



# Challenging Identity and Crossing Borders: Unity in the Church of South India

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People around the world have regularly been challenged to identify themselves as individuals or groups in a variety of ways, aligning themselves with particular communities and denominations. At the same time, with today's greater mobility, people easily cross denominational, regional, religious, and national borders, making traditional labels almost obsolete. The experience of the Church of South India (CSI) can be seen against this background as an experiment in border crossing: with an Asian spirit of unity and concord, people reached out to one another across denominations and church bodies, breaking through dogmatic rigidity to find a new experience of unity. In this venture, the CSI followed the promise of its master, finding a new identity while losing older ones.

## HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND PRINCIPLES

By the turn of the twentieth century, an ecumenical spirit had already commenced in India, as it had in other parts of Asia. Church union initiatives, including those in China and Japan, were part of a search by Asian Christians for autonomy and authentic national experience.<sup>1</sup> These movements should be seen in

<sup>1</sup>Rajaiah D. Paul, *The First Decade: An Account of the Church of South India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1958) 18.

*In its formation, the Church of South India sought to break through Western patterns of denominationalism, seeing itself not as just one more church body, but as a means toward bringing together other churches. Its subsequent history points to the difficulty of maintaining this early vision.*

the light of the emerging trends of nationalism, independence, and anti-colonialism in Asia. Still, the organic union of churches accomplished in the formation of the CSI in 1947 was historically unprecedented. For the first time in the history of Christianity, the deep division between the episcopal and non-episcopal churches, created during the Reformation, was healed. This breakthrough was to have repercussions in the West, where denominational barriers strongly prevailed.

Although there were many earlier movements toward unity, the most defining moment in the story of the CSI's origins came when a group of Indian Christian leaders of various traditions, including Anglicans, came together in Tranquebar in 1919 and produced the famous Tranquebar Manifesto. Negotiations continued for the next twenty-eight years, dealing especially with contentious theological and ministerial issues that had divided Episcopalians, with their emphasis on apostolic succession and the historic episcopacy, from non-Episcopalians.

Building on the strengths of the several traditions involved, the Tranquebar Manifesto declared:

In this Church we believe that three Scriptural elements must be conserved: (1) The *Congregational* element, representing the "the whole Church," with "every member" having immediate access to God, each exercising his gift for the development of the whole body. (2) We believe it should include the delegated, organized, or *Presbyterian* element, whereby the Church could unite in a General Assembly, Synods or Councils in organized unity. (3) We believe it should include the representative, executive, or *Episcopal* element. Thus all three elements, no one of which is absolute or sufficient without the other, should be included in the Church of the future, for we aim not at compromise for the sake of peace, but at comprehension for the sake of truth.<sup>2</sup>

The four elements that formed the basis of union according to the Tranquebar Manifesto set the stage for what was to follow in the CSI: "(1) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing all things necessary to salvation. (2) The Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed. (3) The two sacraments ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Lord's Supper. (4) The Historic Episcopate, locally adopted."<sup>3</sup> As is evident, the proposed union sought to retain the essential and authentic elements of the universal church, while at the same time understanding itself to be a new creation in Christ. This was a "new coming into being," recognizing that "union cannot be brought about either by the rigid imposition of the ancient creeds and confessions or by drawing up a detailed new statement of belief."<sup>4</sup>

V. S. Azariah, the first Indian Anglican bishop; V. Santiago, a Congregationalist theologian; and Meshach Peter of the Arcot Mission, the main architects of the

<sup>2</sup>Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900–1947* (London: Lutterworth, 1954) 101–102.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Hollis, *The Significance of South India* (London: Lutterworth, 1966) 22.

Tranquebar Manifesto, were at the forefront of the complicated negotiations.<sup>5</sup> The most difficult encounters were due to the opposition from Church of England representatives, who at times were more ready to count the cost of the union for the Anglican tradition than to envision the vast ecumenical possibilities for a united church in India.<sup>6</sup>

No one involved in the negotiations had any clarity about the concrete shape that the united church would finally take.<sup>7</sup> All were open to the possibility of God's acting in and through the new church. This experience challenges churches all around the world to guard against the extreme dogmatism that can kill the very essence of the church and its mission. No one in the Indian merger process insisted upon the exaggerated fundamentals of their own traditions, but instead all sought the best possible structure for the Indian context. Thus, four major post-Reformation traditions, the Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Methodist, came together in organic union as the CSI in September 1947—not coincidentally, the same year that India achieved its freedom from colonial domination. The CSI was seen as the local expression of the great catholic unity of the body of Christ.

#### VISION FOR A DISSOLVING IDENTITY

The constitution of the CSI emphasized that it should become an authentically Indian church in matters of finance and personnel and especially in evangelization. At a deeper level, we see a desire on the part of the leaders to break a new path, apart from the Western heritage, with a sense of autonomy and a new Indian identity. The church should “express under Indian conditions, and Indian forms, the spirit, the thought and the life of the Church Universal.”<sup>8</sup> A type of Indian nationalism was present in the very heart of this movement.

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The unity envisioned by the Christian leaders was intended to bring together the various traditions in India—contrary to the experience of division and denominationalism in Western Christianity. Effective evangelization of India was another major stated aim of the union, whether or not this evangelization has been achieved.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, evangelization seems to have been largely ignored as a

<sup>5</sup>See M. K. Kuriakose, *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1982) 317–319, for the Manifesto and the names of the thirty-one Indians and two missionaries involved.

<sup>6</sup>Ninan Koshy, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*, vol. 1 (Hong Kong: World Student Christian Federation, 2004) 91.

<sup>7</sup>Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, 20.

<sup>8</sup>Paul, *The First Decade*, 8.

<sup>9</sup>M. Abel, *The Church of South India after Thirty Years* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1978) 18.

priority in the initial stages of the CSI's life, as the church became preoccupied instead with the maintenance of its ministry.

From its very inception the CSI did not think in terms of a long-lasting identity or static role. More radically, it saw for itself a transient nature and ever changing role. The church was only a means toward the larger mission of God in the world. R. D. Paul, one of the early interpreters of the self-understanding of the CSI, significantly makes the point that

the Church of South India does not imagine itself to be a Church which has been brought into existence in order that it may be one more Church among the various Churches in the world. The C.S.I., on the other hand, conceives of itself as being the means of bringing together other Churches, and that when the moment comes when other Churches would also unite, *it will dissolve itself in its present form, lose its present identity* and will agree to take its place in a bigger and larger united Church which would carry out God's will in the world....*It is willing to give up its identity and its constitution, if by so doing it can bring into being something even more in accordance with Christ's will for His Churches in the world.*<sup>10</sup>

Theologically, the CSI sees itself only as a means for the mission of God and not an end in itself.

The CSI liturgy is perceived as one of the most holistic and comprehensive liturgies in the world, one where various traditions blend in harmony and rhythm. This liturgy has, in fact, been one of the most significant sources of unity in the CSI. However, it was not achieved without difficulties. Various local congregations initially resisted the use of the new liturgy, preferring their own former traditions. Even now, one should not be surprised if a nineteenth-century Methodist hymnal is found in the pews of an ex-Methodist congregation. But at the outset there was no attempt to impose uniformity of worship, and congregational freedom was upheld. The "ordering and development of the worship of a united Church [was] left to grow out of its life in unity."<sup>11</sup> Here a criticism is not out of place: the CSI has not allowed adequate space for experimentation and autonomy in the formulation of new liturgies. This has cost the church dearly. People seeking more meaningful worship patterns have sometimes left the CSI for non-mainline forms of Christianity.

Further, the *Basis of Union* of the CSI affirms freedom and honesty in expressions of belief without allowing total individual subjectivity. It acknowledges that contemporary situations will warrant dynamism in the expression and interpretation of the faith.<sup>12</sup> A note in the *Basis* states that

the uniting Churches accept the fundamental truths embodied in the Creeds named above (sc. Apostles' and Nicene) as providing a sufficient basis of union; but do not intend thereby to demand the assent of individuals to every word or

<sup>10</sup>Paul, *The first Decade*, 9 (italics mine).

<sup>11</sup>Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, 22.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

phrase in them, or to exclude reasonable liberty of interpretation, or to assert that those Creeds are a complete expression of the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, social and cultural settings will legitimately play a dynamic role in shaping the confession of the Indian church, without thereby disregarding or disrespecting the profound traditions of the past.

#### THE DANGER OF BUREAUCRATIZATION

The vision of a church willing to dissolve itself, if necessary, and lose its own identity was an early strength of the CSI. But where do things stand now? Unhappily, the CSI, instead of becoming a church that loses its identity, seems to be evolving into a super-denomination with unwieldy ecclesiastical structures, hierarchy, and institutionalization. Unfortunately, its effectiveness as an agent of change has been diminished rather than enhanced by these processes.

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Still, the most positive aspect of the CSI’s self-understanding is its ecumenical identity itself, which balances some of the negative weight carried by the church. So, while one can be critical of the processes that have resulted in a mega-denomination, historians of Christianity will not be able to ignore the church’s effort to live up to its original calling and subsequent identity as an ecumenical pioneer. We need only look at the efforts of the union discussions with the Baptists and the Lutheran churches in India. Although these did not end in union, the theological discussions have enriched the self-understanding of these churches and of the CSI itself in an atmosphere of mutuality that still prevails in their interactions.

The CSI lived up to its identity as the most open and ecumenical church in India when it initiated a union process with the Church of North India and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in the 1970s, thus opening a new avenue in the Indian ecumenical journey—a journey toward healing the historic divisions of the East and West. The Joint Council of the three churches worked toward organic unity under one umbrella, namely, the Bharat Church. Although eventually the adoption of a common name and organization was abandoned, a new model of Christian unity has come into being within this communion of churches, involving mutual recognition and full acceptance of each other’s faith, ministry, and sacraments.

#### HISTORIC EPISCOPATE

The historic episcopate was the most contentious issue in the negotiations that followed the famous Tranquebar Manifesto. In eventually accepting the his-

<sup>13</sup>As quoted in Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, 38.

toric episcopate, the CSI made clear that it would not adhere to any particular interpretation of this tradition. The constitution simply declares that since the office has been “accepted from early times it may in this sense be called ‘historic.’” The CSI paved the way for a new tradition of episcopacy—not accepting any particular theory but simply adopting the New Testament tradition. Consistent with such a theological position, the CSI highlighted the teaching, liturgical, and pastoral responsibilities of the bishop rather than any notion of authoritarian ministerial power. In 1954, one of the early bishops and the first Indian moderator, Sumithra, captured this spirit well:

The bishops in the Church of South India are not all of the episcopal tradition. Before their consecration, some were Congregational ministers, some Presbyterians and some Methodist. So they do not and cannot follow any one of the current episcopal traditions. All episcopal traditions are to them unfamiliar and strange. In reality they are learning for themselves what it means to be a bishop in the Church of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

However, what has been evolving over the last fifty years is an episcopal office about which members of the CSI are unhappy and sharply critical. In fact, in the 1960s the theological commission of the church already warned that the “temporal power and the worldly honour” associated with the office would only discredit the episcopacy.<sup>15</sup>

In the final analysis, one has to agree that the episcopal office of the CSI seems to have been overcome by the negative authoritarian and power-centered model of the Anglican tradition. The call to be chief shepherd and chief pastor to the people of God is largely ignored or forgotten under the heavy load of administrative work now entrusted to bishops. K. M. George, a lay commentator on CSI history, has observed that

as years rolled on, it seemed that an unseemly scramble began to creep in this plush job instead of a higher calling with all the possible position of popularity, self-promotion and self-aggrandisement. A number of recent incumbents (who were considered as well-regarded pastors) seemed to have lost the sense of vision, integrity, fair play and justice, let alone commitment to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

The Abel Committee had already noted in 1977:

This phenomenon has tended to encourage centralization of authority and bureaucratic procedures even against the constitutional intent and purpose. Consequently, there is too much decision-making power at the top, too much apathy at the grass-roots and too much jockeying for positions in the middle. Further, too much concentration of power, patronage and prestige in the hands of the

<sup>14</sup>Paul, *The First Decade*, 157.

<sup>15</sup>Rajaiah D. Paul, *Ecumenism in Action: A Historical Survey of the Church of South India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1972) 195.

<sup>16</sup>K. M. George, *Church of South India: Life in Union (1947–1997)* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999) 249.

bishops has been responsible in some cases for the unseemly, undignified and un-Christian race for bishopric.<sup>17</sup>

One of the main challenges of the CSI in the near future will be to look critically and objectively at how the episcopal office has evolved and to consider whether the emerging style has hindered or furthered the ministerial and the missional task of the church. The CSI might need to consider other patterns of office that will still provide the church with a sense of unity, while at the same time giving more profound theological and liturgical directions.

#### MISSION AND EVANGELISM

The fundamental goal behind the initiative for the union of the churches in India was to promote effective evangelization and witness to the love of God in and through Christ in a nation of religious plurality. That mission continues to be at the very core of any church, including the CSI. However, Christians in India, including CSI members, seem to have developed an ethnic identity, rather than a Christian one, which is contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The CSI has a checkered history in participating in the political life of the nation for the sake of all people and particularly for those to whom justice is denied. The fact that CSI leaders declared their uncritical allegiance and submission to the powers that be during the Internal Emergency regime (1975–1977) points to the danger of succumbing to narrow communal and minority priorities over the prophetic ministry to which the church is called.<sup>18</sup>

K. C. Abraham, in a timely article during the fiftieth anniversary of the CSI, poses strong missional and ministerial challenges, calling the CSI to be a community of empowerment and prophetic counterculture:

In this situation the nature of the communities we seek has become an urgent concern. The Church should be at the service of people in their search for meaningful communities which are empowered to live in harmonious relationships with nature and between different faiths....But our strategy should be to build smaller local communities which could be counter signs to existing society. It is likely that such counter communities could evolve out of our rural congregations where church life is not so distorted by the power wielders as in our urban congregations....A genuine community should always be open to others in love. But the rootedness of the community in the faith of Jesus gives it a special character. Our attention should be on the identity and mission of the Church as a community or communities.<sup>19</sup>

The trend toward globalization, the consumer culture, and the plurality of re-

<sup>17</sup>Abel, *The Church of South India*, 49.

<sup>18</sup>George Oommen, "Minority Consciousness of Christians in Post-Independent India: A Historical Perspective," *Indian Church History Review* 19/1 (1985).

<sup>19</sup>K. C. Abraham, "The Church of South India in the Twenty-First Century: Ministry and Mission," in *United to Unite: History of the Church of South India, 1947–1997*, ed. J. W. Gladstone (Chennai: Oxford University Press, 1997) 154.

ligions in the Indian context should shape our understanding of mission. In fact, the CSI, which emerged as a countercultural model to the Western denominational and colonial paradigms of mission, needs now to take leadership in evolving relevant and meaningful missional patterns in a world where the several religions demonstrate a growing sense of self-awareness and self-sufficiency. The CSI needs to move away from its urban, middle-class-centeredness and break a new path in which rural congregations will be at the center of its activity. Most of the programs of the church are still a feeble replica of Western models.<sup>20</sup>

The future of the CSI, both from an ecclesiological and missiological point of view, will depend upon how the church will be able to strengthen and empower the local congregations. The rural congregations in particular will need support and encouragement to be effective Christian communities. The CSI is predominantly a rural-based church, despite the long ministerial and pastoral neglect of rural congregations. The church must recognize that grassroots social interactions and faith formations, along with the everyday forms of religious dialogue that are shaped in these local arenas, are where the real witness to the love of Christ takes place.

Failure to come to terms with growing religious fundamentalisms of all sorts and mutual religious intolerance can only lead to the repetition of missiological mistakes that Western missionaries sometimes committed a century ago. The Abel Committee's evaluation after thirty years of the CSI challenged the outmoded approach to evangelism as follows:

The Church has almost repeated during the last three decades the same pattern of work to evangelise others, namely, through preaching at street corners and in villages, and distribution of gospel portions and tracts....Still the approach has been one of asking people to come to us rather than pointing to Jesus in their own midst, among their own surroundings. The arrogant attitude of religious superiority and triumphalism with which we have gone about our evangelistic work has proved to be counter productive.<sup>21</sup>

In reviewing the CSI in its more than five decades of existence, experimentation, and experience, what emerges is an enduring witness to its dynamic ecumenical selfhood, as the church continues to strive to reverberate with the spirit of peace and concord in a world divided by borders. In striving to achieve this goal, the CSI is on a pilgrimage—a journey along with Jesus Christ—denying itself, carrying the cross, and dying in order to rejuvenate. ⊕

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<sup>20</sup>Abel, *The Church of South India*, 30.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.