

The Cathedral as a Centre of Communication

ALEXANDER DEVASUNDARAM*

The Proclamation of the Gospel is the reason for the existence of the Church of Christ on earth. The meaning and method of Proclamation, and the understanding of the Gospel, depend on the time and *milieu* in which the Church is placed. Down the corridors of history we have seen how the Church has responded, or not responded, to the changing social context in which she is placed, thus making the Gospel meaningful or not meaningful, the criteria on which her presence in the world is open for judgement.

Proclamation and Gospel today

'Proclamation' in modern times takes on all the connotations of 'communication' as it is actually understood today. It includes all those expressed or unexpressed, overt or covert, intended or unintended means of communication which are available in our times, and it challenges the Church to make use of all scientific tools of communication in her attempt to communicate the Gospel. Since the Church as an institution is deemed partly human and partly divine, the human part as a social system is open for analysis and study by methods of sociological research which give clues to an understanding of the Church, the *milieu* in which she lives, and the means by which she can effectively communicate the Gospel to the kind of world in which she finds herself at any given time. 'The Gospel' has been differently interpreted at different times; but today the Church is in a predicament as to an understanding of her main goal, which seems blurred and unclear in a world which has discovered that it can get along very well without it. As Paul Abrecht puts it, 'The Church today is frequently the spectator of an exciting, fast moving world, which, however, only mystifies it and frustrates its desire for understanding'.¹ The world to which the Gospel is supposed to be addressed, has taken matters into its own hands and has gone ahead through various ideological, humanistic, political and philosophical channels to endeavour to transform itself anew. Revolutionary thought and approaches, especially Marxism, have sought to bring 'the new life' down to earth, here and now, doing away with bad systems that perpetuate conditions not conducive to the total happiness of man. It believes that solutions to man's ills lie within the historical perspective, when man transforms the world he lives in. Social

* Mr. Devasundaram is on the staff of St Mark's Cathedral, Bangalore.

¹ P. Abrecht, *The Churches and Rapid Social Change*, London, S.C.M. Press, 1961, p. 11f.

injustice, human rights, and the conviction that hunger and misery can be overcome by man's own efforts, and the belief that man is master of his destiny, have become almost universal and account for the tremendous rate at which the world is changing.

Contrasted to this is the Church's traditional view (although in fairness one can say that she is fast catching up) that man is on his way towards a transcendent future, and that the solutions to his problems lie outside history. From the secular point of view, Development is the only reality: the world *can* be changed. For the traditionalist Christian, the world is accepted as being outside the Church's jurisdiction for transformation. The former has an operative model and a rationale for his vision; the latter has no such operative model, for the vision is transcendental.

Placed in such a world, with such an understanding of her role, the Church has responded in two ways: some Christians see their role as essentially onlookers rather than participants—the world is in rebellion against God and they feel no obligation to assume responsibility for it. Others feel that the Gospel is the Good News of liberation for man, in which they are invited by God himself to share the task of transforming the world, not only by a 'change of heart' as hitherto believed, but by changes in the structures that account for the evils that prevent man from being whole; and that this is the reality to which they should respond in obedience to the call of God.

The Church was left behind, while the world around it changed fast, primarily because of a 'communication lag'. On the one hand the Church has to catch up with the world; and on the other she has to clarify her faith to her children who are in various stages of understanding. Thus communication becomes vital to the very life and mission of the Church.

The Cathedral and Communication

Inheriting the Indian cathedrals, as we did, on a historical platter, we face both advantages and disadvantages. Placed in a country where 41.2 per cent live below poverty level, with some 62 per cent still illiterate, with a population that expands faster than we are able to produce food, with a few controlling the bulk of national wealth, while 4 million youth wander the streets in search of employment, one need not submit statistics to understand the exploitation, the poverty and the social injustice in the country. Against this background the Cathedral presents an odd picture. For the type of Gospel she has to communicate to a world of this kind, what she IS speaks louder than what she is SAYING.

Instead of giving you opinions, let me give you some facts. This is data collected from a reasonably progressive-minded Cathedral in S. India for a sociological research programme in 1969.

Who are the parishioners of the Cathedral? 68.5 per cent were above 30 years of age. 71 per cent came from an urban background. 68 per cent were university educated, 67 per cent had received a

westernised 'English' education. 64.6 per cent were in high-level employment (above Rs 1,000 per month) with their own house and a car.

Why do they come to the Cathedral? 96.8 per cent said they came because the service was in English and they liked that type of worship. 85 per cent considered that the 'progressive' policies of the Cathedral (outreach programmes and 'involvement' of various kinds) were not important factors influencing their attendance. Rejection of other factors, such as Fellowship, suggested that for the majority the choice of the Cathedral was based on social status rather than religious motives; and that the aim of the majority was to conserve the *status quo* at any cost. 92 per cent did not want to meet people after the service, while an equal percentage came only for Holy Communion and for no other purpose.

What do they believe? 64 per cent believed that the Church should look to the welfare of its own members first, and only then think of others. 64 per cent believed that social distinctions are 'willed by God'. 73.2 per cent believed that only those who have faith in Christ will be saved and have eternal life. As for suggested changes, 85 per cent of the parishioners (Indians) disagreed with a suggestion for the introduction of Indian languages in the Cathedral services, while 68 per cent objected to the introduction of Indian music. They suggested that classical Western music might be included in the liturgy. Even in private prayer they tended to be highly individualistic: 80 per cent said they prayed privately, but never with their families—and they prayed in English.

This analysis suggests that a majority of the Cathedral parishioners see in the Church one of the institutions able to help them to reproduce themselves as a westernized social elite group, as a system of identification. It is interesting to note that younger people below the age of 30, idealistic and activist in their approach, were reluctant to attend; and there was no attendance by workers and weaker sections of society.

This then is the Cathedral which has to communicate Good News that proclaims liberty to the oppressed, freedom to the bound and deliverance to the poor! In the context of the social reality around this Cathedral, and in the eyes of the social forces that seek to transform the world, the Cathedral is identified with the forces of oppression and conservatism which seek to perpetuate the present state of affairs.

In this lies the disadvantage of the Cathedral congregation for mission in a particular sense. Here we can observe a communication anomaly. In this Cathedral of which we are speaking, thanks to enlightened leadership which saw the tremendous changes taking place in the society around it and the need to catch up with these changes, specialised ministries *were* initiated and set in motion. But, as the research showed, the very nature of the composition of the Cathedral congregation prevented it from interiorizing the new understanding of mission, and as a result the congregation was years behind in its response to the world.

Thus the need for communication, on the one hand to the rapidly changing world and its needs, and on the other hand to communicate to and educate the congregation, becomes imperative to the Cathedral if it is to be effective.

The Role of the Cathedral

By very necessity the Cathedral must become a centre of communication, and the following areas are well defined for her role:

1. Communication to and from the world.
2. Communication to the congregation, to catch up with the world and to be prepared for mission.
3. Communication to other Churches, of which the Cathedral is considered a Central Church.
4. Communication to the young, as a means of transmitting institutional values.
5. Prophetic communication, as the 'conscience of society'.

It will be of interest to see how this kind of communication, as a separate aspect of 'Ministry', is meeting this need. St Mark's Cathedral, Bangalore, provides a case in point. As a result of the sociological study described above, the need for communication was recognised, and a separate department was started for this purpose in January 1973.

All means of communications-media are used—news sheets, posters, audio-visual aids, magazines, bulletins, and of course the pulpit. The outside world is brought into focus, mission is interpreted and clarified, and the congregation is challenged to action.

We have reason to be optimistic about the response, although many are still in the pietistic stage of approach to the Gospel.

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 weeks in January | — the gruesome problems of drought victims were brought to the awareness of the congregation through communication-media. |
| 1st week in February | — Congregation responded, and formed a Relief Service. |
| 2nd week in February | — Medical Team sent out |
| 1st week in March | — money-raising programmes |
| 1st week in April | — Gruel Centres established |
| till September | |
| During July | — Mobile medical teams with three hospitals participating. |

The youth were instant in their response, and they performed admirably. Today, when the congregation are witnesses to these facts, and can see that their action has resulted in large-scale mobilisation for relief by more than 10 organisations, this is a starting-point for communication for further involvement.

Now, when serious problems of social inequality and injustice are projected (e.g. problems of food distribution, and the existence of garbage-eaters in the city) there is a little more willingness to respond,

and to see them not merely as objects of charity. With the built-in resistance of the past, we have a long way to go; but perhaps from the basis of mere 'Relief' these same people may go on to think and work and suffer in terms of 'Release', as the Gospel demands. Meanwhile the specialised ministries keep pace with the changes around us in the city, and their work is communicated to the congregation.

The young, and the children, are covered by this communication system, and are nurtured to take their place when the time comes. It is difficult to predict, but at present the children of the same elite congregation do show signs of responding to change, and some have even ventured to renounce their social identity in the service of the Gospel.

Conclusion

In view of these realities, the Cathedral, placed as it is in the present context, can make use of its advantages and live out its role as a creative minority, sensitive to the Gospel in the needs of the people around it. Endowed with the best in society, it can bring its influence to bear on the power structures and communicate the meaning of the Gospel.

The Cathedral can be the centre from which conscious and conscientious thinking about social problems can emanate; and it can perform a prophetic role. It can be the prophetic minority which warns society around it of its own inherent evils, and the social factors which prevent the ultimate fulfilment of man. With these and other resources, the Cathedral can be the 'conscience' of society, a centre for the communication of Good News to the world in which she is placed.