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The mission of the church and its unity are integrally related: the Lord has given the mission to His one church, just as He has given unity to the people of God in mission. In John 17, 20-21, He says, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." This rather complicated way of describing unity and mission makes it inescapable that the two always go together and that the denial or weakening of one becomes the denial or weakening of the other.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND ITS UNITY

Process and Progress: A Case Study In India

Herbert M. Zorn

BACKDROP

I realize that I am speaking to a group of Canadian Lutherans, most of whose beginnings and present being are closely tied to the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. I assume that you are looking for a more adequate expression of unity with the Christians of this land. Without denying your unity with your brothers and sisters of another land. In this context I would like to describe the challenges, the problems and the progress toward mission in unity of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC). I have no delusions that the IELC is a bright light to follow in any sense of the word; perhaps its one advantage has been the distance that there is between South India and St. Louis - geographically, linguistically, culturally and politically. The need for decisions on the spot became obvious to us there - probably later than it should have - with the independence of India and its attendant fear of all that is foreign. But that preempts the story.

If beginnings were the determinative fact, the IELC should be a strongly separatistic church. The first four missionaries of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission, MELIM, (as the IELC was called before it became autonomous) were ex-missionaries of the Leipzig Mission, who left after disputes over the inspiration of Scripture. The Leipzig Mission was one of the more

conservative missionary societies in Germany that itself had arisen partly in opposition to the "unierte" Basel Mission. It had an unfortunate early history of divisions on the mission field in which almost one-fourth of its missionaries left for other missions or other fields including the United States and Australia.

But beginnings have been shaped by circumstances in India which related to the church's mission. And concern for the church's mission moved the IELC to seek unity.

Until World War I, all of the new missionaries came from the United States, but most of them were Germans from the free churches who had gone to the Missouri Synod seminary in St. Louis for their theological education. Some who came directly to India were German citizens. Others served in U.S. parishes briefly and had had time to become U.S. citizens. Thus when the war broke out, the field was stripped of the majority of its missionaries. A weakened staff became aware of the presence of other Christians in their areas as a result.

Another incident should be cited. In 1907, the missionaries made a geographical leap, from Ambur to Nagercoil, on the very southern tip of India, a distance of about 400 miles. This was done on the invitation of an Indian Christian who represented a group of Christians of the depressed classes (often referred to as outcasts). The area had a thriving Christian community, most of whose members were of a somewhat more advanced caste. After long discussion and over the objection of the London Missionary Society missionaries, who were serving the area, MELIM missionaries moved down to Nagercoil and established work among these people.

It is difficult to analyze such a decision after so many years, and wrong to impugn motives. It is probably valid, however, to say that most MELIM missionaries looked at this move as an opportunity to preach the pure Word in a place where the less-than-pure English Congregational Word was being preached. Many Indians of the depressed classes, on the other hand, saw an opportunity to receive the Gospel in their own right and not simply as lesser breeds with Christians of a higher caste. (This kind of division over caste has plagued the church of India in many places and has been the cause of some very bitter controversy.) Lutheran mission work thrived and the number of "converts" grew far more rapidly here than in the original Ambur mission area, mainly because many of these new members were converts not from Hinduism, but from London Mission Society churches. There was also considerable outreach among other people, especially among Hindus of this and related depressed classes who now found a Christian community of their own kind. Whether this was evangelism or social movement is another question.

The work of the MELIM soon spread to all castes. The result was that the caste problem that had afflicted the Christians in the London Missionary Society and was the occasion for the Lutherans to begin work in Nagercoil also began to trouble the Lutherans. In addition, this development resulted in a higher incidence of Lutheran people who had relatives in other churches, churches which also preached the Gospel and brought people to Christ. Another move into the Malayalam-speaking area on the southwest coast of India simply added to the number of different castes and communities involved, as well as to the inter-church problem.

This mixture of doctrinal and caste problems was affecting the clarity of the Gospel. One problem was that different denominations were being identified with different castes and that limited the Gospel. More serious was the problem that the non-Christians, the Hindus and Muslims, were puzzled at the spectacle of Christians, who were led by the love of Christ - or so they thought - dividing themselves into mutually exclusive divisions. These divisions were more rigid than the Hindu caste system (for, whatever one says of Hindu castes, today all Hindus can worship in their temples) and completely against the Muslim mind which insists on the abolition of caste among them. The laws of Hinduism and Islam were apparently stronger than the Gospel of Christ!

OUT OF ISOLATION

For years, the MELIM took what we today would call a sectarian approach. It is difficult to judge such actions. Rationalism and liberalism in their stronger forms were evident among British and European missionaries. Separatism was met with disdain. Yet, all of these missionaries, from whatever country, came to India with a tremendous sense of mission, whether informed by Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic or any other kind of theology.

The first celebrated change in this position of MELIM came in the action of Dr. Adolph Brux in praying with non-Lutherans after dinner in a private home and later with Dr. Samuel Zwemer, a celebrated missionary to the Muslims and a Reformed clergyman, in a missionary meeting. These actions sparked off a controversy that defied settlement in the field and was referred to the Mission Board of the Missouri Synod in St. Louis. When Brux returned to the United States on furlough, seven years after these incidents and after a period of fruitful work among Muslims, he was discharged from missionary service. His appeal was finally heard and upheld in 1935, but he was never returned to India to resume his work.

World War II brought things to a head once more. The incidents that brought this about were the interning of German missionaries who served in areas where the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church are now established. The number of these Lutherans far outnumbered those in the MELIM. Although MELIM missionaries were overloaded, they felt that there should be some way open for assisting these orphan missions and the interned missionaries. Yet, the whole tradition of MELIM was against it. MELIM had always done its own thing and other Lutherans - and other Christians - had done theirs.

How could there be a shift in mid-stream so that the mission of the church might go forward? In the working out of a program of assistance, some interesting anomalies arose: Missouri funds could be used only for the personal support of interned German missionaries. Support of the orphaned missions would violate Missouri position on fellowship with other Lutherans since it went beyond cooperation in "externals". Thus to fund the Indian work, churches like the LCA (then the ULCA) and Swedish Lutherans simply shifted their funds from support of the interned German missionaries to the support of the orphaned missions themselves.

Out of this experience grew a determination that this sort of situation should never reoccur. A vital relationship had grown up among most of the Lutheran groups in India. After the war, MELIM Lutherans also got into the act. A consensus grew that an agreed statement of doctrine was necessary for inter-Lutheran understanding, for the possible establishment of a united Lutheran Church of India and for discussion with the recently formed Church of South India which had immediately upon its formation in 1947 invited the Lutherans for further discussions. The framework in which the inter-Lutheran discussions were carried on was the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India.

INTER-LUTHERAN RELATIONSHIPS

In 1951 a document entitled *A Doctrinal Statement* was issued by the Lutherans of the FELCI. Although it never gained the status of a confession, it did indicate where the Lutherans stood. Its non-adoption as a confession was more the result of its having served its purpose than of its inadequacy. The FELCI did not feel that it wanted to adopt another confession for itself.

Had the all-India Lutheran church idea borne fruit, *the Statement* might have become its confessional base, but this concept proved to be impractical. Such an all-India Lutheran church would have included Christians of at least seven different languages, most of them mutually unintelligible, involving 700,000 Lutherans (now closer to 850,000) strung out along the entire eastern coast of the vast sub-continent of India. After some negotiation, it was agreed that the FELCI as such could serve the purpose of inter-relationship more adequately.

Over the years, however, pulpit and altar fellowship has in fact developed among many of the Lutheran bodies, which have contact with one another. This was especially true of the IELC (former MELIM), the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Arcot Lutheran Church, all of which work in the Tamil-speaking area. This means, effectively, the interchange of members as they move from one area to another. It also means some interaction in those areas where congregations of two church bodies are located close to each other. Actually, this proximity of Lutheran congregations is quite rare among Lutherans, since overlapping of territory was avoided quite faithfully among Lutherans. The reason is that Tamil Nadu, the locale of these three churches, is smaller than Ontario but its population exceeds 50,000,000. There is sufficient work to be done without overlapping efforts.

I do not mean to imply that the inter-Lutheran problem is solved. Far from it. There are a few places where separate Lutheran congregations maintain their own identity, even though they could become financially viable only if they were to merge. The mission of the church to the vast majority of non-Christians gets lost in this type of situation. Nor does the IELC have a corner on these problems. Similar difficulties, especially in relating to Christians of other denominations, plague the Lutherans in different parts of India.

INTER-CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

The *Doctrinal Statement* mentioned before was put together with the purpose of providing a common Lutheran understanding in the approach to the Church of South India (CSI) in its overtures for a broader union. Along with other Lutherans who lived in South India, MELIM (later as IELC), took part in discussions with the CSI, first as observers, later as full members. These discussions extended over twenty years and I had the privilege of being involved intermittently throughout that period. I believe that a commentary is instructive because it demonstrates the importance of the willingness to be led by the Spirit of God under the Word.

We started, I fear, many miles apart. The Lutherans made it quite clear that there had to be agreement in doctrine first and union later. The CSI pointed out that its very existence was posited upon the understanding that agreement in doctrine would grow out of union. At first, this sounded like an impasse - and I believe that it would have been just that, had we not all seen the continuing scandal of the division among churches.

Impasse became opportunity. A two-pronged effort was set in motion. First, both the Lutherans and the members of the CSI raised issues that they thought were not adequately approached by the other group. Lutherans raised such issues as the authority of the Word, the place of confessional statements and the doctrine of Law and Gospel. The CSI raised the issues of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the understanding of the Man in Christ and the doctrine of election. All agreed that the doctrines of Baptism and the Lord's Supper needed further study. The real crunch came in the matter of church and ministry.

For ten years we hammered away at these subjects. We did not always agree, but we began to realize how much of disagreement was really misunderstanding. For example, the Law and Gospel distinction of Lutherans had been seen by the members of the CSI as a division with all sorts of non-Lutheran implications, including equating the Old Testament with the Law and the New Testament with the Gospel. These conversations led to a series of Agreed Statements, agreed to by the people who put them forward and referred to the various churches for their reactions.

All of these discussions were carried on in English - the one common language for the "theologians" of South India. Additional follow-up meetings were held in Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kanarese. These were particularly interesting, because the apparent differences between churches came out differently when they were cast into other languages. To illustrate how Western some of the disagreements are, in the Malayalam discussions, more time had to be spent on finding an agreed term to express "real presence" in the Lord's Supper than had to be spent on the issue itself.

The second prong of this effort was the development of a catechism for the instruction of confirmands and of inquirers into the Christian faith. I was involved in this process, dealing with members of the CSI and other Lutherans. The essence of Luther's Catechism was preserved in this document, with a careful

1. Herbert M. Zorn, "The History of a Joint Catechism: Progress in India" *Concordia Theological Monthly* (Vol. XL, No. 1; January 1969), pp. 38-50.

fitting into the context of a Hindu and Muslim oriented culture. The catchwords of the sixteenth century divisions between Lutherans and Reformed are hardly in evidence.

After agreed Statements had been prepared and the Catechism work was well along, a negotiating committee sat down to prepare a constitutional approach to union. This is still in process and is running into delaying difficulties, which are chiefly, I believe, of a non-theological nature. There is a strong fear by the Lutherans that the considerably larger CSI will swallow them up and few traces will be left.

Some very significant changes, however, have taken place. The degree of cooperation between congregations and organizations on the local level has increased significantly. There is a strong desire to witness to the world that we are one in Christ and to remove those evidences of our separateness that stumbling block to the Hindu and Muslim inquirer which makes it impossible for him to reach the true stumbling block of the Gospel. Progress is slow and frustrations arise, but that is not new to any of us.

ASSESSMENT

Looking over twenty-five years of involvement in inter-church relations in India and observation of similar efforts in other parts of the world outside of the United States, I find several signals coming to me:

First, it is the mission of the church that drives us to search for expressions of the unity of the church. To every objection about the false or inadequate doctrine or laxness of other churches (I say this with my fingers crossed, because those objections are too often self-righteous and insensitive), there is the response, "Yes, but what do you do about the Christian people who live among each other in separate denominations and try to be witnesses to their Lord in this separateness?" You simply cannot cease searching for expressions of unity.

Second, the Word of God always comes in the words of men. Words of men change in their meaning and grow out of the culture, politics and life style of each society. Therefore we must weigh those words and listen to what people are saying, trying to respond significantly and helpfully.

Third, confessions of faith are important, more as an expression of where we stand at this time than as binding documents. Lutherans operate with the Scripture as the standard for faith and life and the historic confessions as a true witness to those Scriptures. That is where we stand. In dealing with non-Lutherans, the confessions certainly inform what Lutherans will say, but they cannot be, in any sense, a banner of truth.

Fourthly, these matters are so completely tied into the life of the church that they have to be decided in the area and culture where the church is. To put it bluntly, you will have to find a Canadian answer to the questions, just as we have been seeking an Indian answer. With our common commitment to the Scriptures and the Confessions, it is certainly natural that the LC-MS will respect the decisions of its counterparts in other parts of the world, and *vice versa*.