

The United Board's Christian Mission

I. Introduction: From Christian Presence to Whole Person Education

“The United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia works to support *Christian presence* in colleges and universities in Asia.”

Until 2015, the United Board adopted “Christian presence” in its mission statement, highlighting Christian faith and values and working with Asian Christian institutions to strengthen their Christian identity. This mission and vision guided the United Board’s work through the 2000s. In 2007, a special Task Force on Christian Identity and Presence underlined the meaning of Christian presence by pursuing “justice, reconciliation, and harmony between ethnic and religious communities, and care for the environment and civil society.”¹ In 2015, considering the increasingly diverse Asian communities, the United Board decided to identify “whole person education” as an inclusive expression of Christian values and heritage and adopted “education that develops the whole person—intellectually, spiritually and ethically” as its “new” mission statement.²

The change was possible because of a conviction that whole-person education has been core to the tradition of Christian liberal arts education. During the 2010s, the United Board sponsored many Asian Christian higher education conferences discussing the need for cross-disciplinary learning, integrated studies, and critical and creative thinking rooted in liberal arts education.³ In 2012, the United Board criticized, along with other university leaders, the trend of education going increasingly “specialized and compartmentalized, separating the head from heart, intelligence from spirituality, theory from practice, local knowledge from academic knowledge, skills from ethics.”⁴ They proposed that whole-person education, grounded in Christian values, would be the most assuring way for students to learn and grow integrally.⁵ A similar discussion was

¹ United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA), *Report of the United Board Christian Presence Task Force*, unpublished, 8.

² Cf. <https://unitedboard.org/about-us/about-united-board/mission-vision/>

³ Conferences supported by the United Board on whole person education included: “Valuing Liberal Arts in Asian Higher Education,” Asian University Leaders Program (AULP) (2011), “Whole Person Education – Trends and Challenges,” the biennial conference of Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia (ACUCA) (2011), and “General Education and University Curriculum Reform” in Hong Kong (2012).

⁴ United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA), a concept paper for AULP 2013, unpublished, 1-2.

⁵ UBCHEA, a concept paper for AULP 2013, unpublished, 2.

followed up by the Asian University Leaders Program (AULP) of 2013 on: “Whole Person Education: Practices, Challenges, and Prospects for Higher Education in Asia.” During the program, the relation between Christian presence and whole-person education was clearly articulated:

...the concept of “Whole Person Education” captures the vision of the United Board to promote a Christian presence in higher education in Asia. A Christian presence in higher education is, after all, about actualizing whole-person education – grounded in the belief that each person has been created in the image of God and deserves to grow as a whole person (physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually).⁶

Whole-person education has not only been seen as one of the best avenues to articulating Christian values but has also been regarded as the most thorough concept permeating and connecting all the program priorities and initiatives of the United Board.⁷ United Board's programs on peacebuilding, intercultural religious understanding, gender equality, and service-learning have been regarded as ambassadors of holistic education, bridging theories and action, and faith and practices. In other words, whole-person education is only an inclusive language representing the spirit and substance rooted in Christian liberal arts educational tradition, formerly denoted by the phrase “Christian presence.”

II. A Study on Christian Presence in the United Board

Christian identity and presence have been a perennial soul-searching exercise in the United Board. The latest record for such a search is traced back to 1988 when the Board of Trustees received requests from some Christian colleges and universities to help nurture a Christian presence on campus. At the same time, the John O'Donnell group, commissioned to evaluate the United Board's fundraising potential, pointed out the liability of continuing to carry the epithet “Christian” when the United Board's real intention is to strengthen higher education in Asia. These two incidents invoked a critical debate on the board. Partly in response to the John O'Donnell report in 2001, Asian trustees affirmed that, despite the challenges posed by the United Board's epithet “Christian,” it was not a problem in Asia. Instead, the United Board needed not to be

⁶ UBCHEA, a concept paper for AULP 2013, unpublished, 1.

⁷ UBCHEA, a concept paper for AULP 2013, unpublished, 1.

timid or apologetic about its mission of strengthening Christian presence in Asia. Considering the importance of the subject, the Board of Trustees established a Task Force on Christian Identity and Presence for an elaborate study in 2007.⁸

The special Task Force on Christian Identity and Presence was mandated to “set out the meaning and relevance of the epithet ‘Christian’ in the work of the United Board and its significance for the Asianization process.”⁹ In addition to the contribution of the Task Force members, feedback from the trustees, past trustees, staff, specially identified project leaders, and institutional partners was collected for review and analysis. In September 2007, the *Report of the United Board Task Force on Christian Presence* was completed, providing detailed analysis and reflection on the general reception of “Christian presence,” its theology, and the United Board’s positioning.

“What does it mean to be Christians in Asia today?” framed much of the discussion. Key feedback collected from the ground was encouraging, including a genuine appreciation of the United Board’s ecumenical approach, which has offered practical support for the Christian colleges and universities to work in multifaith communities in Asia. The United Board’s stance of “moving away from rigid confessional theological positions and exploring what Christian presence entails in as broad a way as possible” was affirmed to be essential in its relationship with the donors and different stakeholders. Openness to communities of other faiths was regarded not only as a stand against Western imperial powers that they do not represent all Christians but also as affirming that Asian Christians are part and parcel of Asia. What has been agreed to be distinctively Christian was how core human values and deeply held Christian values were shared in the community among Christians, people of other faiths, and people of no faith. As one trustee concluded, “Students and faculty of all faiths need to build a community that can become a beacon of light to a society torn by religious strife.”¹⁰

The report also concludes with a few understandings of Christian presence. It affirms that the United Board, as a Christian organization, has been motivated by a commitment to Christian values and the venerable tradition of Christian higher education. While

⁸ UBCHEA, *Report of the United Board Christian Presence Task Force* (2007), unpublished, 14.

⁹ United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA), a concept paper for the Task Force on Christian Identity and Presence (2007), unpublished, 1. Members of the Task Force were: Paul Appasamy, Judith Berling, John Hesselink, Mary John Mananzan, Willi Toisuta, Wai Ching Angela Wong, and D. Preman Niles (convenor).

¹⁰ UBCHEA, *Report of the United Board Christian Presence Task Force* (2007), unpublished, 24.

Christian higher education is not exclusively by and for Christians, it is committed to Christian values, including liberal and humane education, education of the whole person, moral development of students and faculty, education for justice, equality, reconciliation, tolerance, inter-religious understanding, service, freedom, peace, and civil culture. Fundamentally, Christian higher education should make education accessible to the less advantaged. As one Indian institutional partner warned: “An institution of Christian higher education will lose its Christian identity if it opts for excellence at the cost of the poor.”¹¹

The report emphatically affirms that Christian higher education is not a form of evangelism but the fostering of value-based leadership in administrators, faculty, and students, who will serve and contribute to understanding and justice in their societies. One of its main purposes is to nurture the formation of its Christian students and students of other religious and cultural backgrounds so that they understand their traditions and other religions well. At best, Christian higher education exemplifies best practices in education and institutional life, aspiring to an education that is not merely narrowly market- and vocationally driven but educates human beings for a fullness of life.

Based on these understandings, the United Board supports educational programs that nurture the values mentioned above in Christian institutions where they exist and in educational institutions that aspire to similar educational goals where Christian institutions do not exist. Given the general minority status of Christians in Asia, the United Board supports the development of Asian understandings of Christian identity and Christian education by supporting Asian religious/Christian studies and theology to provide a broad and critical base for understanding Christianity in Asia.¹²

Reflecting on Indonesia's context, Willi Toisuta, a Task Force member and retired Indonesian rector, summarized three foci for the United Board's work for Christian presence. They are leadership formation with a strong character-building foundation, faculty formation with an ethical imperative, and an innovative curriculum sensitive to students' learning capacities and spiritual needs. Taking the Islamic context seriously, he called for Christian institutions to collaborate with universities of other faiths and for boards of trustees to be prepared to keep Christian universities as centers representing

¹¹ UBCHEA, *Report of the United Board Christian Presence Task Force* (2007), unpublished, 23.

¹² UBCHEA, *Report of the United Board Christian Presence Task Force* (2007), unpublished, 12.

society's critical and moral force.¹³

III. Challenges and Opportunities of Christian Colleges and Universities

Up to 2023, among the 87 network institutions listed on the United Board's website, about 60% are Christian colleges and universities, about 23% are universities with a Christian history, and about 17% are public universities in countries where Christian higher education institutions do not exist.

Christian affiliation of the United Board's network institutions by countries:



The public universities are happy to participate in the United Board's program and feel assured of the organization's non-proselytizing approach. The universities with a Christian history are conscious of their background and appreciate the opportunity to reconnect with their Christian heritage and the Christian network for mutual learning. A large percentage of Christian colleges and universities face specific social and political challenges because of their Christian identity and are eager to seek the support of the United Board and one another for their struggle amidst various forms of ethical dilemmas for the sustenance of their mission. The Catholic institutions have often benefited from the structural support of their respective Catholic orders, yet the Protestant colleges are mostly on their own. In 2018, Chung Jung Christian University was sponsored to organize a consultation on "Re-visioning the Role and Relevance of Christian Universities in a Multi-religious, Secular Asia" in Taiwan, which provoked a heated discussion. The conference also highlighted the role of the United Board in nurturing Christian leadership.

¹³ UBCHEA, *Report of the United Board Christian Presence Task Force* (2007), unpublished, 28.

In Asia, the majority of Christian universities were established by churches or missionaries over a century as private universities. Some more recent ones were established by Christian education foundations, sometimes funded by well-off individuals or companies. Some aim to benefit the people in general, while others focus on propagation and evangelization. Nevertheless, Christians and churches are a minority in all Asian countries except for the Philippines and, to an extent, South Korea. Because of the historical collusion between Christianity and colonialism and evangelization and imperialism, suspicion toward Christianity sits deep in many Asian minds. For example, adding the layer of political complexities, Indian Christian schools are ordered not to teach Christianity to non-Christian students, and Indonesian Christian schools are asked to provide Islamic teaching to their Muslim students. Practically, in a less democratic society, minorities generally cannot expect equal and fair treatment by the majority and the ruling power.¹⁴

A popular organizational strategic methodology, the Theory of Change, effectively defines a goal-defining programming process. Most importantly, it asks the question of what system change an organization aspires to, which essentially defines its vision and mission. While the United Board is not in a position to intervene in local affairs, it identifies quality advancement of higher education in Asia as its vision, which has been deeply rooted in its Christian liberal arts education. In other words, the United Board's advocacy for whole-person education is an aspiration for an education system that may go against the trend. When Harry Lewis, a former college dean of Harvard University, published *Excellence without a Soul* in 2006,¹⁵ his language of "soul" sounded alarm to many higher education analysts about how far the current system has departed from the original education mission.

One main issue underlining the "decline" of high-quality education is competition, prioritizing research over student nurture. According to Lewis, even a great university such as Harvard has surrendered its moral authority to shape the souls of its students. The general decay of moral education has left students to deal with increasing cultural clashes and offered them no guidance for their life pursuits. Education integrity in such top-tier

¹⁴ Judo Poerwowidagdo (Krida Wacana Christian University, Indonesia), "Challenges to Christian Higher Education in Asia: Perspectives of a University President," *Christian Higher Education* 2, 1 (2003): 35-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363750302209>

¹⁵ Harry R. Lewis, *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

research universities is giving way to preserving their brand names. Nevertheless, the problem is not about individual leaders but a system in which university governing boards and leaders have lost the initial call to education. Many university leaders adopt the language of “excellence” but fail to articulate the values and visions a great university should embrace, letting down their shared responsibility for building a better society.¹⁶

Michael Lee, an educationist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, depicted a larger picture with the global trend of higher education reform. It is a reform aiming to improve the quality of education and maintain its relevance to socioeconomic needs in the age of globalization when market forces and competition are the core values. Universities worldwide are, therefore, under constant pressure to be more relevant and responsive to market needs, including the development of internationalization. Pressure for reform has also become political as universities face more acute competition for public or government resources. For “value for money” and “fitness for purpose,” teaching, research, and management have been regularly subject to external scrutiny. Rather than the traditional image of ivory towers, universities must strive for survival, competitive performance and resources for sustainable development locally and globally. Bureaucratic management reviews and frequent quantifiable and measurable assessments occupy most of the administrative mind as the university system shifts towards neo-liberalism and the rise of economic globalization.¹⁷

Many discussions about the current higher education system land on a criticism of competition and consumerism. They appeal to universities to uphold their core values and serve the needs of society to preserve their “soul.” Reflecting on his deep theological conviction in *Sailing on Winds of Change* (1996),¹⁸ Paul Lauby’s, former executive director of the United Board, the definition of education explains well what the “soul” is about. For him, education is about dealing with the fundamental issues of human existence, including the meaning and purpose of life, what it means to be human, and the destiny of humanity and the world. It should help students develop a set of values by sharpening their social awareness and sensitivity and engaging them in conversations

¹⁶ Pilar Mendoza, “Lewis, Harry R. *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (Review),” *Review of Higher Education* 30, 4 (2007): 486-487.

¹⁷ Michael H. Lee, “Excellence without a Soul? Higher Education in Post-1997 Hong Kong,” in *Making Sense of Education in Post-Handover Hong Kong: Achievements and Challenges*, ed. Thomas Kwan-choi Tse and Michael H. Lee; 215–232 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁸ Paul T. Lauby, *Sailing on Winds of Change: Two Decades in the Life of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 1969-1990* (New York: UBCHEA, 1996).

around ethical and religious values to prepare them to be agents of change. It is, therefore, not surprising for Philip Altbach, an educational expert at Boston College, to conclude that Christian colleges and universities have served as the only visible defense of liberation education, a tradition deeply embedded in missionary schools.¹⁹ The United Board's mission to strengthen Christian higher education in Asia is to reassure Christian institutions that they do not fight the battle alone against an education system engulfed by economic globalization.

IV. Strategic Significance of Christian Presence in the United Board's Work

The United Board's programs are all about people. In an increasingly fragmented and digitized world, what does it take to keep humans human? In a society with prevailing despair, corruption, and conflicts, how can Christian presence make a significant difference in academia by pointing to signs of hope? These are two spirituality questions that Christian higher education must address.

David Vikner, former executive director of the United Board, once lamented that Christian higher education has lost its unique distinctiveness and is, instead, becoming increasingly secular.²⁰ Despite many Christian institutions still keeping their eyes on the disadvantaged young people, along with the competition in the global market for trade and commerce, Asian universities are also pulled into the competition for university ranking for technological and scientific innovation as indicators of the status of the national economy. Such global competition complicates the ethical and spiritual understanding of humans, equality, and ecological well-being that are core to Christian values.²¹

As affirmed in the Task Force report on Christian identity and presence, the United Board is not positioned to proselytize. Rather, it has positioned itself to empower Asian Christian higher education institutions through the United Board programs of leadership transformation and faculty formation by equipping them with state-of-the-art professional skills and community experiences. Ethical and visionary leadership, socially engaged

¹⁹ Philip G. Altbach, "The Past and Future of Asian Universities: Twenty-First Century Challenges," in *Asian Universities: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Philip G. Altbach and Toru Umakoshi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 24-26.

²⁰ David W. Vikner, "Challenges to Christian Higher Education in Asia," *Christian Higher Education* 2, 1 (2003): 1-13.

²¹ Poerwowidagdo, "Challenges to Christian Higher Education in Asia," 41-42.

faculty and students, and a campus culture of care and interreligious understanding are key distinctive marks of Christian higher education that the United Board believes will facilitate system change to education for future generations and a better society.

1) Developing ethical and visionary leaders

There is an apparent difference between leadership training programs run by a typical education leadership center and those run by a Christian team of trainers. The former considers all the necessary skills to deal with the highly demanding higher education fronts but rarely touches on the fundamental question of why higher education today and what role a university plays for humanity's future; the education vision is often left to the trainees and their sending institutions. On the contrary, a Christian leadership program will not be shy about the question of why. Take the example of the vision statement of Ateneo de Davao University.

The Ateneo de Davao University is a Catholic, Jesuit, and Filipino University. As a university it is a community engaged in excellent instruction and formation, robust research, and vibrant community service. As Catholic, it proceeds *ex corde ecclesiae* from the heart of the Church. As Jesuit, it appropriates the mission of the Society of Jesus and the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola. As Filipino, it contributes to and serves Mindanao.²²

This outstanding vision statement would be presented ahead of any training program the university's leadership holds. It clearly identifies itself, its tradition, the context within which it works, and how each of these identities indicates a special understanding of what the university aspires to do. Each identity sends the university out for a specific commitment to the church, its community, and the larger context, assuring the university of the strength on which it draws. In sum, a higher education leader does not only require the fiducial and management skills for administering the university; s/he needs a belief and a conviction that can keep driving him or her forward as s/he leads the others for system change. In the words of Judo Poerwowidagdo, a former Indonesian rector, Christian colleges and universities are called to be witnesses to their countries for bringing peace and reconciliation where

²² See <https://www.addu.edu.ph/vision-and-mission/>

there are conflicts and divisions.²³

2) Nurturing a spirituality that is rooted in caring and a deep concern for humans

In Vikner's reflection about Christian higher education, he sees the importance of Christian institutions maintaining a "well-landscaped" campus to allow spiritual development space.²⁴ Whether through the physical setup or space in the intra- or extracurricular, faculty and students should be encouraged to engage in life-faith conversations, including dialogues between religions, ethnicities, genders, and traditions. Students should actively inquire about the "big questions" in each discipline, identify their life purpose, rediscover their connection with others and the self, and cultivate an in-depth spirituality for life sustenance.

An important tradition and invaluable tool in Christian colleges and universities is the setup of campus ministry. The United Board has recently revitalized a series of programs supporting campus ministry. Rather than the narrowly defined chaplaincy work in the past, campus ministry can work across religions to nurture a culture of care and inclusivity on campus. Working with professional counselors and student affairs staff, campus ministry can cover specifically the dimension of spiritual growth. Only when the faculty and students find the campus a safe space to share, argue, question, and negotiate with their faiths and understanding of life can they root their values in depth. Support should be provided for anyone interested in acquiring an open Christian mind that learns from history, is humanistic, ethical, sensitive, truthful, and focuses on God.²⁵ Campus ministry is an essential arm in cultivating a "Christian" culture and spirit in a university.

Lewis's criticism of a top-tier research university draws much support from educators who see the increasing isolation of students in their formative undergraduate years. Today's faculty can learn much about student-oriented pedagogy and education technology to facilitate effective learning. However, the most essential lesson a faculty in a Christian institution can "teach" is living out a life of faith-learning integration and exercising a presence in journeying with their students through some of the most critical periods of their growth in life. When teachers walk the talk, their students will not only

²³ Poerwowidagdo, "Challenges to Christian Higher Education in Asia," 44.

²⁴ Vikner, "Challenges to Christian Higher Education in Asia," 9.

²⁵ Nicki Rehn and Linda Schwartz, "How a Common Core Curriculum Serves the Identity and Mission of a Christian Liberal Arts University," in *Christian Higher Education in Canada*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Bruce G. Fawcett (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2020), 148-161.

acquire life skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving but also grow as persons with character, ethical judgment, and a sense of the responsibility of being a global citizen.

- 3) Connecting to a network of Christian colleges and universities, churches, and Christian education foundations

Christian higher education institutions have inherited the foundational, speculative, classical, and theological study of the liberal arts from the earliest ecclesiastical universities through Christian thinkers and teachers.²⁶ Based on this inheritance, they share many common grounds in vision and mission with churches and education foundations with a Christian background. In addition, the vast network of Christian institutions spreading worldwide allows Christian colleges and universities to promote faculty exchange, student exchange, international conferences, integrated library collections, and coordinated training programs. The Christian institutional network can provide a great opportunity to tap known and untapped human and financial resources from alums, influential Christian institutions, churches, and education foundations for joint promotion of the Christian liberal arts education and Christian presence.

In conclusion, the Christian epithet is a source of richness and blessing to Christian higher education in Asia, not a burden. It is a choice for any Christian institution to keep their fidelity to the tradition or to deny responsibility in offering life-changing education. Rather than a set of well-defined programs, the richest way to explore the tradition is to support continued questioning, resistance, and wrestling between the original education intent and the fast-changing environment. This choice requires courage and love for the work to which all educators are called. That there is still much to think about and do is the harbinger of hope for the Christian leaders, faculty, and students and those academics who remain bound to the tradition while seeking to transform it. It is a grave commitment to ensure the survival of grand narratives and values in the Christian heritage and let it drive the scholarly desire and deepest confession of Asian educators.²⁷

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that

²⁶ Rehn and Schwartz, “How a Common Core Curriculum Serves the Identity and Mission of a Christian Liberal Arts University,” 160.

²⁷ Rehn and Schwartz, “How a Common Core Curriculum Serves the Identity and Mission of a Christian Liberal Arts University,” 160.

you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”
(Romans 12:2)

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