

Youth Envisioning Ecumenical Mission

Shifting Ecumenical Mission Paradigms for Witnessing Christ Today

- Fr. Vineeth Koshy *

Today many 'movements' have become 'monuments', however the 1910 world Missionary Conference which was a starting point of the modern ecumenical movement has made remarkable progress quantitatively and qualitatively, extensively and intensively. Ecumenism and Mission activities have now moved away from the mere fringes of proselytizing and baptizing to greater and noble areas of work and study, thanks due to the engagement of many creative thinkers, enthusiastic ecumenists and committed missionaries. Also expected ecumenism and mission receives an overwhelming barrage of responses. Initially and even now a large majority of population is negative, skeptical and pessimistic about the whole ecumenical and missionary enterprise and endeavors. Analyzing some of these unfavorable responses, I get the impression that many of these misunderstandings are due to insufficient knowledge of the nature of mission, its background; it's working its relevance and future prospects or we are too impatient. A well-informed, deeply-reflected and dispassionate study of the ecumenical and missionary movements will lead us to a balanced and positive assessment regarding the contributions of these movements. Therefore the Centenary Celebration of Edinburgh World Mission Conference becomes a unique occasion to celebrate ecumenical unity, mapping mission mandate, understand the challenges and opportunities faced by the Churches and Ecumenical Movements in the contemporary world.

Ecumenical Mission Mandate

Youth is a state of life and mind when there is quality of thinking, pre-dominance of courage and appetite for adventure. However, one of the alarming features of today's youth participation and leadership in the Church is that the younger generation is in the 'exit-phase' and there may be various reasons for justifying this exit. We are forgetting that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are distributed equally and widely in the Church. Therefore it is quite essential that the spiritual experience and expertise of every member must be recognized and drawn into the common spirituality of the local congregations. Thus the concerns of the Church must be broad-based involving the youth, women, and children.

In interpreting the theme and mandate of the Edinburgh Centenary, the youth may asked, 'What it means to Witness Christ Today?' Though the Church exists for mission, but the basic question is: What type and kind of Mission are we looking forward? I may say that in this 21st century youth envisions for some major shifts of mission paradigms and the ecumenical mission must take future directions looking from four different perspectives:

- ✓ **Creative**
- ✓ **Contextual**
- ✓ **Communitarian**
- ✓ **Compassionate**

[*Fr. Vineeth Koshy belongs to Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, presently works as the Executive Secretary-Commission on Youth, National Council of Churches in India, vineethkoshy@gmail.com]

Creative

Creativity is a vital dimension of human existence. The true basis of our creativity is the belief that we are made in the image of God. Thereby God has shared God's creativity with us. Creativity is not some rare esoteric gift enjoyed by a few people like poets, musicians, actors, sculptors, artisans etc. Rather it has been gifted to all, something that comes with being alive, sensitive, caring, questioning, and open to the Spirit of God, willing to learn from the past, analyze the present and explore the future. To be creative is to be willing to grow and to encourage growth in others. The Church and ecumenical movement stands challenged in the sacred task of unfolding the possibilities of the mission in creative ways, that is not satisfied with the 'doing the minimum.' In the normal order of things, if only the conventional way is attempted, it may bring short term results but it may not bring desired outcomes. What the youth and society today really needs is a combination of both the ways, i.e. to be conventional and creative, whereby the problem is not merely solved but eliminated completely.

The call from the youth to the Church for being more effective and meaningful is to go beyond boundaries, beyond conventional approaches and to be open to the infinite potential stemming from God who is the source of all creativity and who himself is creative. This has been proved by the great thinkers and leaders of all ages, who responded creatively and not just reacted normally to the prevailing situation. Today's youth thus envisions such a Church where they can dare to dream creatively and those creative dreams transformed to actions. In these times the degree of change in society is accelerating, every new generation is radically different in culture from its earlier generation. This generation gap from one culture to the other is growing larger and surprisingly such differences are more than cosmetic or superficial changes in 'forms' of expression for example clothing and music styles, mannerisms etc.

The task is to be creative without compromising the non-negotiable basic foundations of scripture, traditions, the changes required of a church to contain, integrate and communicate to their youth, effectively amounts to adjusting their sites to be on target to reach their mission field of neighbors. The spiritual needs of youth cannot be met fully by our ordinary approach. What is needed is a new approach, an unusual way of responding to the situation, a creative style of encountering the problems and challenges. The gigantic problems of youth of our church demand an unusual, imaginative and even fanciful response. That can be brought forward only by critical, constructive and creative thinking and working.

Contextual

Classical science claimed that everything in nature is immutable and unchangeable. However modern science now proves through the theories of relativity, evolution, uncertainty principle etc. that nothing in the universe is immutable and matter is changing constantly. However the mentalities and attitude of the church and society down through all age's remains constant. In this context the young people dream of a Church fully catering to the needs of the church in the new and evolving context of 'common global culture'. The truth is that regardless whether the youth live in village or city, they are all being influenced by the three great unifiers of global culture: internet, movies and music, especially the social networks through internet.¹ Recently someone asked me that, what is the secret of media and internet for their strong influence on this present generation, and then I replied that, "they don't influence them, rather they own them". Today it

seems to many that Church is the last one to catch up and own these changes, therefore church's mission needs to be tuned and adapting in accordance to the rising cultural revolutions.

The rate of change brought about by spreading global youth culture with all its modern distinctiveness renders traditional structures of religious expression obstruction in conveying their original meanings to the young people. The mandate of the contextualization of the gospel requires that no unnecessary stumbling block be put in the way of young people in understanding Christian mission. For an effective mission, Church must understand the soul and spirit of the today's youth. Today there is lot of discussions and debates going on about the matter of indigenization & inculturation of the liturgy for a greater participation of young people. Unless Christ is truly incarnated, all these efforts would be fruitless and meaningless. Inculturation must be going beyond adapting the contemporary cultures, traditions, attractive strategies to attract young people. Therefore the challenge is to compliment and mutually enrich the diverse cultures but at the same time there is One People of God adoring and worshipping him. Thus it means that the mission, life, and teachings of Christ into contemporary cultural situations, without adulterating the culture, values and principles of Christianity.²

Culture is not a ready-made or finished product; every culture is in a process of becoming by continuous encounter with the present realities and the cultures of other people. Meeting of two cultures and the process of giving and taking between them may be called 'inter-culturation'. The process of inculturation is also a process of 'inter-culturation'.³ Gospel or the Christian Faith does not exist first in abstract form and then inculturated in every culture or context. On the contrary the original gospel and the original Church were embodied in a social-cultural form. Every Apostle/missionary/believer has received the faith in a particular historical, context and socio-cultural form, and as a missionary s/he carries this inculturated faith to other peoples. Therefore it is the recipients or the people who have to respond to the Gospel receive and translate the faith in their own contextual, historical and socio-cultural form.

Communitarian

We can never refute that human beings are 'rational' and 'relational' one and the same time. In fact, it is by being relational that we grow and come to be truly rational. We know that 'to-be-human' is 'to-be-with'. More precisely, we are related at all levels of existence, personal, social, universal and transcendental. If we turn to the biblical economy of creation and redemption, it is clear that Bible supports a relational anthropology. God in the creation did not create human beings merely as individuals but as 'man and women' in his own image and likeness. Also it must be noted that Eve was not created from feet to be his slave nor from his head to be his master, but from the middle showing clearly that they are partners and created in equality, thus clearly showing women's equal rights, equal opportunity to serve God & humanity.⁴

It means that God created us to be in relationship and God intended 'being-human' to be essentially be 'being-with-others'. God's redemption of humankind also shows that it was not individualistic. Only the understanding of humans are relational, interrelated and interdependent can help us to respond to some of the serious challenges facing humankind today. Alienation is the cry of men who feel them to be the victims of blind economic forces, social stigmas, political

structures and the frustrations of ordinary people excluded from the process of decision-making which are beyond their control.⁵ The challenges are precisely the structures of exclusion, marginalization, oppression etc. on the one hand, and racism, gender discrimination etc. on the other. Yet we hear of stories of building of counter structures promoting justice, praxis of inclusion, cohesion, fraternity, equality, liberation etc.⁶

Modern youth is now surrounded by technology which makes them alienated and isolated from the rest of the community. Because of the social changes of the past two decades, youth spent more time alone than any other generation, thus miss a coherent sense of community feeling. In the disguise of the freedom of expression and information, youth are having a secret life or lost in cyber highway seeking friends in social networking sites like Facebook, Orkut, and Twitter. Social networking aims in building online or virtual communities of people who share common interests or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others or to reinforce established friendships and form bonds with new friends. Social networking has encouraged new ways to communicate, share information and make friends.⁷ Today if the youth are lost or alienated, it is only because the Church refuses to enter into their lives. The responsibility is on Church and community to know what their youth are doing and not the other way around, blaming for their lack of participation.

Towards the end of the high priestly prayer of Jesus, we hear Jesus calling his disciples as his friends. The model of relation between his followers has been now shifted and now characterized as Friends. The term friend has deeper and wider implications and meaning. As Christ himself says that friend knows everything, is equal, intimate etc. In daily human relations too we can find that the friendly relations are deeper and lasting than the bloody relation. In our ordinary life also we could find many people following closely the teachings of Christ in their life. However the common mis-conception is that evangelized and baptized are only true Christian disciples. Raymond Paniker writes about the *Un-known Christ of Hinduism*. In today's context our mission's demands in identifying also the 'Unknown Friends of Christ' in our surroundings; since we know ourselves that in our work place and neighborhood there are many living unknown friends of Christ, even though they don't know even an iota about Christianity.

It is common to hear about the teenage circles scholarly, religious, or groups. The Christian circle is the group where the faithful live and celebrate, where they are supposed to transform their lives within the set of ideals and values of Christ. However there is a tendency to make the circle to be exclusively Christian or Church centered, isolated and disengaged from the rest of the humanity. The modern mission and the call of the Christ today is to enlarge our inner circle and make it a cosmic circle beckoning not only the human race but also the whole creation becomes the participants and members of this cosmic circle. The term mysticism means union, spiritual mysticism means union with God or the ultimate reality. In Eucharist we are united with Christ the Body broken and shared for the life of the world, which speaks not only about the spiritual mysticism but about a social mysticism. So Christ invokes to all partakers of Eucharist to share our food with the poor and hungry, and this sharing also has a Eucharistic dimension. In Orthodox tradition the bread and wine are the fruits of earth and the same are offered to God by humans which turns into Body & Blood of Christ. This invites us to the 'production for sharing' and 'sharing of resources'. This is contrary to the present culture of consumerism, hoarding of goods, profit characteristic of capitalist culture.⁸

As we approach in awe the Eucharistic Altar, we have One Patten of Body and One Chalice of Blood. The entire Church sings in one voice. This is certainly a call to oneness and community living. As a source of unity the Eucharist is able to bring us more closely, to reconcile broken relationships and heal the many divisions in our lives. This is the crucial symbol of sharing and social meaning of the Eucharist; it speaks about the social wholeness and our table fellowship with social outcasts.⁹ One of the primary objectives of the millennium is the eradication of poverty, however at global and local levels things could have changed if the resources could have been shared and distributed together. In the corporate world the idea of production for sharing would be resisted, however the Eucharistic meaning of production is essentially for sharing among communities. The Apostolic Exhortation reminds us the Eucharist that we celebrate tells us the sacrifice of Christ is for all and that it compels all who believe in him to become 'bread that is broken' for others.¹⁰

Compassionate

Compassion is a prominent Biblical word and a spiritual virtue which can best understood in relation with God only, because the magnanimity and fullness of compassion was revealed in God alone. It is a derivative from a Latin word meaning, to bear, to suffer and so suffering with the sufferer. Therefore compassion doesn't mean mere emotional sympathy and pitying, but one who shows compassion lives compassions, accepts the responsibility to heal, bring hope and minister justice.¹¹ Hugo Rahner is of the view that the main cause of the persecution of the early church was not religious but social and political because Christians preached a God who came not to conquer but to serve and give justice to the oppressed. The core and essence of the Christ's teaching was administering justice, showing compassion and life giving mission for the humanity. So Christ became a threat to the Jews and Romans who were both proponents of colonialism. In present context too the youth must challenge the Church to rediscover the lost and forgotten legacy of compassion and equality of the early Christian Community.

The traditional model of mission had the mandate of service and martyrdom, however in today's context the persecution and suffering has disappeared from the mission perspectives. Today many countries have become battle fields of missionary agencies and donors which are now causing strife's among Churches with their interventions of heavy monetary supports.¹² The suffering and persecution is seen as something alien to Christianity, mission has become now more luxurious and comfortable. The challenge of the modern mission is therefore to rediscover the diminishing ethos of sacrifice and life giving mission.¹³ All the teachings, life, work, signs, parables, miracles of Christ were showing and teaching of sacrifice and importantly Christ as a life-giver. However the ultimate paradox is that life giving is through the cross which he taught through the parable of grain of wheat, unless it falls into ground to die and rises again to new life.

Charity derives from the Greek word *charis* or grace, meaning imparting grace or gift that one possesses and shares with who doesn't. However the tendency of the Christian mission is now confined only to the charity works only and to serve this purpose we have now started innumerable charitable institutions and organizations. The point of argument over here is not that charity is not good; rather the argument is that the mission should not end or be confined only to charity; it needs to journey beyond and transcend the mere walls of charity. A true missionary need to be promoters and agents of justice, peace and reconciliation with a prophetic and active role in the societal life, it also needs demands greater involvement in the political life too. In the life of Christ

also we could see that on various occasions he offers charity to the needy other times questions the unjust structures and powers that oppress the poor and at the same time he never become the part of these oppressive systems or structures.¹⁴

The mission is not to reach and change the world ideologically and dogmatically alone, rather it needs the extension of love, care and compassion. The problem of the marginalized, oppressed cannot be solved only through relief such as reservations and quota systems, although they are also required to some extent as positive step to overcome the past violence's and discrimination against them. We also need compassion, justice and harmony that are extended to broader communities crossing the narrow boundaries including the animal and plant kingdom.¹⁵ We are inevitably committed to work for God's justice in the face of oppression, for God's truth in the face of lies and deceits, for service in the face of the abuse of power, for love in the face of selfishness, for cooperation in the face of destructive antagonism, and for reconciliation in the face of division and hostility.¹⁶ The world needs the touch of love, compassion and justice that could be concretely spelt out, in the light of the experience of interreligious relations, interfaith approaches, peace, justice, understanding, collaboration, forgiveness, compassion in times of calamities and tragedies. As before now too, Human beings need humanity, heart over mind.

Conclusion

Youth envisions ecumenical mission to be liberating individuals from the social conditioning that prevents them from living as free persons. It must enable them to develop inner freedom, so that they are not pressurized by the conditions and expectations of society, but enabling to decide freely on crucial issues that affect choice of life, of family and human love. In the words of Simon Oxley, Christian Mission is no longer limited to the history of attempts to reunite churches or the growth of ecumenical organizations or individuals. It should aim in affirming life and relations/community, inspire rebuilding and reconstruction of community, inclusive of the different and diversities and importantly reaches out beyond the future of church and society embracing entire God's creation.¹⁷ It must conceptualize a theology and culture from the experience and perspective of young people. Challenge and transform the structures that limit youth participation and leadership. Mission is to see life as a call and a gift that leads the individual into the sacred space and making them aware of the inalienable human rights and their giftedness and assists them to develop these to reach high levels of competence for life and living, by providing many opportunities to discover and develop their talents and turn them into strengths so as to grow in self-esteem and confidence. Edinburgh 2010 is not a ultimate answer for on any of the present ecclesial, missiological or ecumenical issues and concerns, rather it is a humble attempt to reflect, pool together the perspectives and resources of youth, women, and subaltern voices, provide guidance, stimulate reflection, and encourage common action by the Churches and Ecumenical Movements to think and act creatively towards God's mission.

End Notes

1. Nicholas Christakis & James Fowler, *Connected: The Amazing Power of Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (London: Harper Press, 2009), 10-17.
2. M M Thomas, "Towards an Indian Understanding of Jesus Christ", in *The Indian Church Identity and Fulfillment*, edited by Mathai Zachariah (Chennai: CLS, ISPCK, LPH, 1971), 17-19.

3. Raimundo Panikkar, "Indic Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism from the Perspective of Interculturation", in *Religious Pluralism: An Indian Christian Perspective*, edited by K Pathil (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1991), 252-299.
4. Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 65.
5. Inaugural Address of Jimmy Reid to the students when installed as Rector of Glasgow University.
6. Walter Rauschenbush, *Christianity and Social Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1907), 11-14.
7. Vineeth Koshy, "Friendship: Online and Offline", *National Council of Churches in India Review*, CXXVIII/ 1 (January-February 2009), 41-42.
8. Sebastian Painadath, "Church as the Continuation of the Table-Fellowship of Jesus", in *Dreams and Visions: New Horizons for an Indian Church*, editors Rosario Rocha and Kuruvilla Pandikkattu (Pune: Jnanadeepa Vidyapeeth, 2002), 79-81.
9. S Kappen, *Jesus and Society* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 84-86.
10. Mathew Jayanth, "Body Spirituality: Incarnation as an Invitation to an Embodied Spirituality", *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, 7/ 2 (January-June 2004), 124-126.
11. Ezamo Murry, "Compassion and Care for the HIV/AIDS Infected and the Affected" in *Health, Healing and Wholeness Asian Theological Perspectives on HIV/AIDS*, edited by A. Wati Longchar (Assam: ETE-WCC/CCA, 2005), 73-74.
12. Keynote address delivered by Dr. Mathews George Chunakara the Director of the International Affairs of the WCC during the National Ecumenical Youth Assembly of Commission on Youth of NCCI, held in Kolkata on 6 January 2010.
13. Hans Ucko, *Common Roots New Horizons* (Geneva: WCC publications, 1994), 80-81.
14. Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 20-24.
15. Walter Rauschenbush, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 56-64.
16. John Gladwin, *God's People in God's World: Biblical Motives for Social Involvement* (England: Intersity Press, 1979), 125.
17. Simon Oxley, *Creative Ecumenical Education* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 11.