MODERATOR'S ADDRESS

to the

16th
ORDINARY MEETING OF THE SYNOD
of
THE CHURCH OF NORTH INDIA

30th September to 3rd October, 2017

Venue : St. Thomas' School, Mandir Marg, New Delhi

Theme : “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few...” Luke 10:2
I t is a huge privilege for me to stand before the supreme, supervisory, legislative and executive body of the Church of North India as the Moderator (should I say, outgoing Moderator) to thank God for our achievements and to discern God’s mind to determine a concrete direction for the Church. I wish to share some of my reflections as perceived during my tenure in office.

 OUR CHURCH:

I always take great pride in introducing my church as the united and uniting together Church of North India that came into existence after forty years of negotiation by our forefathers. Those stalwarts of faith remained committed to their call for unity and persistently struggled to find points of convergence. I had the privilege of interacting with a few of these great people and learnt that they were so passionate about meeting representatives of the other churches because of the deep friendship they made with each other. There were, at times, fierce arguments and serious disagreement but every time they parted, they looked forward to meet again. They did not relent till they reached the point of organic union. We are the proud recipients of this great heritage and it is our bounden duty to nurture it and let it grow not only internally but also to carry on conversing with our sister churches for greater unity.

The birth of Communion of Churches in India was certainly a step forward but not enough. I am glad that the leadership of the Church of North India and Church of South India has resolved to begin negotiation for a united national church. I am hoping that this Synod will take another historical decision by approving the decision of the Executive Committee to form a negotiation committee to carry out this mandate. With God’s help we can achieve this in our lifetime.

The Church of North India has completed forty-six years of its united journey. Its Constitution states that its objectives and purposes are to “proclaim by word and deed the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord and Master of the Church for the salvation and good of all mankind through Unity, Witness and Service.” The first priority for the decade (2011 to 2020) was decided to be, “Evangelism and Spiritual growth”. The theme for the 16th ordinary Synod is aptly chosen as “The harvest is plenty, but the workers are few…” (Luke 10:2). The present context, charged with political upheaval and communal tension, demands that the church makes itself more relevant to the people’s needs, and finds new and alternative ways of addressing current issues. We cannot afford to dwell in our glorious past taking pride in the fact that the church pioneered educational and medical work in India. We need to explore new areas of social intervention and interfaith initiatives to make a difference to the life of our people.

I am glad that this intention is being very forcefully translated into action through number of evangelistic engagements at diocesan and Synod level. There has been a sharp growth in the membership of the church as God has been adding new people to our church every day. There have also been more women to share the ministry of the Church. An increased number of women are pursuing theological studies and also being appointed as full-time presbyters. It was my desire that CNI would find a suitable lady minister to appoint as Bishop during my tenure. I hope to see this desire fulfilled soon. My appeal to this august body is to ensure that all efforts be made to train, appoint and support evangelists to reach out to every unreached area to make disciples of Christ. We must make use of digital and mobile technology to reach out to the unreached.

Martin Luther King in a sermon preached in 1966 said, “These are our guidelines, and if we will only follow the guidelines, we will be ready for God’s kingdom, (Yes) we will be doing what God’s church is called to do. We won’t be a little social club. (Make it plain) We won’t be a little entertainment center. But we’ll be about the serious business (Yes) of bringing God’s kingdom to this earth. It seems that I can hear the God of the universe smiling and speaking to this church, saying, “You are a great church (Glory to God) because I was hungry and ye fed me. You are a great church because I was naked and ye clothed me. You are a great church because I was sick and ye visited me. You are a great church because I was in prison and ye gave me consolation by visiting me.” (Yes, sir) And this is the church that’s going to save this world. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me (Yes) because he has anointed me to heal the broken-hearted, to set at liberty them that are captive, (Amen) and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” The Church has to be relevant to the prevailing context in our country today and therefore be equipped to effectively respond to the various political, economic and social challenges.

While the bishops and the clergy are expected to give efficient leadership to the Church, nothing much can be achieved without the wholesome participation of our laity. Therefore empowerment of the laity is not an option but a compulsion. Theological formation of the laity should begin at diocesan and Synod level. There has been a sharp growth in the membership of the church as God has been adding new people to our church every day. There have also been more women to share the ministry of the Church. An increased number of women are pursuing theological studies and also being appointed as full-time presbyters. It was my desire that CNI would find a suitable lady minister to appoint as Bishop during my tenure. I hope to see this desire fulfilled soon. My appeal to this august body is to ensure that all efforts be made to train, appoint and support evangelists to reach out to every unreached area to make disciples of Christ. We must make use of digital and mobile technology to reach out to the unreached.

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While the bishops and the clergy are expected to give efficient leadership to the Church, nothing much can be achieved without the wholesome participation of our laity. Therefore empowerment of the laity is not an option but a compulsion. Theological formation of the laity should begin with the children in the Sunday School. Our youth are to be groomed to shoulder bigger responsibilities and lay leaders are to be invited to share the ministry with the Church with their pastors and bishops.

Many Christians feel that the Church in India is under attack by the right wing religious fundamentalists supported by powerful political powers. It is my conviction that the intrinsic nature of the Church is to work as salt and light effecting changes in the society by challenging the principalities. This would often result in resistance and opposition by people with vested interests. Therefore the Church, if it truly follows the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, has to be a persecuted Church. Persecution doesn’t weaken the Church but it makes the Church strong and helps
it grow. However, sometimes persecution is self-inflicted by people who indulge in aggressive evangelism with total disregard to the sentiments of the people of other faith. Sensitivity to the cultural aspects of people’s life and expression of true love towards them would win more disciples for Christ. Sadhu Sundar Singh said, “Salt, when dissolved in water, may disappear, but it does not cease to exist. We can be sure of its presence by tasting the water. Likewise, the indwelling Christ, though unseen, will be made evident to others from the love which he imparts to us.”

It is a matter of concern that there are many powerful evil forces that are trying to destabilize and break the sacred unity of the Church. Church property located in prime sites is drawing the land mafia who in connivance with our own people are selling out precious church land with total impunity. Our properties that were once regarded as valuable assets have become a great liability. I wish we relied more on the providence of God rather than commercialization of church land in the name of ‘property development’. It is pathetic that some leaders of the church are victimized and harassed with false criminal cases just because they are not yielding to the pressure of the land sharks to sell church land. The emergence of a few self appointed bishops with the sole intention of grabbing church property has only made the situation worse. Some dioceses are constrained to spend huge amount of money in litigation involving property and therefore have to face serious financial crisis. I salute those sincere people who are committed to protecting our land with great courage even at the risk of their life. We should endeavor to use our land productively for the purpose for which it was procured. If nothing else is possible, we can at least plant trees to increase the green cover to reduce the harmful effect of carbon emission.

Another area of concern is growing number of litigations in the church. There is a sharp increase in the number of court cases fought at various levels to resolve conflicts pertaining to church institutions, pastorate committees and even diocesan councils. Matters that could have been solved through face-to-face talks are taken to court at a drop of a hat. It may be reiterated that the C.N.I. Synod had constituted a ‘Listening Cell’ to address grievances of the people. If I remember correctly, the committee met only once and thereafter became defunct. I was an unfortunate member of that committee. The church has to be a listening church and the Biblical principle of to forgive and be forgiven has to be practiced with utmost sincerity. This would strengthen interpersonal relationships and discourage unnecessary litigations. I am glad the Synod office bearers have made several attempts during the triennium to resolve conflicts by inviting conflicting groups to CNI Bhavan for negotiation. This important work must continue and bear fruit.

The beauty of the Church of North India lies in the fact that its constitution encourages its people to practice and promote different kinds of spiritual expressions. The Holy Spirit cannot be bound by one’s narrow theological understanding or rules made by us. While people who are following Christ for many generations might be comfortable with a rigid structure of the worship service, people turning to Christ from other faiths as first generation Christians might prefer a more unstructured style. A careful balance has to be maintained to ensure that everyone feels welcome and comfortable.

**OUR PEOPLE:**

We, the members of the Church of North India take pride in the fact that we run some of the highest ranking educational and health institutions in the whole country. Quite a few of them are more than 200 years old and have a reputation for having produced umpteen numbers of outstanding leaders for the country.

However, it is a matter of regret that our own community of dalit, tribal and economically backward people have been unable to benefit from our own institutions because we never let them. As Jesus said in Mk 8:36 “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”

We have been serving the people of the whole country but have neglected our own. The name, fame and surplus income from such affluent institutions have no use if they do not contribute towards improving the condition of our people. It is time that we invest in our own community and enable our people to pursue higher and professional education and subsequently be a part of the governance structure of our country.

The initiative of our General Secretary Mr. Alwan Masih to coach our young people for civil service examination has already started yielding results. We ought to keep up this effort and include more youth in this project. Once a directory of available courses and facilities in institutions is published, students can avail higher and professional education that have been out of reach for them until now.

It is also time for the church to be more sensitive to the concerns of transgender community and people with different sexual orientations. How can we be more inclusive of those who are still living painfully at the fringes of society? One place to start is to build wider awareness on this issue and break the culture of taboo and silence that surrounds them. To this effect, pastors can be trained to provide adequate pastoral care.

Another pressing concern is that of the refugees, be it in the Middle East, or close to our own borders. I am glad ISPCK has been working among Burmese refugee children and women. However, the church has not had any direct intervention in favour of the refugees so far. It is imperative that we take immediate steps to reach out to the Rohingyas of Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the Tibetan refugees in India.
OUR GOVERNANCE:
The six churches that came together to form the Church of North India agreed to embrace the episcopacy as both constitutional and historic. The constitution describes that the functions and responsibilities of a Bishop are in the areas of pastoral oversight, evangelism, teaching, worship, ordination, authorisation, discipline, and Diocesan Council and Synod.

Though nothing much is said about the administrative role, most Bishops have to spend much of their time in doing exactly that. Apart from being the chairman of the Diocesan institutions, he is also the chairman of the property Trust. Earlier, the office of the Archdeacon looked after the business of the Diocese. We have done away with the Archdeacon and never appointed an assistant Bishop or established any other office to ensure that the bishops are free to do more pastoral care and teaching. This has made the office of the Bishop vulnerable.

As for the present system, an episcopal electoral body composed of ten members each from the Diocese and the Synod elects the Bishop. Though the Bishop is an employee of the Synod, because of the effective voice of the Diocese in the election process, the people of the Diocese have a claim on him. This makes the transfer of a Bishop difficult (even if there is constitutional provision for this). I recollect that an alternate procedure for the election of Bishop was placed before the Synod but was not considered favourably. I strongly feel that it is time the Synod revisits the provisions for election and appoint Bishops for the whole of Church of North India to be placed wherever necessary. This will strengthen the unity of the church and enhance the effectiveness of the episcopate.

I have been reflecting on the office of the Moderator and the Deputy Moderator for the last six years. The Deputy Moderator has very little constitutional responsibility whereas the Moderator has a huge responsibility to lead the whole church. In case of a Moderator who has also served as a Deputy Moderator, his constant absence from his own diocese adversely affects the Diocese as well as his family. I had expressed that the Moderator needs a chaplain to assist him but I had to manage without, because no appointment could be made.

It would probably be beneficial if Assistant Bishops are elected through an alternate election procedure and placed to function directly under the CNI Synod. An Assistant Bishop can then be deputed to a diocese of the Deputy Moderator/ Moderator. This will enable the Deputy Moderator and the Moderator to devote more time for the Synod work without being worried about their own Diocese. An Assistant Bishop can also be deputed in a Diocese as Moderator’s Commissary in the event of temporary vacancy.

GRATITUDE:
I reckon that words would never suffice for my deep sense of gratitude towards the people I have met during my extensive travels, and for their love and hospitality.

I am grateful to those who have confided in me and shared their problems, knowing that the Moderator does not have a magic staff to solve their problems. I am thankful that they have accepted my limitations and have enabled me to take on the role of a listener.

I have enjoyed working with the Synod Secretariat staff, the Warden, Mrs. Bimla Masih, the kitchen staff, the security of CNI Bhawan and the other support staff who are always willing to respond beyond the call of duty. I am grateful to my colleagues- the Deputy Moderator The Rt. Revd. Dr. P. C. Singh, General Secretary, Mr. Alwan Masih and Honorary Treasurer, Mr. Prem Masih for the time of fellowship and collective decision-making. We, as the Office-bearers, have gone through acute traumatic situations because of some anti-social and anti-church people who instituted false and fabricated criminal cases against us. I am thankful to my brother bishops and the members of the Executive Committee who always supported us with utmost sincerity.

Further, I am also grateful to all the members of Committees/Commissions/Boards/Trusts of the Synod and to the partners in mission - both within India and overseas who have so willingly journeyed with us through mutual sharing and support.

I am also thankful to those who have prayed for me. I appreciate the critics who expressed their opinions to correct the church leaders. However, I hope that people would dissuade themselves from using social media to instigate conflict and to defame sincere leaders. I believe that together we can find more constructive methods of clarifying and resolving issues.

I thank the people of my diocese, the office bearers, the staff at diocesan headquarters, and my family for bearing with my acts of frequent disappearance and for supporting me throughout this journey.

I am grateful to our almighty God who has been so faithful in protecting us and providing all that we need. It is my sincere prayer that He would continue to bless our beloved church in her forward journey of Unity, Witness, and Service. Let me close my address with a few verses from the Bible that I find relevant for this Synod.

2nd Corinthians 6:1-2
As God’s fellow workers, we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For He says: “In the time of favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” Behold, now is the time of favor; now is the day of salvation!

Jai Masih ki!

Glory be to God alone.

The Most Revd. Dr. P.K. Samantaroy
Moderator, Church of North India