

## The First ITI: Singapore August/September 1969

Marilyn Crocker tells the story in 2025

I am writing this piece 56 years after participating in the set-up, conduct and follow-up of the Ecumenical Institute's first major International Training Institute (ITI) conducted in Singapore in 1969. This was a ground-breaking effort, and the culmination of over five years of collaborative networking with denominational leaders of churches in Southeast Asia, Sub-Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands.

Teaching teams from the EI's center in Chicago had conducted international courses for lay and clergy in major Asian urban centers between 1964 and 1969. My husband, Joe, and I with colleague David McCleskey travelled from April – July 1969 teaching introductory Religious Studies courses in Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia, in part as a recruitment strategy to invite participation in the upcoming Singapore ITI. Significant teaching programs had also been offered across Australia.

Influential church leaders encouraged and supported church renewal programs. These included Bishop Yap Kim Hao, Singapore/Malaysia; The Rev. Kang Byong Hoon, Korea; The Rev. Jude Samson, Samoa; The Rev. Kwok Nai Won, Hong Kong; The Rev. Jim Bishop, Australia; Bishop Joshi, Bombay, India; The Rev. Dr. D. T. Niles, Ceylon; and many others. It was with this wide-ranging sponsorship, and the invitation of Trinity Theological College's administration and faculty, that the EI staff arrived in late July to engage in set-up.

The college campus was an ideal setting, tucked just off Mount Sophia Road, then amidst a mix of Chinese, Indian and Malay neighbors. The Rev. Kjell Knutsen, Methodist missionary to Malaysia for over a decade, and one very familiar with the culture, guided us as we sought to locate supplies and negotiate local markets. Singapore at that time was a very advanced, sophisticated nation state, and many of us on staff (myself included) had our illusions of "no, we can't find it here" burst. As for me, a first world educator, assigned among other roles to provide support to the office, I couldn't imagine we would ever be able to find anything more modern than a black-ink *Gestetner* printer. I was humbled (even humiliated) when Kjell announced in faculty meeting, "Yes, I can get us a purple-ink ditto machine!" (Only those of us who taught school before computer printers were available know what that means.)

The Trinity college dining hall, which became both our place for meals and an "auditorium" for whole group gatherings for teaching, was pretty dull and dreary. Some of us who were fussing over things like plates, napkins and salt and pepper shakers were shocked into a new dimension by the Dean's assignment: locate substantial, bright colored, table coverings – yellow, red, black, brown, green, white – AND create massive art forms for the walls depicting the gifts of the many cultures represented by our participants. We hoped every person who walked into dinner on the first evening would feel embraced by a sense of "coming home."

Each morning we met in the chapel for Daily Office, a 30-minute worship service designed as a classical “sing and response” liturgy between the liturgist and the community. Very soon we were approached by the Australian aboriginal participants, George Winnigudge and Silas Roberts, asking if they could enhance the worship with their *digeridoos*, indigenous musical instruments they had brought with them, that provide a deep, vibrant, resonating sound representing “the voice of God.” Those hauntingly beautiful sounds were added to our worship, and thereafter, everywhere the staff of EI gathered for the Daily Office anywhere in the world, the digeridoo was used.

In addition to the teaching curriculum so well outlined in the *Golden Pathways ITI Singapore Report to the Sponsors*, I would like to spotlight the Cultural Festival that occurred near the conclusion of the program. This event, totally planned by participants, gave all a chance to demonstrate -- through food, song, dance, art and drama -- the uniqueness of their own home, their own people. Amazing gifts were shared: Baskar Onawale baked the most delicious pouri and made us promise we would never let his wife know he could do this; Rani Niles took me shopping for my first ever sari, and helped me wear it with style that evening; the Pacific Islanders roasted a pig all day long, in time for us all to partake in the feast.

When we were “sent forth” to implement the area strategies articulated in the final week of planning, it was palpably present – a commitment to transform, *on behalf of*.

My husband, Joe, and I went on to teach in three more ITIs over the next three years : Hong Kong; Jabalpur India; and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Each of them was a transformative event both for us and the participants.