also believe that reconciliation is not “false peacefulness”. It is not the seeking of “harmony on the surface” while “burying injustice in the real world”. All kinds of injustices should be dealt with in the search of an ideal reconciliation. In other words, the seeking of justice and reconciliation necessitates a real confrontation with “powerful structures of injustices”. Throughout history, the misuse of power is the biggest source of all kinds of corruption and injustice. If we fail to confront the misuse of power, the Taiwanese society will be unable to stride forward for a future with fairness and justice.

Therefore, the PCT will not accept any kind of process that uses the name of religion to rationalize “reconciliation of peoples” without first seeking transitional justice. This approach denigrates religious rituals like “cheap grace” and is actually contradictory to Christian faith. We hope that real Christian faith can become the foundation of transitional justice with regard to the indigenous peoples.

In our reflection, we expect the churches to strive internally on:

1. Respecting the value of each tribe, changing from a model of “giving” to a model of sharing, mutual help, learning from one another in partnership with the indigenous peoples;
2. Practicing the ideal of “name rectification” by accepting the original names of each tribe and spelling names of people and places in Romanized characters;
3. Learning from the wisdom of the indigenous peoples with regard to the land and the sea, in order to practice the “care of God’s creation”, which is the PCT’s fifth dimension of holistic mission;
4. Reflecting continuously on the relationship between Gospel and Culture for a fuller Christian living;
5. Sharing the resources of the church with those indigenous people who left their tribes for the city so that their life may be cared for;
6. Advocating the “decolonization” of theological education.

We are also willing to strive with the indigenous peoples in the Taiwanese society by:

1. Advocating legislation concerning the “autonomy of indigenous peoples” and their rights in accordance with the spirit of the “UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People”, “Additional Article 10 of the Constitution” and the “Indigenous Peoples Basic Law”;
2. Advocating that during the compulsory education age the curriculum will treat indigenous people as subjects in the areas of history, culture, and the use of mother tongue of each tribe;
3. Consolidating the education of governmental officials in charge of indigenous peoples’ affairs;
4. Advocating the use of tribal names of people, land, tribes and streets in their traditional territories;
5. Protecting the traditional land and natural resources of the indigenous peoples against damaging development plans by the government and business corporations;
6. Using the name “Taiwanese Indigenous” as a common name, replacing the dividing terms of “mountainous indigenous” and “plain indigenous”;
7. Implementing transitional justice in search of truth and reconciliation.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
 righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
 and righteousness will look down from the sky.” (Psalm 85:10-11)

“For the Lord will comfort Zion;
 he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
 her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
 thanksgiving and the voice of song.” (Isaiah 51:3)

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