

## Chapter 3

### Christian Witness: Contemporary Challenges

God's people, who are called out and designated to proclaim and work for the kingdom of God, are a faith community. This community reveals God's will for this world. It is an extraordinary life of witnessing as well. The defining reality of this witnessing is the church. This witnessing is the authentic self expression of the Church. The missionary vision of the Eastern Church is witnessing. The experiential praxis of witnessing has made it into the salt and light of God's world for transforming the community; in existing as salt and light fresh expressions are possible. This is expressed as a vision, a habit, and a lifestyle. This witnessing has communitarian and spiritual spaces for social and internal societal transformation. A continuous conversation and debate are the means by which it is possible to develop and integrate meaningful vision, core basic values, understanding, and spiritual thought processes. It is in this continuous witnessing conversation the church becomes the church. This fresh expression challenges the neighbourhood. It is the witnessing community, which corrects and being corrected. Christian witnessing is not one dimensional, single style-based, monoculture modality of action. It has dynamic possibilities, which leads to creative justice and righteousness. It has many voices; it is in continuous dialogue with neighbourhoods. It is a challenge for self correction and correcting others, this correction is deep. A fresh awareness of the scripture and the traditions of the church become possible when we entwine the fibers of our private and public lives. A fresh understanding of the weaving of this fabric is unavoidable to reach new avenues of witnessing. The reading of the word and entwining the fibers are unavoidable for discovering new spheres of witnessing. This fresh awareness helps us to face conflicting challenges arising from witnessing to find answers for disputes, and for prioritising spheres of action, which in general can be separated into two sections: firstly, within the faith communities we need new paradigms, which can support socio-economic, cultural and spiritual spaces. Secondly, we need props to support the relationships between faith communities and the society at large. Faith community becoming the conscience of the society is unavoidable for seeking new avenues of understanding and characteristic action styles to offset conflicts. The discovery of suitable areas for action is also essential. As a witnessing community the question, what is the significance of the Church in today's legal entanglements and lawsuits, is relevant. Those who are elected to be a witnessing community should always remain vigilant about the rise of counterculture revolutions. This is the experiential lesson of Golgotha, of spiritual offering, of construction of social justice, of relationships and of new society. Witnessing community is a spiritual community anchored in both secular and sacred issues; there is no dichotomy between sacred and secular.

The essence of the Church is a spiritual self-realisation. Jesus Christ through his 'sermon on the mount' paints a fresh understanding of the 'Law of the Lord' to show the wider aspects of its spirituality. Human and divine ethical concerns stand emphasised as the crowning achievements of a prophetic tradition. God is challenging us to reform and demolish unjust and immoral institutions, to reject deep worldly immoral concerns and awareness in the light of God's kingdom, and to build a vision based on ethical traditions

of God's kingdom. Witnessing is the continuation of this ethical awareness, which God has raised in this world. The early Church was challenged with persecution and death when it integrated ethical issues into its consciousness; this was the nature of the witnessing Church. During the persecution of the early church, Church Fathers demonstrated moral and ethical character of the church and planted foundation communities. Justice, love, compassion, and equality were the basis of this enlightenment. A prophetic approach to the powerless, widows and socially-rejected people have become a creative impulse for witnessing by this community. The Church Fathers pointed out the inevitability of remaining as a model community. Do we have the awareness and preparedness of showing the mutuality of loving kindness toward those who hurt us? We have come to a situation where witnessing is often lost in the spiralling vortex of immorality. The celebration of justice is an inevitable aspect of witnessing. The purity of ethics and morality makes the church a witnessing community. Today doubts and failures are surviving; violence is spreading. Witnessing is possible when we become a just society with social conscience.

### **Witnessing Community is a Worshipping Community:**

Worship is the creative expression of witnessing. When worship is reduced into mere rituals or clattering noises, it prevents witnessing. Worship is the celebration of salvation received through the kingdom of God; it is about God's incarnation as man, rejection, death, and eternity and the continuity of abundant life through the resurrection experience; this witnessing is a celebratory expression and proclamation. A contemporary approach to worship is unavoidable for witnessing; a fresh understanding of idols and iconic symbols in worship should be possible. A self-awareness as a 'baptised community' or 'Eucharistic community' reveals different aspects of witnessing. A self-awareness of having died and buried in Christ and resurrected with him expresses many facets of witnessing. Through the sharing of the broken body and blood of Jesus Christ, witnessing community is expressing the self-confidence for breaking itself for the world. Each baptismal and each Eucharistic offering is a new revelation of witnessing; it is an expression of self-realisation; it is a proclamation of offering of ourselves for the divine purpose. It is through worship, we constantly proclaim who God is and what God's desires are for the world and mankind. Therefore, worship is not a search engine for privatised-heavens. On the other hand, it is the place where the witnessing community reveals God's will for the world. By challenging the world continuously through worship, the faith community is revealing God's will to the world. God's salvation history is celebrated in worship and through which the community conducts a dialogue with the world.

### **Witnessing Community: a community, which facilitates social reformation.**

The witnessing community, which is the sign and sacrament of God's kingdom, expresses its core values through social transactions. The Church being the moral consciousness of the society, always works for the elimination of unjust structures and for

the rendering of justice and to give emphasis for establishing new social awareness and practices. The formation of this new social order through the witnessing community is firmly founded on the theological foundations expressed in Mary's song of bringing down aristocracy from their thrones and lifting up the humble. This visionary agenda is expected to scatter even those who are proud in their inner most thoughts and extend mercy to those who fear the Lord from generation to generation. A critical attitude towards institutionalised religion, religious establishments, and their vested interests, hereditary and hierarchical manipulations is unavoidable. Opting for a blazing furnace instead of an easy choice of falling down and worshipping the golden image, which the king erected, is witnessing; this was the beginning of building an alternate social worship and society. The self-centred religious initiatives of Ahab and Jezebel are fake religious expressions for exploitation. Elijah's witness in this incidence is the expression of an alternate religious awareness. Challenging power structures and challenging religious awareness are part of the prophetic heritage of Nathan who rebuked David, and John the Baptist who bore the brunt of Herodia's anger. Crossing, in the presence of Jesus, the boundary line erected by Judaism is the foundation of a new creation. By healing the hand of the paralysed man and the crippled woman on the Sabbath, Jesus taught a new socio-spiritual interface and understanding of Sabbath of helping people and not leaving them helpless. It is a movement to fullness; it is a jolt/kick at their hard-nosed religion; it is a stand against all existing unjust structures of the society. It is a challenge for the transformation of the society. It is searching for swatham/order. It is the meeting point of Christ-related swatham/order. Here is the parting of ways, it is a challenge, and it is an opportunity for revision. In all these, we see the summation of all ideas of justice. The creation of this new society is the expression of freshness (Unmma), **reformation, rewriting**. In the witnessing life of the Malankara Church we have enlightenment, reformation, reconstruction and through these we have challenges and trumpet calls for the creation of a new society or social structures.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when casteism was rampant, Mathews Mar Athanasius Malankara Metropolitan who gave leadership for reformation observed, during his travels, Christian women standing in water for long periods as some sort of a societal punishment; he listened to their stories of persecution handed out by high caste Hindus. He fought against injustices to give security and freedom for Christian women. In a caste-ridden society he raised the banner of a new social order. Abraham Mar Thoma, who opposed the autocratic administrative style of Sir C. P. Rama Swami Iyer, helped to teach who evangelists are and what the gospel is; this led to a new understanding of witnessing and challenged witnessing communities. The realisation of Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan that as long as there is homeless people, his new home is meaningless to him; this led him to raise the witnessing community to a new social order. The courage of the Metropolitan to point out dangerous dark sides and severe injustices of the 'Emergency Rule' in India and his efforts in opposing the actions of the government are prime examples of his prophetic witnessing. C. P. Mathew, K. K. Kuruvilla, T. M. Varghese and such leaders showed courage by becoming partners for creating a new social order. We see the Christian presence in the fight for national independence. Many medical doctors offering their lives for working in the villages of Andhra and Orissa were a special feature of this period. Advocate P. A. Cyrus shows us the depth of the

engagement of the Christian witnessing community through his work for a Christ-centred new social order in Orissa. But, are we losing the inner strength of this type of witnessing today? Is this family of witnessing writing its last chapter and its own obituary? Witnessing is not possible when selfishness and self interests become the hallmarks of the new social order. This would be a failure of the mission and a rejection of the freshness/innocence of the witnessing community. Church may degenerate into an institution or establishment under this scenario.

Dependence on past achievements is symbolic of this degeneration. We have become a decrepit ancient monument with inability to respond meaningfully to today's issues/*Samasisyas*, challenges and realities; it is a symbol of degeneration and hopelessness; a symbol of the inability to provide a challenge and a vision for a new social order. As a result, nobody is taking the church seriously; church has become irrelevant and decadent. Those who are called out to be different, those who are called out to reform the world through them being different have been transformed into nothingness or meaninglessness, they have lost their savour. Witnessing will be discarded and mankind will be trampling over it. In order to respond meaningfully to contemporary challenges, to develop new styles of action and awareness through which to create an agenda based on core kingdom values, the church needs to develop an in depth self analysis and dynamics for becoming promoters of justice.

This vision of the faith community gives emphasis for realistic and meaningful witnessing. Worshipping community is a moral community. It is the witnessing community, which gives priority for social reformation. A clear understanding of what challenges are directed towards witnessing is unavoidable. Do we discuss meaningfully Christian witnessing in our institutions, establishments and traditions? What are the fields that we should consider for this discussion?

### **1. Active Mission Field:**

As pointed out before, Eastern Churches understand mission as witnessing. Faith is proclaimed in the society through lifestyle. Styles, character and such have importance. It is an expression of self; it is a search for identity. The search for this identity is manifested in the relationship between God and man. Therefore, every agenda designed by the faith community is a creative expression of witnessing. When the Church received the heritage of reformation it selected three fields of activities for witnessing.

#### **A. Education Sector**

Western missionaries marked the start of a new deal in education, which had previously been the traditional prerogative of high castes; high castes had the monopoly over education. The vision that low castes also have a right to education gave an impetus for their emancipation and liberation. It created space for reformation and resurrection. With the aim of uplifting villages through education, the primary school education was given a forward thrust. Mar Thoma Church also took a partnership in this venture. Our

forefathers established more than 120 primary schools. It influenced the lifestyle and future of a generation. Knowledge is opened up for everyone; it provided new possibilities, provided impetus for social justice. They have used various methods for collecting funds for this including gifts of a portion of the daily rice used for cooking (pidiari) and gifting of coconuts trees. 'Teacher - evangelists' gave a new vision for the society. They conducted transactions for re-building social conscience. Generations found a better future through these educational establishments. They became landmarks, symbols, milestones, of faith and witnessing for decades. The idea of 'common good' and related social changes became possible through these schools. Now education has become a means of profit; it has become a commodity, a business. What is our witness in education sectors now? Now we consider that some of these primary schools and secondary schools as uneconomic. These institutions have become unattractive even to the children of the teachers of these schools. The courage and commitment for charitable work has been lost. Higher education sector is in no way different, are we becoming a society incapable of expressing generosity because of the growth of independent establishments, which make education a business or market? What is our witness in the education sector now? What it should be?

#### B. Health Care Sector

Church has a responsibility to nurture the growth of a witnessing community in the health care sector. Hospitals are started as a healing service in Christ. Many hospitals are facing difficulties for providing service for the lack of doctors and other health care workers with commitments. When the health care sector gets entangled in the grips of the business culture, institutions and workers with service mentality and vision may lose their interests. At one time medical students after the completion of their studies centred their care and services in the Indian villages. Today villages are suffering for the lack of health care workers. Has Vinaya Sen's heritage become a closed chapter? Is it possible to challenge Mar Thoma medical students qualifying from medical schools up and down the country to take up these challenges? Is it possible to develop an attitude and vision for dedicating one tenth of our earnings for the 'common good' of the society, transcending commercial interests and profit making?

#### C. Evangelistic work- Mission Fields:

As a result of witnessing life spreading beyond the old boundaries, evangelistic work has become the hallmark of the Mar Thoma Church. Standing firmly within its strong reformation principles and without losing its Eastern authenticity this work has rushed forward with great vigour. The work in the Dalit communities was very active. St. Luke (Puthuparamp), Othara parish and many hundreds of such worshipping communities took shape. Worshipping communities like Puthuparamp have hundred and twenty-five years of history. South Travancore, Palghat, Ankola, Sihora and such missions are the examples and heart beats of a witnessing life. We have seen similar mission activities in the borders of Nepal and Tibet. Some people with higher education accepted this as the vision of their lives. Worshipping communities with different languages and cultures are now part of the Mar Thoma Church. But how far we are able to assimilate, internalise and

appreciate the innate authentic creative parts of their symbols and icons! Are we knowingly or unknowingly involved in enforcing a presumed superior Syrian Christian culture and practices in creating their new identities? Do social cohesion and integration become impossible because of our aversion to cultural differences and inability to transcend communal barriers? The integration of Dalit and multilingual communities, which are part of the Church, should become meaningful.

Equally important are the Diaspora communities, now into fourth and fifth generations and a significant part of our church. How does witnessing become a possibility in these communities? People who are born and brought up under different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have their social consciousness embedded in these new environments. Diaspora community is raising new challenges in witnessing. How do we meaningfully continue the witnessing in Diaspora communities? Diaspora parishes, which were powerful at one time in the industrial cities and towns of the eastern states of India, now have a dwindling membership. In these towns, opportunities are scarce and diminishing for our young generation. They are moving out to greener pastures for betterment and development. Therefore, this is becoming a rootless generation. The older people of the first diaspora generation are now returning to their places of birth. There is scarcity of opportunities for using these people as resources for witnessing; they have so much to give. We should develop new witnessing paradigms based on our past experiences in forming parishes and congregations in South Africa and New Zealand for the second and third generation Diaspora Mar Thoma Christians who migrated there due to scientific and technological expansions and demands. Far and above building new church buildings and institutions we should think of models of witnessing for the common good of the society and for good social cohesion. Diaspora community should not be just a ghettoised colony of Malayalee Syrian Christians, but carry the dream for the whole society for bringing out Christ-centred social changes. They should become a dynamic force for the ethical transformation of communities where they work and live.

Seventeen year olds who leave home for studies in distant places are a group without any recognition and direction. In the midst of varied influences they are becoming a generation without any worthwhile formative guidance. The invasion of the market culture and competition is of great significance. They are losing the influence of Sunday schools and worship services in their frantic guideless lives. Church should have paid careful attention to these demographic changes.

Women, children, and senior citizens should become central areas for witnessing. Discrimination against women is still prevalent. We have tortured women and abused children. The empowerment of women deserves higher priority in witnessing. People who suffer from HIV/ AIDS, for no fault of theirs, is a big challenge in front of us. Children who lose their childhoods due to child-molestation and abuse; old people are forced to live in homes, which are in effect secret bird cages; these are realities of our social existence. An equally important sector is the people who suffer from mental and physical handicaps; they also deserve our concerted attention. The holy bible gives us a basis for witnessing through developing partnerships with such deprived communities.

Joel/Jubilee year and first harvests are Old Testament expressions of this reality. The woman with haemorrhage, widow of Nain, Bartimaeus, Syrophenician woman, Zacchaeus are highlights of Jesus' approach to marginalised people. David's care and concern for the wellbeing of Mephibosheth is another example of this approach. (2 Sam 9). Our witnessing is being reduced to the mere provision of shelter homes, orphanages and bread crumbs. The essence of Christian witnessing is to move the people from the margins of the society to the centre of our witnessing, to make minorities into active partners, to facilitate them to chisel out their own aims and priorities and in the process we should enable them to be strong to visualise their needs instead of doing the thinking for them. This is the way to get rid of the patronising attitudes inherent in mission-related activities. The marginalised minorities are in the limelight today and they deserve our attention; this is a reality. Here we should be able to take a Christ-centred stand.

Similarly divorcees are another group deserving attention. Furthermore, in this situation, as a result of family breakdown love and care are blocked and members of the family are compelled to cut down and break off relationships. Children are denied intimate relationships and care at a vital stage in their development; they are denied love and tenderness in spite of the fact their parents are still alive, well, and having a life of their own. Local parishes should pay special attention to this scene in the context of varied life situations of today. Family is the place where witnessing first takes place, it is the workshop. Faith formation, its nurturing and praxis should intimately occur within the family. The breakdown families, which are the symbol and sacraments of God's kingdom, should be considered as the cause and consequence of the failure of societies; this takes the shine of witnessing, witnessing fades. All the above crashes are barriers against building healthy communities. These situations are challenges to effective witnessing and building healthy communities.

The 'general/civil society' is another important factor for consideration in conjunction with witnessing. It is the 'general society,' or the society at large which creates the stage for witnessing because of the challenges thrown at it. A growing tendency of opposition against Christian witnessing is a reality today, anti-religious secularism is growing; religious intolerance and religious fundamentalism are gathering strength. Formulation of socially just policies for accommodating religious tolerance has diminished. The vision for peaceful coexistence is diminishing; so are the inconsistencies in mutual understanding. Strangers are being increasingly alienated by treating them as an enemy. Together with these are the instigations and propaganda for creating uniformity or a 'homogenising monoculture,' which are the discordant noises against diversity. This is against the philosophy of unity in diversity. This single image creation, uniformity, may force to reject existing idol. The identity created through this rejection will create violence and fanaticism in one way or other. Therefore, witnessing should gather its momentum and vitality through its stand against violence. The incarnation of a social order emerging from mutual dependence, respect and an aversion to all injustices should be the signpost of witnessing. Opposition to growing religious fundamentalism and increasing persecutions, violence, torture, and religious crusades are issues deserving active attention.

Globalisation and consumerism create greed and a profiteering culture; these sectors require the attention of the gospel. Problems arising from economic recession and economic crash of richer, affluent, nations are all witnessing sectors deserving attention. Cultural and economic globalisations and the resulting personal crisis provoke a reassessment to value systems, which deserve a special reflection. The spread of western values and its knowledge banks and environment, its social structures, and all such things affect meaningful witnessing and deserve reflections. Western-dominated conceptualisation of mission should be reviewed in the context of indigenisation of mission and witnessing.

Another area deserving our attention is the 'New Age Spirituality;' It is part of the modern society. It is a revolt against established traditional religions and their institutionalised attitudes, idols, sacraments and traditions. Characteristics of a post-modern and post-industrialised society are seen in this. People are being dissatisfied with the inability of western reasoning to all that occurs in people's experience of the world. Personality-oriented, emotional experiences and attitudes gather momentum. Instead of preventing this by knee jerk reactions, it is essential to search and find new avenues and models of witnessing for establishing God's kingdom in the world.

An area deserving important attention today is the modern means communication. Opportunities and challenges raised by the media explosion should be a subject for our active investigation. Media influences our thought processes, lifestyles, tastes, spirituality, and world views. One pressing task is to capture as many authentic voices as possible to reaffirm a moral universe that respects plurality of perspectives to truth. Cultural expansion and sharing of core values are creating new possibilities. As we meaningfully interact with these possibilities, we should be able to use it effectively for witnessing as well. How far the cyber culture evolved from the computer technology can be used effectively for witnessing? Today cyber churches are evolving; even the Rashtriya Swaya Sevakasangam (RSS) has formed cyber branches in cyber cities like Bangalore. How can these scientific achievements be used as aids to meaningful witnessing? Today's young generations' knowledge, experiences, priorities, technical and professional expertise are neglected by the church for witnessing. Call centre culture has confused the 'day night' awareness of the young generation. Shouldn't the Sunday morning worship culture be reviewed and reorganised? What do we give to the young generation when they lose the concept of the sacredness of Sunday in their work culture? How do we keep the young generation as part of the worshipping community to energise them for witnessing when they never ever have the opportunity for taking leave of absence from Sunday work or the night work, making daytime rest inevitable for them?

How can our aversion to liquor, drugs, and other social evils be used for empowering local parishes for their witnessing efforts? Often priorities given for building infrastructures strangle other important priorities. Witnessing is all about sharing man's experiences of social living and creating civility in the light of kingdom values to recreate a Christ-centred life; it is a search for meaning and purpose; it is only by sharing the life

experiences, it is possible to have an effective and meaningful witnessing in the midst of all challenges.

The nature and style of Christian witnessing in the midst of religious pluralities is an important subject deserving a rethink. Multiple religious and Christian theological issues are extensively discussed. Each religion through its faith formularies and heritage believes its uniqueness and truth; each religion considers other's faith with suspicion. Religious intolerance is a reality today. Religious conversion/proselytisation is an area riddled with problems. In the midst questions raised by religious pluralities, what should be the area for Christian witnessing engagement is a question deserving special attention.

Together with this it is essential to have a well-thought out discussion on the emphasis given to popular sciences. Different emphases on scientific views now exist within the faith communities. These challenges of science also deserve our attention. How should science and religion work together? Plurality of religions, popular sciences' influence and growth are challenges confronting Christian witnessing communities.

What are the challenges religious plurality and the growth and influence of popular sciences throwing at Christian witnessing communities? How can we meaningfully interact? How should conversation between these two possible? How should witnessing become possible through these conversations?