

Indonesian churches to host MWC Assembly in 2021

In July 2009, an unlikely group of Mennonite church leaders from Indonesia found themselves in a conversation outside a dormitory in Asunción, Paraguay. Although the participants in the discussion were not strangers, their paths rarely crossed. The three groups they represented had complex histories, each rooted in a particular set of memories that included stories of separation and division.

But there in the relaxed context of the 15th Assembly of the Mennonite World Conference something significant shifted in their relationship. “At one particular moment,” recalls David Meijanto, “we realized that all of us were of a similar age and that we shared many of the same concerns and values.” For the first time, members of the group asked an obvious question: Why don’t we get together more often back in Indonesia?

The church leaders returned to Indonesia with a commitment to meet every three months with the simple goal of sharing together and encouraging each other. At one of those “Inter Menno” meetings the idea emerged that the three groups could together host the 2021 MWC global assembly in Indonesia.

For many outsiders, the three synods that make up the Mennonite church in Indonesia—GITJ, GKMI and JKI—seem like an intimidating welter of acronyms. But their history, individually and collectively, is a beautiful microcosm of the global Anabaptist church.

GITJ (Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa / Evangelical Church of Java) is the oldest group, with roots going back to the Dutch Mennonite missionary Pieter Jansz, who arrived in Java in 1851. A gifted linguist, Jansz compiled a Dutch-Javanese dictionary and played a crucial role in the first Javanese translation of the Bible. The church that emerged in 1854 was the first Anabaptist-Mennonite congregation in the world whose members were not primarily of European or North American origin. But an even more influential figure in the early history of the GITJ was Kyai Ibrahim Tunggul Wulung, a local mystic whose resistance to Dutch colonialism, vision of a coming “Just Prince” and commitment to creating self-sufficient agrarian Christian communities helped enculturate the missionary message into a distinctively Javanese idiom. Since then, the GITJ has had a complex history, shaped—like all the Mennonite groups in Indonesia—by the trauma of World War II, the long struggle for democracy in

Indonesia and the ongoing challenges of living as a tiny minority in a country with the world’s largest population of Muslims. Today, members of the 110 GITJ congregations tend to live in rural areas around Jepara and Puti, speak Javanese, work as laborers and worship in a somewhat formal liturgical style.

The GKMI (Persatuan Gereja-Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia / Union of Muria Christian Churches of Indonesia) traces its roots to Chinese immigrants who settled in Java in the early 20th century, especially in the region around Kudus. In 1917, Tee Siem Tat, a Chinese businessman, became a Christian when he and another family member were miraculously healed after listening to stories in the Gospels of Jesus’ healing ministry. Almost immediately, Tee embarked on a journey of Bible study, preaching and church planting. From the beginning, the Malay-speaking congregations had contact with Mennonites, but that identity was particularly strengthened in the 1950s and 1960s, when Hermann Tann, a descendent of Tee Siem Tat, consciously worked to introduce Mennonite theology and polity. Today, some 55 congregations make up the GKMI. Its members tend to be of Chinese background, well-educated and strongly committed to missions.

JKI (Jemaat Kristen Indonesia / Christian Congregations of Indonesia), the youngest of the Mennonite synods in Indonesia, emerged in the late 1970s as a charismatic renewal movement within the GKMI. Led by Adi Sutanto, a small GKMI prayer group began to incorporate speaking in tongues, faith healing, visions and prophecy into their regular worship. In 1985, a group of like-minded congregations joined to form the JKI, which has since grown to include 155 congregations, including several in the United States, Australia and the Netherlands. The best-known JKI church—and the likely site of the MWC assembly in 2021—is the 20,000 member “Holy Stadium,” which combines charismatic worship with a remarkable array of social ministries and a strong outreach program to the city of Jakarta.

Clearly, each of these indigenous synods has its own distinctive history and identity. But today leaders are looking beyond those differences to seek new partnerships with each other and with the larger Mennonite world. MWC Assembly 2021 will offer a great perspective on the various ways that Anabaptism has taken root in Indonesia. It’s not too soon to put it on your calendar. **TM**



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