

MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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What is Mission?

Mission essentially belongs to God's plan and scheme. God reveals it to us from time to time through prophets and apostles. "Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets" (Heb 1:1). Our forefathers and prophets have understood it in space and time and have revealed to us through their lives and writings (Sruti & Smriti). The culmination of God's revelation is through God's Son and our redeemer Jesus Christ. He said in history, "I am the Way the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). Today the Holy Spirit is helping us to realize the revelation and to understand the mission. Interestingly, the term mission does not appear in the Bible, yet the concept of the mission permeates the entire Bible. The foundation of the concept of the mission in the Old Testament lies in the understanding that the transcendent God is also the God who is involved in the history. He is the God who acts. The record of His involvement in the history indicates that His work is both revelatory and redemptive.

Meaning of Mission:

The theme of the upcoming National Family Conference is based on the key verse "**As the father has sent me, I am sending you**" (John 20:21). Jesus Christ is the greatest missionary. What was God's mission in sending Him? The Holy Bible tells us that mission is the manifestation of God's Love (John 3:16). Jesus was sent to reveal the Father (John 1: 18) and to make God's love and mercy known to a lost world. Love is to be experienced in its full meaning and depth. One cannot express through the words the length, width, height and depth of God's Love. As God's children in the world we want to be in contact with other human beings, to love and to be loved, to be forgiven and accepted. Love begets Love; hence the commandment is – "To love God and love one's neighbor". Jesus Christ gave a new commandment in John 13:34 "Love as I have loved you". The mission of God as manifested in love is to be understood by, loving God, loving each other and loving one's neighbor. We are called to be servants and also friends walking together in God's mission. Therefore, mission is the core of our being and foundation of our existence. In other words each one of us is created with an in - built mission in the image of God, in his likeness and given the breath of life. So mission is not ours; instead we are created for God's mission and its fullness in our lives. The call is not to become introverts in our tasks entrusted to us. The mission of love is inclusive and not that of excluding others. It has to transcend all the levels of being individualistic, communitarian and religiously fanatic. St. John 4 reminds us that Jesus, whose ministry was primarily among the Jews, initiated a conversation with a Samaritan woman that led both to her conversion and that of the entire community. Today this is the task that is to be continued through the ecumenical and neighborhood mission of the Church.

Purpose of God's Mission:

God's mission in sending His Son is for the redemption of the whole creation. The whole world is the arena where God's engagement for transformation takes place. Mission of God is to be understood in the framework of the mandate given to Adam & Eve to 'till the earth and to keep it'. St. Paul's letter to Romans speaks about the whole creation groaning for redemption (Romans 8:23). Humans have sinned and alienated themselves from the presence of God. They have plundered the earth & destroyed the God-given eco-system. And the humans are now helpless to redeem themselves and the wholeness of the cosmos. God takes the initiative in this helpless situation by sending His son and our redeemer Jesus Christ to redeem the whole creation. God's mission in sending His son is full and adequate and the death of Christ on the cross has opened the way for redemption. To actualize this redemption humans have to respond to it positively and live a life of salvation by experiencing it every day. A Christian in the

world lives in a neighborhood which consists of not only human beings, but also many animate beings. In many places, we are not the ones creating the neighborhood, but we are accepted into the neighborhood that is already there. We have no right to destroy our neighborhood or pollute the same. There is an added responsibility of stopping all sorts of exploitations and activities polluting the living atmosphere. The suspense at the Copenhagen Summit and the unresolved concerns of environmental pollution in USA, the aviation system and the number of the cars on the road are making us more concerned of the purpose of our mission today. The responsible freedom, which God has given to humankind by His creation and redemption, is empowering to experience and to lead our fellow beings to the experience of salvation. It includes the eco-justice very much needed in the inhabited world. Rom 8 speaks of a day when the whole creation will be redeemed. Can we catch the vision of God walking with us in our neighborhood as God did in the Garden of Eden with the first humans (Adam and Eve).

Manifestation of Mission:

Christ manifested the mission of God through His incarnate ministry. The mission mandate of the Church is to be of incarnation and this is revealed in the life and work of the people of God inside and outside the visible Church. We as a diocese in North America reach out to the people in Mexico and to the Native Americans, while each parish is witnessing the Lord through its congregational life and reaching out to the neighborhood. Mission is no longer from center to the periphery. It should be manifested outside the walls of the sanctuary. It is from everywhere to everywhere. Jerusalem was the centre of religion for the people of the Israel when Jesus incarnated. It was the practice then for everyone to come to Jerusalem to experience God's redemptive activity. Religion, sacrifices and priests were all there at Jerusalem. Prophet Jonah was shocked to receive a different kind of mission – to go to Nineveh and call the people to repentance. God is also the God of the people of Nineveh. Jesus in his public ministry was found more often in the villages and remote centers of the Galilee rather than in Jerusalem. He broke the mental ghetto by going and staying in Samaria and crossed the boundaries by going to places like Sidon and Tyre. He was not only ministering to the house of Israel but also to outside that fold by appreciating the faith He found in the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman. The challenge of the Mar Thoma Church in the 21st century is to assume its global nature by transcending the boundaries set by the familiar religion and culture. Can the Church incarnate in a cross - cultural, inter - racial inter-generational context? The Church is to cross all barriers to reach out all ethnic groups, class, tribes, social classes and cultures. The message of salvation is to be shared with all people everywhere and not to keep the same within the walls of the sanctuary.

Mode of Mission:

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ express the mode of Mission. To be a Christian means to follow the Christ who said –"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mat.16:24, NIV). It is having a life of following Jesus and taking up the cross daily. The cross has its pain, struggle, the agony and ultimate destiny of death. It is the mission of involvement, facing concrete situations of life. In a world of consumerism, pleasure - seeking and craving for safety and security, a disciple of Christ has the unique role of taking up the cross and following Jesus. While the people are freedom-conscious and fight for their rights, Christ calls his followers to discipline life and follow the way of renunciation and to carry out good works without desiring the fruit of one's labor. The resurrection of Jesus makes us conscious of God's engagement in mission for transformation. He gives us the power through resurrection. The early disciples were empowered to turn the world upside down, all because of the experience of the risen Lord with them always. So in carrying out the missionary journeys, St. Paul says – in Christ there is only YES (1 Cor. 1:20). Suffering and sacrifice shall not deter us from carrying the cross of Christ. The cross is the symbol of God's love. The mission of the church is to follow the life style of the cross in all walks of our life every day. The theme for this year's

Maramon Convention was 'live the gospel'. It focuses on living a life worthy to God. Can we celebrate Easter (Christ's resurrection) in the neighborhood every day?

Building of Community of Believers:

The ascended Lord commissioned the disciples to continue the mission in time and space. The expectations of the disciples were different, even when they left their profession and decided to be in the chosen twelve. Peter & Judas Iscariot were different in their temperament and in their commitment to Jesus. James & John, sons of Zebedee wanted to be on the left and right in position, when Jesus comes in Glory. Only John was at the foot of the cross of Christ. All others were scattered and they were afraid of the leaders and Jews. Apostle Thomas couldn't accept the words of others who told him that Jesus has risen. But the outlook of these disciples changed when the resurrected Lord re-commissioned them and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were empowered by the power of the resurrection to preach the crucified Jesus. Then they lived as an Easter community and celebrated their plurality. Their ministry was to form the community of believers wherever they went and preached the Gospel. They emphasized community living and all together shared spiritual nourishment in community growth. The challenge of the Day when individualism plays a significant role in the world is "Mission of Community Formation and Community Living". (Acts 14, 17 etc). Building people is more important than building infra - structures. People pool their resources for the mission and the ministry of the Church. But they shouldn't be seen as only for channelizing money; instead their lives are to be spiritually uplifted and transformed, even through the ministry of giving. Relationship binds all aspects of the community life and hence it is the mission to develop more dialogue, formal and informal, at all levels to bring out the very best in each one for the edification of all in the community and for the glory of God.

Church is the Body of Christ:

The church as a community is uniquely called to carry out the mission. The Church is the body of Christ. It means that Christ is the Lord and the body is the broken body of Christ. Worship & sacraments keep the members together as a community. Participation in the Holy Qurbana reminds us of what God in Christ has experienced on the cross. Here we enter into a mystical union with Christ and realize that unless & until we are also prepared to break our body we cannot become the body of Christ. This is the mission of imparting life by sharing our life, for the life of other people. It is the mission of self – emptying. It is the mission of putting more life into the life of other people. Caring by sharing is an integral part of the mission. The Church being the Body of resurrected Jesus will reveal the nail marks of her master in carrying out the mission in the world. (Gal 6:17)

Church Lives by its Mission:

Today the Church lives by the mission. Mission was the heartbeat of the New Testament Churches as we read in the book of the Acts of Apostles. There is a mission of the Church to its members, and a mission to the outside the world. Emil Brunner has said: "The Church lives by her mission as fire exists by burning". It means that a self centered, inward (looking) isolated community cannot be called a Church. A person is a person only when he interacts within the community. The very act of creation of each individual by God constitutes a mission to be fulfilled with and among others, which reminds us that 'you are not your own'. We all belong to God and we belong to each other. That means there is a mission to be fulfilled by the life of each person. In married life, the life – partner is an extension of one's own self. In Indian culture wife is called 'Sahadharmini' which means one who resides together and work together to carry out or attain the mission (dharma) of the family. In a culture where people long for individualism, and where people are reluctant to get married, God's mission for each individual is to be well defined in a manner that is acceptable and pleasing in the sight of God. Hence within the family and within the parish/church, there is a mission to the members and also a mission to the outside world. The scientific and technological experiences and demands to which the new

generation is exposed today, curtails their free times as individuals and families. The call - center culture confuses our day – night consciousness. The communication system influences our thought process, life styles, spirituality and in general our views about the world. Cyber culture can create virtual experiences in our community living. This will also affect the value system. The challenge before us is to read the signs of the times and establish the Kingdom values by living out the faith. Mission here is about sharing the human experiences of social living to construct Christ centered life with Kingdom values.

Church as Leaven, Salt and Light:

Three strong symbols used in the New Testament are Leaven, Salt and Light. The Leaven is added to the dough to make it useful; salt preserves from disintegration and light throws out the darkness. The church is in the world like the leaven, salt and light. Sin in any form brings the darkness. It is the function of the Church to throw light to all the areas where darkness prevails. If sin is alienation, Church has to do the ministry of reconciliation and fellowship. In a world of crime and terrorism the mission of the Church is to become models (light) where life in all its forms is respected and valued. When decay and disintegration become the norm of the world, Church is called to be the salt that gives its saltiness so that process of disintegration is reversed to integration where 'Being' finds its meaning and relevance. When there is an imbalance between the thinly populated developed countries of the North and over populated under developed countries of the South, Church is called to be the leaven that makes populous useful. Whatever we term as useless becomes useful when we realize the truth that these are the unused or 'not - used – properly' ones. Everyone is useful and needed in the eye of God. It is the God given mission to bring peace in our families, consolation for the bereaved in our neighborhood, shelter for the homeless, joy for the broken hearted, recovery of the health for the sick, comfort for the distressed, unity and reconciliation for those who are estranged, development for the poor and needy and harmony between all peoples and communities. Our prayer is: 'Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

The Great Commission:

The Great commission (Matt 28:19 – 20) is to go into the entire world and not wait for the world to come to us. This requires obedience in love to the Lord. Even in commissioning, the God - given freedom of choice is not taken away; the early apostles were asked to wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Discipleship, that includes disciplining the self, is not taking away the God – given freedom of choice. If humans have fallen by the misuse of the freedom, salvation brought by Christ through His death & resurrection is not taking away that freedom of choice. The commissioning of the disciple by the risen Christ is making them more responsible for their choice and the subsequent result of it. When we realize that the redemptive act of Jesus is full and complete, its appropriation in the lives of the people is through our human choice day after day. This should be the commitment of the Church in the 21st century. The second coming of Jesus Christ is to gather the faithful and all those who belong to Him; they are to be judged according to the choices they have made, as response of God's salvific act in Christ. The glory of redemption lies in the fact that God respects the freedom of choice He has already given to his creation. Hence the mission means to realize this truth and live a responsible life where the salvation is rightly appropriated in life and the life is found eternally with God in the community of God's Kingdom.

Call of Church on 21st Century:

Church as a global community must be willing to cater to the needs of the less privileged and marginalized. This is specially important at a time when the Edinburgh Mission Conference held in 1910 in England is celebrating its centenary this June. Edinburgh Mission conference -1910 recognized the need for the Church to become a global missionary Church. This is a time to evaluate our past and plan

the future mission of the Church. The Church and its people should equip to provide social justice to others especially in the community where we live. The Church cannot exist within the walls of its sanctuary. It should be able to walk the rugged roads and visit the less frequented Samaritan wells. Preaching of the gospel has to go hand in hand with its practice or 'living the gospel' in the present. The mission is consummated in the culmination of the experience we all will have in the Kingdom of God. The God given mission is to find the place of each life in the Kingdom of God. Let me conclude with the words in our Holy Communion Liturgy:

“May our hearts be with Christ on high, who is at the right hand of God the father”

“Our hearts are truly with the Lord”. Amen.