

Engaging the issue of “Christian identity” within the United Board (UB) is nothing new! Indeed, as Dr. Wai Ching Angela Wong recently wrote, “Christian identity and presence have been a perennial soul-searching exercise in the United Board.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, the term “Christian presence” was embedded in the organization’s mission statement up until 2015.

Wong identified a pivotal moment in 1988 when the board confronted two perceived competing values: (1) requests from some institutions to help nurture a Christian presence on campus; and (2) the liability of continuing to carry the epithet “Christian” in fundraising efforts. Additionally, significant shifts were happening in Christianity in the Asian contexts. Remembering that UB started as a missionary organization from the United States, both board and staff leadership had been very white, with missionary approaches for its first 60 years of work. Elite academics and business people with deep East Asian connections or Asians trained in the U.S. with evangelical Christian beliefs had led UB. However, with liberation theological movements in the global South in the 1970s and 1980s, including Asia, UB saw a shift in the board’s makeup, particularly with members from Asia. New board members from Asia with liberation theological perspectives started problematizing UB’s white western Christian assumptions embedded in its work. There were a lot of tensions on the board with white missionary evangelical theological views and Asian liberation theological understanding of Christianity. The board spent much time discussing these issues and eventually adopted Asianization as its priority. It led UB to create the Hong Kong office.<sup>2</sup>

Although UB adopted Asianization as its strategic priority, its meaning varied depending on the person and context. Some Asian board members used it to make the UB a stepping stone for their career development. Some other members still strongly held white western evangelical beliefs of Christianity. In such a context, different people articulated UB’s mission differently, generating tension.

These conversations in the 1990s eventuated into the establishing of the special Task Force on Christian Identity and Presence, convened by late Dr. Preman Niles, to engage in an elaborate study in 2007. The task force focused on articulating UB’s mission, rooted in reinterpreted Christianity in/from Asia, challenging western imperial Christianity that missionaries brought. Unapologetically holding onto decolonial Christianity, which is relevant in Asia and open to other religious and secular institutions, the “Report of the United Board Task Force on Christian Presence” was completed in September 2007, providing detailed analysis and reflection on the general reception of “Christian presence,” its theology, and the United Board’s positioning.

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<sup>1</sup> Wai Ching Angela Wong, “The United Board’s Christian Mission,” commissioned paper, March 2024, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Credit goes to Dr. Judith Berling, who served on the 2007 task force, for providing this historical recollection.

The important work of the task force in 2007 led to UB's turn in 2015 to "whole person education" as an inclusive expression of Christian values and heritage and adopted "education that develops the whole person—intellectually, spiritually and ethically" in its new mission statement.

Dr. Boyung Lee remembers introducing postcolonial biblical scholarship in her earlier term of service on the board to articulate Christian presence further in such a context. She talked about the difference between the Great Commission (Matthew 28 which emphasizes evangelism) as a quintessential imperial Christian message that justified Western imperialism and conquest and the Great Commandment (Matthew 22 which emphasizes embodied love of Christ in our lives) as the essential message of inclusive Christianity that charges UB to embody justice-based Christianity for the marginalized. According to Dr. Michael Gilligan, it provided a critical aha moment for several of our board members to fully support Christian presence and identity, later expressed as "whole person education."

We commend to all of you the following important historical documents for your review and conversations:

1. Report of the United Board Task Force on Christian Presence (2007)
2. Practicing the Presence of God: Christian Higher Education in Asia (2012; Michael Gilligan's Address to Chung Chi College Students)
3. Whole Person Education as a Way Forward: Challenges and Prospects (2017; Anne Phelan on behalf of the Task Force)
4. Whole Person Education: The United Board's Perspective on Its Principles and Practice (2019; White Paper explaining the meaning of WPE in UB's Contexts)
5. The United Board's Christian Mission (2024; Wai Ching Angela Wong)

Some questions to ponder with these documents:

1. **How can the United Board's history of Christian presence inform its current and future initiatives in whole person education?**  
Reflect on the historical shifts in the United Board's mission from overt Christian presence to Whole Person Education. How can these historical lessons guide the UB in staying true to its Christian roots while being relevant in contemporary contexts?
2. **In what ways can the United Board ensure that its partnerships align with its Christian identity and mission of Whole Person Education?**  
When engaging new partners, what criteria should be used to assess their alignment with the United Board's values? How can the concept of Christian presence be maintained and respected in multi-faith or secular collaborations? As

we engage in our strategic planning, how can we utilize the concept of Christian identity as a guiding principle in the process?

3. **How should the United Board's Christian identity be expressed and operationalized within its current mission of Whole Person Education?**

Consider aspects such as board composition, staff hiring practices, the creation of a logo, and the crafting of the mission and vision statements. How can these elements reflect the Christian values while being inclusive of the diverse contexts in which the United Board operates? How can UB ensure the continuity of its Christian identity through inevitable staff and trustee changes?