

A MISSION SPIRITUALITY FOR A UNITED CHURCH

Reflections from 50 years of experience of the Church of South India
THE ST THOMAS UNITY LECTURE

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by

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"A Creative Adventure in Church Union"

The Church of South India was inaugurated on 27th September 1947 so we celebrate this great Jubilee also in the 50th year of India's independence. *Here followed a lengthy section on the main features of the CSI union*

Problems

The main motive behind the CSI union, as already seen, was mission. Soon came signs of fundamentalist outpouring but also undue attachment to service institutions

'Charismatic' preachers practised emotional manipulation; sheep stealing, groupism, and literalist biblical interpretation grew. The evangelistic passion betrayed an Ark mentality, with unexamined doctrine and an exclusive claim of truth. There were some initiatives for social justice and conscientizing the poor for greater self-reliance; but, in my observation, with no great effect. VELCOM (Visions for Equipping Local Congregations in Mission) was a new programme in the early nineties, yet to be assessed.

In the Church's Service Institutions, jobs were sought with a view to power in church life; further, while nationally health, educational and other 'service' provision was growing, the opportunity was not being taken for the Church to concentrate on needed new 'services' e.g. AIDS, alcoholism, psychiatry, counseling, reforming educational method for the poorest.

In the India there is staggering poverty and severe corruption and in the CSI's early years there was concern for Christian participation in the issues of justice in that scene. But, again, in my observation, there is little CSI work in this sphere. The CSI has been handicapped in this because much of its public witness has been to do with its own communal interests.

Dalit Concerns

It is important to acknowledge the greatest credibility for Christian mission in India comes from those depressed communities who got their humanity back through social movements associated with that mission. About 75% of CSI members are originally from the Dalit community. But while Dalits may be spoken of as brothers and sisters, they are not encouraged in the Church to become brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. In some areas Dalit Christians are in separate churches. But the CSI has attempted to address caste issues and there have been attempts to reach out to the poorest of the poor. Yet, part of the situation is inter-Dalit conflict. All this is undergirded by the biblical vision of a vulnerable God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ and continues to identify himself with vulnerable people; and there are those who keep up that vision by their extraordinary commitment. In the wider political arena, the CSI has been handicapped because much of its public witness has been to do with its own communal interests.

Inter-Faith Concerns

Nearly 20 centuries of Christian presence, 5 centuries of Roman Catholic mission, 3 centuries of Protestant mission yet India is left with a minority of about 2.5% Christians. Surrounded by Hindu and Muslim people, what is the appropriate Christian approach?

India, North and South, has a long and distinguished tradition of Christian scholarship in the understanding of other faiths and in good inter-faith dialogue with comparable scholars and thinkers of those faiths. But, by and large, the CSI has been slow to promote inter-faith dialogue. Consequently, pastors and leaders are unfamiliar with it; so, it seems, is the CSI hierarchy. A ministry of inter-faith dialogue is needed for a reconstruction of mission in the multi-faith context of India; but there is little sign of relevant training in the dioceses.

Towards an Indigenous and Integrated Spirituality

Biblically, we see 'spirituality' in the Christian life to consist in 'sacred worldliness'; this means loving God and loving neighbour always within the Holy Spirit sustained ambience of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The CSI, as the body of Christ living in a land known for its spiritual traditions needs to work in the light of that vision.

Worship and Liturgies

In the early intention of the CSI, there was encouragement for creative liturgies relevant to the Indian context; but when The Book of Common Worship was authorized it was mostly a modification of material from the West. Resistance continues to accepting in worship enriching elements from

the Indian heritage. Meanwhile, fundamentalist groups have composed new, popular songs that tend to make Jesus a personal cult figure but lack concern for fellow human beings.

Encountering Hindu Spirituality

Hindu religious traditions are extremely complex. A single example: the Bhagavad Gita, in essence, integrates meditative discipline with moral action. Indigenization can mean adventurous immersion into some aspect of Indian spiritual tradition, "a Christ-centred syncretism". But the CSI has shown little interest. Instead, Indian economic success and the growth of a 'consumer' middle-class have brought temptation. The CSI needs, as does any church today, an economic ethic within an indigenous spirituality.

Reform and Challenge

From the CSI's second Synod onwards, successive reports have confessed "all is not well with our Church today". I have pointed to "the internal divisions and the power struggle" that are "eating up the bone marrow of CSI". Litigation escalates, especially in relation to episcopal and other elections; within a diocese a 'party' gains power and bishops themselves are in danger of being controlled by such.

United to Reform.

Yet, there are those consistent in their criticism and call for change who formed the 'People's Movement Towards Reformation of the Church of South India' (PMR-CSI); their aim, to recapture the original vision of the CSI, promote decentralized structures and people's participation in decision-making and there has been some impact.

The Challenge for Church in the UK

Ecumenism has strengthened in the UK but there remains a lack of seriousness about a united Christian witness in a divided world. There are some more progressive voices within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. There is a greater hope than before of one catholic church, fulfilling Jesus' prayer that "they may be one". Yet also, individual traditions are emphasizing their own identities: the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

No united church will be perfect; we all need to grow towards being one with the Father, as the Father and Son are one with the inter-linking Holy Spirit; thus we shall love the 'other', both God and fellow humans. Interestingly, no

historic creed mentions this, no doctrine emphasizes this, yet it is the most profound and central insight of the Bible.