

**Panel Discussion on “Nature and Mission of the Church”  
Faith and Order Plenary Commission, Crete, 7-13 October, 2009**

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**“Nature and Mission of the Church”: An Indian Perspective**  
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**Introduction**

Let me, at the very outset, greet you in the most precious name of the Holy Trinity.

I also greet you on behalf of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) and I should like to express my deep sense of gratitude to the Moderator of Faith and Order Commission, His Eminence Metropolitan Dr. Vasilios and to the Rev. Cannon John Gibaut, its Director for their kind invitation to be part of this meeting of the Plenary Commission. It is matter of immense satisfaction that the CWME and the Faith and Order, two of the foundational pillars of the World Council of Churches, have now entered into a period of collaborative work, which I hope will continue in the coming years.

I have been asked to make a brief response to the document “The Nature and Mission of the Church”, neither from the perspective of the CWME<sup>1</sup>, nor from my confessional perspective which is Orthodox, but from my regional contextual perspective which is Indian.

In a matter of 10-12 minutes, one could not possibly make a substantial response to a document that contains some profound ecclesiological and missiological insights. Therefore, for reasons of time, I shall confine myself to just **one** aspect of the NMC document that, in my perception, has some serious ramifications for our context in India. This, then, is a humble effort to respond to the call of the text itself which says:

Faith and Order invites Churches in different parts of the world to enrich this study with appropriate regional material to enable their congregations and church members to engage directly with themes which are necessarily expressed here in quite general terms.<sup>2</sup>

**The Locus: The Land Struggle of Dalits and Adivasis at Chengara:**

On August 3, 2007, around eight thousand families belonging to Dalit and Adivasi communities invaded a rubber plantation in Chengara, Kerala, India. They literally “pitched their tents” on that piece of land, which was given to a multinational firm by the Government of Kerala on a lease agreement for ninety nine years. Even after the lease period was over, the Government did not take any steps to retrieve the property from the company. The landless and the homeless Dalits and Adivasis who “occupied” this land demanded five acres of agriculture land for each of their families and declared that until their demands were met, they would not leave the estate. This

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<sup>1</sup> . Commission on World Mission and Evangelism has already made an initial response to “The Nature and Mission of the Church” copies of which are available.

<sup>2</sup> .See “The Nature and Mission of the Church” , p.11.

historic struggle at Chengara estate led by Dalits and Adivasis, under their own banner, has now crossed two years and has attracted international attention. About eight thousand small tents have been pitched in Chengara by Dalits and Adivasis. Struggles like Chengara movement offer a real theological locus for a meaningful discourse on ecclesiology and mission in India. At Chengara, each of the eight thousand and odd tents offers us different “little narratives”—narratives, albeit unwritten, texts of their own, a new *depositum fidei*, for ecclesiological missiological reflections in India.

Against this backdrop of the predicament of the poor in India, namely Dalits, tribals, and particularly their womenfolk of whom the plight is further worsened by the on-going project of economic globalization and other unjust systems of patriarchy, cultural nationalism, genocide and ecocide, one has to say that the ecclesiology that is reflected in the NMC text is by and large an “ecclesiology from above”. More specifically, there is an obvious absence of an ecclesiological discourse “from below” that would treat the poor and the oppressed as the real constituencies of the church. This probably was a consequence of the particular methodology of this study process that perhaps did not consider an integral analysis of the global geo-political context as a necessary pre-requisite for such a study. As a result, the document, to a great extent, fails to bring out the socio-political implications of theological insights that are articulated here, especially for the poor and the marginalised sections of our society who form the majority of the church in the global south, particularly in India. In other words, the landscape of the dispossessed is what is conspicuously missing in the text.

One of the fundamental ecclesiological assertions that the NMC makes is that “the Church is centred and grounded in the word of God...it is the word of God made flesh: Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified and risen”.<sup>3</sup> It could be deduced from this statement that the Church, in real terms, is the approximation of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, an extension of “the Word becoming flesh and pitching the tent among the people” (Jn.1:14). This incarnational aspect of ecclesiology and therefore of mission is not adequately explicated in the text. Differently put, the real lacunae of the document lies in the fact that the words of the text are not embodied and incarnated among “the tent dwellers” of our times, the dispossessed and the disempowered. Let us remind ourselves, in this context, yet again, of the challenge the younger theologians at Kuala Lumpur posed to the Faith and Order Work of the WCC, that “these formulations would go to waste if they were not integrated into the realities of our lives”.<sup>4</sup>

The Chengara struggle of Dalits and Adivasis (cited above) is a very tangible and contemporary manifestation of God’s word becoming flesh and pitching tents, around 8000 of them, in this case. It is in these tents of the homeless Dalits and Adivasis that we need to locate the real “ecclesia”. The NMC, unfortunately, is not very helpful in this process of identifying the actual church amongst communities of people in struggle for fullness of life.

The Biblical images of Church that are expounded in the NMC, images such as ‘people of God’, ‘koinonia’ body of Christ’ and so on are also bereft of this liberative

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<sup>3</sup> . Ibid, p.13.

<sup>4</sup> . Qouted in Mary Tanner, “A View from the Past”, a paper presented at the Faith and Order Plenary, Crete, 2009, p.8.

dimensions of ecclesiology. 'Body of Christ', for example, as in the case of the other metaphors used in the text, is dealt with almost exclusively from an *a priori*, doctrinal, and sacramental perspective, leaving out its sociological implications. In India, for Dalits who form the majority of the Indian Church, the body of Christ is a Dalit body, a 'broken body' (the word Dalit literally means 'broken' and torn-asunder'). Jesus Christ became a Dalit because he was torn-asunder and mutilated on the cross. The Church as 'body of Christ', in the Indian context, therefore, has profound theological and sociological implications for a Dalit ecclesiology. As Y. T. Vinayaraj, a young Dalit theologian urges us:

We need to convert the Church as the true body of Christ where Dalits meet and transform other untouchable and abused bodies into divine agents.<sup>5</sup>

This is an urgent ecclesiological challenge for the Indian churches. The NMC, however, fails to strike chords and resonate with such contextual theological challenges. Even in those places where the text does speak of prophetic dimensions of the Church, somewhat of an artificial dichotomy between the being (ontos) and the becoming (praxis) modes of the Church is maintained. In other words, the text, fails to encounter the real "ecclesia" among communities of people in pain and suffering. As Gutierrez reminds us:

...the poor today, rather than being regarded as a 'problem for the church' raise the question of what 'being the church' really means.<sup>6</sup>

The prophetic and social dimensions of sacraments, especially of Baptism and Eucharist, are however, more strongly reflected in the document. These have crucial significance in the Indian context where discrimination on the bases of caste, class and gender is still practised even among ecclesial communities. Inter-communion is not just a problem between and amongst churches in India, rather it is experienced among various caste groups within the same ecclesial traditions as well, who are not able to share the body and blood of Jesus Christ at the Lord's table. The NMC in this sense should be able to challenge the unjust and discriminatory attitudes of certain churches (mine included) towards Dalits who are either rejected by these churches or treated as inferior people if and when they are allowed to join these churches. Those churches that still retain their 'upper caste' complex and hegemony must be challenged by the discussion of NMC on the 'sinful' nature of the Church, as casteist structures within churches in India must be deemed expressions of systemic sin.

Another major challenge that the Church in India is encountering is the persistent attacks and persecution that it has to suffer from the fundamentalists among the majority religious tradition in India. The recent attacks on Christians in Orissa (Khandamal) have been particularly atrocious. What is often ignored in all this is the fact that it is the Dalit and Adivasi Christians who are being specifically targeted by the casteist Hindu fundamentalists in India, often with overt and covert support from the State. This is where the importance of civil society is particularly noticed. In such a context, church must become an interlocutor in civil society, as Felix Wilfred would put it.<sup>7</sup> The challenge before the church in India is to be part of progressive civil society initiatives such as the subaltern movements of the Dalits and tribal

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<sup>5</sup> . Y.T. Vinayaraj, *Re-imagining Dalit Theology*, CSS, Tiruvalla, 2009, p.61.

<sup>6</sup> . Quoted in Julio de Santa Ana (ed), *Towards a Church of the Poor*, WCC, Geneva, 1979, p.152.

communities. This also calls for an inter-religious dialogue of a different persuasion, quite different from the classical models of dialogue. What is needed today in India is a subaltern version of inter-religious dialogue. Unlike the classical models of dialogue which was mostly about mutual appreciations of doctrines at esoteric and intellectual levels, a subaltern version of dialogue is “dialogue from below”, a process of challenging religious traditions including one’s own on, on questions of injustice such as casteism, that is practised within various religions traditions. Here again, the NMC does not have much to say and offer. Perhaps, it is time, Faith and Order took up the issue of ecclesiology and religious plurality on its agenda.

In sum, the NMC is appreciated for its philosophical imagination, but it needs to be complimented with sociological and poetic imaginations where the text (the Word) takes on flesh and enters the realm of the pain and pathos that the poor and their earth endure.

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<sup>7</sup> .Felix Wilfred, Asian Dreams and Christian Hopes at the Dawn of the Millennium, ISPCK, Delhi, 2000, p.181.