

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXIV, No. 2 (Issue 48) May 2016

Encountering Mission

Scattering for Gathering

Victor Raj

Abstract: Scattering for Gathering is one of the numerous biblical paradigms for mission. In this brief essay, I summarize several conversations I have had with some church planters and pastors in India who began their ministry as catechists. Some of them already planted congregations before they entered the seminary for formal theological education and pastoral formation. While serving as pastors, these men encourage and empower gifted people and their families to reach out and plant new congregations. Patterned after the apostle Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 3:16–18), they believe that one person plants, another waters, and God gives the growth. God scatters His people wherever He will so that by His word He draws all people to Himself.

Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, the first Protestant missionary to India, was a loner. While studying at the seminary in Germany, Ziegenbalg had a vision to reach the people of India with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1706, he landed in Tharangambadi on the southeastern shores of India and began his ministry among the Tamil-speaking peoples in the region. Endorsement for his ministry from the mission board came a little later.

Six decades later, in 1761, pioneer English Baptist missionary, William Carey, followed Ziegenbalg and began a new mission in Bengal on the northeastern shores. Carey was labeled an “Enthusiast” for casting a vision for reaching out to people in faraway lands. Himself a tanner by trade, Carey would be joined by Joshua Marshman, a weaver, and William Ward, a printer and book seller. These three would make the missionary hall of fame, under the name “The Serampore Trio.”

Missionaries were conversant in biblical languages and thoroughly trained in the theology of their respective denominations. They became experts in linguistics and



Rev. Dr. Victor Raj is the Buehner-Duesenberg Professor of Missions at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He is also Editor of Lutheran Mission Matters, journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology. rajv@csl.edu

were cognizant of India's religio-cultural and philosophical context, in which they would accumulate a lifetime of learning for teaching and communicating Christ boldly to various people groups of the nation. They translated Scripture into the vernaculars and dialogued intelligently with their Indian counterparts, experts in other religions, languages, and cultures. They trained people in making a living for themselves and to serve others in their neighborhood and the larger society. Support and good will from the respective Home Mission Societies followed.

Three centuries later, Gospel witnessing in India outside the church walls takes place through the life and service of Indian Christians: a vast number of laypeople with an unbridled testimony to the Lord by word of mouth. The apostolic paradigm that St. Paul posits in his Corinthian correspondence is alive and well in the twenty-first century: Paul planted, Apollos watered, and God causes His word to grow. The Lord keeps adding to the number of believers.

The Sunday after Christmas 2015, I had the privilege of spending the afternoon with the presbyter of a congregation of the Church of South India (CSI) and his committee members, four miles west of my home in Trivandrum, India. This 450-family congregation is celebrating its centenary this year. The celebration is year-long, presenting evening lectures on a monthly basis to the congregation and in the neighboring towns, testimonies of highly accomplished Christians who grew up in the area. The congregation itself had been a "church plant," the fruit of the vision that the pioneers cast as the mantle of church leadership began to fall from the London Mission Society onto indigenous shoulders. Expatriate missionaries began to perceive the need for cultivating indigenous leadership and to equip them for raising future generations of Jesus-followers in India. The church that rises from the native soil would be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.

In September 1947, the Anglican, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist missions operating in India came together to form the Church of South India by way of demonstrating their post-missionary organizational stability and for presenting a united witness of the Gospel of our Lord in a nation of diversity and plurality of religions and cultures. Similarly, in November 1970, the Church of North India was formed. Altogether, their membership today totals 5.5 million.

Gospel witnessing in India outside the church walls takes place through the life and service of Indian Christians: a vast number of laypeople with an unbridled testimony to the Lord by word of mouth. The apostolic paradigm that St. Paul posits in his Corinthian correspondence is alive and well in the twenty-first century: Paul planted, Apollos watered, and God causes His word to grow.

The CSI congregation in my neighborhood has on its own deployed six missionaries and their families to different towns in central India, patterned after the Home Mission Society. These laypeople are supported with prayers and resources from the congregation. They engage the communities in which they are placed as Christ's witnesses. They learn the local language and get acclimated to the life and lifestyle of the people to whom they reach out at the grassroots level. Long term, they team up with other volunteer missionaries who work in the region to form new Christian communities and congregations. The pastor of the sending congregation himself had been a volunteer missionary before he enrolled for seminary education. Come May, he will be deployed to Andhra Pradesh to oversee church planting activities in the state.

Involvement in the various activities of the Home Mission Society is a strongly recommended prerequisite for enrolling in seminary education in the Indian churches. Prospective students will have shadowed evangelists and church planters as much as possible. Students come with a minimum four-year college education and an awareness of the society and culture in which they live and intend to serve. At the seminary, for the sake of building a biblical foundation for mission, students interact more with the history of Israel and the prophetic literature in the Old Testament. After seminary, they enter the diaconate and later work as probationers to qualify for ordination. In theory and in practice, planting churches is an integral part of pastoral formation in the Church of South India.

The India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC), the LCMS's India partner, had also been innovative in planting congregations through laypeople during the church's formative years. What is now Concordia Theological Seminary Nagercoil first began as a Teacher Training Institute. Initially, a number of Tamil- and Malayalam-speaking nationals were trained there in the Lutheran way to serve as teachers and catechists. They would shadow expatriate missionaries and serve as evangelists and teachers in the villages where they would be placed. Lutheran teachers were deployed missionaries and evangelists, guided, mentored and supervised directly by expatriates. Teachers lived in the villages they were serving. After school, they visited families in the neighborhood and presented to them the Story of the Lord, inviting them and their families to join the faithful. School auditoriums became chapels during weekends. Lutheran teachers served as catechists, leading worship, preaching, and conducting weekly Bible studies. The Sacrament was celebrated when the ordained missionary was able to visit the site, usually within one to three months.

Already in 1951, the IELC based in the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu reached out to Mumbai in the northwest to serve primarily the Tamil- and Malayalam-speaking Lutherans who had moved away from home to benefit from the job opportunities in the metropolitan area. Targeting initially the diaspora, the church deployed two clergy, one speaking Malayalam and the other Tamil. They organized

congregations in Mumbai and expanded the ministry among the native Hindi- and Marathi-speaking populations. The pastors would identify potential leaders for the church and catechize and train them for evangelism and church planting. Some leading men would be sent to the Nagercoil seminary to receive further training in the pastoral formation program.

The IELC's charitable institutions have been missionary outposts. Boarding schools for boys and girls, Lutheran schools for the deaf and the blind, college hostels, trade schools, health clinics, and hospitals that the IELC inherited from the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission had built into them a deep sense of spirituality and a commitment to confess Christ boldly in a hostile environment. Their chaplains encouraged these establishments and their staff to present before the world around them a Christ-centered servanthood. The church body would deploy dedicated men and women to these institutions to serve as missionaries, empowering them to put to good use the various talents that God had invested in them. The men would initiate a Bible correspondence course and monitor Christian reading rooms in town. Other men would "pony express" Christian books and sell them and distribute Gospel tracts and Scripture portions. Women would shadow nurses and other healthcare workers, visiting the sick and the destitute in the neighborhood. Some of the men would enroll in the seminary's one-year Bible course and return to the mission field as certified catechists, while a select number of women would train as deaconesses and "Bible women." God has His way of spreading His Word that transcends human understanding.

God has His way
of spreading His Word
that transcends human
understanding.

First established in 1926, my mother congregation had in twenty-five years birthed four new congregations within a ten-mile radius. Together they received pastoral care from one ordained clergyman assisted by one catechist and a Lutheran school teacher. In the 1970s, all of these congregations became independent, each one ready and able to call its own pastor and make the annual budget. One of these congregations planted a new (grand-)daughter church in a nearby village and raised enough money to buy property and build a brand-new church building. In the Indian context, church buildings are a visible testimony of the One who alone is worthy of the honor and worship of all people. In two generations, these five congregations together were blessed to raise ten pastors for the IELC.

Vacation Bible Schools have played their role in the formation of new Christian congregations. They show how God uses each member of the body of Christ for making Him known among those who do not yet know Him as their Savior. Growing out of VBS, Sunday School children of two Lutheran congregations in my neighborhood reached out to the non-Christians of their age and organized them as

“Hindu Sunday School.” Their weekly meetings merited the attention of adults. Within seven years, what began in a Christian family’s front yard in 1967 attracted young adults and extended families and became a congregation. One can only cherish the thought that the Spirit blows wherever He wills.

Wherever the word of God is living and active, the enemies of the cross also surface. Congregations do not multiply today in the same way as they did a generation ago. Other religions have intentionally copied Christian outreach ideas and begun their own Sunday Schools, special programs for young adults, study groups on college campuses, and volunteer organizations for serving communities in various ways. A harvest for the Lord nevertheless awaits consummation. Some seeds fall on rocks and do not take root. Others fall on the wayside and are trampled on. Other seeds fall among thorns and are choked by thorns and thistles. Inasmuch as God sows the seed, He prepares the soil well for the seed to be received, take root, and bear much fruit. His Word never returns void. God scatters His people in order to gather everyone at His feet.