Summary in English

*God Remembers* is about the search for a theological basis of remembrance in communal conflict. The whole research is based on the main question, “How can the current culture of remembrance be informed by a deeper understanding of remembrance in biblical, theological, and liturgical resources of the Christian tradition in order to deepen reconciliation after the 1992-98 conflict in the HKBP?”

The question comes from the realization that our history has been wounded by traumatic experiences suffered through genocides, violence, wars, and terrors. In recent times, statue of remembrances of the past conflicts have been resurrected as symbols and warnings of the events that took place. We tend to preserve what had happened in the past for the memory of our departed. The world is shifting from trying to forgetting the painful past to remembering.

However, the new era of remembrance does not go unchallenged. Sometimes the memory of the past is too bitter to remember, and as such it seems better to forget. What is the goal of these shifts in remembering the past conflict? Is remembering better than forgetting? In the case of traumatic events, people tend to suppress their memory because it is too painful to remember. This raises the question whether victims should remember their painful memories? And if so, how do we deal with these memories?

The difficulty in remembering the past does not lie only in personal trauma, but also in the case of communal conflict. The challenges of remembrance in case of communal conflicts are even greater. How can we have a communal remembrance from different individual stories? How do we decide which memory is the right story? How do we remember correctly in communal context? How do we remember in cases of communal or personal conflicts where the role of the victims and perpetrators are not clear cut? How can remembrance be used in such communal conflict without causing more pain in the unhealed wounds? These questions challenge the idea of remembrance in communal conflict.

Communal conflict happened in churches as well. I took an example of my own church’s conflict, which is the HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestant/Protestant Batak Christian Church) 1992-98 conflict, where the Church was divided into two groups and this particular conflict has taken casualties from both sides. The church decided to re-unite and decided not to talk about the past conflict. I am questioning the Church’s way of dealing with the past conflict, if the way of forgetting is the right way for the church. If not, how can we remember the past conflict without turning it into a negative memory which could lead to vengeance and perpetual circle of violence? The conflict of the Church leads me to look for the theological foundation of remembrance especially in the case of communal conflict.

The research begins with looking at how complicated a church conflict can be. The six years conflict of the HKBP has brought pain, a substantial loss of membership, loss of material and even lives of pastors and Church’s members. The conflict was the result of multiple interests, conflict of personalities, lack of ecclesiological clarity, supported by the national current political situation, all intertwined in one event.

The HKBP then decided to reconcile in 1998 without sufficiently talking about what had happened. After analyzing the conflict, we conclude that 1998 Reconciliation General Synod happened because of: 1.) The combination of political turmoil in Indonesia; 2.) The fact that the ephorus in both camps were entering their retirement age; plus 3.) The segregations that
happened within each respective group. A willingness from both sides to reconcile hurts and grievances was left unexplored.

The hesitance of opening up the past is understandable. It was difficult to construct a history, let alone to find what really happened during the conflict in a simple manner because conflicting sides have different memory of what really happened and considered themselves as the victim of the conflict. Some may think that the Church’s decision not to talk about the past traumas anymore makes some common sense because nothing positive seems to be gained from telling and thus passing on this story. It is too painful to tell through generation upon generation. The retelling and remembrance of the painful past could stir up hidden anger among those who hear it for the first time, and also the people who have experienced the conflict.

However, the story might be too important to be silenced. Would it not be better to talk and share the stories of both conflicting sides in a spirit of reconciliation instead of forgetting it? How can we speak about the past conflict in the Church without bringing back the pain and vengeance? These questions lead us to look for the basis of remembrance in Christian tradition especially in the biblical, theological, and liturgical resources.

Remembrance has very strong biblical roots. The aspects of remembrance in the Old Testament serves as a memorial which not only serves to remind men of the past mercies of God as a ground for their presence obedience but also enables man to recall God’s past promises and deeds in thanksgiving and prayer for new blessings. It means that remembrance is always more than just a passive psychological understanding of recalling something back into the mind. The term ‘remember’ is often followed by an action, both by God or Israel. The order to remember is a strong theme in the Old and the New Testament to remember the core of the tradition which is God’s saving action towards God’s people. In connection with the sin and guilt, God also remembers what happened in the past and when God remembers it is usually connected with consequences. When past wrongs are not remembered anymore, it means that Israel is not being punished any longer and does not necessarily mean that God does not remember them.

Israel, as the chosen people of God, shares their identity in their remembrance of God. Israel’s social memory is being passed on through oral traditions and it was open to interpretation. Israel believes that they should actively re-experience and re-actualize those memories as their identity and not just as an act of calling something into mind. Thus, the memory of God’s saving action is very important for Israel to create their identity, and it shapes the present and future Israelites tradition.

The use of some words that can be translated into memory in New Testament also shows the active sense of the term ‘remember’. Communities in the New Testament time preserved their social memory on Jesus teachings through storytelling and continuous reinterpretation, and understood the story as active as Jesus self has told them the story. Although storytellers might have different details from what really had happened, the core remains the same. The purpose of what we called informal controlled type of oral tradition is that they want to keep the message alive to their own context. Memory is still acting as a strong force in the preservation of the tradition of the New Testament communities. It is not considered as a mere recalling of something back from the past, it is kept to re-live and re-experience the teachings of Jesus and to make it actual to the present context.

The continuation of the same active idea of remembrance is found in the New Testament especially in the institution of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a unique event, which was instituted by Jesus himself to remember him. Remembrance is the heart of the Eucharist, where
Jesus is being present and remembered. Even so, the Eucharist is not a whole new tradition that Jesus creates. It is actually a continuation and a renewal of the remembrance done in the Passover meal. The past deliverance of Israel by God is brought forward to the present by the present redemptive act by God in Christ and they are both to be remembered for the sake of future. Jesus is the paschal lamb that is to be sacrificed—sacrificed on the cross—and his sacrifice is a unique kairos-time event that embraces all chronological time.

With such strong biblical foundation, we shift now to what 20th century theologians have found about remembrance. Three theologians, Johann Baptist Metz, Alexander Schmemann, and Miroslav Volf, helped us to see the theological underpinnings and implications of remembrance. Their different theological backgrounds have enriched our understanding of remembrance and offer a kind of ecumenical theological understanding of the Eucharist.

All three theologians agree that Christians should not forget their memory as God’s people in the celebration of the Eucharist. This is the basis for the call to remember in the Christian tradition. The theologians agreed that the Eucharist is the source of our experience in the communion with God. This experience rooted in the memory of the cross is something that transforms the church as a community of believers.

Metz reminds us that the remembrance in the Eucharist is also to remember the suffering of Christ. The church as a community of believers cannot exclude the voices of the suffering from her context. These voices resonate with the context in which we are living and remind us of the memory of the suffering on the cross. This memory of suffering brings an implication that the Church is expected to be inspired to act as a community that remembers the suffering. God’s message in Christ speaks clearly to the communities who are insensitive to the situation of the world. And we have seen, what Metz did is giving a place to the voices of the voiceless to be heard. When we apply this to a context where communal conflict took place, then the remembrance of the suffering can be translated as remembrance of the past hurt. This means that the past hurts should be remembered, based on the theological foundation of the remembrance of the suffering. Thus, what Metz proposes is a theological basis of remembrance of the past hurt.

The place for remembrance in Christian tradition is in the liturgy. This is the contribution from Alexander Schmemann that we can incorporate. He brings the Eucharist to the fore as the most important sacrament because of its communal aspect. Schmemann also reminded us of the centrality of the Eucharist in worship and theology. Because of its central place, we should be aware of any hidden motives for using the Eucharist to anyone’s own purpose. Schmemann reminds us of the place where we can remember our past together as a community.

What we can take from Volf is, for the sake of embracing and reconciliation and to bring it to the communal context, his plea to remember truthfully. This plea is not only addressed to the victims and perpetrators, it is more for the sake of the entire community. There is a kind of handing over of personal memory to communal memory that is based on the theological ground that Christ will enable us to remember truthfully in love. Christ is the ultimate healer that remembers the pain. We can sense an eschatological hope in this idea. This hope of future in Christ does not turn us into a passive state of forgetting, rather it demands us to remember truthfully first as a condition to forgive and reconcile.

What Volf and Schmemann relate is a plea to remember the past in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is exactly the place where we can remember the past truthfully and surrender the painful memories to Christ the redeemer. This remembrance will be done at a communal level, where it becomes communal memory. Communal remembrance means taking up the
responsibility to remember as a community. The remembrance of past wrongs will be viewed from the Eucharist perspective that God remembers and ask us to remember the freedom from the pain. Here we can say that Volf would ask us to remember the past truthfully as a participant of the communal feast at the Eucharist.

This brings us to the resource of remembrance in the liturgy of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the central sacrament where the whole community celebrates the event together as one body of Christ. It is the uniting sacrament for every individual. We therefore can also learn to see this as the place for victims and perpetrators to come and celebrate the table of the Lord together. This difficult yet possible action is the time and place where people will be brought together as one. A proper liturgy of the Eucharist should be able to offer redemptive memory for the liturgy of daily life of Christians in the world. In the liturgy of the Eucharist we remember the suffering. When we say suffering, it does not mean that we only remember the memory of the victims. In communal conflict, the pain of shame and regret for wrongdoing that cannot be undone, means that perpetrators recognize that they are in need of healing and a forgiveness for actions that can only come by unmerited grace. All who heed the invitation to come recognize themselves in the brokenness of Christ. The actuality of the Eucharist invites and embraces everybody to come together as one, in a remembrance of Christ: it is His Peace we need and extend to one another. The Eucharist offers a safe place to let go of negative memory towards people who don’t want to remember the past because it is too painful. At the same time, the Eucharist also offers a place of remembrance where memory of the past will not be lost.

In order to be able to remember the past, the Eucharist gives us the assurance that we don’t have to hold on to the memories; nor that such memories have a hold on us: it is the memory of God who remembers us in Christ that is the formative memory for our lives. The community of believers will remember and bring their lives to Christ in the Eucharist. Victims and perpetrators are invited to first remember and then bring their memory to God. When personal hurts are brought to the presence of God in the memory of the Eucharist, it becomes the memory of the community. Personal stories become the story of the community, thus giving the assurance that the personal memory of the past hurt becomes that of the community. To know that one does not have to take the burden of remembering the past alone is a liberating experience. The Eucharist is the place of daring to let the bad memory and the pain to be in God’s presence with the hope of healing of memory.

The letting go of the pain does not mean that the memory will be gone. The Eucharist also acts as a place of communal remembrance, with the assurance that God remembers what had happened in our lives. When people bring their memory, they surrender it to the community, and the community brings it to God. The memory of the past becomes a communal story, and the story of God’s saving action in the light of the Eucharist. The memory is still there, but is now given a new meaning. Thus, the person can let go of their personal hurt, knowing that the memory stays, and at the same time the pain is not in the memory anymore. It has become a redemptive memory of Christ’s saving action and God’s remembrance.

It is important to note that to forget should never become a goal in the letting-go process of the painful memory, rather, it should become a viable option. While appreciating Volf’s experience and reflections, we reject Volf’s ultimate argument that says forgetting is the ultimate goal. To forget is an option only after such redemptive memory takes place, nevertheless not a goal. Knowing that the memory is now being transformed and yet remembered, people can opt to
forget, or to remember it with different meaning. Along these lines of thought, we have no need for the view that forgetting should be the final prize of eucharistic remembrance.

Even so, we still need to be aware that remembrance is not the final way of dealing with the past hurt. It opens up the way to true forgiveness and reconciliation. For remembrance is needed in order to forgive. Without the memory of the hurt you cannot forgive or even reconcile because you cannot forgive what you have forgotten. This is why remembrance is the way towards real reconciliation. The act of remembrance, especially in Christian theology, is often connected with forgiveness and reconciliation. Remembrance is a way towards real reconciliation. We suggest further research is needed on the ways of forgiveness after remembrance.

The theology of remembrance can become the church’s contribution to the memory of the suffering in the world. Like all liturgy, it is effective because its undergirding theology is sound and not because it is driven by a purposeful scheme of success. On the contrary, in a theology of remembrance the church is asked to act as an institution of remembrance of the suffering, and not the quick fix. Following this path, the church will be aware of the memoria passionis in its own context, and remembers it within the larger community of remembrance, thus giving birth to a new social memory that sees the hurt that was and still is in the light of hope of a memoria ressurectionis, that makes visible the contours of a healing reconciliation and the sure and certain knowledge that God remembers. The transformation of negative memory into positive memory can be experienced and thus celebrated in the liturgy of the Eucharist, where victims and perpetrators are invited to share their memories, together within the larger community of believers. It is to remember the fullness of Christ, and the God who remembers. The element of communal togetherness in the liturgy of the Eucharist makes us remember and pass on that hurtful memory to God. When we truly know that God remembers, the memory takes on a different meaning. The memory becomes the memory of God who was there and remembers us and our situation. After this truth is realized, we can choose to let go of the painful memory or remember it in a new way. We should keep one thing in mind: while it is human to forget, God will not forget. God remembers.