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Cathedrals Without Walls

Does the Church in India need 'Cathedrals' at all? Are there forms of specialised ministry which can best be carried out from a Cathedral? What do our existing Cathedrals stand for in the eyes of our non-Christian fellow countrymen? Are we to go on indefinitely maintaining large and costly monuments of Victorian piety which no longer serve their original purpose? Are not these stately buildings, with their Western architecture designed to house a Westernised way of worship for a Westernised congregation, more of a liability than an asset today? What are we to say about Cathedrals to those members of the united Churches (C.S.I. and C.N.I.) who come from former denominations which reject the very idea of a Cathedral or 'Central Church'? What on earth are we to *do* with the wretched things?

Most of the existing Cathedral buildings in the C.S.I. and C.N.I. areas are a legacy from the Anglican Church. Many were built on the simple assumption that every diocese ought to have a Cathedral; and that by definition a Cathedral is a large and imposing edifice designed not only for holding large-scale acts of worship, but for 'effect'. Many were built (understandably at the time) in a Gothic or neo-Classical form which is totally alien to the culture and ethos of India.

Today the priorities and concerns of the Church in India are different. Our understanding of our vocation, and our relationship to the culture and society around us, are different to those of the original builders of the Cathedrals. Our understanding of our mission, and the goal and methods of evangelism, are different. While no one is seriously proposing to demolish existing Cathedrals, it is unlikely that any diocese will feel inspired to build a new Cathedral (even a thoroughly 'Indianised' one) in the near future. We have come to recognise that the existing buildings very often convey (by their mere physical existence) a wholly misleading image of what the Christian community is, what it stands for, and what it conceives to be its role in modern India. This is sometimes reinforced by the sociological composition of the average Cathedral congregation, which tends to be wealthy, cosmopolitan, elitist and committed to upholding a structure of society which is being radically questioned.

Are there ways in which the Cathedrals can be used more creatively and constructively as a part of the total strategy of the Church? Can they become centres for, e.g., Communication, Dialogue, Outreach, Concern, Commitment, Sharing? Can they be used to project a more true image of what the Christian community stands for in the life of the city, the rural area, the nation at large?

These are some of the questions which have been debated at a number of Conferences in recent years. In 1966 the Synod of the Church of South India authorised a study of the role of Cathedrals, and Canon

A. H. Dammers (a former C.M.S. missionary in Tirunelveli, later on the staff of Coventry Cathedral in England) was commissioned to undertake a survey of existing C.S.I. Cathedrals. His Report was used as the basis for a Conference at Madras in March 1968; and the proceedings were published (with many useful facts, figures and suggestions) in a booklet, *Cathedrals in Modern India*, addressed to the Synod Theological Commission.

In October 1973 an informal meeting was held at Bangalore on the theme, *Cathedrals without Walls*, on the initiative of the Presbyters-in-charge of Cathedrals at Bangalore, Madras and Calcutta. In these three centres, stirring and dramatic things are happening, and the conference provided an opportunity for sharing and discussing the new vision, new programmes and new forms of ministry which have arisen in response to the vast problems of those three cities. But the Conference also included representatives from other, small, centres such as Kottayam, Tirunelveli, Dornakal and Hubli, as well as persons engaged in new forms of ministry which are not specifically Cathedral-based. There were a number of participants from the Roman Catholic Church, to whom much of the discussion appeared new and challenging (they had not associated this type of work with Cathedrals as such) but who also contributed much valuable thinking.

Finally, in November 1974 a committee met in Calcutta, commissioned by the Board of Social Services of the Synod of the Church of North India, to reflect upon the role of Cathedrals in the C.N.I. Attendance was small, although invitations had been sent to representatives of many different traditions within the C.N.I.; but the committee benefited from the presence of two invitees from the C.S.I., as well as a number of local people concerned with these questions.

The present issue of *The Indian Journal of Theology* contains a selection of papers read at the Bangalore Conference in 1973, in the hope that these will generate further reflection and constructive thinking about the possible role of Cathedrals or Central Churches in India. We are also publishing the text of the Report of the 1974 C.N.I. Committee, with the knowledge of the General Secretary of the Church of North India. As the Report had not been formally presented to the Synod of the C.N.I. at the time of going to press, *publication here does not imply any official policy, decision or resolution of the Church of North India or its officers.*