

Reflection on the visit to Minahasa (GMIM), North Sulawesi, Indonesia

September/ October 2024

by Apwee

Day One: GMIM Visit with UCA President Rev. Charissa Suli

This afternoon, Charissa and I arrived in Manado from Jakarta following an invitation from Rev. Dr. Hein Arina, President of GMIM, for the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and UnitingWorld to attend GMIM's 90th anniversary celebrations. It has been a long time since a UCA President last visited GMIM (The Evangelical Church in Minahasa), one of the Uniting Church's key partners located in North Sulawesi, in the eastern part of Indonesia. The partnership between UCA and GMIM has flourished over many years, with numerous GMIM members in the diaspora going on to become leaders within UCA congregations. I recall in the early 2000s, when Rev. Dr. Tony Floyd and I were part of a ministry team at Camberwell Congregation. We visited GMIM many times, strengthening the church-to-church relationship. With the support of the VicTas Synod, we were able to respond to GMIM's request for assistance in church management.

Upon our arrival at Sam Ratulangi Airport, Charissa and I were warmly welcomed by Icha, the Moderator's Executive Assistant, and Rev. Christian Luwuk. We enjoyed a lovely lunch together before heading to Tomohon Theological College to meet with Rev. Hein Arina. Our discussion was lively and enriching, covering the history of the area, the current theological student body (around 2,900 students), and the ecumenical connections that continue to strengthen the partnership between UCA and GMIM. For me, this first day was marked by the rekindling of the spirit of fellowship, partnership, and our shared commitment to being agents of peace and social transformation.

Day Two: GMIM Visit with UCA President Rev. Charissa Suli

On the second day, the theme of collaboration in mission was highlighted, with a focus on the church's role in "healing ministry" to serve society. The Evangelical Christian Church in Minahasa (GMIM), through its Medika Foundation (its healthcare agency), has been providing medical services since 1905, beginning with Siloam Hospital in Sonder. Today, Rev. Dr. Hein Arina invited Rev. Charissa Suli and me to witness GMIM's ongoing healthcare ministry in the regions of Amurang and Manado, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Kaloorang Hospital, serving the people of Amurang, takes its name from the local word meaning "goodness." This hospital has recently expanded, adding a new building dedicated to hemodialysis treatment. In the heart of Manado, Pancaran Kasih (which translates to "Beam of Love") Hospital stands as one of GMIM's largest medical centers,

offering a wide range of services. It has also recently completed a new building for its laboratory and administrative offices. During the thanksgiving services held at both hospitals, Rev. Charissa Suli had the opportunity to extend greetings from the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). These ceremonies were attended by key figures including the Governor of North Sulawesi, the Mayors of Amurang and Manado, church leaders, doctors, nurses, and community members.

Witnessing this healing ministry brought to mind the ministry of Jesus, who healed the sick as a sign of the Kingdom of God. GMIM's commitment to healthcare is a continuation of that mission. As partners in mission, GMIM also invited us, as representatives of the UCA, to reflect on our own engagement in healing ministries. Are we, as the UCA, participating in the signs of the Kingdom of God through our work in ministry and mission?

Day Three: GMIM Visit with UCA President Rev. Charissa Suli

Worshipping God on Sunday is one of the most profound expressions of faith, devotion, and obedience for GMIM members. With over 2,700 ministers (more than 60% of whom are women), 11,000 deacons, and 16,800 elders, GMIM serves more than a million members across 1,100 congregations. We joined Rev. Dr. Arina at the Yesus Memberkati Citraland Congregation in Manado for a special thanksgiving service, celebrating the congregation's 9th anniversary and the completion of their church building—a project that took nine years of tireless effort. The Moderator encouraged everyone to remember the importance of walking humbly with God, emphasizing how humility strengthens our friendships, relationships, and partnerships. After lunch, we traveled to Reidel Congregation in Tondano, which shares a sister church relationship with Glen Waverley Uniting Church in Melbourne. President Rev. Charissa Suli led a prayer for Lebanon, joined by Rev. Dr. Dan Sompe, the minister at Reidel Congregation, and Dianna Wright from the Presbyterian Church (USA). The theme for this third day was humility. Humility allows us to appreciate life and seek peaceful resolutions amid differences and conflicts. It also calls us to treat one another with care and respect, regardless of the size of our community. Humility helps us live with gratitude and thanksgiving.

Day Four: GMIM Visit with UCA President Rev. Charissa Suli

Today was a day marked by a deep sense of belonging to the past, a bold embrace of the future, and a profound experience of living in the fullness of God's presence. The day began with a powerful moment of worship at GMIM's 90th Anniversary Thanksgiving Service, held in a local football field in Bitung. Surrounded by a congregation of up to twenty thousand GMIM leaders and members, we joined in joyous praise, celebrating God's unwavering faithfulness and protection over the past 90 years. The atmosphere was electric with unity. From the youngest children to the elderly, men and women alike,

the entire community participated with joy and gratitude, embodying a strong sense of belonging to the church. The event was also graced by key leaders, including executives from PGI (the Indonesian Council of Churches), moderators from other churches in Eastern Indonesia, as well as the Premier and Deputy Premier of North Sulawesi, alongside the Mayors of Bitung and Manado. Their presence underscored the significance of this milestone for GMIM. In the afternoon, a momentous occasion took place as UCA President Rev. Charissa Suli and Rev. Dr. Arnold Abbas formalized a partnership between UCA and Germita, solidifying the bond between our churches. This partnership is not just a symbol of collaboration but a commitment to journey together in faith and mission.

Reflecting on GMIM's history, we are reminded that the church's past has shaped its strong identity and sense of belonging. With this foundation, GMIM looks to the future with courage, knowing that while the future may differ from the past, it is God's hand that leads us forward. This awareness of both past and future empowers the church to live fully in the present—experiencing the Kingdom of God in the here and now, filled with the fullness of love, faith, hope, and joy.

Theological Reflection on Mapalus

(GMIM Visit with President Rev Charissa Suli)

The concept of “mapalus” a vital tradition in the Minahasanese culture of North Sulawesi, illustrates a profound theology of cooperation and community, expressed beautifully during a Sunday service through the “mapalus dance”. This dance, where one group cuts the rice and the other collects it, visually represents the harmonious working together of individuals for a shared goal. This local wisdom is more than just a practice for the village's livelihood—it embodies a deeper spiritual truth that resonates with the Christian faith. At the heart of “mapalus” is a sense of unity born from a purified heart. This first aspect reminds us of the foundation of Christian discipleship: the transformation of the heart through Christ. Just as the members of a “mapalus” group must have a pure intention to serve the community, in Christ, we are called to have hearts that are no longer driven by ego or selfishness, but by love for others. This heart transformation is the beginning of our journey toward communal life, echoing the call of Jesus to love God and our neighbors.

The second aspect of “mapalus” is an awareness of our shared humanity and responsibility. This self-awareness leads to the development of a collective responsibility within the community. As Christians, we are reminded of Paul's teaching on the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12: the body has many parts, and each part serves a unique purpose, but all work together for the common good. The “mapalus*” system trains its members to recognize their role and responsibilities within the broader community, just as the body of Christ functions when each member serves with their gifts. It is through this shared responsibility that communities thrive, in both practical and spiritual senses.

The final aspect of “mapalus”—working together to transform the community—speaks directly to the mission of the Church. As members of the body of Christ, we are called to be agents of transformation, seeking justice, peace, and reconciliation in the world. The cooperative nature of “mapalus” is a lived expression of the Christian mission, where unity in diversity creates a synergy that brings about change for the betterment of all. The “mapalus” reminds us that the goal of the body of Christ is not just to exist in harmony but to actively engage in transforming the world, bringing God's kingdom of justice and peace to life.

In essence, “mapalus” reflects the theology of the body of Christ: transformed hearts leading to communal responsibility and collective action for the sake of transformation. It is a powerful reminder that our faith is not individualistic but communal, rooted in Christ's love and united in service to God's mission. Just as “mapalus” sustains the village life in Minahasa, the body of Christ sustains and transforms the world through love, justice, and peace.

Theological Reflection on Tinutuan in Minahasanese Culture

(GMIM Visit with President Rev Charissa Suli)

Tinutuan, a simple yet deeply symbolic dish, has profound theological and cultural significance for the Minahasanese people of North Sulawesi. This traditional porridge, mixed with vegetables, transcends its role as a meal and becomes a reflection of the values, history, and faith of a community that has endured hardship and suffering. Its presence in every Minahasan household and event illustrates a deep bond between people, their land, and their faith. Historically, tinutuan emerged during times of colonial oppression under Dutch rule, when resources were scarce, and survival required ingenuity. In these conditions, the Minahasanese people gathered whatever vegetables were available, mixing them with a tiny portion of rice and cooking it with ample water. This humble meal became a symbol of resilience, reminding the community of their ability to persevere through extreme suffering. In the face of deprivation, tinutuan was a way for the people to embody hope—a hope that still resonates today. Theologically, tinutuan draws our attention to the cross of Christ. The cross stands at the heart of Christian faith as a symbol of suffering and salvation. Just as tinutuan was born out of hardship, so too did the cross represent the pain and suffering that Christ bore under oppressive powers. Yet, through the cross, there is the promise of new life, just as tinutuan sustained the Minahasanese people through their darkest times. This connection reminds us that in moments of great suffering, there is always the hope of survival and renewal. Tinutuan also fosters a profound sense of community, much like the cross creates a new family of believers. In the act of sharing this meal, there is a coming together, a solidarity that transcends individual hardship. The Minahasanese proverb, "Once you eat tinutuan, you become Minahasanese," speaks to the way this dish forms a bond between people. It is not just a physical nourishment but a spiritual one—a meal that unites people across cultural and social boundaries. It reminds us of the Eucharist, where believers, regardless of background, come together to partake in Christ's body and blood, forming one community in the

kingdom of God. Furthermore, tinutuan's emphasis on seasonal eating reflects the biblical call to care for creation. It is a reminder of the responsibility humanity has toward the earth, echoing God's call to steward creation with wisdom and compassion. By using locally available, in-season ingredients, the Minahasanese people affirm their connection to the land, acknowledging God's provision and their role in preserving the earth's resources for future generations. Finally, the diversity of ingredients in tinutuan is a powerful symbol of the unity in diversity found in the Kingdom of God. Just as this dish incorporates a variety of vegetables to create a wholesome meal, so too does the cross welcome people of different cultures, languages, and ideologies into one community. It reflects a vision of God's kingdom where peace, justice, love, and freedom prevail—where those who are different come together as one body in Christ.

In conclusion, tinutuan embodies a rich theology of resilience, community, creation care, and unity. It is a reminder that, like Christ on the cross, we can find hope in the midst of suffering, and that we are called to live in solidarity with one another, caring for creation and celebrating the diversity of God's people. Through this simple dish, the Minahasanese people offer us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, where the values of love, justice, and peace reign supreme.