Background

In the second half of the 20th century, it was widely perceived by the people of Taiwan that the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) played a crucial role in the democratization struggle by serving as a prophetic voice in the society. Since the lifting of the martial law in 1987, the social, political, and ecclesial landscape has been evolving. It changed dramatically after the 2016 elections when Taiwan elected a first female President, Tsai Ing-wen with an overwhelming parliamentary majority for her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). For the first time in Taiwan’s history, the Chinese Nationalist’s Party (KMT) that ruled Taiwan with an iron fist for seventy years from 1949 is in a minority with only 33% of National Assembly seats.

Taiwan’s International Context of Two Empires

Taiwan is set between two Empires: China and the West. Compounding its identity issue, there are two Chinese demands its allegiance the Republic of China (ROC) established by the Nationalist regime (KMT) in 1911 and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Ten years after its foundation, the KMT and the Chinese communist party entered a protracted civil war vying for the control of China. Mao Ze Tung’s party won and founded the PRC in 1949. The KMT fled to Taiwan with the support of the USA. Taiwan was forced to serve as the refuge of the ROC which turned Taiwan into a military fortress for the USA. Taiwan is set between two Empires: China and the West, eminently like its neighbors, Japan and Korea, developed into an economic giant through military, economic, cultural and religious means to stifle Taiwan’s place internationally and intimidate the Taiwanese people.

The other Empire for Taiwan is the West, eminently represented by the USA, which incorporated Taiwan into the Cold War structure as part of the post-World War II “containment policy.” Since then, Taiwan, like its neighbors, Japan and Korea, developed into an important economic machine, and integrated into the Empire of the West with much international aid and loans. The globalization of the market, ever omnipotent and omnipresent, has brought about the demolition of life, distortion of social values, the commodification of human beings as evidenced in human trafficking and other modern forms of slavery. Phenomena such as child prostitution, day laborers and migrant workers, all suffer the transnational corporation’s chase of profit and appealing for international support for the people’s right to self-determination. Despite the subsequent severe repression by the KMT, during which the use of Taiwanese Bibles, Hymnals and newspapers and pamphlets were banned, the PCT has not been afraid to challenge the future of Taiwan remains deeply rooted in its self-understanding of the satanic mission of God in Taiwan: the renewal of the corporate body of Christ, the restoration and reaffirmation of the Taiwanese people’s identity and dignity.

The martial law era claimed over 20,000 victims who were the elites in the country. PCT pastors and members in ten years from 1949 is in a minority with only 33% of National Assembly seats.

International Forum

In February 2017, the PCT invited its partner churches and ecumenical organizations to discern together the sign of the time and to sharpen its missional focus. Forty-five partner churches and ecumenical organizations sent representatives including Asia Church Women’s Conference (ACWC), Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Council for World Mission (CWM), World Council of Churches (WCC), World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). They engaged in Bible study with one hundred and twenty-five Taiwanese participants made up of whom were women and youth. These sessions of exploring the scripture together were immensely beneficial for spiritual support of the Taiwanese who have long felt the isolation from the ecumenical family. Many international partners, for the first time, heard the pain and the cry of the Taiwanese, and the reality of today’s Taiwan. This experience led the February 2017 International Ecumenical Forum to propose the establishment of a Taiwan Ecumenical Forum (TEF) to meet an urgent need for information sharing about Taiwan and for mutual support.

The PCT Today

The PCT celebrated its 150 anniversary in 2015. Since its establishment by Scottish and Canadian missionaries, the PCT has inherited the inspiring commitment to the spiritual and physical health of the Taiwanese including their education and the sustainability of the church.

The PCT also became a forward-looking ecumenical church. It is an active member in world ecumenical organizations in which it has served and continues to provide leadership roles. It also enjoys a mutually enriching relationship with forty-two partner churches.

Globally, it is recognized as a missional church that has distinguished itself in prophetic witness, especially during the “White Terror” period from 1947 to 1987. In face of the two Empires of China -- the ROC and the PRC -- PCT courageously spoke out in the form of three public statements in the 1970s calling for urgent reform and appealing for international support for the people’s right to self-determination. While the PCT must hold the government accountable for many international political, professional, academic organizations. How should the PCT be proactive in working with the government and the civil society in Taiwan to exercise their soft power? For example, can the PCT encourage exchanges with international civil society and international NGOs in the health and the human rights sectors?

While the PCT must hold the government accountable in the current national implementation on transitional justice, to what extent should it be engaged in the national debate on the same-sex marriage legislation?

A major issue facing the PCT is the issue related to the Austronesians. The ecumenical movement has not been well-informed about the multicultural makeup of Taiwan whose original inhabitants are Austronesians. There are 18 tribes of varying numbers who are trying very hard to preserve their own heritage, culture and language. Yet, their history is filled with tragedy that still requires accounting. President Tsai has announced the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission to address this tragic history.

PCT has been criticized for its political activism and has for long been alienated from other Taiwan’s denominations due to ideological differences. With so many political and historical traumas not yet dealt with and with historical judgment and justice not yet fully accounted for, the PCT continues to experience and witness a weakness in corporate community and distorted cultural values among the Taiwanese people. These issues are particularly evident among the indigenous peoples whose land had been robbed and whose culture and dignity have been shattered.

Set in the context of the life-threatening crises wrought by the two Empires impacts Taiwan’s development in all sectors: economic, environmental, political or theological. For example, whereas economic "development" in North East Asia has
The ecological movement, the PCT partner churches and the PCT are called to affirm that partnerships with the PCT is a shared mission imperative rooted in the Missio Dei and follows Jesus call to a life abundant for all God’s people including the people of Taiwan.

Meaningful partnership in the pilgrimage for justice and peace must indeed involve resource sharing and mutual solidarity. This modality is key in the global struggle for justice in the context of empires. The PCT has an important place and a leadership role in the global ecological struggles for self-determination of peoples and indigenous rights. The humiliation of Taiwan in the international community, the current political and socio-economic climate, the depth of the suffering and oppression of a people denied independence and self-determination provide the focus and locus for ecological partnership and missional engagement.

The PCT often felt neglected, left on their own in a global and eccumenical context where the voice and support for PCT and the Taiwanese cause were often invisible and absent from the mainstream ecumenical action for justice and peace. Ecumenical partnership and solidarity must affirm and embrace the specific historic prophetic role of the PCT in securing the freedom, dignity and identity of Taiwan as a full and independent member of the community of nations.

The ongoing life and witness of several ecological communities in the global south has given a new appreciation of perspectives and a mutual awareness of the charm that separated them. In face of the life-threatening crises of the 1980s and the rise of the global ecological, eccumenical commitment to life-affirming inclusive communities will bring about hope and transformation of lives. This significant learning was highlighted at the 1983 WCC Vancouver Assembly statement on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation. Unless there is peace in Taiwan, there cannot be peace in the world. Unless there is justice for the people of Taiwan, there cannot be justice around the world.

Today’s Taiwan calls for new and different models of ecumenical partnership. Joint analysis, regular sharing of information, framing shared advocacy roles are essential partnership ingredients to avoid misunderstanding and overcome the hurt of the past.

The exploration of these pressing issues along with a sharing of the variety of responses to Taiwan’s current challenges and its rich gifts will help the ecumenical movement to affirm and give thanks to God for the life and witness of the PCT. In reflecting together the prophetic role of the Church and the meaning of a mutual covenant as partners in God’s vineyard will allow the people of Taiwan to speak from the heart. The TEF will be a rich learning process for the Taiwanese participants to continue to benefit from the input and change of these ecumenists who would bring a wide-ranging spectrum of concerns, including social, political, economic, cultural, gender and ecological issues.

The PCT is called to find fresh means of engagement and dialogue across a diversity of ecclesial traditions, ecumenical, charismatic and Confessional. The current social and political challenges posed by the context of Taiwan call for a unity of purpose and spirit in the church. The PCT must remain a church that welcomes all despite differences in political affiliation and social values. The ecumenical adage of unity in diversity must be pursued because Jesus Christ called his followers to be one just as he and God are one. These can be honored as gifts and harnessed for the common mission of the church.