

Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church

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Study:

**Christian Witness:
Rethinking the Mission of the Church**

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Translator's Note

I felt a strong need for this translation because of the world-wide spread of our Church and of our proud claim that we are a global church. Four out of our twelve dioceses are outside the Malayalam speaking state of Kerala; two dioceses are outside the boundaries of India and a large number of expatriates live in the Middle East and Africa as well. Since 1993 Sabha Council published 17 important studies for the benefit of all the members of the Church. However, these important studies are not available to the growing non-Malayalam speaking sections of our Church, which also include new communities joining our Church from our evangelical endeavours. This is very much like the 'pre-Vatican-II' *ex cathedra* declarations in Latin. It is this realisation and burden, which made me to make a comment at the Mandalam about the need for abstracts of these works in other languages and particularly in English. This landed me in trouble and our Metropolitan very kindly suggested that I should do this translation. His Grace, The Metropolitan, also made sure that this instruction is recorded in the minutes of the Mandalam. Distinguished members of the Mandalam who have the scholarship in both languages and theological insights on the theme promised to help me, but when approached all of them explained their busyness in a variety of ways and I was left with the baby.

Translating this study was very painful for me in many ways: I have not realised that Malayalam has grown so much over the last fifty years and even Malayalam dictionaries cannot cope up the speed with which our writers who are constantly inventing words as they go along. The never ending constructions of sentences and writing in a 'preaching mode' gave me problems. It took many years of hard work to learn to think in English and then speak and write in English, but this translation gave me the most difficult task of reverting to think in Malayalam, get into the mindset of writers of this study and then translate it, which I do not think I have succeeded.

Therefore, I sought help from few friends to find appropriate equivalent words; a word like 'unmma' and similar ones fooled some of them as well. Then I remembered that most vegetables are usable for that very tasteful dish in Kerala cuisine, 'aviyal.' Therefore, this translation is in no way perfect, this is all I could come up with. I apologise to the distinguished group of scholars who prepared the study for any omissions, additions or for any unintentional wrong representation because I do understand my responsibility that my presentation should be a faithful representation of their material.

All in all this is an important study, which merits much wider exposure; therefore, it should be made available to a much wider readership particularly among our younger generation of the Diaspora. I want to particularly thank Mr. Mathew Kallumpram, my dear and very valuable sparing partner, for the help with the third chapter. I hope this would give encouragement to the Council in asking the authors of future studies to prepare a synopsis of their work in English for the Tharaka.

I thank the members of the Mandalam, Rt. Rev. Dr. Geevarghese Mar Theodosius and Most Rev Dr. Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan for giving me this opportunity. I also express my sincere thanks to Rev K. S. Mathew, Sabha Secretary, for the time and effort that he spent on editing it and publish it.

Prof. Dr. Zac Varghese FRCPath, London
14 October 2009

Chapter 1

Paradigm shift in mission: a historical appraisal of the mission of the Church

Christian mission requires a new understanding and reflection in every age. Although the word mission is not discussed as such in the bible, mission or Christian witnessing is deeply interwoven in the metanarrative of the scripture. The word mission is derived from its Latin root--mitto, which implies the meaning of sent or being sent. Mission is always implied in the very structure of the bible. God has entrusted his son, Jesus-the Christ, with a mission and a message for establishing his kingdom on the earth with the help of the Holy Spirit. The mission that Jesus inaugurated has become the sole responsibility of his disciples under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The early church at Pentecost became a witnessing community of God's kingdom. We see a partnership and presence of a Trinitarian God in the historical development of this divine mission.

There has been enormous paradigm shifts in our understanding, emphasis, and praxis of Christian mission over the last twenty centuries. This historical appreciation is crucial for engaging in mission activities in the present time. However, in this introductory chapter we are only giving few light brush strokes in painting various models of Christian mission.

Mission of the Early Church:

The purpose of preaching kingdom values, for the disciples, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit was not about just planting churches, but was about the centrality of the cross and the redemptive power of the resurrection providing enormous possibilities for the regeneration of the world and the creation of a new society. For the early witnessing community witnessing was not just a special moral code or a professional obligation of their election; it was indeed their whole life (Acts 1:18). Early Christians in their simple, ordinary life situations, created an extraordinary language of love and living patterns, which still have an amazing influence on all models of mission.

The following were some of the special characteristics of the mission of Jesus and the early Church:

1. Revolutionary Model.

The early witnessing pattern of the church in the Greco –Roman milieu created the image of a revolutionary model through their simple but deeply meaningful and symbolic declaration of allegiance to Jesus, the Christ. This was indeed a powerful challenge and rejection of the existing politico-religious hegemony of the Roman Empire. The total liberation made possible in and through Jesus; they challenged the exclusive, personalised, private religious patterns, and powers of the time; they totally rejected the separation of life into secular and religious enclaves. Instead, the revelations of God in Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God which was inclusive and integrated all the way from the margins to the centre and centre to the margins of our existence.

2. Creation of a new community.

This revolutionary pattern of Christian witnessing created a special relational bonding within and without the faith community. It became abundantly clear that in Christ's new family there can be no division into Jews and Gentiles, masters and slaves, males and females, rich and poor, the periphery and the centre. In this witnessing community everyone is equal. That is, in this new faith community, all are in a common relationship with Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28). This fraternity and solidarity removed all man-made divisive tendencies through the unconditional love of God.

Therefore, the fundamental characteristic of the early Christian witnessing is neither the rejection of the world that God created nor an extravagant expectation of a new world order yet to dawn: it was also neither about safeguarding and stabilising the world as they knew it nor rejecting the possibilities of a new world yet to come. Witnessing was about establishing kingdom values by living out their faith in the places and positions where God placed them.

3. Mission Models of Eastern Church from 2nd to 6th Century.

There had been distinctive differences in the missionary activities from the second century onward. Mission emphasis and pattern have shifted from a Hebrew culture to a Gentile culture. Emphasis on immediate eschatological and apocalyptic expectations shifted to the idea of 'to be in the world and not of the world.' The spontaneity of Christian mission moved to structured and codified patterns; witnessing moved from the ordinary simple folks to intellectuals and valued social classes; Emperor Constantine put his official authority and seal in institutionalising Christian mission and making the church an extension of the state bureaucracy.

With this the direction and style of Christian mission changed; inclusiveness and classlessness shifted to safeguarding special interest groups and exclusiveness. Christians and the church became symbols of cultural, intellectual and economic elitism. A tendency was developed to look down on others who are not in the fold of Christian influence and social structures. This otherness gave faith community opportunities for exercising power and showing generosity by handing out charity with an arrogant patronising 'mission compound' attitude.

When Christian churches in the western world increasingly became an arm of the state, wielded power and amassed wealth, eastern churches remained outside such power structures for carrying on with their mission. Although Asian churches were a minority, they were actively involved in Christian mission. Around AD 225 Syrian Church sent its mission to many regions of Asia; this was particularly significant with Nestorians.

4. Protestants and Reformation Model

Growing Papal power and influence created unstoppable turbulence in the church in the 13th and 14th century Europe. This resulted in the reformation movement of Martin Luther, which changed the witnessing pattern of the church.

The impetus for reformation started with the theological understanding of salvation narrative in Christ. A deeper understanding about the means of salvation and how it is achieved contributed to reformation. A greater understanding of Pauline teachings of justification by faith and grace operating through the death of Jesus in our place and on our behalf has continued to contribute to the ongoing reformation in the church. Various emphases on these theological understandings and debates about means of salvation and justification have some times helped and at other times hindered mission activities. Although we declare that mission belongs to God our independence and self-centred interests may affect mission in major ways.

Reformation somehow emphasised the importance of the individual and his personal freedom in contrast to the restriction of individual rights and privileges for the common good of the community. Such an understanding creates a myth that individuals can exist without the community, and man is not created for the community.

Reformation denied the indisputable authority of the Pope over sacramental life and faith of the members of the church. In its place bible has become the foundational guide for faith and mission of the church.

Reformation has not considered many issues outside the structure and governance of the church for the following reasons:

1. Reformists were particularly concerned about changes needed within the church.
2. Non-Christians were not a significant component of their communities.
3. They were fighting their own battle for survival.
4. Up until reformation, monastic orders were the main agencies for mission, but opposition to monastic endeavours by reformists prevented further progress in mission through monastic orders.
5. There were many internal conflicts within the 'Reformation Movements,' which prevented the vitality and progress of mission- related activities of the church.

5. Enlightenment Paradigm

The age of enlightenment starting in the 16th century made reason the guiding principle. “I think, therefore I am” was the mantra of the age. It was founded upon scientific knowledge of the world and the rational knowledge of the self, with emphasis on individual human life and freedom, promising social, political and intellectual progress to all. Modernity is obsessed with evidence-based realities. Truth had to be discovered intellectually and through reason. Hence there is a dualism between truth and reason. Modernisation brought seemingly indisputable social, economical and political benefits to western nations, which they genuinely believed as human progress and exercised domination over other less developed nations and peoples of the world. Revolutions in science and technology have also been used for dominating, even destroying natural and environmentally balanced eco-systems for selfish interests of ego-centred man. There has been a strong emphasis that human progress is only possible through a rigorous scientific outlook and an increase in human perfection through an increase of self-centred achievements and knowledge.

Church’s response to the age of reason through its missionary activities varied: some viewed Christian faith as a stand alone attitude of mind; others viewed it as a privatised and personal experience; some tried to elevate it above scientific logic and reason through theological dialectics. It also has been used as a social yardstick for measuring goodness and humanitarian outlooks and some even used it for liberating mankind from religious shackles.

6. Post-modern Paradigm

Within a very short time, towards last decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, western world lost its reliance on modern gods and goddesses of philosophy, scientific knowledge, and industrialisation. Post-modernity reacts to the tenants of modernity and remain suspicious of truth, of authority, of church, and of governments. Many cataclysmic world events shook the foundations of western civilisation: world wars, Russian and Chinese revolutions, devolutions of colonial administrations, growth of atheism, north–south divide and the gulf between the rich and the poor nation-states of the world are some of the examples of mega earthquakes that hit the world and shook its foundations. These and many other events made us realise human success is just another mythical illusion, a utopia.

Under these circumstances, the mission of the church needs to be entirely different from that of the earlier times. We need to take stock of and respond to the changed and changing circumstances of the world to provide a tailor-made mission, which is faithful to Christian traditions and values.

David Bosch outlines transforming mission paradigm shifts in the following terms: “it is relational because it gives primacy for the dynamic relationship between God and the world; the church is intrinsically missionary in its very nature and therefore we should think of the church’s mission rather than the church and mission: the church is God’s pilgrim community; the church is not for the people, but more than that the church is of the people; there is inviolable organic unity between people of God.”

The mission of the church is a longing for justice, spreading the gospel, regeneration, liberation, enculturation, witnessing and a hope- filled action.

7. New pathways of mission from 1960.

The creation of the world Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 and the second Vatican council (1962-65) gave impetus for new pathways in mission. An ecumenical flavour to the Christian mission happened to exist after the merger of the International Missionary Council with the WCC at the 1961 WCC General Assembly at New Delhi. This work continues under the division of 'World Mission and Evangelism' of the WCC.

Ecumenism:

Before an ecumenical dimension of the mission evolved the mission priority was in the order of God- Church –World. Since then this priority has shifted to the order of God-world-Church. This meant that the involvement of the church in deciding church-centred mission agenda has been lost in favour of secular issues guiding the priorities of the mission. The priority today seems to be the collaboration with all people of goodwill. Thus the emphasis of mission has shifted to secular agenda such as health and education. Salvation has encountered a humanising dimension; transformation of the society and the world became more significant than individual's salvation and personalised spirituality.

Salvation agenda gained a wider meaning, to include the whole created earth, in the eighties and towards the end of eighties; the purpose of mission has become the transformation of the universe. The main theme of Harare Assembly of the WCC was "Come Holy Spirit- Renew the Whole Creation." The ecumenical vision of the nineties was critical of compulsory religious conversion. A reconciled and renewed creation has become the goal of the mission of the church in 2000. This vision of God uniting all things in Christ has become the driving force of mission with the hope that the Holy Spirit will renew and empower the church in every place to participate fully in God's mission of healing, reconciliation and restoration. It is in this understanding that the possibilities of common witness and concerns for expressing church's unity for Christian mission are to be realised.

A historical appraisal of mission reveals certain well validated methodologies, which would help us to rethink on how to encourage churches to bear witness to God's intentions to heal a fractured world and create a new community in the perspective of God's kingdom on earth. The following is an attempt in this context.

8. A Rethinking on Mission Paradigms:

8.1 Mission as an Announcement or Declaration or Proclamation

Mission was primarily a declaration of the 'good news' in the first century, but they did not see a dichotomy between talking and walking their faith. In their mindset mission was

organically integrated with evangelism and social service. In this understanding they created a theology of cohesion bringing together faith and action, spiritual and secular, individual and community; this seamlessness unified all aspects of life in the context of mission. Gospel is the manifesto of the kingdom of God because God's kingdom is the new just society in Jesus. The church undertook the responsibility of declaring the good news as a partner in God's great commission. In general terms, the great commission was taken for granted as a programme for declaring life and mission of Jesus Christ to the world and to bring everyone to a common fold of discipleship (see wide infra). In this, the church viewed gospel as their inheritance and it became their heritage and responsibility to plant churches through evangelisation. They misunderstood the call to discipleship by carrying the cross of Christ as simply of planting churches. However, socio-economic situations challenge religious fundamentalism and sectarianism. The church is called out for creating a just society.

8.2. Mission as historicising and Epistemologising Jesus Movement

Jesus Movement was developed through Christian disciples; in Christ a new community was formed and nurtured. Politico- religious conventions and cultural developments of Roman Empire stabilised this new community. This new 'walled, enclosed community' opened up to create an inclusive community involving all socially and economically marginalised people who were kept as waste heaps outside the city walls as outcasts. Today the church needs to appreciate this historical background of mission for establishing a covenant of amity and cooperation for a creating a just society. The church needs to re-establish this historical tradition through liberation movements. This longing for justice and relationships should become the hallmarks of a witnessing Church.

8. 3. Mission as Re-reading of the Biblical Text for a Relevant Ecclesiology

The vision of Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine's theological treatises helped to develop an ecclesiology for the church in the mediaeval period. Following St. Augustine's teachings God, sin, grace and such became ecclesial resources; churches became centres of wealth, power and privileges. Theological discourses were prevented outside the church circles. The church through its administrative structures controlled all aspects of religious and secular activities of the society; it became increasingly focused on building itself rather than promoting the kingdom. The church thought to have the God-given commission to Christianise non-Christian world. Reformation was a critical challenge to such established attitudes and praxis of the church. The bible became the foundation for entrenched reformation principles. Through biblical study and interpretation the church gained wisdom and understanding; it further helps us to understand situations and to question our thought processes. The bible questions the tendencies to codify faith in such a way to exploit people through religious practices and sacraments. Rereading the bible and establishing biblical authority for appropriate contextual requirements should be considered as an important aspect of the mission of the church.

8.4. De-Colonising the Colonial Methodologies

Post colonial attitudes have been developed as a result of the dominant Euro-centred dialectics, renaissance, enlightenment, and the hegemony of the secularism. The colonial mission model developed during the period of enlightenment. Historically, reason and logic directed a secularly-oriented western Christian culture, which influenced a colonial model of mission. Westerners crossed their geographical and cultural boundaries to reach out to an ‘uncivilised domain’ and searched for opportunities to ‘civilise’ them in a western mode. To them mission was not just about sharing the gospel, but also about extending boundaries of their empire by colonisation.

The beginning of colonial mission paradigm was adaptation and accommodation. Through these two modes and priestly hegemony they Christianised colonies.

Indigenisation is involved in adopting religious symbols and worshipping pattern in the cultural contexts while remaining faithful to scriptures and its interpretation. Inculturation is the adaptation of the way church teachings are presented to alien cultures and to influence those other cultures without losing the purity and power of the gospel. It is the incarnation of the gospel in the native culture without affecting its purity and power. The critiques of colonial mission models suggest that these paradigms were not considered to be compatible with Indian caste systems and it was felt that western colonial attitudes and standards were used for deciding boundaries and parameters of mission.

8.5. Mission: Contextualisation of Liberative Methodologies.

Liberation movements have germinated from challenging the sufferings of the oppressed sections of communities. Rev. K. C. Abraham stated, “Freedom struggles are new paradigms for theologising the experience of the peoples of the third world.” This model is a different praxis from the traditional Christian mission methods. This practical theology is not discarding theoretical Christianity, but embodies actions, which help transformation. The ‘action-directed thoughts’ and ‘thoughts-directed actions’ provide the praxis. Freedom struggles directly challenge exploitation and give a new agenda for mission-oriented action and its reformulation. Here mission is in partnership and for strengthening the commitment of unity with others.

8.6 Deconstruction of Representation and Narration in Mission

Destroying ego boundaries and reaching out to others by extending self is a process of understanding and fulfilment. Therefore, culture, language, and style of mission are entirely of those who are involved in mission. Mission reports, particularly of its working patterns, experiences and descriptions, are entirely representative; presentation is just representation. Post-modernity wants to deconstruct, but it is not clear about reconstruction; this has consequences for the church. But sensitive mission is a celebration of local experiences and critical reception. This is possible because of the deconstruction of existing descriptive reporting and associated thinking patterns. Mission is not something that we do outside our usual area of involvement, but much more than

that it is a cooperative action in Jesus with other communities. Here we see mission as an engagement with others for embodying kingdom values for empowering us for a mission-oriented lifestyle. Mission narratives are the stories and dreams of partners in mission. More than becoming a voice of the voiceless in the community, we should become agents for searching out for distinctive voices of communities and harmonise it to create a symphony which in itself would become an impetus for developing a transforming mission.

9. Background of Mission in the Contemporary World

Today we live at a time when many new ideas of mission are evolving and in a space which is highly crowded like a public square. In addition we also notice the emergence of protective self-centred mission activities for safeguarding the interest of various faith communities for enlarging their heap of resources, power and influence; this creates conflicts and self-perpetuating and unending struggles for occupying the space in the public square and the media. Under this circumstance Christian mission is not only from centre to periphery but also from every where to everywhere. It is an absolutely necessary and unavoidable responsibility to find ecumenical partnership with various mission agencies involved in creating just and peaceful communities. The sign of this kind of commitment for developing this partnership in mission is not power and domination but shelter and hospitality. Hospitality is not the accommodation and sheltering of existing unjust factors. Hospitality, sheltering, and welcoming are important elements for eliminating the time-old practice of subjugating people and confiscating their human rights on the basis of caste, colour and gender.