

MENNONITE HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN INDONESIA

Stefanus Christian Haryono

HISTORY

First of all, I want to highlight that Mennonites in Indonesia are divided in three synods and each has its own historical background. The three Mennonite synods are:

1. ***Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa (GITJ)*** = The Evangelical Javanese Church (65, 000 members)
2. ***Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (GKMI)*** = The Muria Indonesia Christian Church (16, 302 members)
3. ***Jemaat Kristen Indonesia (JKI)*** = Indonesian Christian Churches (6, 500 members)

Secondly, in discussing Mennonites in Indonesia, we cannot ignore the period of imperialism of the Dutch in Indonesia, starting 350 years ago and lasting until the day of independence on August 17, 1945. Pieter Jansz, the first Dutch Mennonite and his family came to Indonesia in July 1851. They lived in Jepara, Muria peninsula in Java. He spent a lot of his time and energy translating the Bible into Javanese, and because of this work, Pieter Jansz received “the honor of knighthood from the Dutch crown.”¹ His colleagues, H. C. Klinkert who came to Indonesia 5 years later translated the Bible into “low-Malay, the language used by Indonesian Chinese throughout western Indonesia.”² Pieter Jansz had a lot of challenges in reaching the Javanese, and in converting them to Christianity. “After serving and evangelizing in Jepara for 30 years, Jansz retired from active mission service to the congregation and school that he had established in Jepara, and he moved to the new Christian colony in Margorejo. Jansz had done considerable work in developing the theory of the agricultural colony as a method of evangelization.”³ His son, Pieter Anthonie Jansz, continued the development of that theory. The details of this history we can find in the newly released Institute of Mennonite Studies book, ***Dutch Mennonite Mission in Indonesia*** by Alle Hoekema. The Jansz family died in Indonesia. The fruits of Jansz’s mission enterprise are seen today primarily in the ***GITJ*** (The Evangelical Javanese Church).

¹ Lawrence Yoder, *The Church of the Muria: A History of the Muria Christian Church of Indonesia - GKMI* (A Thesis for Fuller Theological Seminary, 1981), 25.

² Ibid., 25.

³ Ibid., 24.

Stefanus Christian Haryono, who wrote this while studying at AMBS is a pastor of Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (GKMI), Pati, Java, Indonesia.

The second Mennonite church is the **GKMI** (The Muria Indonesia Christian Church). The third Mennonite church is **JKI** (Indonesian Christian Churches). The GKMI will be the main topic of this essay, but first I will cite the background of JKI. The founder of JKI was a former pastor of GKMI who graduated from a seminary in California around 1970, and returned to Indonesia “full of enthusiasm and ideas for evangelism.”⁴ This was the cause of the split with GKMI, and resulted in the forming of JKI because there was disagreement over some ideas between him and GKMI churches. This split did not start healing until 1996. He began to build congregations with support from some USA Mennonite churches. Now, they have some churches in Java, California, and Australia.

Now to focus on **GKMI** (The Muria Indonesia Christian Church) where I am a member and a pastor. GKMI is a Mennonite church with an Indonesian Chinese background. The founders of GKMI church were a couple named, **Tee Siem Tat** and **Sie Djoen Nio**. *This is their story*. Mr. Tee and others established a partnership which was active in several businesses, serving the industry and community of Kudus (Kudus means *Holy*) city. Kudus is a cigarette city where the main business of Mr. Tee was producing and printing the paper for the large clove cigarette industry of Kudus. “Mr. Tee was a man with strong and unwavering character, but he was also open for change if the benefits to change could be proven to his satisfaction.”⁵ Mr. Tee’s wife, Sie Djoen Nio was “a gentle woman, but she had strong character and convictions. She was a good mother taking care of her three children with patience and love, but she could think for herself and challenge her husband if she thought him to be on the wrong track.”⁶ Mr. Tee and his wife brought their children to a European Elementary School, that was opened in Kudus by a Catholic Mission. The Catholic church schools are “a very important tool of evangelism,”⁷ and they encouraged the children entering the school to be baptized. For Mr. Tee, it was not such an important matter.

Mrs. Sie Djoen Nio received from her relatives the two-volume low Malay Bible translated by a Mennonite missionary, H. C. Klinkert. She read the Bible and frequently that would “only happen late at night after the house was quiet.”⁸ She often wept when she read the story of the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Her husband was not happy that his wife was making such a thing out of the religion of their children’s school. Mr. Tee was afraid that “if his wife become a follower of this Dutch religion, it would bring negative responses from the Chinese community which vigorously maintained the religion of their ancestors,”⁹ which was Confucian.

⁴ Ibid., 501.

⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

In 1917, Mr. Tee became sick. He sought help from the local shaman, the priest of the Chinese temple, and some medical doctors. But none were able to discover his illness. His wife remembered Jesus Christ and his disciples healing the sick in the Bible; then she approached her husband to get help from Christians. Through his uncle who lived in another city he had a connection with a Salvation Army Lieutenant. The Lieutenant visited Mr. Tee's family every week, prayed and taught him about Christianity and gradually the seeds of faith were being planted in his heart, and he was healed at the same time.

This experience brought a great change in the life of Tee Siem Tat. He not only told his family, but also he told his experience to the Chinese community. This was an influence for the conversion to Christianity of the Chinese in Kudus city. He attended a Salvation Army church several times, but he was confused and troubled with the Salvation Army beliefs, especially "the ceremony of baptism being replaced by a flag ceremony."¹⁰ Even though Mr. Tee and his group later identified themselves with another denomination, they continued to maintain good relations with the Salvation Army. "This evidenced in the fact that for 25 years they continued to use the Salvation Army songbook."¹¹ In his effort to seek a relationship with other Christians, Mr. Tee was careful. He tried to get guidance from the Seventh Day Adventist, but he had struggles with them because of too much the emphasis on the Old Testament. The group of Mr. Tee's grew bigger so he approached the Reformed church mission to help; but again he had two problems. First, officially the Reformed church mission didn't have a territorial mission in Kudus, as written in the mission's agreement. This was influenced by the imperialism policy of "*divide et impera*," which means the policy of division. Second, personally, Mr. Tee didn't agree with the practice of infant baptism. The Reformed mission recommended that the Mennonite mission serve Mr. Tee's group. The request of Mr. Tee to the Mennonite mission to serve his group wasn't easy to fulfill because the Mennonite mission was experiencing a great crisis in the 1917 revolution. This crisis came about because "in 1919 the personnel and financial resources of the Mennonite mission were severely limited."¹² Also at that time the Mennonite mission in Europe had a conflict concerning the issue of control between two mission organizations.

The Mennonite missionaries in the Muria area taught Mr. Tee's group about Christian faith in catechism classes, "but it was not they who were responsible for the large number of persons in the Chinese community being converted in a relatively short time."¹³ It was the embryo of Chinese Christian Community (Mr. Tee's group) itself that was

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 50.

¹² Ibid., 54.

¹³ Ibid., 54.

largely responsible for that growth. December 6, 1920 was the first baptism of Mr. Tee's group by a Mennonite missionary; they were 25 people, including Mr. and Mrs. Tee, at their house in Kudus. From the year 1920 to 1923 there were 88 new believers who were baptized in and around Kudus.

The group's rapid growth was in such contrast to the experience in neighboring cities during the previous years. The question is "*What caused it?*" Lawrence Yoder in his thesis makes the following analysis (p. 58-61):

First, Mr. Tee's group's developing mission had highly influential leadership. The evangelists of other ethnic groups could not adapt linguistically and otherwise to the local population. Tee Siem Tat, the Kudus leader, was a respected and successful businessman of strong character and courage. After he became a Christian, these characteristics continued to be influential. Before Mr. Tee converted he was influential; and so when he converted, his influence and following continued to be substantial.

Second, there was a flow of influence along lines of family relationship. In traditional Chinese society the elder members of the extended family have great influence over the youth. Fathers have great influence over their children, uncle over nieces and nephews, and so on. In carrying on evangelistic work in subsequent years, Mr. Tee always reminded his coworkers: "*Bring the head of the family to Christ and it goes without saying that other members of family will be won for Christ as well.*"

Third, is the spirit and enthusiasm which the Chinese Christians possessed, especially in the matter of evangelism. Mr. Tee had experienced something great, and with enthusiasm he shared his experience to many others. Mr. Tee raised the spirits of the members of his group by saying: "*Freely you have received the Gospel, so be free in witness to others about it.*"

Fourth, the Gospel was proclaimed in form and words which could be easily understood and received by Chinese people, in the low-Malay language. The Western missionaries emphasized the Javanese language because their mission was directly and primarily to the Javanese which was about 98 percent of the population.

Fifth, in the annual report of the Mennonite mission in 1923, it was mentioned that many people actively participated in the evangelistic movement. Before the congregational fellowship the shopkeeper closed his store. They began in prayer. Not only the father of the family prayed, but the mother and children participated as well.

The evangelism which they carried on was not something they did just at particular hours on particular days. It occurred every day in their relationships. For example, in 1922 a Chinese Christian told about their new faith to a Javanese who came to his shop. The result was a group of Javanese came and requested baptism.

Mr. Tee's group grew rapidly in the area surrounding the Muria mountains and was lead by lay people during these 40 years. They had no help from the Mennonite

missionaries, because the Mennonite missionaries were more focused on the Javanese. Until 1958, Mr. Tee's group used the Dutch name *Chineeseche Doopsgezinde Christengemeente*.

Since 1952, GKMI has joined such world networks as MWC, MCC, Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), The Mennonite Brethren Mission, The European Mennonite Mission (EMEK), Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) and Christustrager Sisterhood (a Protestant nuns community) in Germany. A grandson of Mr. Tee, Tan Hao An was the first GKMI pastor who studied abroad and graduated from Goshen Biblical Seminary in 1955. In 1962, for the first time, GKMI had a Javanese pastor named Soedarsohadi Notodihardjo.

The year of 1967 was a milestone for GKMI. The world of GKMI was not only in the surrounding Muria mountain, but GKMI carried efforts in evangelism and church planting on other islands, such as Sumatra, Kalimantan (Borneo), and Bali. GKMI synod established the Board of Missions and Service (*Yayasan Pekabaran Injil dan Pelayanan Kasih [PIPKA]*). GKMI also serves through ICHTHUS radio broadcasting, hospitals, health clinics, schools from kindergarten to high school, and a social service agency called *Yayasan Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Swadaya Masyarakat (YPPS)* which provides help for social and economic development. GKMI used to be Mennonite Chinese but now GKMI is multi-ethnic.

IDENTITY

The young generation of GKMI had an important role in the development of GKMI churches. They became the pioneers of GKMI churches in the cities. If in the Bible we find the verse: "*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them*" (Matthew 18:20), this became "Where two or three GKMI members gathering together, there will be a new GKMI church." The warm and strong friendship present in the GKMI members has been an important part at their outreach. We have Menno-Net, a mailing list on the internet where every day we keep in touch by sending information, prayer concerns, spiritual articles, jokes, and so on. For example, in spring 2001, we had a new member; originally she was a member of GKMI in Kudus who now lives in Dubai, Emmirat Arab. She does fund raising and planning in her community to build a church.

In the midst of a variety of denominations in Indonesia, GKMI has been seeking the Mennonite identity, especially in the past 20 years. This is evidenced in the teaching of Mennonite beliefs to the congregations. GKMI teaches sixteenth century Anabaptist history and GKMI history in the catechisms and the adolescent retreats. GKMI synod decided to celebrate Mennonite Day each January 21 (or the closest Sunday) with the same pre-planned sermon for all GKMI churches. GKMI synod is serious on this point; in fact we translated *Mirror of the Martyrs* and *From Anabaptist Seed* into Indonesian language

and we are adopting a song written by Menno Simons called “True Evangelical.” We are also trying to continue developing a Mennonite Information Center in GKMI synod office.

I still remember when I was in an undergraduate program, how a Reformed church scholar described the Mennonites as a sect in his thick church history book. Now people are getting to know who GKMI is as a Mennonite peace church since some Mennonites became leaders in the academic institutions.

Church life serves as an important role for the congregations to nurture their faith. Most Indonesia churches, including GKMI, have a daily activity which always relates to studying the Bible. Sunday worship is the ultimate for Christian life since we understand that worship is “*bakti*,” which means *devotion and loyalty mixed together*. On the one hand, a pastor’s position seems to be between God and the people. This understanding influences the worship; the black robe and stoll as clerical uniform, elements of worship, and especially special worship such as Baptism, Communion, Wedding, Christmas, Good Friday, and so on. On the other hand, the relationship between a pastor and the congregation should be like the relationship between spouses.

The destruction and burning of churches doesn’t discourage Christians from building new church buildings, and rebuilding burnt churches more wonderful than before. Even though their own houses are simple, they want to dedicate the best for the Lord Jesus. When we had a lot of riots, destruction, and burning churches five years ago, we remembered the Anabaptist martyrs. This encouraged GKMI synod to print four pictures of the Martyr’s Mirror and hang on the sanctuary wall at GKMI churches as a reminder of *the cost of discipleship*.

Let me tell you about this cost of discipleship. One day, when I visited a church member, whose job was at a government office, he told me that his director had offered a new position to him, because of his achievements. But his director requested him to convert to Islam. He rejected that offer, even though at that time two of their children were at college and one was in high school. His wife is junior high school teacher; in Indonesia, it is a position which does not have a high income. In Indonesia, parents are responsible for their children until they get a job. We can imagine the wrestling between life and faith, between the needs of stomach and the confession of faith. As a pastor, I am proud of them; they are a faithful family. He said, “I will never deny that Jesus is my Lord. I prefer to lose the additional income and high position rather than the source of blessing, Godself.”

Christians in Indonesia have to wrestle not only in life, but also when they die. Three years ago, I lost an active young church member. He was 23 years old. He and his sister were members of my church. Their mother sometimes went to a Pentecostal church, and their father was a Moslem. The young man and his girl friend were killed in a motorcycle accident. At the funeral service at the cemetery, after the pallbearers laid down the coffin, immediately his uncle said, “He cannot receive a Christian funeral service; he

must be buried in an Islamic service.” Then he came close to the coffin and prayed an Islamic prayer. My church members began grumbling and asked me, “Pastor, what should we do?” “Be patient, just wait and see what next he will do, I said. After praying, he demanded young people to come and help dig the ground. Someone commanded, “Let’s bury him!” “Wait a minute!” I shouted. I came forward to the coffin and said, “He is a member of my church, that’s why I am here with other church members. I am sure that all of you as his friend know that he is a Christian. Why can we not give a funeral service for him, as our responsibility?” Then I began the funeral service.

You can imagine our debate with Moslems at the funeral. Many times, the family had memorial services for their son. However, the family was still in shock. As a church we gave our sympathy through our attendance. One time before the worship in their house, the father said to me, “Pastor, I want to follow your faith, I am going to church this coming Sunday.” At that time I was so surprised, because I never encouraged him to convert to Christianity. Jesus himself did evangelization through our sympathy. On December 2000, I heard that he and his wife were baptized in my church. Praise God!

And another story of wrestling is this. One day a Mennonite church member in a village died. He had converted from Islam to Christianity seven years before he died. There was a funeral service for him and he was buried at a cemetery in his village. Everything was going well. That evening the family was shocked, because about twenty Moslems dug up and brought the coffin to the family house. The Moslems avoid the burial of a Christian beside a Moslem, even though it was a public cemetery. You can imagine the situation at that time. Because they had no choice, the family took the coffin to the village leader. The leader could not disagree with the Moslems. The next day, the coffin was buried in another village where many Christians live.

These stories are only a little part of the Indonesian Christians’ suffering. We find suffering everywhere in Indonesia because of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The word of God is absolutely our strength. ***“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me”*** (Matthew 5:11). This word becomes real in our lives. It does not tell about the times past when the Gospel of Matthew was written, but the truth of God’s word is forever.

So even though we have many problems in our country, it does not mean that we ignore the call to spread the Gospel in others country. Since 1983 GKMI synod has been involved in the global mission program. In 1983 and 1993 two pastors were sent to be pastors in the Mennonite churches in the Netherlands for a couple of years. In 1986 we became the midwife for the Mennonite church of Singapore. In 1999, we sent the first woman missionary to Maccau. Maccau is the Las Vegas of Asia where there is gambling and casinos, and all the tragedies that occur in that place. Last year, we sent a couple to

be missionaries in Thailand. And in January 2001, we sent the first professional missionary to Mongolia. GKMI synod has the theme of "*From Asia to Asia.*"

The relationship between GITJ and GKMI has been a networking in economic building, theological education, and other programs; but the relationship deteriorated because the GITJ synod has had internal conflicts from 1978 to 2001. After a painful history between GKMI and JKI, in 1996 we had the first informal meeting. January 22, 2001 was the historical meeting of GITJ, GKMI, and JKI synod boards concerning the "*Mennonite Joint Committee.*" GITJ and GKMI had worked together in the Mennonite Joint Committee, but now JKI was to join them. We tried to name and put behind us the history of the bad relationships. It was a long and painful process; however we face the future. The first program was the Youth Disciple Training. The participants were 12 young people from three Mennonite synods in Indonesia and from different fields of education and degree programs. During that time, they were motivated again to be responsible as the young generation of the church, and to be of service; to be a professional person with Christian character, and to display the variety of ways of being involved in church social services. As a Mennonite Community in Indonesia, we want to do more for our churches and country in the midst of the chaotic condition. We need peace. I encourage all Mennonites, here and in other countries, to live in peace, to embrace peace and to work for peace as our identity and our mission.