

An International Perspective on the Ecumenical Scene: Comparing the Situation in India and Britain

A lecture by Rev Dr Andrew Prasad at the Annual Forum of the Churches Together in
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Introduction

I am delighted to be with you this evening and bring you greetings from the Thames North Synod.

The Synod works with Churches Together in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex & East London, West London and North Thames. One third of its 143 churches are in Local Ecumenical Partnership. I am not an expert on the subject of Ecumenism but in my role as the Synod Moderator I am involved in the ecumenical life of the Church. Being one of the Trustees of the Churches Together in England, I get to see a bigger picture of ecumenism in Britain but more from the point of view of administration than theology.

My interest in ecumenism is rooted in my experience in the Church of North India and my studies at Bossey Institute but above all it is rooted in the Bible. A biblical imperative for Christian unity is Jesus' own prayer, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou has sent me." (John 17: 21) Christian unity, therefore, is a divine mandate.

My experience in India relates to 1970s and 80s and Britain from 1989. We should acknowledge the difference of time, contexts and ecumenical eras. It will be inappropriate to compare and contrast; however, we can learn a lot by sharing stories and experiences.

Indian Experience: Potted Plant in Multi-faith Context

I was born and brought up in India in a multi-faith context. I was baptised in a Presbyterian Church, confirmed in a Methodist Church, served as a minister in a Cathedral. I have been a member of the Church of North India, a united church formed in 1970.

The desire for the unity of the Church has been integral to the pertinent issues of authentic mission, identity and the Church's participation in the wider society in India, which the Christians in India have been facing.

Paul Puthanangady said that 'We have a church in India but not an Indian church.' He has argued that a Christian community, without having its own cultural roots, could not incarnate the value of the gospel and the Word has been deprived of the means to manifest its vitality in India.¹

The early traditions of the Church in India are linked with St Thomas, St Bartholomew and Syrian Christianity. In 15th century, the Portuguese made the beginning of western colonial power in India and brought Roman Catholicism with them. The 18th and 19th century opened doors for protestant Churches and their mission agencies, particularly from the evangelical background, to spread the gospel and establish churches.

¹ Puthanangady, Paul, 'Amalor's Contribution to Inculturation of the Indian Church' in Chandran, J, Russell (ed.), Third World Theologies in Dialogue, Essays in Memory of D. S. Amalorpavadas, Bangalore: EATWOT, 1991.

These churches & mission agencies brought with them their confessional divisions. Christianity was like a potted plant in India. The Syrian Orthodox Church was not rooted in India. Roman Catholic and Protestant missions were rooted in the ideology of western Christendom. They imposed their own theology, ecclesiology, polity and leadership. There were individual missionaries who were open to accommodate some of the cultural elements by dividing the gospel between essential and carnal (which was later called Indigenisation).

The Modern missionary movement gave birth to modern ecumenism. The confidence in America and Europe to convert the whole world in this generation [in 19th century] could only be achieved by 'cooperation' among mission agencies.

For instance, the London Missionary Society was set up in 1795 by four major denominations. Its Fundamental Principle (1796) stated,

“that its [LMS] design is not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy, or any other form of Church Order and Government (about which there may be difference of opinion among serious persons), but the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, to the heathen; and that it shall be left (as it ought to be left) to the minds of the persons whom God may call into the fellowship of His Son from among them to assume for themselves such form of Church Government as to them shall appear most agreeable to the Word of God.”²

There is little evidence that the LMS missionaries lived up to this commitment. But one can not deny the fact that the missionary co-operation was an effective tool. The Church Missionary Society invited Danish missionaries to work for them in the initial years of its mission in Calcutta. Missionaries from various denominations came together for annual missionary conferences. Their mutual relationship helped them to work together.

The New York Conference in 1900 and the Edinburgh Conference 1910 encouraged co-operation. One of the results of the cooperation in mission was that by 1920 the idea of the organic unity of the Church of South India and North India was conceived.

There was a 'comity' arrangement among mission agencies. Mission agencies were given specific geographical area to work in order to avoid competition. Thus, Indians had little chance to make a choice of denomination. Whichever missionary society came into their Area, they accepted their form of Christianity.

Church of North India: Structural Unity to Living Relationship

In 1924 the Presbyterian and Congregational churches united to form United Church of North India and invited other denominations to enter into negotiation for unity. It took several round table conferences over decades and several versions of the plan for unity before the CNI finally came into being in 1970. The negotiators acknowledged that division in the Church was a testimony to departing from faith in Jesus and they worked hard to overcome it.

There were seven denominations at the negotiation table and finally six joined to make the CNI. The CNI remains a significant example of the organic union.

The six denominations were:

1. The Council of the Baptist Churches in Northern India.

² Goodall, Norman, The History of the London Missionary Society 1895-1945, London: Oxf. Univ. Press, 1954, p. 3.

2. The Church of the Brethren in India.
3. The Disciples of Christ.
4. The Church of India (formerly, the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon).
5. The Methodist Church (British and Australian Conferences).
6. The United Church of Northern India (former English Presbyterian and Congregational).

A reading of the four consecutive versions of the Union Plan suggests that missionaries put vast energy into addressing matters pertaining to the doctrine, polity and denominational differences which had their origin in Western Church history.³ These matters appear to have been of great importance to missionaries but they were of little significance to Indians.

The term 'organic' was used in order to avoid the misunderstanding of equating unity with uniformity. Unity did not mean uniformity but, as Pritam Santram has put it, 'unity in diversity'. Santram stressed the fact that the diversity is not lost in the union but it contributes to the strength and riches of the CNI.⁴

D. K. Sahu wrote,

"The union of churches in north India marked a transition from denominational identity to a corporate identity... Thus the uniting churches adopted the ideal of organic union as a contemporary expression of the identity of the Church. This means that within the union, each uniting church was required to see its own identity as being not a whole but a part of a common identity. The strength of the new identity lies in the discovery of the richness of various traditions, along with the way in which groups of people in different regions make their own contribution to the witness and service of the Church."⁵

The compulsion to move beyond confessional confines and to embrace diversity enabled CNI to take further risks and relate with people beyond the institutional church for a common cause. In response to some doubts raised in the mid 1990s about the extent to which the model of organic union had contributed to the effectiveness of the church's renewal and mission, CNI re-committed itself to move beyond the classical notions of Faith and Order to the unity of persons and communities in living relationships.⁶

Anand Chandu Lall affirmed that CNI views church unity within the context of wider unity of all God's people.⁷ This implies that in a multi-religious context like India, the church's mission could not be an exclusive mission. The Church is in mission along with others.

³ See, Marshall, W. J., Faith and Order in the North India/Pakistan Unity Plan, a Theological Assessment, London: Friends of CNI, 1979.

⁴ Santram, Pritam, 'The Church of North India', an Appendix in Gorai, D. C., Transfer of Vision, Calcutta: CNI, p. 42. [CNIB & APPC]

⁵ Sahu, D. K., The Church of North India, A Historical and Systematic Theological Inquiry into an Ecumenical Ecclesiology, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994, a published Ph. D. thesis submitted to the Univ. of Birmingham, p. 3.

⁶ Raiser, Konrad, 'The Church a Community in Mission for JPIC' in the 'Minutes of the 9th Ordinary Synod', Appendix-II (ref. S:9:95-543, II), p. 91 88-102 & 134-137, CNI. [CNIB]

⁷ My conversation with Anand Chandu Lall in New Delhi on 15 December 1997. See, A Report, 'A Working Document on Church Structure and Self-Reliance', (EC: 75: 585 D), Appendix VII, prepared for a sub-committee, 1977.

The CNI began to define itself in terms of an inclusive community that is concerned for justice. The CNI programmes' reports suggest that CNI's mission thinking and practice was geared to the development of suffering communities, irrespective of their religion or caste.⁸

Vice and corruption rampant, in the society, do creep in the life of the Indian Church. However, its minority status and solidarity with marginal communities tends to bring various denominations and new Christian groups closer. The Church seeks to champion the voiceless.

In Britain: Mission from Margins

When I came to Britain in 1989, I found the scene quite different from India. In principle I should have been welcomed by all the historic denominations that were part of the unity in North India. Yet the truth is that I was seen as either Anglican, Reformed or Methodist. I felt compelled to strip myself off the unity that was so natural to me and fit myself into one mould or another. I am aware of some painful history that contributed to structural differences. However, I am still struggling to learn different church structures and why they are so dear to people that belong to them, even today.

The British and international ecumenical instruments have helped British churches to work together, but I suspect, without seriously challenging their structures or ecclesiology to change. Ecumenism is mainly seen as an additional extra over the top of regular denominational business.

A recent review by David Spriggs called 'Moving Together', which takes into account of the ecumenical journey in England from 1997 to 2007, offers interesting insight.

He found the Swanwick declaration in 1987 to move from 'co-operation to covenant' significant. He identified more Pathways for the ecumenical movement:

1. ecclesial to ecumenical (church unity to wider unity of world /universe)
2. Churches together to Christians together
3. 'Doing ecumenical things' to 'doing things ecumenically'
4. Multilateral to bilateral conversations
5. National to Local (and back)
6. Inter-church to inter-faith
7. From unity to koinonia

The ecumenical work takes different forms at national, regional and local levels. It ranges from denominational covenant, such as, Anglican and Methodist Covenant, to local ecumenical partnerships.

I am attracted to the Local Ecumenical Partnerships in Britain which came into being in 1960s and are still going strong. There are about 1000 congregations in LEP agreements from among the major historic denominations. There are theological factors, such as, local Koinonia, the Lund principle (1952) and Pauline body model which are experienced by many LEPs. There are also non-theological factors behind the LEPs, such as, declining number of

⁸ Gorai, D. C., A Guide to Development, SBSS, CNI, May 1981. See, CNI, Consultation on Development Concepts and Programmes. A Report, New Delhi: CNI-SBSS, 1988,pp. 44f.

Also see, Triennial Report, SBSS, CNI, 1992-95; Activities Report, Community Health & Development, 1995; Master Plan, The Church in the Healing Ministry (Vision 2000), 1994.

Also see, Caleb, J. R., Thy Kingdom Come. Bible Studies on Development, SBSS, CNI, 1993. Das, Soman, Our Journey in Christ with People. Bible Studies, New Delhi: SBSS, CNI, 1994.

worshippers, aging congregations, lack of funds and support for ministry, and heavy cost of maintaining large buildings.

Many LEPs work well while some struggle. The LEPs on the one hand enforce the denominations to work together and good relationships among senior church leaders do make a difference. On the other hand, there are demands on each LEP by participating denominations to be in line with their denominational structures, which cause problems.

A few words capture the movement in Britain over the years showing an improving situation:

- Cooperation – covenant – commitment – and hope for koinonia
- Difference – distinction – diversity – unity in diversity

Conclusion: Mission from Margins

The churches/denominations have come a long way in mutual trust, relationship and co-operation. However, the organic unity is no longer considered as a viable option for unity in the 21st century ecumenical context. We are in a new era and a new context. The post-Christendom, multi-faith and multi-culture context of Britain helps dismantle old barriers and opens up new opportunities of ecumenical engagement. The Christian Church is no longer the centre of the western society; it does not direct the socio-political and cultural institutions. This means loss of influence but also an opportunity for the Church to resume its prophetic ministry from the margins.

Questions for reflection:

Does the legacy of Christendom, including the Episcopal and Non-conformist divide works against koinonia?

To what extent does Western culture (individualism) hinder ecumenism in Britain?