

**CHURCH AND  
THE NEW NORMAL**  
Missional Imaginations  
for a New Humanity



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**Dr. Geevarghese Mar Theodosius  
Suffragan Metropolitan**



Christava Sahitya Samithy  
Thiruvalla

(English)  
CHURCH AND THE NEW NORMAL  
*Missional Imaginations  
for a New Humanity*

Dr. Geevarghese Mar Theodosius Suffragan Metropolitan

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## FOREWORD

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It is important, in challenging and difficult times as these, with the Covid-19 pandemic raging across the world, for there to be wise guidance about how the life of the *ekklesia* and also the Christian family is to be led. We need to know about the pitfalls of the ‘new normal’ that our leaders and thinkers say we have to get used to. We need advice about what are the new areas where the ministry of the *ekklesia* should be strengthened? How can the ‘new normal’ be something better than what used to be our normal?

The Suffragan Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Theodosius has put us all in his debt by reflecting deeply on how the Church should behave in the time of Covid-19 and the disruption to the ‘old normal’ way of life. He has reminded us of the importance of the Church or the *ekklesia* standing in solidarity with those who are the most affected by the pandemic - the defenceless and the marginalized. He has cautioned the *ekklesia* to not fall into the trap of legitimizing the corporate and business model of the ‘new normal’, rather asked it to be informed by the biblical accounts of how God supported the marginalised. He has focussed on the changes that are needed in the praxis of the Church or *ekklesia* and not just in the theology or liturgy of the *ekklesia*.

This challengingly relevant book of essays is an extremely timely and exciting addition to the theological and ministerial reflection on how the Church or *ekklesia*

should move forward in these strange and difficult times. It deserves to be read not only by theologians but by all Christians and people of faith. By its careful scholarship and practical application, the book will challenge Christians not to sit back and wait for the work of God to be done by others, but rather to stand up and be counted in the fight against the forces of the 'Empire' that seek to dominate and control the world through their control of the levers of government and the economy in order to benefit a few.

I would recommend that all priests and lay-persons carefully read the book and thereby make the life-style changes that the Suffragan Metropolitan Mar Theodosius has so forcefully suggested.

**Rev. Dr. Sunil M. Caleb**  
*(Principal, Bishop's College, Kolkata)*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Pandemic Covid-19 is taking us to a 'new normal'. It means we are entering into a previously unfamiliar living situation. It means that a new living pattern is becoming the standard and usual in the life of human community. Those who closely observe can see the transformation taking place in the worship pattern and the religious practices of the congregating faith communities. The effect of the corona virus and the subsequent lock-down period that the entire human community was facing in the global as well as in the national level has brought transformation within the home and larger society. While people are struggling between the old and the new, the Christian Church is called to accept change as a reality. Also, the Church has the task of finding the relevance and thereby setting the direction for the community that is embracing the 'new normal'. Church has to encounter the challenges of the day and find the 'new normal' as an opportunity to explore the given possibilities to live with the values of the Kingdom of God that brings glory to God and blessings to all fellow beings in a God created world. This book is an attempt to that end and invites readers to reflect on the topics that are seen in the different chapters.

I was invited to write an article in 'Chalanam', the annual publication of the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary Kottayam, on the topic 'Coming Humanity - Culture, Politics and Theology', published in the year 2020. It deals with the changes that are happening in human life with the effect of the culture and politics of the people

who are also searching for new meaning through theological reflection about the recent transformation in their lives. Prof. Babu Zachariah, HoD, English (retired), who was my teacher in the Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla (1966-1969) wanted me to reflect on 'Perspectives on a New Normal in South Kerala'. That book edited by Prof. Babu Zachariah with the collection of articles by eminent scholars, was published in June 2019. I am grateful for the Editorial Board of the two publications for giving me an opportunity to write the articles.

The 'new normal' has made life in the digital world as quite normal today with the demand on 'work from home' or children and students attending online classes. We have introduced Artificial Intelligence (AI) in public places such as hospitals, shopping malls and airports where social distancing has become a reality, where life is moving at a slower pace, and where guarding oneself from the danger of spreading the disease has become difficult.

The return of the emigrants to their native land and the demand to get proper work in places such as hospitals and construction sites have brought in topics like, 'Locating the Other', 'Envisioning Hospitality' and 'Churching the Diaspora' for a closer study. Pastors are the religious leaders who are struggling to cope with changes in worship pattern and style. This has necessitated reflection on topics such as 'Recreation for New Life', 'Pastor Journeying with Christ', 'Ecclesia- a Counter Culture against the Empire', 'Reformation as an Invitation for Sacramental Living' and the like. These articles which were presented in the clergy conferences of Mumbai Diocese are also included in this book.

Family is the basic unit of Church and Society. Though several articles are written on the topic, it is appropriate to look into the necessity of 'Strengthening the family values' in the present scenario. Home is the safest place to keep oneself safe even in the quarantine period. But what does that mean? How is the parent-child relationship

today? Are we taking care of the aged and the children? Are we strengthening family relationships? These are pertinent questions to which we need to give new answers.

There are so many people who are marginalized even in this Covid-19 pandemic. The Corona virus does not see divisions in human community that the Global world does – developed nations, developing nations or underdeveloped nations. I have included an article on the transgender community. May that be a window to understand all sections of marginalized communities. There is a need to understand our world as ‘One world and One people’.

It was Dr. Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church who suggested me to publish a book while I had to go through the quarantine period for 28 days in June 2020 while I came to Kerala from Mumbai to shoulder additional responsibilities in the Church.

I am grateful to so many of my friends who have read these articles and given suggestions to modify them before printing. I am thankful to Rev. Dr. M. C. Thomas, Prof. of Old Testament, Mar Thoma Theological Seminary Kottayam, who has read and helped in editing and choosing a title for the book. The Prologue written by him gives a scholarly analysis and theological basis to the title and contents of this book. Rev. Dr. Sunil Caleb, Principal, Bishops’ College, Kolkata has graciously written the Foreword for this book, after reviewing the material. This book took its shape while I shifted my residence from Mar Thoma Centre, Vashi, Mumbai to TMAM Mar Thoma Center, Ranni in June 2020. I thank Rev. Alex Peter, Chaplain, Christian Medical College Ludhina and Rev. Joel Samuel Thomas, Vashi for preserving these texts intact. I am grateful to Mrs. Mary Mathew, former teacher of MTRS Kuttapuzha, Thiruvalla, for proof reading, Mr. Asher Mathew, a student of the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary (BD II), Kottayam, for

designing the cover page, and Rev K. E. Geevarghese, Vicar, Jerusalem Mar Thoma Church, Kuttapuzha, for overseeing all the work related to the printing and production of this volume. This book is published with the help of Christava Sahitya Samithi (CSS), Thiruvalla. I am also thankful to Rev. Dr. Mathew Daniel and Mr. Vijoy T. Oommen of CSS for their kind help.

It is my hope and prayer that this volume will help active discussion and learning on the topic 'new normal', by which I will feel satisfied that this book is serving its purpose in this present-day world.

**Dr. Geevarghese Mar Theodosius**  
**Suffragan Metropolitan**

*Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church*  
*1<sup>st</sup> August 2020.*

## PROLOGUE

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The Rt. Rev. Dr. Geevarghese Mar Theodosius Suffragan Metropolitan deserves all appreciation as his new book 'Church and the New Normal: Missional Imaginations for a New Humanity' is being published particularly in this most critical situation faced by the people at large. As we witness today, the entire world is facing an unprecedented situation caused by the pandemic Covid-19 which was quite unanticipated. Now, it seems that the normalcy and the existing rhythm of our daily routines have been disrupted which compelled us to discern and embrace a changed living scenario as the 'new normal'. As we know, such a 'new normal' state of life is not absolutely novel in the history of the human community. It has been occurring, though not frequently, in world history due to several other reasons. But, significantly for the present generation, the 'new normal' situation appears to be strange and unforeseen. We discern it as very sudden and bizarre since it happened in the form of a global pandemic disease directly affecting each and every human irrespective of any identity markers. Undeniably, on the one side, the after effect of the pandemic caused by Covid-19 will have multiple consequences but, on the other side, the upshot of the 'new normal' situation created by the New Economic policies of the global Corporates will definitely have adverse effects on the common people and their living conditions. We have already been experiencing this today in our daily lives adversely and differently.

It is quite understandable that such ‘new normal’ conditions have decisively forced each and every human to make a pause in his/her fast moving daily affairs to have a revisiting of the nature, meaning and purpose of life in this world. For the *academe* and the intellectuals, the book has genuinely challenged to voice radical questions with critical rationality and self-reflexivity on the politics and diverse shades of the ‘new normal’ situation which has already been evidenced in our major universities like Jamia Millia and JNU campuses though the protests have been labelled with other names and reasons. But the unholy nexus of multiple interests and economic factors behind such scenario shall neither be overlooked nor taken for granted.

As a faith community, it must neither be overlooked nor ignored but must be approached and encountered as a faith-question that challenges our Christian witness and mission. Since our life and witness have deep Scriptural grounding, we need to reflect upon how the faith-community responded to similar societal challenges that they had confronted in their social life as reflected in the biblical texts. In this regard, outstandingly, the Babylonian exile that took place in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE which had decisively reshaped and re-configured the life, faith and witness of the people of Judah in the Old Testament is taken here for biblical reflection. Let me approach it with three different biblical books written in the context of the Babylonian exile (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) as we read it in the books of Lamentations, Daniel and Isaiah (Isa. 40-55).

The book of Lamentations obviously reflects the living conditions and faith response of the people of Judah during the post-traumatic conditions after the Babylonian attack and invasion in 587/586 BCE. Chapter 1 visibly represents Judah either as a widow or as a physically abused woman who was victimized by the dominant Babylonian empire which is vividly pictured as follows: *“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly*

*in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have been her enemies.”* (Lam. 1: 1-2). The Babylonian exile has brutally made the social body of Judah like an othered and abused one and the outcry emerged out of this disembodied social body must be seen as their response to the New Normal condition caused by the pandemic of exile. Walter Brueggemann has commented on it correctly as: “Lament, set in the context of a hymn, is the social code and social gesture of those who refuse to submit readily to settled power and settled truth and who find their own pain, loss, or anger to be more compelling than officially legitimated truth claims. Thus Lamentations, in its very utterance, is an act of resistance and defiance that interrupts doxology, that asserts an alternative reality, and that believes that out of the candid embrace of pain new social alternatives may be generated.” (Walter Brueggemann, “Lament as Wake-up Call (Class Analysis and Historical Possibility), in Nancy C. Lee, Carleen Mandolfo (eds.), *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts Symposium*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008, p. 223).

As indicated above, the book of Daniel, the apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament, likewise was seen as a response of the people of God, especially the Judaeans, as they had been encountering persecutions by different empires which began with the Babylonians. Though the book in its canonical form was supposed to be documented in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Dan. 1 beautifully narrates the people of Judah as an assaulted community among whom the minority of the human capital with its material resources had been deported to Babylon. The chapter obviously describes their faith response to the Babylonian hegemony through their radical resistance and protest to the imperial persuasions and portfolios. Here, the resistance and protest through their disobedience to the empire and their radical commitment and obedience to Yahweh has been represented meaningfully which, today,

can also be recounted as a response of the faith community to the ‘new normal’ situation.

Furthermore, Isaiah chapters 40-55 has been taken as the discourse and message of the prophet who was supposed to be active in the Babylonian exile where the prophet was addressing a dispersed and disembodied community located in Babylon. The prophet was delivering the message of comfort and hope of restoration through the repositioning of their bodies back in their own homeland Judah. This we read in Isa. 40: 1-5: “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*” If we relate the exilic situation as a ‘new normal’, the prophet was empowering and preparing the people of God to reimagine the newness that Yahweh is going to grant them. Yahweh had promised the people of God that they will surely have a new exodus from their exiled condition. As we read about the Servant songs in Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12, the prophet was envisioning the radical newness through the Servant ministry of the people of God which will visibly be realized through reimagining a New Heaven and New Earth.

Likewise, the New Testament closes with the great imagination and vision of a New Heaven and New Earth where the sovereignty and reign of the slaughtered lamb will ultimately be realized. No ‘new normal’ condition that maintains and supports any sort of othering will be manifested there. Rather, everyone will witness to the “*the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*” And all will bear “*loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God*



*himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the One who seated on the throne will say, “See, I am making all things new.” (Rev. 21: 2-5).*

Importantly, the present book, “*Church and the New Normal: Missional Imaginations for a New Humanity*” contains 13 chapters that cover a wide range of very relevant and contemporaneous topics. As the Bishop of the Mar Thoma Church who had rich and diverse experience in serving the Church in different socio-cultural and linguistic settings, the title and contents of the book expressively expresses his sensitivity and contemporaneity to the challenges that the world at large is encountering. It obviously talks about his academic attention and awareness. Further more, it sensitively announces his own identity and commitment to the ministry of the Lord through the Mar Thoma Church which signals the future direction to which he is envisioning the Church. Furthermore, the book addresses the fast-changing world scenario where the author envisions and reimagines the Christian response to matters like Artificial Intelligence, Digital World, New Normal particularly in South Kerala etc. Within such a broader socio-cultural setting, he envisions the Ecclesia as a counter text against the Empire and re-imagines the shape of the Coming Humanity where meaningful and empowering hospitality will obviously be realized as in the Kingdom of God. Having set an extensive and expressive platform, the author places and locates the Church as a reformed one and envisages the pastoral ministry as a journey with Christ for the new creation of the world with a trans awareness exhibiting a sacramental living in this created order. To conclude, let me place on record my deep appreciation and gratitude to Thirumeni for asking me to be a part in this ongoing witness of making creative response to the existing ‘new normal’.

**Rev. Dr. M.C. Thomas**  
*Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam*



## INTRODUCTION

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For the present generation, the year 2020 will definitely be a marked one signalling the decisive shift caused by the virus named Covid-19. The effect of the disease triggered by a tiny Corona virus had not only global but also local consequences, causing the death of many people across the world. The Covid-19 pandemic has made tremendous changes in the world as well. The changes were multi-dimensional in its magnitude and effects. It has socio-cultural and economic effects by changing our thinking pattern, behavioural styles, interactions, lifestyle, and the like. As we have witnessed, the lockdown period affected people in a multitude of ways. For some, it had a psychological impact and led to breakdowns due to lack of social interactions and engagements; but largely, it has created socio-economic collapses both at the micro and macro levels. In the religious scenario, such a lock down left worship-places empty, denying religious ceremonies for the nurture of the spiritual needs of believing communities. In short, the pandemic produced by the Covid-19 created a decisive separation of life pre-Covid and post-Covid. The way we perceive everything as normal has changed. Moreover, it indicates that our understanding of normal must not be taken for granted because the reality that we used to reckon as 'normal' will not be absolute but only relational and even temporal. It has also challenged us to question and ask what is really normal. It means that the definition that we used to attribute to normal must always be renegotiated revisited.

In such a predicament, it seems that going back to the previous normal appears to be impossible, and not a choice. It challenges us to think about a new normal that we can't predict to be a different and much better normal than the former one. It indicates a situation which we have never anticipated, but, fortunately or unfortunately, turned to be a different normal and/or a regular one. Furthermore, we don't know in which way the new normal is guiding the world, and where it will finally bring the globe. Not only that, as a forerunner to such changes, the recession and the global economic crisis that started a decade before have made us think about a new normal in a different manner. As per the popular dictionary meaning, the term 'New Normal' is used to reflect a change in society, particularly and mostly, in relation to business and economics, that refers to significant change in financial and business conditions. It is clear that the 'new normal' narratives are diverse and they are applied everywhere on the basis of power and different capitals. Generally, such narratives legitimize inequalities in the social space. An observation found on the Internet describes a statement narrated during the global financial crisis of a decade ago, "We cannot re-write the chapters of history already past, but we can learn from them, evolve and adapt. The new normal may even be a better normal, certainly a different normal."<sup>1</sup>

The use of the word 'new normal' is not new because it seems to have been in use since the World War I in different capacities. But as noted above, its use now in the present scenario of global economic recession and post-Covid has received more significance and meaning. Now, it is largely used by the corporate media, and the corresponding powerful social structures that design the current socio-economic and cultural structures to legitimize the stagnant economic conditions and the growing global inequalities. They define it as something natural to acquire public approval. As Earl Wysong and Robert Perrucci observe, "These are efforts that attempt to legitimise inequalities, especially economic inequalities,

by framing them as natural and inevitable or that encourage modest reforms to reduce their negative social and personal effects.”<sup>2</sup>

Keeping such popular discursive articulations in the background, the concept of a new normal has been employed here with a biblical and theological purpose to confront those super powers and structures that legitimize inequalities through their ‘new normal’ narratives. The Church, the body of Christ, as a corporate living entity, must continue to engage with such forces of inequalities with alternative ecclesial imaginations for bringing out a new humanity. As a part of such imaginative process, the church needs to confront seriously the existing ‘new normal’ narratives that support all hegemonic efforts of present-day super structures of power. Such efforts of ecclesial imaginations obviously have a biblical grounding, which we need to rearticulate in relation to the present global socio-economic environment. Therefore, ecclesial imaginations must fashion counter narratives against the prevailing ‘new normal’ narratives of the very powerful corporate structures who attempt to control the imaginations of the public society. Ecclesial imaginations must have the vulnerable as the central focus and it should be targeted towards the defenceless and the marginalized. For them, a new life with dignity, freedom and power must be realized in the transformation of the whole universe.

To cite a few biblical examples in this regard, the post-flood narratives in the book of Genesis reveal that the flood during the time of Noah appears to be a pandemic situation for the post-flood communities. It says that “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclinations of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually,” (Gen. 6:5), which reflect the hegemonic and sinful inclinations of humanity to exercise their power and authority over against the divine intentions for justice, peace, and equality in His creation. The concept of the ‘new normal’ could be applied in such a context where the sin and disintegration

of the communities made God bring forth such a pandemic-like situation to make a new creation with different imaginations through Noah and his subsequent generations. God was entering into a new covenant with Noah which had universal significance as evident in the symbol of rainbow indicating the realization of wholeness in diversity. But the reality of human sin continues, contrary to the divine attempts of redemption and re-creation. Further, the Tower of Babel narrative (Gen. 11: 1-9) shows the confusion and disintegration of human communities with their 'new normal' efforts at 'making their name great'. The 'new normal' situation can be attributed to these narratives, and the consequent call of Abraham for being and becoming a blessing to the nations (Gen. 11:1-12:4) could be considered as the divine imagination of a new created order, over and against the selfish motif of the community at the Tower of Babel.

Furthermore, in the book of Ruth, Naomi's life and interventions can also be imported for our purpose. The family of Elimelech and Naomi had to face an adverse situation in Bethlehem through famine which made them a migrant family in Moab. But, as we read, though they settled in Moab, adversity had chased them in the form of death, which finally culminated in a very disembodied situation, making Naomi and Ruth return to Naomi's homeland with empty hands. Being a vulnerable woman in men's world experiencing adverse life situations in a foreign land, Naomi went through adverse and abnormal life situations. In such a context, she could experience and knew that it meant to be in a 'new normal'. As we go through her discourse in diverse situations, we see that such a discourse had the function of transformative imaginations which we could derive from her interaction and engagement with her daughter-in-law Ruth. She was guiding Ruth through their life situations to transform their life for a better future.

Likewise, for the people of Judah, the Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE was yet another event which

made Judeans think about the ‘new normal’ situations. Though the exile happened through the Babylonian imperial hegemonic conquests acquiring the land of Palestine, the internal socio-economic situations were not favourable to the common masses of the land, which we can read from the prophecies of Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah. The eighth and seventh century BCE prophetic discourse underlines such ‘new normal’ conditions of injustice and inequalities. But, later, being a scattered community spread across in ancient West Asia, the people of Judah appeared to be an uprooted community having lost their identity through the loss of their land, temple, and dynasty. The prophet who was active in the Babylonian exile, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah, was preparing them for a return to their homeland Judah (Isa. 40-55) with alternative imaginations for becoming a new community with a different identity and goal.

The ministry of Jesus can also be approached with this interpretive frame, preparing the people for becoming a Kingdom community over and against the ‘new normal’ discourse of massive oppression perpetuated by the Roman Empire and the Jewish religious structures that supported the Roman imperial agenda. As we read the invitation of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the Good News” was meant to invoke in the people an alternative imagination over and against the ‘new normal’ narratives of the power structures of the day. Through his invitation, Jesus was creating an alternative community with a different narrative of equality, justice and peace, by sacrificing his own life for a new humanity.

The 13 chapters in the present work contain different articles and lectures published and delivered at different occasions which are reworked and refashioned with the selected theme of the Church and the ‘new normal’. Chapter one is about “Artificial Intelligence: Societal Effects,” which is a theological analysis of artificial

intelligence. Artificial Intelligence is “*the capacity of a machine to imitate intelligent human behaviour.*” It is defined as the “capacity to realize God’s vision for life, breaking it into action plans and implementing that action plan by overcoming the challenges and meeting the demands of vision implementation.” Artificial Intelligence aims for the precision, perfection, efficiency and achievements. But theologically speaking, life on this planet thrives because God-given intelligence kept life-sustaining values like love, compassion, grace, trust, peace and hope in God’s creation alive. In this hi-tech world, we are the torch-bearers in a very decisive moment in the life journey of this creation, and surely, we are at the crossroads. Whether Artificial Intelligence is a boon or a bane is yet to be seen. A technology is only as good as the application for which it is used. When used in the right direction, Artificial Intelligence is the biggest enabler which will launch us into a new age and era. Therefore, our choice will be most crucial. Let God give us the wisdom to choose the right. ‘Digital World - Serving in the Global Network as Unifying Pastors’ is the topic discussed in chapter two. It discusses about the pastoral ministry in a wired world that is altering one’s self and is differently defining it. In such a context, pastors are responsible for keeping the conceptual memories of our church alive. And we have to think of how we are going to recreate and reinterpret the foundational experience of our church consistently and to maintain a strong faith and value system. Through this effort, we attempt to keep our church unified because they are not only the interpreters of memory, but also are guardians of faith and motivators.

Though the territorial empires are physically absent today, the Empire is present in a different form as a new form of sovereignty through corporate structural powers. In this setting, chapter three discusses about “Ecclesia as a Counter Text against the Empire.” Ecclesia as “*a called out community by God for God’s purposes,*” must be “*the Counter Choice against the Empire, in the text of the Life-Story.*” Pitted against the Empire, the ecclesia is to be guided towards



the promises of God in complete freedom. Even to hear these words is so relieving and comforting. But then comes the responsibility of the Ecclesia to be aware of the controlling tendencies and structures of the modern world and be a counter agent to those, to secure one's own freedom in God, and to fulfil His purposes. The current context has also been reckoned as 'new normal' which is a previously unfamiliar or typical situation that has become standard, usual or expected. So, what is narrated in chapter four as "Perspectives on a New Normal in South Kerala" which is to have some perspectives on a 'new normal' in order to receive an awareness of what was the Normal in reference to the southern part of Kerala. It concludes with the observation that the people of southern Kerala appear to risk their customs, manners, and values on their journey to more freedom, progress, and stability. The 'new normal' in the human community of Southern Kerala is teaching us a lesson that what we call as normal today will be a subject for change and the new normal will ever be subject to renewal, making everything 'new'.

Chapter five describes about "Coming Humanity - Culture, Politics and Theology," which rearticulates the understanding of God and His relationship with the creation. It is discussed in detail that in the culture of Coming Humanity, the repentance, dedication, restoration, re-use and sustenance are the fundamental framework of lifestyle; whereas in the lifestyle of Coming Humanity, love, faith, hope and peace are the forces of cohesiveness, and the driving energy to move forward. Theologically, Coming Humanity is a dream of a new order. It is the fullness of new humanity which began in Christ and it is found in the salvific act of Christ. The church is called out from the world, to be in the world, for its transformation with the values of the Kingdom. The challenge is to step out into the street to express her solidarity with the people there. Because they are the poor, the people are open to receive and welcome where the values of the Kingdom of God must be realized through extending hospitality, which is narrated in chapter six as

“Kingdom of God - Envisioning Hospitality”. The example of the Navodaya Movement of the Mar Thoma Church is taken as a model in welcoming and extending hospitality to the Transgender community in Mumbai. It is concluded that envisioning hospitality leads to concrete actions of the Gospel (Matt. 25: 35 ff). One’s joy is found in self-emptying for the abundant life of the other. In the ministry of hospitality, the ‘otherness of the other’ is taken from the people to help them to ‘feel at home,’ which must be envisioned in the prayer: Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven’.

‘Churching the Diaspora,’ particularly in the present-day challenge of the ‘new normal’ which is stated in chapter seven. Being members of the global church, it is very important to understand the new forms of mobility and integration, particularly when our members live in the midst of transnational communities with multiple identities. It necessitates that a paradigm shift is needed in understanding the mission and ministry of the Church in this context. What we need is to have a new orientation, or perspective, about mission: a change from the hitherto accepted model. The change is inevitable for relevance. It is to have openness to be more creative in the pluralistic context of mission. Churching the diaspora must be a continuing one where creating disciples of families must be the focus. It is strongly believed and affirmed that one of the predominant focuses in pastoral ministry is locating the other by breaking our own ‘gated motif’ and ‘closed mentalities’. It is affirmed that as a community of faith, it is our responsibility to reorganize these realities and take care of those who live along with us. Immanuel Levinas says that the ethical relations we need to maintain are fundamentally a ‘face to face’ relation. The simple gaze at the face of the other, beyond one’s name, gender and all other constructions is transformative, redemptive and divine. Such a pastoral engagement is discussed as “Locating the Other” in chapter eight. Where do we locate the clergy of our times in the ‘new normal’ setting of rapidly increasing migration and population density in

cities? There, pastors face a situation which makes their ministry more challenging. Globally we used to face the challenges like the decline of the Western economy and culture, bureaucracy in the administrative system, moral concerns of the clergy, ethical concerns in the structure of the family, integrity and transparency in the life of the people, and ecological concerns on the face of the planet. Therefore, the pastoral ministry should be a journey with Christ which is elaborated in chapter nine as “Pastor Journeying with Christ.” Here, the lifestyle, life-values and life-mission of a pastor is narrated.

“Recreation for New Life” is the discussion in chapter ten. Recreation is about being ‘born again’ by the ‘grace of God’ and by one’s willful decision. Our life is a spiritual pilgrimage. It is new life in Christ. Life in Christ is not being ‘born’ by the world (carriers of the world) but born in the world (to engage in the world). It is concluded that when we are ‘in Christ’, we share this privilege of becoming a part of the new creation in God (Punarushti) to redeem and renew the whole universe. Chapter eleven is on “Reformation as an Invitation for Sacramental Living.” The Reformation is not for the formation of a new Church but for transforming the existing Church for a fruitful living which is discussed based on the reformation happened in the Malankara Church. It is not only liturgical, but also holistically inviting everyone to a sacramental living in the social space, where the church as a transforming agent must live for others. “Strengthening the Family Values” must be our focus today in the contemporary consumerist world which is the discussion in chapter twelve. We live in a global world where ‘new normal’ claims are constantly emerging from different quarters. Travel and migration have become very common. So, in a given geographical area, there is a plurality of lifestyles, embraced and exchanged according to one’s taste and need. The rapid changes that are taking place around families are shaking these close-knit relationships within the family. It is observed that a number of families end in divorce or are dysfunctional. The families will have strong

foundations only when they rest on the eternal values of the Kingdom of God like justice, love, reconciliation, peace and the like. The family is the foundation instituted by God where all these Kingdom values need to take root so that we can be in relationship with God as well as with one another, and be the family that God expects of us; transforming ourselves - as individuals, as families, as communities, as societies and therefore the world into God's kingdom. But it starts with strengthening the family.

The last chapter is on "Transgendering through Transawareness" where the church's approach and ministry to the socially alienated Transgender communities is discussed based on such ministry done by the Mar Thoma Church. It is affirmed and concluded that the Church is plural, diverse, and multiple in functions. Through the work of the church with the Transgender Community, we can understand the Church as the Body of Christ with expectation and hope. This is possible only if the Church is inclusive in its outlook. The inclusiveness will equip the Church to be an open community that shares the pain and pathos of the wounded world. Jesus expressed his solidarity with the homeless by moving about without a home. The Church, as the body of Christ, is called and sanctified to have these marks or life styles. Church is a compassionate companion to those who are on the street or margins. God will surprise us, as he did to those on the Emmaus Road, when the Church will respond courageously to the heartbeats of the Transgender community by its' liberative presence in the name of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pharmafield.co.uk/opinion/new-normal-new-thinking>

<sup>2</sup> Earl Wysong and Robert Perrucci, *Deep Inequality: Understanding the New Normal and How to Challenge It*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 13-14.

# 01 | ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: SOCIETAL EFFECTS

‘Oria Kathi’ was born on January 1, 2019. She lives in the Microsoft Cloud and sends poems through Instagram and Twitter. She is a robot functioning with the help of Artificial Intelligence (*hereafter* ‘AI’) to write poems and draw pictures. Who will get the patent for her creations, of poems and pictures? Within this setting and based on the present-day reality of the New Normal, this chapter is on Artificial Intelligence and its impact on the society.

As a person interested in God, creation, and everything influencing relational dynamics, it is always a matter of great interest and concern to study and reflect upon AI and its impact on society. It always excites me to know that God has created us by His own hands and the rest of creation by His Word. He has given us the freedom to decide and choose. We have the capability to distinguish between right and wrong. But these facts become more powerful when we add one more thing to it – God has created us in His own image. When we say God has created us in His image, we can surely assert that we are created to love God’s characteristics on a lower scale (Psalms 8:5). And one of such characteristics is intelligence. Proverbs 2:6 says, “*For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.*” So, is human intelligence the prototype of divine intelligence? Surely that question is entirely another matter of discussion, but it is beyond the scope of this

study. To know what impact AI is having on society, it is necessary to know the definition of intelligence.

## **Human Intelligence: A very unique and complex phenomenon**

Intelligence is defined differently by the different streams of science. But, we need to approach it from a theological point of view. A very good and simple theological definition of intelligence can be, “*A capacity to realize God’s vision for life, breaking it into action plans and implementing that action plan by overcoming the challenges and meeting the demands of vision implementations.*” Or in still more simple terms, we can say, ‘intelligence is the capacity for making the right choice.’ When God created Adam and Eve, He kept them in the garden. For Adam, intelligence has some implications. It is interesting to know that this intelligence is not a single unit. Instead, it is the cluster of three types of intelligence. (1) Logical Intelligence: for instance, one simple example of logical intelligence is the capacity to assess danger, or figuring out ways to cross a river while travelling. (2) Emotional Intelligence: the capacity to process one’s emotions in positive ways. (3) Spiritual Intelligence: ability to recognize God’s presence and God’s will in the logical and emotional experiences of life.

It is true that ‘Intelligence’ in totality is not a single element phenomenon. Rather, it is the coming together of three different intelligences as stated above. These three elements are strongly united and most of the time the clear trifurcation between the three is very confusing. But the most interesting thing is the fact that human intelligence evolves through the different life experiences as we live and grow. Hence, in order to be intelligent, it is necessary that human life must move through the varied experiences of life. Now with the background of this theological understanding of human intelligence, we should think about AI or Artificial Intelligence.

## **What is Artificial Intelligence?**

The simplest definition of AI can be, “*The capacity of a machine to imitate intelligent human behaviour.*” It’s a branch of science which deals with the simulation of intelligent behaviour by computers. Or in other words, Artificial Intelligence is about replacing human

decision making with more accurate, precise and sophisticated technologies. AI brings devices to life, and influences life and its behaviour. It is inevitable that machines will make human decisions. But will machines have the will to go with our compliance? Importantly, such definitions create excitement and critical apprehension. Importantly, there are three particular areas where AI is used very extensively: (1) Day to day human life, (2) Bigger and complex needs and (3) Artificial super intelligence.

### **1. Day to day Human Life**

The use of AI in day-to-day life is increasing rapidly. We can find AI in so many different things from a simple calculator, to smart-phones, to the most advanced home robots called humanoids. To take an example, a robot waitress was introduced in a restaurant in Kannur, Kerala, in July 2019. There are 3 robots to take orders. They serve food on a tray at the right table. Are robots replacing humans? Definitely, they do not substitute human persons. Rather, AI will amplify human productivity. The risk of existing skills being replaced by new skills has always been there. The battle between man and machines goes back for centuries.

Steam engines put horse carriages out of business. In more recent times, we have moved on to worry about the impact of Sophia, the intelligent robot, self-driving cars from Tesla, software tutors, algorithm driven communications networks, medical diagnostic software systems, advanced hydroponic agriculture systems, automated check-out counters and other applications of AI. All these were once a dream. Now they are reality, revolutionizing human life.

On closer examination, we will find that most innovations in technology have been about being able to do something that could not be done before, or doing something on a scale not seen earlier. Science and Technology is fusing with other knowledge traditions like life-sciences, thus creating unimaginable vistas for human life. When the spinning machine was introduced, traditional weavers went out of business. But production increased and even the poor could afford clothing when the price came down. The earth digging machines, along with dynamite did not replace human labour. On the contrary, they helped humanity to build dams and sky scrapers

that would otherwise not have seen the light of day. The reality is that human needs are infinitely elastic. When one need is fulfilled, many new needs are created.

Equally, one innovation spawns another, resulting in a continuous web of innovations. This web of innovation is continuously and rapidly enlarging the pie of grades available to society. M. G. Sriram joined I.I.T. Bombay in 2012, after his B. Tech course in the TKM College, Quilon. He became a drop out to start FYND, an e-commerce start up. He has a live data of 900 stores related to 600 brands. Reliance Industries was attracted by his Interactive Project and bought it for Rs. 395 crores. How amazing is the enterprising! New jobs are replacing old jobs. New skills are replacing older skills.

Conventional Engineers are not recruited these days. Reliance Industries was conducting campus interviews in Calicut NIT for placements last year on the basis of whether students are learning lessons on Artificial Intelligence and whether they are capable of programming machines to learn. Machines created by humans are most likely to complement what humans do. Machines have already started saying: "We can do things better than you!"

Why do we need AI in our day to day lives? The usual three reasons given are: (a) To free us from the burden of day to day decision making, so that human intelligence can be engaged for more complex and deeper issues of life and society. (b) To make our lives more comfortable. (c) To make our decisions accurate, precise and contextual. It is true that AI will never get bored doing mundane jobs.

The above reasons seem very promising, but are we reaching these goals? If we observe more deeply, we can find that, the real picture is something different. In some areas it has a positive impact, but AI is also altering human psyche in an alarmingly dangerous way. As machines get smarter day by day, many policy and ethical issues remain unresolved. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in our society, it will change how we work and live.

As the productivity and efficiency advantages AI brings in increases, there is also the moral dimension of machines becoming smart enough to make decisions for human society. Machines



learning algorithms are building personality profiles on every human being. AI algorithms can learn our behaviour and before we know it, they know us better than we know ourselves. There is no doubt, AI will transform society, and there is a big need to safeguard against the unethical use of AI, for it will take more than just the intent. India is focusing on five sectors: health care, agriculture, education, smart-cities and infrastructure, and smart-mobility and transportation. Here, some concerns are to be discussed:

**a) *Memory vs. Dependency:*** Human memory is the foundation of our logical intelligence. It is the interpretation of memories which help us to take right decisions and right choices. But to have memories, one must engage in life experiences. But, what if we have means of getting interpretations without engaging in experiences and creating memories? True, there are Search Engines, Geo Maps and Digital Assistances for help. Now there is no need to engage in a particular experience, create a memory from it, and later on, interpret it to make a decision on all matters. Instead these new technologies are enabling decisions straight away. It all seems very comforting, but in reality, we are losing our decision-making capability - something which we acquire through the evolution of our logical intelligence. Thus, our younger generation is moving unknowingly from freedom to dependency.

The one big concern which always haunts people regarding AI is, "If AI is going to handle jobs then what about the jobs done by humans, their livelihood and purpose of existence? AI will only amplify human productivity, not replace humans. The fear that cognitive technologies will put hordes of people out of work is baseless. AI deals with the set of data provided to it for a particular group of human beings. But God has created every human being unique and exceptional. So how will that uniqueness and exceptionality be addressed by AI. If AI is going to use a particular set of data for a particular set of people, will there not be discrimination and marginalization? AI is learning from humans. Before an AI system can learn, someone has to label the data supplied to it. There are skills that must be learnt - like spotting the signs of a disease.

Today when Artificial Intelligence is used in our day to day life, two questions must be asked: *Who is the creator & controller of AI, and for what is AI used?* One thing that can be said about AI is that it is developed for human beings. And what is the reason for developing AI? Surely, to make human life more efficient and comfortable. At the outset these claims seem true. But if we dig deeper we can find that, at present AI in different ways is created and controlled by some of the most powerful, rich and influential people on this planet and AI is used to alter the very psyche of the common people. The aim appears to be “to have control over natural as well as human resources of this planet.”

**b) Smart to Confused:** Emotions are an integral part of human life. When we engage in different life experiences, we go through different emotions, which forces us to process our emotions and make us emotionally strong. So, emotional intelligence is our capability to process negative emotions to find meaning in negative experiences of life. Look at the youth of the day. How amazing is their capability to adapt with demands of digital life. Most of them are heavily dependent on all the different digital tools. This dependency makes them digitally smart, but most of the time, abstain from real life experiences. Whenever negative emotions hit them, they have no idea of what to do with them or how to process them. The result is emotional confusion, wreck, desperation, loneliness and acute depression. Can we imagine a future where our young ones will mature from their emotionally immature state? It's hard to believe that we are slowly moving towards such a future.

**c) Vision to Wandering:** Human intelligence develops from the engaging of different life experiences, processing the negative emotions received through those engagements and ultimately finding God in the midst of those emotions and forming a vision for life in love, compassion, trust and hope. We all had clear divine vision because we allowed our spiritual intelligence to grow through our logical and emotional intelligence. But what if we are dependent and confused? The result will be mind-wandering, instead of living with a vision. It's scary to see more and more of our future generations getting into this wilderness of wandering instead of having a clear vision for life from a fully evolved spiritual intelligence.

The other troubling question about AI is – “Suppose even if a Machine has logical as well as emotional intelligence, can it acquire spiritual intelligence? How is it going to have a relationship with God? Is it possible?”

## **2. Bigger and Complex Needs**

Now a days, it’s really promising to see AI being used in some very big and complex needs of humanity; like space research and exploration, medical care, meteorological predictions and natural resource detection and usage. Surely, the use of AI in the area of health and care-giving and meteorological predictions is really appreciable.

Dr. Nupur Gigri at VESIT [Vivekanand Educational Society’s Institute of Technology], Chembur, Bombay is using Microsoft’s AI (Artificial Intelligence) for predicting how airborne diseases can propagate, based on climatic conditions, air quality and population density in an area (June 2019).

In another instance, an app is developed and AI is taught to identify the leaf, root, fruit diseases and pests in a garden. (Satellite monitoring is also possible). The app can warn farmers in advance and that brings down the treatment costs [Aug 2019] in farm areas. Sri Raghunath Shevgaonkar, the Vice Chancellor of Bennet University explained, “This is a unique initiative and can act as a role model for creating a vibrant AI ecosystem in the country.”

Screens are the new surface of our digital landscape. Touch screens take this a step further by allowing our intentions to become more direct and demanding. When the machine is flexible enough to do what we want, the screen becomes more valuable. The screen is now the new skin of our lives. The screen is shaping us culturally in profound ways. Screen culture is a world of constant flux, of endless sound bites, quick-witted and half-baked ideas. The screens serve as the modes of perception that are shaping the way we think, feel and experience the world.

AI can also define future career options. It helps to enhance the new age skills of students. Solutions are found in healthcare, security, agriculture and smart-mobility.

### **3. Artificial Super Intelligence:**

Some of the big nations are in a race for creating an Artificial Super Intelligence. The interesting fact about the ASI is that it will supersede human intelligence by 10 to 100-fold. And the catch word is that it will know how to improve by itself. Surely the ASI will create more and more ethical questions.

Genesis 1:27 affirms that God has created us in His own image and we are unique in the sense that we share divine intelligence. But as humans, we are now into creation of something which will be having an intelligence greater than us. God has created us in His image and now we are trying to create something which will be better than God's image. Is it not a warning sign? Are we not also on the way of the people who tried to build a tower which could go above the heavens? AI is considered as the ultimate invention of human race. We need to regulate AI before it becomes a danger to humanity.

### **Conclusion**

The great Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking said "*Intelligence is the human ability to adapt for positive change.*" But what if we even lose the power to sense the need of change? Or what if we decide to stop using our intelligence to escape from the stress and strain of experiential indulgences, memory interpretations and vision formations? Then our life will become completely meaningless, and we will be robots controlled and guided by someone else.

Software robots are taking over manual processes (for e.g., RPA: Robot Process Automation). Robots are faster, more accurate and ensure more compliance and security than human workers. India can be the biggest RPA talent box in the immediate future. One often repeated criticism is that 80% of the jobs like drivers, secretaries, teachers, doctors etc will become redundant, making the arrival of AI a curse instead of a boon. When the computer was introduced, it was again the same criticisms and fears that were there as we now hear about AI; but the innovative human mind developed ways and means to control it and make it useful in their everyday life. We need to look at these technical developments with a positive attitude towards it and need to train

and update human skills so that human society can have a much better life. Bill Gates said, ‘AI can be our friend.’

AI aims for precision, perfection, efficiency and achievements. Life on this planet is thriving because God-given intelligence always tried to keep alive life sustaining values like love, compassion, grace, trust, peace, and hope in God’s creation. Science and technology will definitely continue to baffle us and therefore the larger society is to be equipped for these challenging times. The ultimate triumph will be of the human mind, in taming even this technology. AI’s ability to input, associate and recall information transcends what people can do. But a person’s ability to use this information to reason, evaluate and strategize far exceeds the capabilities of any machine. These two powers combine to make for a potent force.

To conclude with the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “*Stand at the crossroads, and look and ask for the ancient paths. Where the good ways lie, walk in it. And find rest for your soul.*” This is a defining moment for the intelligent age. We are the torch bearers in a very decisive moment in the life journey of this creation and surely, we are at the crossroads. Whether AI is a boon or a bane is yet to be seen. A technology is only as good as the application for which it is used. When used in the right direction, AI is the biggest enabler which will launch us into a new age and era. Therefore, our choice will be most crucial. Let God give us the wisdom to choose what’s right.

# 02 | DIGITAL WORLD: SERVING IN THE GLOBAL NETWORK AS UNIFYING PASTORS

*“What is needed therefore is a translation of the Gospel that goes beyond conveying propositions – a translation that concretizes the Gospel in individual and communal shape of living. Proclamations of the Gospel must be accompanied by performances that embody in new situations the wisdom and love of God embodied in the cross.”*

*Kevin J. Vanhooser (‘On Postmodern Theology’, Cambridge: 2003)*

An article described the State of Maharashtra as the most vibrant state in our country, and said that it was now aiming to become one of the most digitally advanced states in India. Mr. Vijaykumar Gautam IAS, Principal Secretary in the Directorate of Information Technology, Government of Maharashtra, spoke about the various digital initiatives that are in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s dream of ‘Digital India’. The Government of Maharashtra has already got many feathers of IT initiatives in their e-governance cap. Nagpur has become the first digital district of the state, connecting all 776 grama (village) panchayats with broadband connectivity, which can be tapped for services like Wi-Fi and hotspot for internet access to all. In an effort towards cashless economy, the Maharashtra Government is planning to launch its own e-wallet called ‘Maha Wallet’. This is

expected to have features like a user-friendly interface for techno savvy as well as novice users, and can be used to make hassle free and secure transactions like shopping, utility payments, paying government dues, and for fund transfer across other wallets, etc.

For church Pastors, digital technology is something we cannot completely deny today, or unreservedly embrace. It is sweet and sour. We need a middle way. The question is how to get it done. In order to know that, we have to look further into the digital world and break the theme down into smaller sections.

## **Global Network**

A global network is any communication network which spans the entire earth. In today's world, the internet is something which not only connects the whole world together, but also makes the world a small village. It also alters human life on an individual as well as collective level, very substantially. There are some positive and progressive changes as well as some negative and damaging changes in the 'new normal' scenario. We do agree that there are some disintegrations or fragmentations happening in our society, and therefore we have started to feel the need for integration and unity. Therefore on the basis of all these, we need to think how the digital world is affecting Pastors, the Church, and the Ministry. What must be the nature of ministry in the midst of all these?

## **Pastors in a Wired World**

Usually we consider technology as a tool. And till recently we have been thinking that the user of technology can decide on how to use it; and that technology cannot alter the 'self' of the user. But digital technology is so powerful and alluring that, in a very subtle and quiet way, it is altering the very '*self*' of each and every human being. Broadly speaking there are three foundations of pastoral ministry: the power of love, the need for patience and the embodiment of compassion. But unfortunately, these are getting altered rapidly because the Internet works on the three different values like the power of progress, need for speed, and the efficacy of efficiency.

What kind of relationships do we have when digital and online communication is replacing the face to face conversations and interactions? We have almost wiped away the habit of writing

personal letters and posting the hard copy. But still there are aged parents or elderly relatives who look forward to getting a mail through the postman. We have moved further from there to a position where attending calls is not our habit these days. We prefer texting. Thus, genuine contacts are being replaced by instant messaging and texting. We want to 'get to the point' and save time. We avoid dialogue and express our mind-set that engagement with other people is exceedingly exhausting. In a digital world, we have very many 'contacts' but very little 'connections'. Should this not indicate that certain things are not right?

### **The World of Change**

The values of the Digital World bring subtle changes in our own self, and our personality gets changed.(1) Instead of 'other centeredness' because of the power of divine love, now we are very self-possessed, because of self-love. (2) Instead of waiting patiently for God to reveal His ways we are now very impatient and impulsive. (3) Instead of being life-oriented because of compassion, we are now programme-oriented because of the desire to be popular and successful.

Constantly being connected online, one becomes very restless, stressed out and distracted. In this situation, we have started finding it difficult to focus on a particular thing for a long time. We desire change. We long for the weekends and say "Thank God it is Friday!" But Monday carries lots of 'hangovers'. We tell our intimate ones that we will go for a vacation. But that never comes. Driven by a succession of pre-occupations, we keep postponing our time together for relaxation. Thomas L. Friedman has written a new book entitled, "Thank you for being late" and describes it as an optimist's guide to thriving in the age of accelerations. It was not long ago that we met over a cup of tea or coffee with our dear or near ones, chatted and parted feeling fulfilled. But this does not take place now as and when we want it, because we are living in a rapidly changing world and the acceleration of the change is beyond our imaginations. Isn't it then good to be 'late' than being never?

### **Role of the Pastor**

A Pastor is one who is called to serve all kinds of people in any given place and time. He does that in response to a commitment



to the call and commission of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who carried out His public ministry here on earth. So, a pastor needs to recognize the ministry of the Lord, in space and time, and at the same time, partner with Jesus in carrying a relevant ministry to the lives of individuals and communities in the digital world. Pastoral ministry requires a pastor to be available, composed, calm, and focused.

One serious question that the present pastor should ask himself is whether he is moving closely with the Lord of the Church, or getting addicted to the digital world and the online life. The best way of checking this out is to monitor whether we are attending to mobile phones every now and then, even without the mobile ringing or getting any notifications. If so, we are addicted. The present digital world is enslaving us and altering our commitment to the ministry and to the Lord. Further, we live in a 'selfie' world where there is so much rush to establish, prove, build and propagate ourselves in social life, career and in ministry. Self-centeredness, materialism, worldliness, consumerism etc. build our vision of the gospel from seeing beyond 'self' and 'selfishness'. The question that the resurrected Lord asked Peter (John 21:15), "Do you love me more than these" comes to us as relevant now.

### **Availability of the Pastor**

A pastor, as the servant, is to be available to his people. Psalms 23 speaks about the physical presence of the shepherd with the sheep. When one is addicted to the digital world, the visit of a friend or a stranger becomes a nuisance. If we are reading the message, or sending one, or even talking to someone, then welcoming the person who is physically present will be delayed, giving the person a feeling that his visit was at a wrong time. We will ask the real person to be seated while we are still busy with the virtual person over the mobile. Therefore, the word of greeting or welcome will be a delayed one, which will by then miss all warmth of keeping the relationship. A pastor by virtue of his vocation is ordained to imitate Christ who stood on the road to attend to Bartimaeus, or crossed the sea to see the Legion of Gergesenes. A pastor is expected to attend to the flock and take away the 'otherness' from the Other. People are important and therefore all digital gadgets should take only the second place, giving primary

importance not for the self but for the person in front of you as the ‘friend or the stranger.’ A pastor will be welcoming all and attentive to their needs.

People living in the digital world are numerous and have characteristics different from each other. A pastor has the unifying role in the formation of communities. It is possible for today’s world to replace physical presence by virtual presence or by online availability. That is the success of technology, but not that of a pastoral ministry. A unifying pastor is called to continue the incarnational ministry of Christ by incarnating in the life situations of the people.

### **Pastor as a Role Model**

A pastor is not only a shepherd but also a role model as a person who reveals God to the world. Paul wrote to the young pastor, “*Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*” (1 Timothy 4:12) The personality of a pastor is always exposed to the world -his positives as well as the negatives. As pastors, when our positives are exposed, it is encouraging. And when the negatives are exposed in a community, we are forced to correct ourselves and grow as good pastors. But the ‘online social media’ that gives us a life in a virtual world provides us the convenience of presenting ourselves in a better way by hiding the negatives and even hiding ourselves from the real physical community. It hinders our spiritual growth. Here the personality of a pastor will be a “twisted self”. The genuine life of the pastor is possible only in a physical, visible community where our whole life will be exposed and we become available to the community to encourage them as well as to correct them. The life of a pastor is not self-centered but people centered. A pastor has the priestly function of interceding for the people before God

### **Wisdom Vs. Information**

Because of our constant online connectivity, we are having an uninterrupted flow of information. Today we live in our ‘information junkyards’. As pastors, how do we take all this flow of information to ourselves? Too much of unprocessed information confuses the brain regularly and that confusion leads us to insensitivity, inaction or procrastination. Today so many of

our Pastors are badly affected by this procrastination and inaction. Keeping on storing all the junk and doing minimum things to reflect on it, the informatics are not making us wise and good pastors. We get wisdom by the *'interpretation of'* and *'reflection on'* the available information. This reflection and interpretation motivate us to proper action. But for the proper reflection and interpretation of the information, every day we require some leisure, time of silence and quietness. That's why today, there is a greater necessity of having daily quiet time in a pastor's life. Look at Jesus. Jesus acquired information during day time and late in the night or early in the morning, He just moved away from everything and reflected upon all that information (*Matt 14: 22-23, Luke 5: 15-16*). He communed with His Heavenly Father. Turning towards silence and spending quiet time was His way to figure out how to deal with the demands of His life and ministry. Social media can tell us what is trendy, what is popular, what is happening now. But that will not provide us a space to think of why it is happening and how that matters to our life.

### **Unifying Ministry in an Altered World**

Our global network is not only affecting us individually, but also the world around us. The church is getting altered and also the faith communities. We can notice more and more disturbances and alienation among the people in the churches and communities. So, what is the pastor's role here as a unifying figure?

*a) Interpreters of Memories:* For any community, memories are very important and they keep the community intact. For the onward movement of a community those memories have to be kept alive by recreation and reinterpretation. For example, we say in the liturgy of the Holy Qurbana: "Lord, we remember your death..." There are two types of memories: (A) Conceptual Memory and (B) Perceptual Memory

Conceptual Memories are born from the "whole being participation" in a particular experience and then this memory is kept alive by the recreation and reinterpretation of the same experience consistently. By keeping such memory alive, the process helps us to build a value system of a community. The faith and value system of such a community shapes the identity of that

community and keeps the community intact. A simple example is our Holy Communion service. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me until I come.” At one point in history the whole Jewish community participated in the experience of freedom from Egyptian Slavery. Later the memory of that experience was kept alive by the celebration of Passover. As a gathered community, every year they recreated and reinterpreted the whole experience of the Passover. And that recreation and reinterpretation gave them their faith and value system, and kept them together. Similarly, through the Last Supper (Holy Qurbana), Christ experience is recreated and reinterpreted.

But the perceptual memory is created only by auditory and visual exposure. The best examples of perceptual memory are pictures and videos. Today, through Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and the like, we are trying to create a perceptual memory of certain events. And, knowingly or unknowingly, that is happening on the expense and replacement of our Conceptual Memory. For a community of faith, this is both dangerous and scary. A perceptual memory of our community is cherished, as it is more recent and more closely connected to our lives. But it won't directly strengthen our faith or our value system. And if this trend goes on, it endangers the integrity of our community.

As pastors we are responsible to keep alive the conceptual memories of our church. And we have to think of how we are going to recreate and reinterpret the foundational experience of our church consistently and to maintain strong faith & value system. Through this effort, we attempt to keep our church unified.

*b) Pastors as Motivators:* Christian communities always made sure that its spirituality is manifested in heroic actions. (*James 2: 14 –26*). The church is called out to be a witnessing and serving community. This movement was carried forward by the intentional and consistent commitment of all faithful members. It is very personal as well as very influential in the community life. This type of activism is tough and demands a very deep commitment. But today, slowly this activism is getting replaced by ‘Slacktivism’. Slacktivism means action performed via internet in support of a cause, requiring less time and personal involvement e.g. signing an

online petition, joining a campaign group on a social media website or completing a challenge like Ice bucket challenge - making a video of an event and posting it on a website. Slacktivism can only give us a pseudo sense of involvement and satisfaction. Facebook & Twitter can start a movement but it cannot generate a sustained change. Therefore, the challenge in front of pastors is, “How do we motivate the Church to a visible rigorous activism, and lead the members to a consistent deep commitment for a cause?”

c) *Guardians of Faith*: As a church, it's very important for our existence to keep on reviewing from time to time, “What is our faith & value system?” As the church is always open to the world, there are chances of wrong beliefs getting into the Church life (*Matthew 7: 15*). A constant exposure to the online world is changing the landscape and mindset of the people in a very substantial way. They cultivate choices that are cheap and convenient. People want things to be different, easy and painless. And this is bringing in new belief systems in churches. Now God is seen as a mere provider of human desires. Modern thinking expects worship to be emotionally satisfying and soothing. They expect the sermons to boost their egos positively. People have got so accustomed to the online market catering to their personal interests that they have started evaluating the Church on the basis of online market's criteria. People have started coming and going in search of a church that satisfies their needs and lines up with their conveniences as we do usually in online shopping. Churchgoers have now become the ‘Church shoppers’. The end result is that “*Church is getting reduced to a commodity.*” And when the church is reduced to a commodity, its belief system and style of worship become its advertisement to attract the consumers. In such a situation there is always a pressure on the pastors to make the ‘Faith System’ more attractive. The idea of God today preached within much of the modern churches is very distorted. During World WarII, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned of the dangers of cheap & convenient grace. He wrote, “*Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline and communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without cross, and grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.*” God's words are very clear that our ways are not God's ways. A

pastor is ordained to reveal the nature and will of God to the people of his time.

d) *Unifying Pastors*: Church is a faith community that gathers for regular worship. Therefore, the Church has a beautiful web of relationships. (1 *Corinthians 12: 12–26*). We are so deeply connected that our unity with God and each other is of existential necessity as the family of God. Unity is possible only if there are relationships that sustain it. And maintaining such relationships within a community is always a pastoral challenge. All the social networks also come up as a way of building strong relationships. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and all other Social networks for more than a decade now have created personal groups. “All the social networks can be a good tool to start a relationship or catch up with a friend or to restart a lost relationship, but they cannot replace our real sustained relationships.” That is the difference between church fellowship and online fellowship. The uses of all these media for the desired relationships have further disintegrated our real human world. If Church is the body of Christ and Christ is head, then we become members of His body, unified to complement each other and to serve.

## **Conclusion**

The constant tug of electronic inputs never allows us to be clear and focused. We are hyper connected but easily distracted; always available but rarely present. As unifying Pastors, there are certain things we have to seriously take note of:

The digital technology is making us impatient and impulsive and it doesn't tolerate any possible delays. According to Kosuke Koyama, Jesus Christ was a “Three mile an Hour God”. Pastors have the role to exhort the people in the digital world to slow down, create pauses in one's busy life, spend quality time with dear ones in sharing and relating, and thereby valuing togetherness in life.

Digital technology connects us to long lost friends. But it also enables us to avoid people. It can become our hiding place. For God, we all are God's children, and so are we for the pastor. When the digital world is bringing global outlook in every turn, pastors should not ignore their local community and at the same time not

forgetting the global moves. Shepherds should live with the smell of the sheep and know the green pastures. They are expected to focus on bringing in more global aspects to their local community.

Technology is so strong that we feel we must be always available, by being always connected to the particular task. Technology demands our attention. Result is our absence from the rest of the world and from the fine characteristics of human life. A pastor's ministry is unifying and not alienating any group of people. He is called to minister to all.

Technology is so passionate about certain things that we rarely question the wisdom of its content. As pastors, we emphasize the values of the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, we care for other members by sharing the God-given resources. When we identify the needs of the people, we send care packages to them using modern technology. This is possible by pooling the human resources and packing provisions according to their need. Here human touch is important and we grow in unity.

Technology is so compelling that we even place electronic devices into our children's hands at earlier ages and not the Holy Bible. We train our kids to look down on electronic gadgets than look up for divine power. Pastors unite people to study the Holy Bible together, recognize the Go-between-God (Holy Spirit) and practice fasting and prayer to discern the will and power of Almighty God.

Pastors cannot ignore the digital world or avoid using electronic gadgets. Pastors are called to understand the epistemic (knowledge) and cultural shift brought by the existing Global Network. With all the electronic equipments on our table or in our pockets, we need to ask the question, how far are these making us better pastors, and more engaged in the given ministry? Christian faith, values and practices have to be reoriented in the modern cosmopolitan culture. All pastors are called to extend 'the love, beauty and grace of the Divine' to all kinds of people around us and the wider world. While fragmentation and disintegration are taking place in our global and local world, pastors are to bring the ministry of integration through prayer, worship, mission and witness. As pastors we are called to be creative and innovative to

tend to the flock through new mission models and bring them closer to the Kingdom of God. To that end, we, as servants of the Lord of the Church, need to plow and plant. The digital world will know the pastors by their fruit (Mt. 7:20).



# 03 | ECCLESIA AS A COUNTER-TEXT AGAINST THE EMPIRE

Life is like a story. There is a beginning to a story and there is an end. Between the beginning and the end lies the text of the story. Text decides how the story will be – encouraging or discouraging, happy or sad, interesting or boring. So, what is the content of the text of the story of human life? The content of the text of human life is the choices of life. This is not only true about individuals but also about communities. Empire and Ecclesia both are choices of life. So, what type of choices are they?

The word empire means, “*A large territory comprising so many countries under one sovereign authority or the Monarch.*” In the Bible also we can find so many such empires which are all very powerful territorial states. But in the contemporary theoretical articulations on empire, particularly in the discourses of Hardt and Negri, the Empire is materializing before our very eyes in a different form. According to them, “it is a new form of sovereignty.” The “basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.” They continue that “In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentralised* apparatus of rule

that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colours of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow. (Hardt & Negri, *Empire*, pp. xii-xiii). Currently, we witness new forms of power structures taking the form and assuming the power of the new Empire in the form of corporates that aspire to have the dominion over the world bringing new slogans for the New Normal reality.

Back in the Old Testament narratives, many empires were visible, among them, the most prominent one was the Babylonian Empire, and in the New Testament, it was the Roman Empire. Whereas the Ecclesia means “*A political assembly of citizens of ancient Greek states.*” But in theological terms, it means “*A community called out by God, for God’s purposes.*” The Christian Church is the best example of Ecclesia in theological terms.

From an outer reading, both terms Empire and Ecclesia seem to have the same meaning. But an inner and deeper reading establishes that they are entirely different and opposite. So now the challenge here is to figure out, “*Ecclesia as the counter choice against the Empire, in the text of the Life-Story.*” There are certain characteristics which need our attention.

## **1. Control versus Guidance:**

In an Empire, the most important thing is the authority over everything. And to have supreme authority, the Empire must have absolute control. Rule of Romans on the Jewish Community is the best example of that. Even their religious practices were controlled by the Romans. Or in other words, it is the complete control over everything. Today also we can see such Empires in a new form of corporate and economic power structures trying to control everything. The best example of one of such modern controls is the penetration of giant software companies into individuals’ thinking, by altering the brain patterns of human beings. This slow but constant penetration results in the control over communities. Today control can be found working in almost all the different socio, psycho, political and religious structures of

the modern world. It is a very dangerous situation leading to an elusive and subtle slavery and oppression.

When the Empire emphasises the “*Dominion by Control*”, Ecclesia talks about the “*Freedom in Guidance*.” Paul wrote to Galatians, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.*” (Gal 3: 2 – 29). Even to hear these words itself is so relieving and comforting. But then comes the responsibility of the Ecclesia to be aware of the controlling tendencies and structures of the modern world and be a counter agent to those tendencies, to secure one’s own freedom in God, to fulfil His Purposes.

## **2. Uniformity versus Plurality:**

If *control* is most needed for existence in any Empire, then the *uniformity or homogeneity* is the best tool to have the control. A big territory of diverse communities following the same socio/political/religious/cultural lifestyle, is much easier to control. In the book of Daniel, the King’s effort to impose the uniformity of the Babylonian Empire on Daniel and friends is the best example. In today’s world, there is a strong effort to impose this uniformity by modern day Empires. Sometimes it is done forcefully, but most of the time it is very subtle. One of the best examples of such efforts is the New Age churches and their so-called theological principles, ecclesiastical management systems and worship styles. Their penetration to the ancient ecclesiastical communities is very subtle, elusive, and devastating.

When Empire tries to impose the “*Life style of uniformity*”, Ecclesia always upheld the *Wealth of Plurality*. Genesis 4:17-22 gives an account of the different communities with their own uniqueness. This plurality was upheld by Christ in Jn.15: 5 (*I am the branch and you are the vine*). This becomes clearer in the Book of Acts of Apostles when Peter spoke in one language and people understood in their own languages. And this uniqueness of the plurality will be fully manifested in the Second Coming of Jesus (Rev. 7:9-10). Ecclesia’s existence is possible only in the safeguarding of the uniqueness of plurality. Daniel’s refusal to follow Babylonian life style is one such brave attempt countering the Empire. Today’s responsibility of

*We the Ecclesia* is to safeguard our own uniqueness and to refrain ourselves from imposing our uniqueness on other communities.

### **3. Imposition versus Love:**

We have just established that the biggest challenge for any Empire is to maintain the uniformity and it is possible only through the forceful imposition of it. There are four factors that play a prominent role in this process of imposition: (a) Competition, (b) Selfishness, (c) Jealousy and (d) Cruelty. In the whole story of Daniel and his friends, we can see these four factors playing most prominent roles in the imposition of the Babylonian lifestyle in different instances. And these four factors can be found playing the most prominent role in today's New Age Empires also.

The very foundation of Empire is evident in the act of imposing its dominion and power. Whereas Ecclesia has only one foundation that's Love. Christ said to the Ecclesia of His disciples, "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" (Jn. 15:12-13). When the Imposition talks about Competition, Selfishness, Jealousy and Cruelty; Love gives the counters for all these four. Love in Ecclesia replaces competition with co-operation and harmony, selfishness with sacrifice, jealousy with acceptance, and cruelty with forgiveness and compassion (1 Cor. 13)

### **Conclusion**

During Second World War, the biggest counter text against Nazi narrative was raised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Once he said, "*It is the characteristic excellence of the strong man that he can bring momentous issues to the fore and make a decision about them. The weak are always forced to decide between alternatives they have not chosen themselves.*" Ecclesia as God's called out community is powerful and derives its strength from the crucified and risen Christ. Church must not give away itself to the *tempting and self-justifying impositions* of Modern Age Empires. Instead Church must have the counter narratives formed on love, grace, hope and forgiveness.

# 04 | PERSPECTIVES ON A NEW NORMAL IN SOUTH KERALA

‘Normal’ and the ‘New Normal’ are two very interesting terms. Both look and seem very similar, but if we delve into their meanings, they are very different. ‘Normal’ means something which is standard, usual or expected and ‘New Normal’ means a previously unfamiliar or typical situation that has become standard, usual or expected. So, what is intended here is to have some perspectives on a New Normal in order to receive an awareness of what was the Normal in reference to the southern part of Kerala.

## **Normal in South Kerala**

The southern region of Kerala is an interesting mix of coastal plains, midlands and mid-sized hillsides having a humid, tropical, wet climate. This geographic and climatic condition has also influenced the life and value system of communities there. Some of the aspects that made up ‘normal’ in this region included the following:

- (a) Farming, fishing and industries were the main source of income for the communities.
- (b) Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a strict hierarchical social order based on the caste-system. There was a system of norms and beliefs to assist the caste system and social hierarchy. Every member of each caste engaged in social affairs with self-imposed sense of duty and fear. Lower

caste people were excluded from public space by means of strict rules of pollution and untouchability. Changes started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the intervention of a new education system, followed by the reforms by socio - religious leaders like Sree Naryana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal, Aiyankali and others. Social attempts of transformations were led by religious institutions like churches, temples and mosques, and later by the reservation policies of National and State governments along with the implementation of criminal laws against any type of caste-based discriminations.

- (c) Family System was very strong and cohesive. Fabrics of the joint family structures were guarded. A well-oiled value system and morality was passed from one generation to another through family setups.
- (d) Religions not only took care of the spiritual needs of various communities but were also a means to social reforms and social inter-actions. The religious harmony and tolerance between different communities at that time was commendable.
- (e) Education was given prime importance in the nurturing of the younger generations in Southern Kerala.
- (f) Women enjoyed a greater autonomy and respect in comparison to women in other parts of India.
- (g) Simple living, satisfaction with available resources and savings therein for future were the motivation for the common man to live peacefully.
- (h) Good food habits, manual work culture and unpolluted environment led to the presence of a healthy life style leading all diseases to the margins.

Initially, migration from Kerala was to other parts of India and then to places like Malaysia and Africa. Nevertheless, the effect of that migration was not felt much in the southern part of Kerala. But the migration boom that started in the 1970s to Arab Countries, US and UK started touching every facet of life in Kerala. Consequently, this boom slowly impacted the farming and

manufacturing sectors. The region and its people got dependent on the revenue from outside.

### **From Normal to the New Normal**

But this has all been changed a lot in the recent years. And now the 'new normal' has emerged in the following manner with change and continuity:

- (i) from good to bad as a sign of degradation,
- (ii) from bad to good as a sign of transformation and progress and
- (iii) from good to bad and then again changing from bad as the new good. Such trajectory of transitions has been observed which is described in the following narration.

### **Changes in Agricultural sector**

Farming, which was once the foundation of the economy, hit rock bottom because of migration, financial losses, unavailability of people, and high cost of labour. There started a preference for salaried jobs among the younger generation and fascination for urbanized and modern life style for many. Now there is a momentum among the present generation in the form of organic farming, fish farming, and the like. The real motivation behind this change is to have healthy food, good produce, development of sustainable eco system and therefore to have a better economy.

### **Combating Social Evils**

Continuous efforts to fight casteism surely helped in uprooting untouchability and bringing the outcastes to the main stream of society. But, now a days, this is leading to the condensation of these classes to get unified as socio political bargain forces. Such solidifications instigate them to bargain for better prospects politically as well as socially on the price of their freedom and rights of others.

### **Inflow of Money and the Consequent Socio-economic Changes**

Changes in economic condition and the consequent negative effects on the unity and integrity of the family system and values

appear to be significant in the conditions of the New Normal of the region. The influx of money from migrants have led to bad cultural changes in the family system. As more and more people can afford to have their own houses, the old system of joint families disappeared. Because of this breaking down of families into micro units, the once necessary external support systems also vanished. Daily stresses of life, alienation and loneliness instigated depression. It has almost become the new normal for individuals and families. Continuing absence of at least one of the parents in the house has seriously affected the nurturing of children and youth. The result is a psychologically and emotionally weak younger (new) generation. As the individualistic value system is becoming more prominent, promiscuity and divorce are slowly becoming the new normal.

### **Changes in Dietary system and Habits**

The dependence on the land produce, farmed with excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides, affinity to fast food and aversion to manual work are increasing. The onslaught of life diseases like diabetes, heart attack, and kidney and liver failures have become the 'new normal'. These lifestyle diseases are not sparing even children or the very young.

### **Education and Unemployment**

A high density of educated youngsters has increased the unemployment index to very alarming levels. Craving for white collar jobs have led to the aversion to all other types of skills and employment opportunities. On the one hand, women are getting good education and employment; and on the other hand, crime against women is also increasing. The employment sector has opened doors for talented, skilled, and educated women to go for regular employment in public.

### **Consumerist Life Style and Culture**

The consumerist life style has become the new normal. Big houses, a four-wheeler, and high priced new gadgets have become the new necessity. People of Kerala, once famous for their financial acumen and wisdom, are very comfortable today in taking big loans to fulfil their consumeristic cravings, right from the day of their employment.



As the urbanized disposable consumeristic life style took deeper roots in the lives of people, it started affecting the environment as well, in a very negative way. This has led to the new consciousness of waste management at the local level. A very positive new normal is “My waste, My Responsibility” etc. with a motto of Reduce – Reuse – Recycle. This has initiated the domestic composting programmes, and organic farming through kitchen gardening. This is picking up momentum in the modern society.

### **Changes in Spiritual and Theological Orientations**

The introduction of the migrants to the neo charismatic movements in various countries of migration started the mushrooming of such movements in the southern part of Kerala also. Christians were the first to be influenced by such movements. This has very much affected the main line Christian churches. And to keep their flock in their fold, so many traditional churches knowingly or unknowingly started following the individualistic, charismatic and monetary growth-oriented theology.

This has been further fuelled by the growing consumeristic life style prevalent in Kerala. The large money flow has replaced the humane and community conscious images of a church to a very commercialized individualistic identity boosting one. With the new wealth of today’s world, church people are more interested in donating their money for construction of churches, parish halls, parsonages and memorials rather than for projects that serve the wider community. Worship places have now become places of modern exhibits, craving for socio – political recognition and new acceptance.

### **Unholy Alliance of Religion and Politics**

A very selfish political and communal involvement is hampering the harmony between different religious communities. Religious and communal fundamentalism is rising now to different levels. It is affecting the very meaning and relevance of ‘faith communities.’

### **Conclusion**

Today the southern region of Kerala may still be lagging in comparison to the Central Travancore and northern region of

Kerala. But the prospects of this region can be developed into a sustainable, peaceful living space for all. What is needed is the acute vigilance on life changes and genuine interpretation of life situations and the mass involvement for life sustenance. The new normal is not static. It moves for further renewal as changes would take place in human history. There will be resistance with the spirit of continuity. People in general would work for comfortable and safer lifestyles. People in southern Kerala are all educated and daring to move on to better economic spheres. They, in general, are intelligent and innovative. The influence of secularism from the West has affected so many young and middle aged persons. They appear to risk the customs, manners and values on their journey to more freedom, progress and stability. The new normal in the human community of Southern Kerala is teaching us a lesson that what we call as 'normal' today will be a subject for change and the new normal will ever be subject to renewal, making everything 'new'.

# 05 | COMING HUMANITY: CULTURE, POLITICS AND THEOLOGY

There is an old saying, “Change is the only constant”. We are born for change, and there is growth for us from the very beginning. The prospects of a new beginning always bring two emotional states: Fear and excitement. Fear exists when we are not sure of the things we are exposed to. There is excitement because we have expectations.

In any new beginning, we face three types of expectations: expectations from God, expectations from ourselves and expectation from others. The ‘Coming of Humanity’ is God’s expectation from the entirety of His creation. Coming Humanity is the hope of the fullness of humanity in places where hope is lost. This idea challenges us to re-imagine human beings and humanity from cultural, political, and theological perspectives, especially in the face of challenges raised by the ‘new normal’ visions of the day. With Coming Humanity, we search for a beautiful vision in the cultural dimension of which needs to be deeply investigated in the light of human experiences that are embedded in a canvas of art and culture opened up in hope. Here we need to go deeper into the nuances of the destiny of God’s creation.

## **Destiny Defined**

The word humanity means the quality or state of being humane, and coming of humanity means reaching the fullness of

being humane. This destiny is not very simple. In reality, this humanness can be achieved only by living in harmony with the total creation of God. The daily choices we have made in the past, and are still making in the present, may take us away from our relation with God's creations, if we are not careful. To understand this path, we need to recognize theology, politics, and culture.

## **Theology of Coming Humanity**

One simple definition of theology is that it is an understanding of God and His relationship with His creation. To understand the destiny of creation in Coming of humanity, it is necessary to understand the following principles:

1. God is not only the Creator of human beings, but also of everything that we see in the created world. Humankind is just one element of this whole creation. Their role is important.

2. The God of Creation is an unrelenting, persuasive, and passionate parent God. He goes to any extent to keep His creation alive, and to help it move forward to attain its destiny.

3. God's creation is a very diverse, yet united. A single entity. It exhibits the complex web of relationships. All the elements of this earth are deeply inter-connected and they influence each other.

4. God's creation is not 'creation complete'. Instead it is 'creation becoming'. The destiny of creation is to reach the state of harmony described in Isaiah 11:1-9. At every step, God is persuading His creation to move, and attain its destiny.

5. The biggest blessing God has given to His creation is freedom of choice. Opportunities keep coming along the way, and the choices the creation makes decide its path and destiny.

6. Sin is moving away from the mark. Every wrong choice by God's creation is a deviation from reaching the mark of completeness. Even if the creation falls by the nature of sin, God is gracious in providing another chance (Revelations 21:1-4).

7. The Hebrew word '*Shalom*' means single in its wholeness. It is the root of two important words of Judeo-Christian faith:

a. Shalom. It means peace, further derived as 'reign of harmony', because of the wholeness and completeness.

b. The word Jerusalem denotes ‘the city of wholeness’, ‘they will see the wholeness’, or ‘they feel the awe of wholeness’. Creation becoming is living the destiny of wholeness of St. John’s vision of Revelations 21:2. The vision of the Prophet Isaiah explains that destiny.

8. Human beings are fundamentally conscious of the events taking place around them and they go on interpreting and interacting with the changes.

9. Humans are the most powerful and intelligent beings on the planet, and substantially influence the course of the whole planet in its journey for divine wholeness. The human is also called to guide the rest of creation to reach its destiny of growing to fullness. (Gen. 2:15)

10. Humans are responsible for their choices. In every choice, the effects are not only on human life but also on the life of the whole planet. On one hand, humans are most powerful, and on the other hand, human life is very fragile in its exposure to and relationship with the rest of creation. The disturbances to this relationship affect human life, and often, very badly. Hence, peace and harmony are essential for an integrated life.

## **Politics of Coming Humanity**

Politics is a very interesting word, and today it is connected with so many things. The simplest definition of politics is that it is the process of making and implementing policies by the polity, and for the polity. The process of politics requires the following: (1) The process has to be democratic and be governed by well laid out principles. (2) Democratic process ensures the participation of diverse communities and gives an inclusive texture to the policies. (3) This whole process involves right interpretation of history. It also needs a right assessment of the present needs and a clear understanding of the future as well. (4) Well defined principles that govern the whole process to move in the right direction.

In the politics of Coming Humanity, it is the theology of Coming Humanity that is the fundamental framework for creating policies. In today’s politics, policy is mostly centred around greed, control, centralisation of power, and exclusion. On the other hand,

in the politics of Coming Humanity, policies should evolve from acceptance, inclusion, sharing, and sustenance. The consciousness that we constitute a single people will enable us to turn away from the patterns of conflict that dominate society, and we will begin to learn to collaborate and co-operate.

### **Culture of Coming Humanity**

The word culture usually denotes some type of art-form and expressions. But culture has a deeper and broader meaning. Culture means the lifestyle of humans living in a particular community, and in a particular geographical area. And lifestyle involves everything needed for a peaceful existence in relation to the world. The individual lifestyles are derived and explained from the lifestyle of a community. Therefore, the culture of Coming Humanity must evolve from the theology of Coming Humanity, and be guided by the politics of Coming Humanity. In the culture of Coming Humanity, repentance, dedication, restoration, re-use and sustenance are the fundamental framework of lifestyle; whereas in the lifestyle of Coming Humanity, love, faith, hope and peace are the forces of cohesiveness and the driving energy to move forward. Theologically, Coming Humanity is the dream of a new order. It is the fullness of new humanity which began in Christ and it is in the salvific act of Christ that Coming Humanity is formed.

### **Conclusion**

The Messianic promise in John 14:27 is “Peace I leave with you... Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid”. Father God has created us not to destroy but to be life-giving, and to see creation growing and maturing. We have this destiny to reach; and God Immanuel is our strength and assurance in this journey of ‘Becoming’.

# 06 | KINGDOM OF GOD: ENVISIONING HOSPITALITY

The Gospel of Luke is written to show how the Gospel of Jesus Christ became relevant and meaningful to the ordinary people, the poor and the outcasts. When Jesus started his public ministry, He spoke on the Kingdom of God and helped the marginalized to understand that they have a space there. The Gospel, in Luke 14:15-24 says that the privileged people who were invited earlier to come and dine with the King at the feast did not turn up and the host angrily asked the staff to go and invite all those who are on the street and margins of the society to come for the feast. Jesus, as He taught the Kingdom of God, told everyone that the invited or chosen people of God will not be in Heaven if they are preoccupied with their own concerns, and gave various excuses (vv. 18-20). Jesus said, “for I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper”(vv.24). Jesus was saying this in the midst of a worshipping community where there were teachers and keepers of the Divine Law such as the Scribes and the Pharisees. A person who is preoccupied with personal matters and selfish interests cannot remain open to receive the invitation of God and enter in to the blessings of the Kingdom of God. The Church, as a called-out community, is expected to be open and welcoming. If the Church remains isolated, insulated and introvert, it becomes selfish and communitarian and loses the status of being in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said, “when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you.” (vs. 13-14). This is the characteristics of the Kingdom of God, which is reflected in the passage: “Go to the streets and lanes of the city...go out into the high ways and hedges.” (vs. 21, 23). The Kingdom of God has preferential option for the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind. Jesus made this real in His public ministry by moving from place to place and people to people. He did not have vested interests and did not seek places where safety and security are found. He said that the Son of man has no place to lay his head.

### **Church, the Sign of the Kingdom**

The Church is called out from the world to be in the world for it's transformation with the values of the Kingdom. The challenge for the Church is to step out into the street to express her solidarity with the people there. Because they are the poor, the people are open to receive and welcome. The lame wants to be free to rejoice with the rest of the community and to live with them sharing the fellowship. Twenty-three years ago, when the Mar Thoma Church decided to move into the ‘red streets’ of Bombay it was a tiring affair. But over the years, the Ministry has grown with three RLA (Red Light Areas) centers having 65 children, Navjeevan village with 160 children, Navjyoti School with 378 children, extension Homes with 65 college going youths and the mothers programme, with about 500 mothers. There are mothers who have moved out of the flesh-trade, children who are married and settled, and a few going for higher studies.

The Kingdom of God is a manifestation of God’s love. The Church has to manifest the unique love of God manifested in Christ Jesus. It was on the road to Jerusalem through Jericho that Jesus stood and asked the disciples to call the blind man. The disciples wanted to silence him. But Jesus wanted them to know that the Kingdom of God for which He is giving His life on the Cross is inclusive. The blind was healed and he Joined Jesus in going to Jerusalem. The inclusive nature of the Church was revealed when the Mar Thoma Parish in Kalyan started a ministry to the intellectually challenged, twenty-five years ago. Now it caters to 78



children and the School has A- grade certification. Navodaya Movement of the Diocese is commencing a rehabilitation programme for those graduates who come out from that school.

People on the street, high ways and lanes are the homeless people. Jesus sends them to their homes as he instructed the person who lived among the tombs (Mk 5: 1-20). The Church today needs to ask this question whether they should remain there on the street or rather find a place to live. It was quite challenging when the staff of Navodaya Movement of the Mumbai diocese found colonies around the dump yards of Mumbai- people living among the waste and living out of it. This is dehumanizing. The ministry among such people revealed that the communities can have transformation; 500 children are now going to school and the women in one dump yard decided to start Self Help Groups (SHG) to find alternative ways of living. The Kingdom of God teaches the human communities to live a life that goes in the life style of Jesus to impart life to the dying and the deprived and to give it abundantly. Adding life to the impoverished is a characteristic of the Kingdom of God, where such are invited to the feast of the Master. The people in the dump yards are now learning how to better their standard of living.

Navodaya Movement has dared to face the challenges of the transgender community as well. India has about 490,000 transgender people with a literacy rate of about 56 percent. Most of them are on the road found begging or engaged in sex work for their living. Very recently, they have been recognized as a 'Third Gender, by a Supreme Court ruling in India in April 2014. The intention of the ministry of Navodaya is to facilitate new avenues of skill enhancement, education and alternate ways of living to these members. The movement aspires to provide social justice and instill in them a sense of human dignity to live in the world as any other citizen of the Country. A helpline is given to them (1 800 3000 5110). This has helped Navodaya to understand that there are about 45,000 transgendered people in Kerala itself. Navodaya believes that redemption and transformation are possible to the underprivileged and can contribute to create a new social order based on human dignity and divine justice. We read in the Book of Acts 8: 26-43 that a transgender person from Ethiopia went to

Jerusalem for worship, had access to read the Book of Isaiah; the Holy Spirit enabled Philip to teach him the Scripture, lead him to faith and then baptize him. This is an eye opener to all to realize that the Creator God has plans in Jesus Christ for the redemption of people of the third gender, and to accept them in the Kingdom of God.

## **Envisioning Hospitality**

Hospitality is a virtue. This is repeatedly mentioned in the Holy Bible. Jesus Christ accepted hospitality and asked the disciples to feed the multitude. He shared the last supper with the disciples and took with him a thief from the cross to paradise. A church that does not show hospitality cannot be called 'the body of Christ'. Hospitality is a fundamental attitude of openness towards one's fellow beings. On the one hand we recognize the image of God in every human being irrespective of status, gender, caste or religion. On the other, we recognize the divine plan of salvation God has opened for us in Jesus Christ. Hospitality is an opening to go along with the life of God. It is a means of self-emptying like Jesus Christ to give space for the other. It is not charity. It is receiving a person or group of persons with a smile. Hospitality in the Church may upset the status quo when we receive the people who are on the street, marginalized, lost and who are counted as the least and the last. It is full of pain, risk and inconvenience. Members of the Church are called to be the disciples of Christ, following the discipline of a servant to wash the feet of the strangers who come from the dusty roads and filthy environment of the lanes. This is a call to sweat with the sweat of the travelers. The interaction of Jesus with sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, robbers and outcasts indicate not only the pattern of ministry of the Kingdom of God but also a daring action to break the walls of division as a matter of extending hospitality to strangers and the so called 'enemies'. In the Kingdom of God there are only children of God all bearing the 'image of God'. This then is the radical message of Hospitality. There is no private ownership and possessions, but only provisions of God for sharing and caring.

Envisioning Hospitality leads to concrete actions of the Gospel (Matt. 25: 35 ff). One's joy is found in self-emptying for the abundant life of the other. In the ministry of Hospitality, the

otherness of the other are taken from the people and help them to 'feel at home,' which must be envisioned in the prayer: "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven".

# 07 | CHURCHING THE DIASPORA

Hans Kung is a known liberal Swiss theologian who has written extensively on the Church. His latest publication is entitled “Can we save the Catholic Church”? He answers his own question by stating that the new leadership in Pope Francis has already started showing a positive sign. “It is not only that he has plans, I think that the simple clothing, the change of protocol and the completely different tone of voice are not superficial things... that is the beginning of saving, not the end. But that is already a lot”. Pope Francis is the first Latin American Pope who has come to the leadership when a good number of members started leaving the Roman Catholic Church. He comes from a developing nation and from a humble origin. He is not a dogmatic scholar who affirms everything as it is given in books. Instead, he is people oriented when it comes to theology. One unique nature of this person is that he spends two hours every morning in prayer and one hour every evening in adoration of the Eucharist.

This chapter focuses on the topic ‘Churching the Diaspora,’ particularly in the present-day challenge of the New Normal. Being members of the global Church, it is very important to understand the new forms of mobility and integration, particularly when our members live in the midst of transnational communities with multiple identities. It necessitates that a paradigm shift is needed in understanding the mission and ministry of the Church in this

context. What is intended, in this regard, is to have a new orientation or perspective on mission: a change from the hither to accepted model. The change is inevitable for relevance. It is to have openness to be more creative in the pluralistic context of mission.

### **Discipling the Families: The unfading Ministry in Churching the Diaspora**

Ministry of the Church is very much dependent upon equipping and empowering the families. It is from the families that individuals or young families go to different places as members of the diaspora. Families settle first before they become members of the church nearby. In our community, the diaspora families group together as a lay-movement to form a local congregation and parish.

It goes without saying that visiting families play a vital role in maintaining personal relationship, to mutually enrich the families. Values of the Kingdom of God are caught through the relationships – relationship within the family and outside. Our ministry is challenged whenever the value and significance of family is ignored or belittled. The tendency of our young members to remain single or decide not to have children in wedded life are all raising questions on this front. How do we church them? We remember that the problem of Christians not living as disciples is not confined to any geographical space, it is closer to our own homes. This will make it difficult to church the diaspora as the spiritual foundations of the members are not strong. This is not to give up hope. Christ went to the extent of enabling the Samaritan women and the man living among the tombs to spread the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Our parish ministry is called in when crisis situations arise within the family. It can be situations like divorce<sup>1</sup>, separation, sickness<sup>2</sup>, death etc. It can also be disappearance, shooting, addiction to drugs, alcohol etc. Our calls can come in such situations during day or night and we have a vital role to play like the Good Shepherd. Read John 10:11-15 in this context. *“I am the Good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man*

*runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep.”* Jesus warns us when He says, (v. 10) *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”* Discipling the families can be done as a team work of the leaders of the parish and the family. Faith and faith practices of the individual and families are to be motivated and encouraged. Counselling and referrals can be done or arranged. Regional programmes like ‘Family Enrichment and Family Empowerment’ can be an organized effort.

Church gives importance to community living. This indicates that the religious community has a role to play in the discipling of the families. Mar Thoma Church practices infant baptism and nurturing of children is done through the Sunday School Ministry. As a parish, we need to reinforce the significance of maintaining this relationship between the families and the religious community. The presence and leadership in all Sunday school activities, camps and conferences for children, and family related events are vitally important in the spiritual discipline of the children and families. These are not optional. The leaders have the ministry of encouraging individuals and families to grow in spiritual disciplines like personal meditation, study of the Word of God, family prayer, and corporate worship and prayer fellowships in each parish area. These are foundational in churching the diaspora. The good shepherd will know the sheep, find feed for them, protect them from all life-threatening and life-taking evil forces and remains as a door of the sheep (John 10: 7).

St. Peter reminds us about the priesthood of all believers. We have a leadership role in our parish. The most important aspect of a healthy relationship is to be fair with all the members in the community. A pessimistic leader can never create a well-disciplined community. Optimism succeeds. An optimistic person demonstrates control by listening to what the members want to say. It is a good practice to lead the members with heart and ear rather than by emotions and by mouth. A positive approach is essential for motivation. It is always good to use “please” and “thank you” when you enter into a conversation with others. Research has shown

that people who are thanked by authority figures are more likely to co-operate, feel valued and that provides immediate positive reinforcement to the pastoral ministry. A hurtful word or behaviour leaves a scar for a life time. A good leader will help the members to overcome his or her weakness without being hurt. The method of dialogue is important for us to gain the confidence of the people. The process of involving members in the thinking and decision-making process is not only essential but it gives a sense of elation that makes the people feel important. Recognition is the key word.

### **Churching the Diaspora: a Ministry that is Continuing**

We live in a world where the diaspora is to be understood in global-scapes. Transnationalism has become the living space of the present generation. This is also true of the members of the diocese of North America & Europe. People have started growing in multiple living spaces and carrying multiple identities. How will the Church cope with these multiplicities?

Churching the diaspora can be termed as a need of the mother Church in India when the members migrate to the geographical boundaries of this diocese. Ministering to them can be an extension of the ministry that is familiar to us whose homeland is in India. This can also satisfy those who in the diaspora community have a nostalgia for their homeland. But, how about those who are members of the ‘new generation’, with a different language, culture and spiritual/religious orientation? What is our challenge here? Can we be good shepherds to strangers? Bishop Johnny Itty of the Episcopal Church says, “Churches of the Indian diaspora now find themselves no longer simply immigrant churches but now increasingly identify themselves as distinctly part of the social and religious landscape in which they worship and serve the community”. As a community we need to recognize the talents and gifts and create a space for everyone to participate and develop their contributions. Mar Chrysostom, our Valiya Metropolitan says, “Diaspora is not just a person moving from one place to another in search of comfort and stability. It is man discovering his consummation in the context of people different from himself. Diaspora is the first step in the realisation of the fullness of man in Christ and through Christ. That is what is achieved in the Church, the body of Christ. The Church is not separate from the

world, but it is qualitatively challenging the world to be genuine and authentic. The Church is in the world and for the world". A transformational leader will not only listen with empathy to become the voice of the voiceless but also give visionary leadership in nurturing the total community and leading them to greater heights.

Churching the diaspora is an ecclesial action. The Mar Thoma Church practices democratic pattern of administration. Therefore, decision making bodies and members are important in the ministry of churching the Diaspora. Any general body meetings of the parish would reveal that women and young are minimal in discussing the concerns of the members and making decisions<sup>3</sup>. The election of the Diocesan Assembly members in 2014 reveal that majority of those who were elected were male and belonged to the age group of 45 years and above<sup>4</sup>. Bishop Dr. Thomas Mar Eusebius, Metropolitan of the Malankara Catholic Exarchate in USA says, "Kingdom does not denote a uniform society with a monolithic cultural strain. It does not exclude any aspect or portion of reality from its solicitous reach. Rather it is all inclusive in so far as every reality is to be permeated and transformed by the Gospel values. Exclusivism is alien to the Christian faith and to the spirit of the Gospels". Churching the Diaspora becomes people oriented and satisfactory only when people in the parish are understood and they are ministered unto. Speaking about servant leadership, Robbert K Greenleaf says: "servant leadership emphasises increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting as sense of community; and a sharing of power in decision making".

## **Conclusion**

Liturgical practices with places of worship and pastors to minister will keep the hitherto present religious community happy to maintain their identity. But the community can live only by confronting the rapid changes taking place in them and around them. We have the challenge to understand the religious text, the Holy Bible, in the context of the people who live in multiple life-scapes. When the Word of God is preached or taught, what they require is not simply the biblical exegeses of the text, but a gospel of the Holy Bible to their ground realities. What should Christians practice? What must I do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10: 17) was the question posed to Jesus Christ by a learned religious person.



Churching the diaspora will become the ongoing ministry when the local parish will help the present members and families to lead a renewed disciplined life based on the values of the Kingdom of God. Walking with Jesus and growing in the experience of the Kingdom are to be daily experiences in the life of every person. Conforming to the pattern of the modern world is not the answer; life will become a spiritual act of worship when it is offered as a living sacrifice in a manner that is pleasing to God. Churching the diaspora will bring transformation to the individual and to the community.

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- <sup>1</sup> Where do you find divorce more evident? In the church or outside? What is the pastoral ministry to those who are going through strained relationships in our families?
  - <sup>2</sup> I have seen the number of persons coming to CMC, Vellore. The OPD has 6500 people every day, with each doctor seeing 70-80 patients.
  - <sup>3</sup> Indian Parliament election is taking place in April 2014. Congress leader Sri Rahul Gandhi desires to have more young leaders in the country. Smt. Jayalalithaa is advocating that more women come to the fore front in a male dominated senior leadership.
  - <sup>4</sup> Lay Representation: Below 25 yrs : 1, 26-35: 12, 36-45:26, 46-55:23, 50-60:11, 61-69: 11, 70 up: 5(including 11 ladies), Total : 89. Lady representation in Indian Lok Sabha in 2009 is 10%, America it is 18%, UK is 23%

# 08 | LOCATING THE OTHER

The Mar Thoma Church is a reformed worshipping community that gathers together for worship and goes out in search of the Other. So, we have the main question, who is the Other? The Other can be our life partner, sibling, anyone in the family, in the parish of the Church, in the neighborhood and larger society. The Other can also be a dear one, a friend, a stranger, or an enemy. So how do we locate, or identify, the Other? Here, we need to think about how God sees them. How does God in Christ relate to them and how does the Kingdom of God place them over against the New Normal claims of our period.

We live in a global world and at the same time in a digital cloud where we constantly witness the challenge of the New Normal. When we live with our computer, smart-phone or any of the other electronic gadgets, most of the time we are in a virtual world. No one lives there. No life is found, even though animation is possible. Today, Artificial Intelligence (AI) can replace humans, but cannot replace the warmth of a human touch or the experience of human relationships.

The globe, as narrated above is shrinking and the tendency there is alienation, exclusion or deletion. The growing tendencies of high-rise flat systems (exclusively living in cubicles and not knowing the neighbours) or more comfortable 'gated communities'

(where entry is restricted and the stranger is excluded) point towards it. There is a growing homogenizing tendency along with the progress of globalization where we impose the same system of exchange everywhere.

This is not what God desires or what is good for us. We live on our planet Earth, continuing to live as humans, where we remain faithful to God and keep a meaningful relationship with everyone and everything that we come across in our life. Also, we inhabit a cultural, socio-geopolitical, and religious world where differences based on nationality, citizenship, gender, race, class, ability, and religion are still present. As a community of faith, it is our responsibility to reorganize these realities and take care of those who live along with us. Immanuel Levinas says that the ethical relations we need to maintain is fundamentally a 'face to face' relation. The simple gaze at the face of the other, beyond one's name, gender and all other constructions is transformative, redemptive and divine.

Gen. 33:10 tells us about the gaze of Jacob on the face of Esau, where he found the divine in the other. Other examples are Jesus and the thief on the cross or the woman caught and brought to be stoned to death. The primary responsibility of discipleship therefore becomes facing the deep and the divine in the face of the Other. Mathew Fox, a scholar, calls us to re-configure our relationship with the divine, fellow beings and Mother Earth. Living in a religious community always demands a repositioning of ourselves (John Vanier) for the betterment of the other and the community as a whole.

## **Pastoral Engagement**

It is in the above context that we need to look into the pastoral engagement. It has multiple aspects like:

### **A. Representative priesthood**

Priests as the servants of God represent the people before God. People matter. As a community under the Mar Thoma Church, this is what we see, for instance, in the mission fields, Navjeevan, Rag pickers ministry, outreach to the transgender community, and educating the intellectually challenged. All these are different in

themselves. In the course of our ministry, these differences are to be celebrated. We come across so many people who physically or otherwise are challenged. For God, disability is not a dysfunction but an ability to function differently. We must not compartmentalize them on the basis of looks and structure. People in our world must be guided to grow into unity with the Gospel of the Kingdom of God that we proclaim. Therefore, community formation and community living are two functions of pastoral engagement. If we seek perfection in what we seek and do, that leads us to a closed entity and therefore we miss the persons. What a person is at any point of time does not reveal fully who that person can be. What is revealed is only part of the being. We grow daily. When God created the world, he entrusted humans with the responsibility of tending it, and he found that as good (though not perfect). So how do we see the world as 'good'. We need the eyes of God.

### **B. Pastor as leader and good shepherd**

A pastor is a builder of lives. As Andrew Murray said, our love to God is measured by our everyday fellowship with others and the love it displays. A leader who is ignorant of the realities of a nation or particular geographical space cannot serve its people. Denial of the poor (the last, the least and the lost) is, in fact, the denial of Jesus Christ himself. Pastoral engagement calls for persons who will live with conviction and will be prepared to endure all sorts of sufferings. Jesus Christ is the Chief Priest and He is our model revealing to us the meaning of being a good shepherd through the ministry of incarnation, public ministry, crucifixion and resurrection.

A visionary is one who sees the link between the part and the whole, the local and the universal, the personal and the general, the immediate and the ultimate. As A.W. Tozer pointed out, "God dwells in His creation and is everywhere; indivisibly present in all His works. He is transcendent above all His works even while He is immanent within them". A priest therefore, ministers for the transformation of the people. Transformation is not just any change. It is the change that liberates individuals and leads them to the fullness of Life (Jn. 10:10). The transformation of a Dalit mandates that he or she is freed from oppression and exploitation, as well as is equipped to express himself or herself fully for his or

her own sake and for the sake of the society. In this process, freedom is a state in which one is able to discover one's full scope and stature to live in this world and to serve others. Therefore, the purpose of transformation is 'fulfillment'.

### **C. Pastor as servant and sacrificial lamb**

The three principles that govern a pastor are: (1) Self-denial, (2) Humility and (3) Purity. In a 'me first generation' self-denial becomes difficult which is contrary to what Paul says in Rom. 12:1-2, 12-13. The model is Jesus who self-emptied for others (Phil. 2:1-5). Humility before God makes us to leave our ego in order that we may perceive our calling with the whole of our being. The Beatitudes (Sermon on the Mount) as said by Jesus defines purity by saying 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.' A river is sacred (as Indians consider) because of its generous self-giving outreach, that awakens fruitfulness wherever it flows.

What does it mean to be a servant? A servant regards others as more important than oneself. Likewise, the priests are to look for ways to support, encourage, build up, and stimulate the other. That requires an attitude that would rather give than receive. Then it helps one to care and respect. Paul in Galatians 5:13, exhorts us to serve others in love. How do we do that? (1) Instead of always thinking about receiving, we start looking for ways to give. (2) Instead of holding grudges against those who have offended us, we must be anxious to forgive. (3) Instead of keeping a record of what we have done or who we have helped, we will take delight in forgetting our deeds and be a priest on the shadow of the cross of Christ.

True service is voluntary, not forced. One must be willing to serve, willing to place oneself at the disposal of others (Mt. 20:28, Mk. 10:45, Lk. 22:27). Jesus brought spiritual and physical healing to people (Lk. 4:18-19); gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and speech to the dumb; He restored wholeness to people affected by leprosy. Many of the beneficiaries of His healings belonged to categories of people considered unclean, in His society and subject to different degrees of ostracism. Most often, this is what is happening in the remote villages of India. Many of the healings of Jesus were acts of restoring people back to the dignity of life in

the community. His service sprang out of His compassion for others. Jesus revealed himself as a humble servant in a very poignant way when He washed the feet of His disciples at His last meal with them (Jn. 14:3-5, 12-15).

True service requires self-emptying; emptying oneself of ego and pride. Priests are leaders of a community and society. It is not enough to provide for the needs of the poor and the suffering at a personal and individual level but we need to take efforts also to change social conditions and structures that create and perpetuate poverty and avoidable suffering. A priest cannot go a long way if he is going alone. He is called to move with the community. That also means to move the community to minister wherever possible, where the community can serve other communities, religious or secular in nature.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia on February 04, 1968, two months before he was assassinated (April 04, 1968): “You don’t have to have a College degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the Second Theory of Thermodynamics in Physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love and you can be that servant”.

## **Conclusion**

Growing to the fullness of oneself to serve others to the extent possible is the purpose and reward of pastoral ministry. This is a call to grow together and in excellence. The prayer of Rabindranath Tagore is relevant here: “Give me the strength never to disown the poor and bend my knees before the insolent might”. Aliveness is the yardstick by which the tenure of a person/clergy needs to be evaluated, not retirement. That is what the Metropolitan Mar Chrysostom who crossed 102 years of life embodies. In the 2018 flood in Kerala, he recollected the flood of 1924 and said, “humanity came along with the disaster of flood. People come out to help without considering religion, caste and politics. Man went out in search of another man”. What a wonderful lesson. Who is the Other? Another creation of God: a mystery that unravels for you to discover.

# 09 | PASTORS JOURNEYING WITH CHRIST

Where do we locate the clergy of our times in the setting of our New Normal? With the phenomenal rise in migration and rapid growth in numbers in our cities, pastors today face situations which make their ministry more challenging. Globally, we used to face challenges like, the decline of the western economy and culture, bureaucracy in the administrative system, moral concerns of the clergy, ethical concerns in the structure of the family, integrity and transparency in the life of the people, and ecological concerns on the face of the planet.

The New York Times (March 22, 2013) reported that “Anglicans and Catholics share common problems, starting with the broad drift in Western countries away from religious institutions”. Once, Archbishop Justin Welby told the BBC, “I feel a massive sense of privilege at being one of those responsible for the leadership of the Church in a time of spiritual hunger, when our network of parishes, and churches, and schools, and above all, people, means that we are facing the toughest issues in the toughest place”. These are also concerns of all pastors, as the people look to their pastor with the expectation of being a persuasive preacher of the Holy Bible, an able organizer in the day to day activities of the parish, an enabler and builder of leadership among youth and children, an understanding-sympathetic

counselor and a good shepherd who is regularly interested in the spiritual nourishment of the people and their families.

## **Walking with Christ**

An ordained minister assumes his office by responding to a definite call from God and accepting the grace of God through the sacrament of ordination. The ministry of such a pastor has a unique function in providing the needed guidance, wisdom, fellowship, encouragement and a true understanding of the Bible to the people whom God entrusted him with, through the Church. This is carried out by the minister who walks with Christ daily.

Archbishop Welby was the 105<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury and spiritual head of 77 million Anglicans around the world. Following centuries of protocol, he began a ceremony at the Canterbury Cathedral Oak door, by tapping his crosier (staff) three times. A 17 years old girl, Evangeline Kanagasooriam, asked aloud who he was and why he had come to the ceremony. The archbishop answered, “I came knowing nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified and in weakness and fear and much trembling”.

One who walks with Christ will spiritually grow in the knowledge of the person and work of the Lord and will imitate Him in one’s own life. Through personal prayer and daily study of the Word of God, a minister will discern the teachings of Christ and will grow with a desire to incorporate the teachings into practice in one’s own life. Jesus becomes an eternal contemporary to him. The pastor who listens to God regularly will find it a joy to walk like a shepherd with the flock through the mountains and valleys of human experiences.

A pastor imitating Christ will be a father figure in the Church, attentive to the people. He will respond with love and compassion to the needs of the people particularly those who are sick and poor. Church journeying with Christ will emulate the underprivileged for the sake of enhancing the life of the poor. We read in 2 Cor. 8:9: “for you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich”. Both the universal Churches appear to have chosen as their heads, men who combine strong leadership skills with a marked instinct for self-



effacement, an affinity for the poor and vulnerable in society and the believers in both denominations hope that they will demonstrate a willingness to look anew at old problems. Both leaders have set themes of simplicity, modesty and innovation.

### **Life Style of the Pastor**

An ordained minister is set apart for the specific function of shepherding the sheep. His life style will be tailored to meet the needs of the people whom he leads. When Moses was called by God to deliver the people from their bondage in Egypt, he was called to the life of a traveler, always looking up to God for guidance and confronting the challenges the people faced in their life of slavery, delivering them from the powers of Pharaoh and walking with the people by exposing himself to all the human experiences in their long journey of 40 years to a settled life in the Promised Land.

115 Cardinals from all over the world came together to choose a leader with prayer and reflection and they chose the Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio (76 yrs) as the 266<sup>th</sup> pontiff of the Catholic Church. He is one of the several children of the working-class Italian immigrants in Argentina, ordained on December 13, 1969 and rose through the Jesuit ranks. He is the first non-European Pope in 1200 years, the first from the Americas, the first from the Southern hemisphere and the first Jesuit. Being unique, he decided within a short time to go simple by donning the simple white cassock, using the same cross which he was already wearing as a bishop (instead of the gold pectoral cross that was offered) and asking the people to pray for him and the Vatican city before he blessed them and wished them good. Instead of being seated on a traditional throne, he greeted the cardinals by standing and greeting them one by one. Avoiding the limousine that was waiting to take him to his temporary quarters he went with the Cardinals in their bus. He picked up his suitcases from the clerical guest house where he was staying and paid the bill himself, thus creating a style of his own of being the religious leader of the day.

This is a challenge to the universal Church. It is easy to be persuaded by the world's standards of affluence. The Church can also become an NGO with lots of funds in the name of charity

instead of the love of Christ. As pastors, how do we lead the Church? Can we embrace a life style of simplicity? In the modern world, it is a challenge to live modestly, avoiding indulgence and luxuries. There is a need to be more generous to cater to the needs of the poor. Will our parishes grasp more keenly the meaning of journeying with Jesus? Isn't it true that the Church that is poor because of contributing to the basic needs of the less fortunate is closer to Jesus Christ? That is why St. Francis, though rich, imitated Christ in his life and the world knows him as the 'poor little man', and which motivated Mother Teresa to be the servant of the poorest of the poor. The world called her the 'saint of the gutters' or simply 'mother' of everyone.

### **Life values of the Pastor**

Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount to inculcate values in the lives of his listeners. He said, 'be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5: 48). Jesus was contrasting with the lives of the pagans and tax collectors of His day and pointed out to the Heavenly Father who causes the Sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. He exhorted the people to become sons of the Heavenly Father. Jesus, who called the disciples and chose the twelve, repeatedly asked them to follow Him and said 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'. In John 21, Jesus repeatedly asked Peter to follow him (Vs. 19, 22). In the life of a minister, following Jesus Christ daily is a mandate and an inevitable discipline.

St. Paul in writing to the Christians in Philippi says that the Christian should put into practice the values of the Kingdom of God. He tells them to think of those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable and praiseworthy. St. Paul himself is becoming an example here by saying 'Whatever you have learned or received or heard or seen in me -put it into practice' (Phil. 4: 8, 9). Paul sending Timothy to Ephesus, found that the greed of the people was the root cause of their problems, presents Jesus as the true and real leader. Timothy was asked to follow Jesus' example and to adhere and remain faithful to the call and the Gospel.

Every Pastor needs self-imposed discipline to be a follower of Christ which includes personal prayer, study of the Holy Bible

as well as other relevant reading. He acknowledges that he is called by God and draws authority for his ministry from God every day, like an Ambassador of a Government who keeps in constant touch with his authorities. Whoever does not pray to God, prays to the devil, said Leon Bloy. When we don't proclaim Jesus Christ, we proclaim the worldliness of the devil, the worldliness of the demon. The Pastor will have the awareness that God is overseeing his life and ministry all through. The '*Tooyaba Service*' that we have before every Holy Qurbana helps us to examine ourselves before God and to confess all our sins. It begins with Psalms 51 as a prayer of confession, asking God to wash us thoroughly from all iniquities and cleanse us from our sins. 'Be holy as I am holy' is the call of God. What we need for the ministry is a clean heart and right spirit so that we will walk in the presence of God free from all discord and impurity. Only then, are we equipped to offer praise and thanks giving to God through our life and ministry. Jesus reminded those who journeyed with Him that 'what comes out of the mouth, proceeds from the heart' (Mt. 26: 41).

### **Life-Mission of the Pastor**

Every minister who is committed will have a life - mission. Vocation comes from the call of God and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When Isaiah was called, he committed himself to be a prophet of God. When Philip was called to be a deacon, his ministry was guided by the Holy Spirit to carry out God's mission in several places. Some of the spiritual leaders of the Mar Thoma Church, like Abraham Mar Thoma, Kovoov Achen, and K. K. Kuruvilla, set clear lessons for the contemporary Church. They trekked the ministerial path before us. What we need is the guidance of the Holy Spirit to keep our conscience vigilant daily and the Word of God to guide our spiritual journey. Jesus Christ exercised the habit of daily prayer, listening to the Heavenly Father and implementing God's will and purpose. He was not persuaded by the evil spirit, pressures of the world or even that of the members of His close circle. Jesus said 'watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation, the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak' (Mt. 26: 41). When Jesus hung from the Cross, He cried aloud 'It is finished. Father into thy hands, I commit myself'. That was the cry of the 'mission accomplished'.

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God during His ministry and told the people that it is ‘at hand’. He called the disciples and promised them that He will make them fishers of men. The mission in ministry is to enable people to understand that they too can have a place in the Kingdom of God. The ministry is to draw them closer to Jesus and to the experience of the Kingdom of God. Jesus prayed for the followers as we see in John 17, in the High Priestly prayer, “I pray for them... My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one... For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (vs. 9, 15, 19)”.

A pastor is to be a person of prayer, praying not only for communion with God but also to intercede for others. The power of prayer is great and the need for intercession is also high. ‘Care for the flock in your charge’ is a duty laid upon us, not as an option about which we can be apathetic. The risen Jesus asked Peter thrice to ‘feed my lambs’. A pastor is not only ordained to minister in a particular denomination but also to be a spiritual father to all people with whom he comes into contact. The Roman Pontiff, Pope Francis said to the Cardinals at the Sistine Chapel on the first day after his election, “When we walk without the cross, when we build without the Cross, and when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord. We are worldly. We are bishops, priests, cardinals, and popes, but not disciples of the Lord”.

## **The Vision and Mission of the Journey**

Journeying with Jesus is to realize the vision and mission of Jesus. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar on the way side seized the vision from Jesus and took up the mission to journey with Jesus, who went to Jerusalem to die on the cross for the redemption of the whole world. The Centurion who supervised the process of crucifixion looked at the crucified Jesus, and proclaimed, “truly He is the Son of God”. The risen Jesus appeared to the perplexed disciples and told them: ‘As the father has sent me, I am sending you’. The early apostles not only witnessed Jesus Christ wherever they went, but also turned the world upside down with the power of the Gospel.

## **Journeying with Jesus Christ: Reaching out to the Marginalized**

The Gospel of Mathew tells us that on the day of the Resurrection, the angel rolled away the stone at the tomb and appeared to the women who went there during the early hours of the day and said, He is not here, he has risen... go quickly and tell the disciples that he is going ahead to Galilee (Mt. 28: 5-7). Jesus carried out his public ministry mostly in Galilee where the ordinary and marginalized people of the society were found. The Gospel witnesses to the fact that Jesus had a preferential option for the poor and the marginalized.

Pope Francis carries with him the legacy of St. Francis of Assisi, the monk who devoted his life to the sick and the poor and who founded the Franciscan order. The newly elected optimistic Pope has deep compassion for the poor, a simplistic lifestyle, prioritization of justice and mercy as well as pastoral openness. He is committed to the alleviation of poverty through the redistribution of wealth. It is remarkable that he said to his followers not to come to Rome to celebrate the election of the new Pope, but to contribute that money to the poor. In his former days he has shown compassion to the HIV-AIDS victims, by washing their feet and kissing them.

1976-1983 is portrayed as the time of the dirty war in Argentina when about 30,000 people disappeared or were either killed or kidnapped. As the Jesuit Bishop there at that time, he concealed at a Jesuit school several people persecuted by the dictatorship of those days and even helped a young man who resembled him, to flee Argentina through the Brazilian border, giving him a priest's garb and his own identity document.

Pope Francis made a passionate pledge on the day of his installation Mass (March 19, 2013) to serve the poorest, the weakest, and the least important. He urged the world leaders to protect human life and the environment and use tenderness to inspire hope to the world. "I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, all men and women of good will: let us be protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment".

## **Journeying with Christ: Carrying out the Ministry of Reconciliation**

The very purpose of Jesus dying on the cross was to carry out the ministry of reconciliation. St. Paul writes about this in his second letter to the Corinthians: “God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is in Christ. God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors of Christ, Since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (II Cor. 5: 18-20).

Pastoral ministry is a ministry of reconciliation. It involves reconciliation with God and with one another. An ordained minister says the prayer of absolution (your sins are forgiven) after the prayer of confession. His calling is to enable the people to be conscious of their sin and to confess it as they come to the presence of God. “The minister in charge of a parish shall make ardent efforts to advise and correct unrepentant persons living in Sin....” (Sabha Constitution 11). Therefore, journeying with Christ also means to tell the people, ‘sin no more’. The 105<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby said, “Our task as part of God’s Church is to worship Him in Christ and to overflow with the good news of His love for us, of the transformation that He alone can bring which enables human lives flourishing with joy. The tasks before us are worship and generous sharing of the good news in word and deed”.

Mar Thoma Church has a Diaspora community with its people living and worshipping in different countries and different cultures. Life in diverse cultures finds renewal and unity when we are reconciled afresh to God and so are able to reconcile others. A Christ-heeding life changes the Church and a Christ-heeding Church changes the world. Archbishop Welby said in his sermon on the Enthronement day (based on Mt. 14: 27) that, ‘the more the church is authentically heeding Jesus’ call, leaving its securities, speaking and acting clearly and taking risks, the more the Church suffers...yet at the same time the Church transforms society when it takes the risks of renewal in prayer, of reconciliation and of confident declaration of the good news of Jesus Christ.

In today's world, Christian leaders need to hold Biblical and theological views on abortion, gay partnership and contraception. It is equally important to treat our fellow beings with respect and compassion. Archbishop Welby adheres to the traditional doctrine that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman. Yet he said, "We also face deep differences over the issue of sexuality... I know I need to listen very attentively to the LGBT communities (LGBT - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender), and examine my own thinking prayerfully and carefully. I am always averse to the language of exclusion, when what we are called is to love in the same way as Jesus Christ loves us. Above all in the Church we need to create safe spaces for these issues to be discussed honestly and in love".

### **Journeying with Christ: Healing the Broken World**

Jesus is the greatest healer. He is one who heals people physically, mentally and spiritually. The blind, the leper and the woman with infirmity, all had the healing touch of Jesus. To the thief on the cross he said that he will be with Jesus in Paradise. He transcended boundaries to heal the evil possessed and to honour the faith of the Gentiles. The risen Jesus destroyed the powers of sin and rose from the dead with the marks of his wounds on His body. Therefore, He is called as the wounded healer. It is in the midst of the broken world that He sent his disciples to go with the gospel. The early apostles were ready to take up the pain and suffering of bearing the cross of Jesus. St. Paul says in his letter to Galatians "I bear in my body the marks of Jesus" (6: 17). St. Peter says "But rejoice that you participate in the suffering of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed but praise God that you bear that name"(I Peter 4: 13 & 16).

Church comprises of the 'called out' people of God. The ministry of the Church is primarily carried out by hundreds of thousands of people who get on with the charge of loving their neighbours, loving each other and dedicating millions of hours of voluntary service regularly without reservation. One of the greatest privileges of a parish priest is to minister with them and to them initiating projects and programmes at the grassroots level where men and women, old and young, parents and children are all

involved. In our present set up due importance is not given to children and women in the worship services and in the various areas of ministry. The symbolism of the 17 years old teenage girl opening the doors of the nine century old Canterbury Cathedral to the 57 year old Archbishop Welby and the Archdeacon Sheila Watson leading the Archbishop to the Diocesan throne in the Cathedral as the world (including 2000 invited guests) watched, serves as an eye opener for the global Church. Church becomes relevant when it faces issues and differences. Church becomes a source of remarkable blessings when the world faces difficulties and discovers the wounded (e.g. Good Samaritan and the wounded on the way side).

## **Conclusion**

The risen Lord is on the move. The journey goes on with the resurrection of Jesus. The Church is called and set apart to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ and journey with Him. Like the Emmaus Journey, Christ opens our eyes to know more about Him and to have a living, communion relationship with Him. Like the Galilean breakfast as seen in the Gospel of John 21, He enables us to experience His love and forgiveness and to assume the mission of 'feeding His sheep'. We are the pastors of our times. This journey with Christ is abundant with meaning and purpose. This journey takes us to our consummation experience in the Kingdom of God, where there will only be one great shepherd and one flock. The prayer in the Eucharistic liturgy says: O God, make us worthy to come before you with contrition and humility. Purify us from all stain that we may be transformed by the renewal of our life, and go forth, as did the wise virgins, to a new world, bearing the shining lamps of faith.



# 10 | RE-CREATION FOR NEW LIFE

Re-creation (or *Punarushti* in Malayalam) is a beautiful theme through which we are entering into a new life in Christ. The old is passing away and the new is coming just as the autumn is fading away and the spring is coming. A tree will grow by shedding its old leaves and bearing new ones. New sprouts, new leaves, new flowers and new fruits are signs of growth. Every living being goes through this process of growth. Life is dynamic when there is a process of receiving and giving. Humans live by breathing in and breathing out. A child grows from infancy to old age when the human body sheds the old cells and receives new ones.

## **Re-creation and Rebirth**

Re-creation is being 'born again'. Living in India, we need to differentiate this from the 're-birth' (*Punarjanmam*) that religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism speak about. Rebirth in these religions is related to one's karma (actions). As it indicates, we are caught in the cycle from birth to birth or death to death. If we do good, then we get a better birth. If we do evil, then we get a lower birth. According to this doctrine, one goes through a cycle of births till the person is released from this cycle to attain Moksha (Salvation-Liberation).

What we speak of Re-creation (*Puna-srushti*) is different and is about being 'born again' by the 'grace of God' and by one's willful

decision. Our life is on a spiritual pilgrimage. The Gospels in the Holy Bible tell the world how some people believed in Jesus as the Saviour of the world and became his followers, while others opposed him and refused to believe. The Gospel of St John, chapter 3 narrates the incident of the Jewish leader Nicodemus coming to Jesus. To him, Jesus said, “no one can see the Kingdom of God, unless he is born again” (vs. 3). A person is born physically of human parents, but he is born spiritually of the Spirit (vs. 6). This is by the Grace of God and at the same time, a willful commitment to ‘renounce Satan, all his angels, all his hosts, all his worship and all his deceits in order to believe in Jesus to live as a person of God, pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness’. St. Paul puts this in his own words, as we read in 2 Cor. 5:17. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation (*Punashrushti*); old things have passed away; behold all things have become new.” (New King James Version).

### **Re-creation and Relationships**

Life grows in relationships. As we know, marriage is a sacrament in the Church. We recognize only heterosexual marriages. Man and woman are brought together in marriage. We pray for God’s blessings upon the individuals coming together. We believe that life together is possible only when both of them seek the blessings and guidance of God for the marriage to progress and to go on smoothly and harmoniously. This new life, which we acknowledge as wedded life, is Re-creation. It is the question of embracing another person. By all means the other is different. The other can be of a different culture, language, creed, taste, aptitude and outlook. In marriage, such a person is accepted, distinctions are honoured and individual integrity is maintained. The married realizes that ‘the one body’ is incomplete without the other. They need each other.

But, unfortunately, we domesticate our relationships. We always say that ‘blood is thicker than water.’ This is blurred vision. God has a purpose about each life and life-together (relationships). Marriage is for companionship and for procreation. A child that is born in marriage comes with a divine purpose. Parents receive the child as the fruit of their marriage and as a gift of God. They assume the responsibility to bring up the child. Though the law of

the land requires the parents to look after the children up to the age of 18, the love and attachment continues till death. The children also inherit the assets and properties of the parents. Generations prosper through relationships. Khalil Gibran is correct in saying the famous dictum: “Your child is not your child.” Do we realize that?

A child grows in a community and is molded by the culture and values of the larger society. Many people are involved in the growth of each child. We have the parents, God-parents, Sunday school teachers, religious leaders, friends and neighbours. In the field of education, a child grows through the education in schools and colleges. So is the case in the area of sports, games and recreation. The educated needs a place to work and that role is fulfilled by the various work places in society. It can be availing the job opportunities or creating new ones where others are also employed. A girl child is given in marriage to a man in another home (Giving is a virtue) and a man marries one from outside his blood relationship. Receiving another is fulfillment of life. Jesus said, “Thus a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one.” Mat.19:5. Your child is not your child! He or she is meant for another.

### **Re-creation and Human Dignity**

Re-creation is new life in Christ. Incarnation of Jesus Christ means to be a human being and to live among humans. It is God’s way of dealing with the whole of Creation, for its redemption. It is also to proclaim the Good News that in the Kingdom of God, there is space for everyone. Jesus said, “abide in me and I will abide in you” (Jn. 15:4). He brought in the imagery of the vine and its branches to tell everyone that “you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me”. This is Re-creation. St. Paul understood this when he said, “for me to live is Christ”.

Life in Christ is not being ‘born’ by the world (carriers of the world) but born in the world (to engage in the world). We need to be comfortable and dignified in being ourselves. While being unique and different, we need to uphold the dignity of others. How is this possible? We look at Jesus who walked on the earth as ‘The Man’ and saying, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”(Jn. 14:6). Jesus

kept his dignity by always living for the purpose of God who sent him to incarnate. He did so by voluntarily setting his mind to die on the cross (emptying himself) and by serving the people to empower them to keep their dignity. Our dignity is not to be rooted in the affluence (material wellbeing) and comforts (position and power) but in being the children of God who inherit the space in His Kingdom in order to wipe away the tears of the suffering and marginalized. It is in this context that we understand (i) the significance of the mission to reach out through our mission fields, (ii) the importance of education we give to the tribal community and the poor, (iii) the parenting we give through Navjeevan to the children born in the red streets and (iv) the development activities we carry out to the ‘rag-picker communities’ living around the waste dump yards. When we are ‘in Christ’, we share this privilege of becoming a part of the new creation in God (Punasrushti) to redeem and renew the whole universe.

# 11

## REFORMATION: AN INVITATION FOR SACRAMENTAL LIVING

*“The Reformation event has a very great significance in the identity, vision and ministry of the Mar Thoma Church. This unique event cannot be secluded or distanced to history but it becomes more meaningful, vibrant and colourful when it is an on-going process in the life of the Church today.”*

*Zacharias Mar Theophilus Suffragan Metropolitan.*

As the Malankara Church is a reformed Church, it is quite appropriate to reflect on the meaning and relevance it has in our day to day living.

### **Reformation: Transforming for a New Living**

Obviously, the Reformation was not for the formation of a new Church but for transforming the existing Church for a fruitful living. The Malankara Mar Thoma Church is part of the Christian Church in India that started in 52 CE with the visit of the apostle Saint Thomas who preached the Gospel to the people in the southern part of India. The availability of the Holy Bible in the language of the people and the mission of help that came from the Church Mission Society (CMS) enabled the leaders of the Church to look closely into her life and mission. Great men like Palakunnathu Abraham Malpan and Kaithayil Geevarghese Malpan felt the need to educate the members of the Church to look into their lives and its practices in the light of the Holy Bible. People

responded to this invitation and recognized the need for transformation within the worshipping community, the Church. This invitation caught momentum and brought reformation within the existing Church. It is significant that the reformation fathers chose to uphold the values of the Kingdom of God instead of worldly ways.

### **Reformation in Liturgical Life**

Reformation in worship is an integral part of church-life and growth. The Church gains vitality and she assumes her growth as members gather together regularly for worship. God is the one who is worthy of worship. God's children, the members of the Church, gather together to praise and glorify Him (Isa. 6). God fills his children with His love; Jesus Christ strengthens His body by His grace and the Holy Spirit grants dynamism and vitality for the renewal of the Church by His abiding presence. The gathered community by its regular religious practices turns to liturgical forms of worship for meaning and discipline.

All important occasions of human life are moments to turn to God and seek His grace and blessings. Many religious practices have become sacraments in the Church where the religious community gathers together for worship. Although the entire human life is to be understood and celebrated as a sacrament, the Church has identified seven sacraments for the edification of human life. A sacrament can be defined as a means of receiving God's grace. Every sacrament has its outward expressions, which will carry meaning only when there is an inward spiritual experience. This is possible only through the grace of God. Though the Church has liturgical forms of worship for all sacraments, and the religious practices appear to be a ritual, each sacrament will become relevant and meaningful only when there is inward spiritual experience in the life of the people. Therefore, the sacraments in the Church are for the sacramental living of the people. The reformation in the Church was an invitation to the members of the Church for sacramental living. It is to be noted that the reformation-fathers trusted God and were strengthened by God's grace, which made them give away many of the material possessions and risk the positions they enjoyed in their society.

Today it is our challenge to share God given resources for imparting abundant life to the last, least and the lost in the society. Our Valiya Metropolitan Mar Chrysostom says; “every anticipation in the construction of a more humane world is a sacrament”. Reformation keeps challenging the church and the people to view the world as a sacrament and to live like a sacrament.

### **Reformation: An Invitation for Sacramental Living**

Reformation is not a one time event; it is a continuous process inviting members to reform their religious practices and to renew their life. The salient features that the Mar Thoma Church speaks of as unique characteristics of reformation are not closed entities but processes that shall give meaning to the nature of the Church as we move forward in time. For example,

(a) At the time of reformation, the Church took a stand to translate the liturgy from the Syrian language (Syriac) to Malayalam. The reformation process was intended to free the Church from the domination by a foreign language and to grant freedom for the members to have the liturgy in their own language. It is gratifying to see that the Mar Thoma Church continues to translate its liturgy into the languages of the people based on the geographic location of the Church’s parishes. Wherever the Church members become conservative and hesitant to change their language from Malayalam, when the growing generation speaks other languages, the Church is turning a deaf ear to the invitation for sacramental living. In the North American context, there are French speaking people in Canada and Spanish in the Southern states of USA. Likewise, linguistic and cultural diversity is evident in the parishes located in Germany, Switzerland and Ireland.

(b) The reformed Church gave due emphasis to studying the Holy Bible and living the Gospel. In the modern technocratic world where humans are ‘busy’, a large number of people stay away from studying the Word of God and renewing their life accordingly. They knowingly or unknowingly neglect the essentials of Christian life. While we do not want to be mere traditionalists, we need to keep the traditions of personal meditation, family prayer, study of the Word of God in smaller groups, and systematic learning of the faith and practices for spiritual nurturing and

healthy growth. The reformation is therefore an invitation at all times to understand and live the Word of God. Church-life becomes sacramental living when the members take keen interest to grow in family worship and in prayer groups. Thus, regular attendance in the Church's organizational meetings will nurture one's spiritual life as well as strengthen the fellowship of community living.

(c) The reformed Mar Thoma Church is a missionary church. While the Church is highly liturgical, it is also evangelistic. The reformed Church took great interest to cross all boundaries and to reach out to all people with the gospel. At one time, there was a strong movement by the people in the Church to go out of the State of Kerala in small groups to profess the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to live and preach the Good News among people, irrespective of caste, colour and creed. The Ashrams of the Mar Thoma Church are examples of that movement. When a community withdraws itself and lives like a caste or communitarian group, they are making the Church insulated and isolated and thereby taking away from the spirit of reformation. If it becomes necessary to close any local parish, after a reasonable period of existence, it would be highly indicative that the church there was an introvert instead of reaching out to the people in the neighborhood. Today the Mar Thoma Church has become a global church, mainly by its Diaspora. Reformation today is to address all issues arising from the geographical spread of the Church to almost all continents including the issues of migration and the consequent plurality. It is necessary for the Church to become inter-racial and multi-cultural. This kind of reformation can only happen in a church that practices sacramental living.

(d) The reformed Church is hierarchical in nature and democratic in her administration. The spirit of reformation can be continued only when the Church maintains a proper balance between its hierarchical and democratic characteristics. There can be real danger to the Church when over emphasis is given to the Church's democratic pattern of decision-making or the leaders become autocratic and authoritarian. The Church should be willing to give proper attention and recognition to the priesthood of all believers and be willing to listen to the wisdom of the Church's



chosen leaders as well as people who are talented and experienced. The successful growth of the Mar Thoma Church to its current stature has proven that its members have listened to the prophetic voices of its spiritual leaders to engage in social involvement in order to carry out the servant ministry of the Church, and that the Church has respected its lay-leaders who offered leadership in global ecumenical circles and other spheres to witness Jesus Christ.

### **Reformation: Transforming the Church as a Community for Others**

The Reformation of the Church was to make the Church a community for others. Jesus Christ lived on Earth as a ‘man for others.’ The purpose of God in sending His son Jesus Christ into the world is to redeem all creation through Him. The Church is an instrument for serving God’s purpose and therefore a channel of God’s grace to the entire world. The Church will lose her meaning and purpose if she exists only for her own wellbeing. Instead, as Mar Chrysostom Valiya Metropolitan says: “the Church should act as the conscience of the society and also as a social auditor”. It is here that we find the relevance of the mission and ministry of the Church even at the local level.

Jesus Christ showed the Church the true way of life by His self-emptying life. The cross of Christ marks the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we celebrate these events in every sacrament, particularly the sacrament of Holy Qurbana where it says, “He took bread in His holy hands, gave thanks, blessed, sanctified and broke it and gave it to His disciples saying: take, eat, this is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me”. These words are not simply to be recited or repeated during the Holy Qurbana, but to become a living experience and enable the transformation of the Church and the world. This is the meaning of re-formation. This is living “the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” every day.

Late Suffragan Metropolitan Dr. Zacharias Mar Theophilus said: “As a Church, we need to introspect and identify spaces for reformation in our personal and community life and take the bold step to make the changes by submitting ourselves to God Almighty

for a life of sacramental living.” Adhering to the words of Jesus Christ, “you are the light of the world”, Church forefathers established the motto of the Mar Thoma Church as “lighted to lighten”. So, it is inevitable to keep the light shining as the Church continues to grow, worship and practice a more meaningful and sacramental life for spreading the good news that Jesus Christ is the savior of the entire world and the light to the whole world.

# 12 | STRENGTHENING FAMILY VALUES

Family is one of the oldest institutions of society and is as old as humanity itself. It is the basic unit of the Church and society; as a matter of fact, Church is the family of families. It is also the basic community from where we understand the global world. In every century, family has faced the stresses and strains of life. Lifestyles (of each family) are tailored according to these experiences within a given culture and space. As we tend to classify the human society of the East and the West, we are also conscious of the varieties of lifestyles that human families have in different continents.

Today we live in a global world where claims of a New Normal are constantly emerging from different quarters. Travel and migration have become very common. So, in a given geographical area, there is plurality of lifestyles; embraced and exchanged according to one's taste and need. The rapid changes that are taking place around families are shaking these close-knit relationships within the family. It is observed that a number of families end up in divorce, or are dysfunctional. The families will have strong foundations only when they rest on the eternal values of the Kingdom of God like justice, love, reconciliation, peace, and the like.

The role of family in the Church and society is so deep and strong that it becomes the crucible where future generations are

molded. The inter-relationship with family members and the very atmosphere of the family has far reaching consequences for the lives of its members. Children born and brought up in a family grow up with what they see and experience in their family. Family rests on relationships. A group of people living under the same roof will not comprise a family. The family setup becomes real when members relate to each other and they play different roles as it is determined and given to them by God.

This chapter walks through our need to understand that God is our creator; that He is the foundation of our relationships, and that marriage is divinely instituted by God and lays the ground for relating with each other; that we must freely give our talents & be stewards to all of God's creation; how sin alienates us from God because of our worldliness and desires to conform; how Christ's salvation redeems us to understand the kingdom values and it is these kingdom values that bring us back to the realization that God is our Creator.

### **God is the Creator**

God designs every family. He must be at the centre of each human family. Unity within the family crumbles when God is taken away from the family and different spheres of life. The very Godhead is understood as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This is the model for all human families. Jesus Christ lived amongst humanity, always in communion with the Heavenly Father and obeying Him. Every family finds the meaning of family life by living in communion with God through prayer, study of the Word of God and meditation. This value of the family is being diminished as families tend to become more and more nuclear in a fast changing world. Personal meditation and family worship are to be encouraged in order to keep the unity and integrity of all families.

### **God Gives Relationships**

Relationships are the cradle into which each child is born. There are only male and female in humankind and created beings. It is the relationship that gives dignity and respect for each person in the family and also for the person to play the different roles. All relationships are God given; therefore, they are divine. It is to be

respected as sacred. They are to be maintained as it is in relationships that human life grows and carries out its purposes.

Love is the binding factor. Reconciliation between members brings peace and harmony. Justice is maintained by mutual respect. Everyone is considered precious and attributed with dignity. The Holy Bible presents families as venues where inter-personal relationships are kept and respected. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament speak about God -ordained responsibilities within the family circle. The Old Testament speaks of families that take care of not only direct members of the family but also servants, dependents, animals and nature. Today the sanctity of all these relationships is forgotten and the freedom loving new generation tends to ignore God given relationships.

### **Sacramentality of Marriage**

What is marriage? Marriage is a divine provision sanctified by the Creator. It is a sacrament-*Koodasa*. We turn to the Word of God to understand marriage (Mathew 19:4-6). It is the question of dealing with incompatibilities. Marriage is to be approached as a permanent institution. It is the taking of a vow; to be there for each other as long as breath lasts. In marriage, you need unconditional love and commitment. Studies have proven that men and women live longer, happier, healthier and wealthier lives when they are properly married.

Choosing a life partner is important and needs divine grace. The process of leaving, cleaving and becoming one in marriage is a blessed one, and at the same time a painful and hard experience which has to be properly understood and handled for building up a smooth married life. Verbal and non-verbal communication in marriage is very important. Communication of love and hate, approval and disapproval, desire and dislike, hope and disappointment, must be understood properly for a successful family life. Both failure to communicate and wrong communication can destroy family life.

Marriage is for a lifetime. When two people marry, it involves the merging of separate patterns of living into a shared life. It is here that a family becomes the sanctuary of life, a sacred place dedicated to God. Parenting is a great responsibility for both

spouses, and it remains a common challenge. The distinctive roles of a mother and a father must be clearly understood and effectively discharged along with the common roles involved in parenting. In Christian families, it is vital for the parents to understand that they are the first Biblical teachers and sex educators. Marriage is considered to be a gateway of setting up of the family and carrying out responsibilities for the good of the members within and outside of it.

## **Talents and Stewardship**

Another area that has to be considered is about God given talents and gifts. There is an exhortation that is given to the wedded couple towards the end of the marriage service before the final benediction. It says: Remember that you are stewards of God in wealth, time and talents. Therefore, set apart a portion of your income for the needy and the poor and for the mission of the Church. We seldom remember that our time, talents and wealth are also meant for others. This feeling becomes strong when we realize that in the society in which we live, everything is paid for.

The Western culture has also crept into the East whereby no one extends a service unless it goes with some sort of payment. Voluntary service is slowly dying out. St. Paul writing to the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 12) speaks of the various gifts given to humankind. He says: *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.* Now to each one, the manifestations of the Holy Spirit is given for the common good.

Parents need to understand that children need their time, talents, and not just their money. Married couples understand that their time, talents, and money are to be shared with one's life-partner. Most of the elderly are worried these days about their old age. We know that they are to be respected and well taken care of. This was the system in the Indian tradition. Human care and service with a human touch is getting lost, although there are exceptions among us in this land. But is it not a fact that while Grandparents are needed for babysitting, children feel helpless to take care of their parents when they become like children because of old age?

What is the model we have given our children through our own lives? “We are helpless” is not a good answer. Every Christian is called to give hope in a hopeless situation. What about the orphans? Do we understand that an orphan is to be accepted as our own child? (Acceptance is a better word than adoption). How about the widows in society who need financial support (Acts 6.1) when their bread winners are gone? Is there reluctance on the part of the parents to give extras for the differently-abled in the family? This is what James says: *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

Certainly, globalization has provided new opportunities for the enhancement of life for many. Modern system of communications has converted the world into a global village. But now this has drifted to the position where globalization refers only to economic factors. It attempts now to integrate the national economies into the international economy through trade, foreign direct investment, capital flow, migration and the spread of technology.

An Indian philosopher said: “In caring there is a commitment to its well being and flourishing, a joy in its perfection and sorrow in its stresses and strains, a kind of knowing which maybe called knowing-with. When it is said that we could become aware of the presence of God in Nature it is through this experience of caring of things that we acquire a sense of the divine presence. It is not a mere intellectual understanding of things but grasping this complex unit of love, understanding, and service, which is caring, and sharing.” Jesus is the embodiment of God’s great love (John 3.16). He has called us to follow him. St. Paul tells us to have the same mind of Jesus (Phil. 2). St. John reminds us that it is in abiding in Christ that we bear much fruit for the glory of God and for the manifestation of God’s love in the world. Since there are many forms of caring, we have many ways of knowing God.

## **Sin and Salvation**

Sin called by any other name is still sin. There are several definitions for sin. This is not an attempt to state them one after another. One short definition says “sin is missing the mark.” God

has created human beings with a definite purpose. Missing that purpose is sin. See the Genesis story. It comes as a result of irresponsible action and disobedience. The psalmist says: *“The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have all together become corrupt; there’s no one who does good, not even one.”*

*“When a teacher of the law came to Jesus, calling him, Good teacher, Jesus turned and asked him why do you call me good?” God alone is good. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. We sin if we say we are sinless and we deceive ourselves (1John 1:8). Jesus Christ is our Savior. He has opened the way of salvation through His death on the cross. 1 John 1.7 says – The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.*

**Sin is alienation:** God has given us a life in relationships. We have relationship with God and we have relationship with one another. Breaking the God given relationship is sin. St. Paul uses the word reconciliation when he speaks of salvation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5.18,19). All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We have relationship with one another. This is ideally best experienced in the family. Luke 15. 11-32 *tells us the parable of the Father and two sons. In vs. 24 the Father tells the elder son that the younger son was away from home and hence was dead.* Alienation from relationship is sin. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ says that one should not call the other person a fool (5.22) and the one getting angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

**Salvation is Humanization:** Salvation is humanization and not the other way round. Dr. M.M. Thomas said: *“The mission of salvation and the task of humanization are integrally related to each other even if they cannot be considered identical.”* Human beings live in inter-personal relationships. All relationships carry with it the baggage of God-given responsibilities. Caring and sharing are Christian virtues. Love is manifested in life through deeds. *When we say that we love God, it becomes true only when we love our fellow being as well (1 John 3:17 & 4:20b).* The parables of Jesus remind us of the need to share our resources and to care for the Lazarus who is on our doorstep (Luke 16: 19-21).



We live in a world that is divided between the rich and the poor. Mother Teresa said: “The poor are beautiful.” Professor Mohammed Yunus, Nobel Laureate, says that poverty is not created by the poor in the world; the poor are there not because of their fate. Humans are responsible for the existence of poverty. Therefore, humans can eradicate poverty from the face of the world, if they have a will to do it. Greed and the pursuit of acquisitions are isolated as the source of bondage. The existence of poverty reminds us of the sinful nature of humans.

Jesus is our ONLY salvation. Jesus came to liberate humans from all powers that dehumanize them. Hence the liberating power of the Risen Lord is for all and it has to be shared, so that all can experience it. This is the Good News – *our Salvation*. (*Gal 5.1*). *The commandment given by God is summarized in saying that one is to love God with all their might, heart and mind and to love one’s neighbour as oneself (Luke 10:27). Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain who the neighbour is (Luke 10:29-37). But how do you understand the commandment: Loving as one’s self? This is a hard nut to crack. Jesus demonstrated it by His death on the cross and in saying: “I give you a new commandment, love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12). This is at the heart of understanding others’ needs. The “me-ness” of the self is transformed into the “we-ness” of the life together. This is the spirit of community life and the culmination of it is the salvation experience in God.*

## **Kingdom Values**

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount has pointers to the values of the Kingdom of God. When we read Mathew 5-7, it begins by defining the blessed people and ends with the exhortation to put into practice the words of Jesus. This is possible only by being rooted in God and growing in Christian values by responding to the needs, concerns and interests of those in the world. The Church is the family of families. The Church is not an entity by itself but an instrument of God for the transformation of the world. The goal of transformation is the establishment of God’s Kingdom. Therefore, the world is to be seen as an extension of the basic family unit. Family values are meant for the purpose of transforming the world into God’s Kingdom. The Kingdom values could be outlined briefly as following:

## **The Cross**

The Cross of Jesus is the key to the Kingdom of God. Cross is not the point of annihilation but a place of resurrection; resurrecting with the resurrected Lord. It is the point of mission and ministry of the Church. Realizing this spirit, St. Paul said: *For me to live is Christ (Philip 1: 21)*. Christians today are called to *reveal this new humanity in Christ and live in this world as Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor 5: 20)*.

## **Renunciation**

Jesus Christ, during his public ministry, said: The Son of man has no place to lay his head (Luke 9:58). This is indicative of Jesus' life-style of renunciation. *Thyaga* is the Sanskrit word for this. It not only means to give up but also to transcend. Jesus was not tied down to a particular place or bound by his close relatives. This has more meaning in a global world of today where one does not have permanent interest in any particular geographical place.

Jesus Christ walked through the streets of Galilee with the purpose of inviting humans to experience the Kingdom of God. Jesus had no difficulty in dining with the people and at the same time going hungry and thirsty in search of the lost, the least and the last. People mattered to Jesus. This is the nature of God. In the modern context, Jesus invites humans to *seek first the Kingdom of God (Matt 6:33)*. The world would have been much different if we all learned to say enough when God meets our basic necessities and no to things that are not absolutely needed (Phil 4:12). One needs the grace of God to pronounce these words 'enough' and 'no' with the right spirit at the right time and at the right place. Discipleship is possible only through discipline.

## **Service**

John. 13 portrays the ministry of service through the symbol of the towel and the basin of water. Jesus demonstrated it to His disciples when they sat together for supper. The disciples were pre-occupied with the thought of understanding who among them was the greatest. So, they forgot to provide water for washing the feet of all who came for the supper fellowship. Jesus understood their mind and gave them a lesson by washing the feet of everyone

with water and drying them with a towel: *When He finished, He returned to his place and started saying: "Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord, rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set for you an example that you should do as I have done for you."* (Jn 13.12-15)

## Conclusion

What do we see in the world? There is a very strong tendency in the contemporary world to consider the individual person apart from the community. May I help you? What can I do for you? These are popular jargons without much meaning. Personal freedom is glorified and radical individualism constructed, without any consideration for the well-being of the community, which deprives people of a shared experience. Community living is vital for humans to survive. Deprivation of that increases the rate of suicides. It creates persons uprooted from society and devoid of community support. The Church is a community in mission. It is being criticized that the Church has failed in her mission of community.

The Church cannot remain introverted, isolated or insulated from the rest of the world. The Church is to be the Church without walls; a place that welcomes people, a place where sinners are healed and restored. The Church can be the light of the world and the salt of the earth only by responding to the needs, concerns and interests of those in the world, freeing from the powers of darkness and redeeming from the possible process of disintegration.

This is the servant ministry of the Church. The servant rule is built on a structure of mutual accountability. Ephesians 5.21 says: *"Be subject to one another, out of reverence for Christ."* This then is dynamic, participatory, and empowering. *Who all will be on the right side of the King in the Kingdom of God?* Matthew 25.34 says: *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in; I needed clothes and you clothed me; I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* (Matt. 25: 34-40)

The liberating power of the risen Lord is for all and it has to be shared and experienced by all. The Church is called to give to the world an ‘Alternate Way’, the Way of the Cross based on love, justice, selflessness, sacrifice and servant hood. *“A city on a hill cannot be hidden” said Jesus and continued: “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14 -16).* The Church can be an effective instrument only if it is prepared to address the issue by the exercise of servant-power. This is the model of Jesus’ life and ministry. This takes away all selfish and manipulative power that can creep in the lives of individuals and communities. The family is the foundation instituted by God where all these kingdom values need to take root so that we can be in relationship with God, with one another and be the family that God expects of us – and transforming ourselves as individuals, as families, as communities, as societies and therefore the world into God’s kingdom. But it starts with strengthening the family.

# 13 | TRANS-GENDERING THROUGH TRANS-AWARENESS

What determines who we are? The immediate answer that comes to mind is our personality... and sexuality is an integral part of our personality. Behavioural patterns develop according to one's gender and influences what we do and determines who we are. Sexuality affects all segments of society including children, adolescents, adults and the elderly. Physiological changes in the person affect human sexual behaviour which has sociological, cognitive, behavioural and biological dimensions.

If one were to plot a graph of sexuality, with each of the predominant sexes along one of the axes, where would we locate the Transgender and their allies? Transgender is a person who identifies with a gender that differs from that person's assigned sex at birth. Trans-man is one who assumes male gender while the person was known as a girl at birth. Likewise, Trans-woman is one who assumes female gender while the person was determined as a boy at birth. Inter-sex refers to humans who have physical characteristics of both male and female sexes. This questions the traditional binary divisions of human community as male and female and causes problems in placing them. Struggling with this issue, the Supreme Court of India came up with a landmark judgment in April 2014 (Nalsa Judgment) declaring the different ones as a 'Third gender'. This position is also debated by the transgender community asking why they cannot be considered as

the ‘First gender’? Do the realities of the New Normal pose any challenge to our understanding of and the living conditions of the transgender communities?

Christian Church holds traditional understanding of sexuality as a divine vocation to be regulated within the heterosexual (patriarchal) families and formulated biblical and theological understanding of human sexuality, family and marriage. This traditional and dominant theological legitimization of heterosexism is discarded by the discordant voices of the LGBTQ community. This challenges the Faith Communities who in turn have to re-examine their theological understanding and learn to grow as inclusive communities. Traditionally, the Church looks into the views of her community to respect the Holy Scriptures and the Church tradition they hold from Church Fathers and the Councils. However, the modern Church wants to be open to the various aspects of sexual revolution which portrays genuine and real facts of life. The Church is called to be open. When God is guiding the world in unexpected ways, should not the Church respond to it courageously to become the Church in the very space where the created order struggles to find place and meaning to its very being?

### **Biblical Revelations**

The book, Acts of the Apostles, gives us a glimpse of how the early Christian Church grew by confronting the challenges it faced as it moved from Jerusalem to different places and from the Faith community to different human communities. Acts 8 narrates how Philip, a deacon of the Church, was led by the Lord to meet the Ethiopian eunuch in a desert place, when the eunuch was returning from Jerusalem after worshipping there. Acts 8:26-40, enables us to discover how God guided the early Church to grow in unexpected ways.

Here, in the text, the Ethiopian Eunuch holds a very respectable and dignified position assigned by the Queen of the country. He could go to the prestigious Jerusalem Temple for worship and had access to it. Moreover, he is wealthy and travels in a chariot in those days. He had access to the Holy Scriptures and could get a scroll to carry with him. Scrolls were generally kept in religious places and were accessible only to the religious

leaders. Also, he could read and reflect on the Scripture unlike most of the people in those days who did not have this privilege. He is engaged in a study of the Holy Scripture with Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit. He receives the Gospel of Jesus Christ and openly confesses his faith (vs. 17). Finally, he goes through the Sacrament of Baptism whereby he identifies with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and he receives the grace of God to carry the Gospel to Ethiopia and to be a witness there. He rejoices in his salvation. (vs. 39)

An exploration into this text with diverse theological and ethical responses enables us to realize the complexity and diversity in our Christian understanding of the transgender community. Some of the questions that challenge us are, for instance, how do we become a Church where they can share their sufferings, struggles and celebrations? Can we discern how God continues to work and act in our present-day realities? Can we remain faithful to God by following God's ways?

### **Navodaya Movement of the Mar Thoma Church**

Navodaya Movement of the Mar Thoma Church had its humble beginning in the Bombay Diocese in the year 2014. The movement recognized that justice is denied to the transgender community and therefore a ministry specializing in this area was established. A helpline was started to extend a helping hand to all those who seek justice and assistance. This revealed that a large number of transgendered individuals were migrating to cosmopolitan cities like Mumbai. Several of these were migrating from Kerala. In April 2017, the Church decided to extend the ministry of Navodaya to Kerala and other places. This project is now chosen as a birth-centenary project of the Valiya Metropolitan of the Church, Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Mar Thoma. Most people have some prevailing bias and prejudices about the transgender community and also about any kind of ministry for, and amongst, them. Therefore, Navodaya Movement decided to have, as the first step, awareness programmes at different places to create an understanding of the transgender community and help clarify the various steps needed for the Church to become inclusive.

## **Objectives of the Navodaya Movement**

The ministry of the Navodaya Movement to the transgendered community of the Mar Thoma Church has the following objectives: (i) A just society where men, women, and transgendered people have equal rights to access development opportunities, resources and benefits. (ii) Educate the society to provide a respectful and dignified life for transgender individuals without any gender discrimination. (iii) Equipping and empowering transgender individuals to understand and realize their personhood and strengthen their social relations. (iv) Promote means of sustainability and livelihood for them by making use of the available opportunities. (v) Equip the larger society to recognize the genders other than the dominant ones. (vi) Give guidance and assistance to the transgender people for their medical and psychological needs.

### ***Church: Extending Hospitality to the Transgender community***

Transgender people are God's gift to us and to the universe. They have gifts and qualities to offer to the well-being of the human community. The Church is to be an inclusive community that extends hospitality, fellowship and solidarity. The Church must be on the fore front to offer them a welcoming home. The present practice of driving transgender children out of the home or creating an environment where they are forced to go out is not at all a model or a state that can be promoted. This is unchristian and unlawful. Parents are to be encouraged to love their transgender children and to assume the responsibility of giving due dignity to their life. Transgender children can be born to any couple, their wedded children or grandchildren. Accepting them as they are should be the norm, so that transgender children will own a home and respect their parents and siblings.

In our social relations and in interactions with any member of the transgender community, the Church should take the initiative to take out the 'otherness' from the person and improve the understanding that it is together that we form the human community. Transgender members deserve equality, dignity and social status. Jesus did strange things, like walk with sinners, eat with tax collectors and stay with Zacchaeus.



## ***Church: Upholding Transgender Rights***

We need to protect the rights of transgender children and work towards reducing the number of drop outs from our schools and colleges. Bullying on campus should be curtailed and proper toilet facilities must be arranged for the transgender children. The Church should assume the responsibility to help drop outs from schools or colleges continue their education in the best way possible.

Transgender children also deserve inheritance rights to parental properties. Denial of the rights to inheritance is a denial of human rights. Transgender children should not be viewed as a curse and the family should continue to care for them. It is the responsibility of the parents to protect a child up to the age of 18 years. The government should give scholarship for free education to transgender children.

The transgender community is a minority in need of a proper status. They too require identity cards issued by the governments or panchayats. Those without housing should be provided shelter, and shelter homes established for this purpose. They should be provided access to public transportation, public places, educational institutions and employment exchanges and reservations provided where possible.

There is a need to facilitate new avenues of skill enhancement and alternate livelihood programmes that are helpful and sustainable. Human rights of the transgender community are to be safeguarded, including their access to the public places. Trans people are vulnerable to violence; once they are thrown out of their homes or walk out, they get assaulted on the streets. On an average nine out of ten transwomen are gang raped. Security is a big concern and monetary transactions are not safe. Rules are to be formulated to enable the Transgender to open bank accounts. Law should be the same for all.

Guidance and assistance must be given to transgender people for access to medical and social facilities. This would include places for religious practices. Public or government facilities to take care of the aged should be established. It is our responsibility to create public awareness through the various programmes thereby leading the people to re-integrate the transgender community into the main

stream of society. They currently undergo class discrimination, caste-based violence and exclusion. More advocates like Tiruchi Siva, a Rajya Sabha member of the DMK in Tamil Nadu can help make their issues heard at the government level as they are a minority and highly stigmatized.

This is a complex issue which needs continued research, the findings of which could help lead the Church to carry out a better ministry in the coming years.

## **Conclusion**

Church is plural, diverse and multiple in functions. Through the work of the Church with the transgender community, they will understand the Church as the body of Christ with expectation and hope. This is possible only if the Church is inclusive in its outlook. The inclusiveness will equip the Church to be an open community that shares the pain and pathos of the wounded world. Jesus expressed his solidarity with the homeless by moving about without a home. He rejected the patriarchal household model of His home. Jesus encouraged children as well as women who were not married or without children to live towards the Kingdom of Heaven. On the Cross, He entrusted His mother to His beloved disciple, affirming an alternate model of home where blood relation alone is not the norm. He promised a thief on the cross to walk with Jesus to Paradise. The Church, as the body of Christ, is called and sanctified to have these marks or life styles. Church is a compassionate companion to those who are on the street or margins. God will surprise us, as He did to those on the Emmaus Road, when the Church will respond courageously to the heartbeats of the transgender community by its liberative presence in the name of Jesus Christ.