



## Reflections on an Indian Ministry

1975

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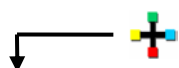
I went to India as a missionary of the Church of Scotland in 1936, and during most of the years since then I have been working within the Indian Church. The period spans almost 40 years. Looking back and reflecting on many great changes and rich experiences, what stands out?

The first is the experience of living through the formation and the early years of a united church. I came to India eleven years before the Church of South India was formed. And I have spent the last nine years in the area where I had worked before union. Coming back again to those same churches which I had known intimately before 1947 has given me an acute feeling of the difference which union has made. I have felt this particularly in respect of the City of Madras. My impression of the churches in Madras as I knew them before 1947 was that they were separate congregations each concerned about its own affairs; I do not remember getting any impression of a coherent body of people concerned about the City as a whole. It was not 'the Church for others'.

I do not want to draw a romanticised picture of things as they are now, but I am bound to say that the 'feel' is different. I have found people willing to think about the needs of the City as a whole. I have seen the churches deeply and effectively involved, along with Government and other agencies, in meeting the problems of the slums, of the beggars with leprosy, of the pre-school children who have nowhere to go when their parents are at work, of the old and of the despairing. Of course there is still much congregational introversion. There are still plenty of churches where (as an elder of one of them said to me the other day) it is felt to be enough if 'the Church caters for the needs of its members'. But no one could live through the experience that I have had, from 1936 to 1947, and from 1965 to last year, without being conscious of the difference.

During the years preceding union we were (rightly) anxious to make clear that union was not just a matter of organisational efficiency, but a matter of learning from one another to be more truly the Church of Christ. But it is also true that a united church is in a position to think and work

for the whole community more easily and more effectively than a number of bodies which are committed to nothing more than occasional co-operation.

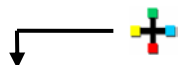


I think that this needs to be said at the present time. There is a widespread weariness among those who have laboured to bring about organic union among the churches, and a widespread nausea among those who have merely watched the exercise from the touch-line. It is felt that there are more important things than 'ecclesiastical joinery'. There is need to explore the forgotten depth and breadth of human spiritual experience, to find more of the reality that transcends our involvement in the endless rat-race of a society devoted to technology; there is also the need to tackle much more resolutely the issues of justice, peace and human survival.

But it is a mistake to think that these concerns lead us away from the concern for Christian unity. The only kind of spirituality which is congruous with the Gospel is a shared spirituality, one which leads us into fellowship – not with a small clique but with all men. The struggle for Christian unity is the struggle to find that kind of fellowship, a fellowship which is simply the foretaste of mankind renewed in Jesus Christ. The action which is needed for justice and peace will miss the mark if it becomes simply a series of programmes separated from the total experience of fellowship in Christ.

This leads me directly into the second experience. As the bishop of a diocese I have found it very easy to allow two things which belong together to fall apart-with consequences which are fatal for the witness of the Church. One is the regular congregational life which is centred in weekly worship, preaching, the sacraments and pastoral care. The other is the wide-ranging programmes of social action, which (in Madras) included such things as Industrial Mission, Lay Training, Slum Rehabilitation, Child-care for the children of working parents, Health clinics, Hospital Visiting and a Counselling Centre. It easily happens that these two lines of activity become separated, become in fact rivals for the concern and attention of trained workers, become a subject for mutual criticism and even contempt. Each side is tempted to accuse the other of neglecting the central concerns of the Gospel. The parish clergy regard the commitment of their colleagues to programmes of social action as a deviation from the main business of the Church, and in return they are regarded as hopelessly tied to an irrelevant ministry-looking after selfish and introverted congregations instead of going out in mission to the world.

But it is precisely for the sake of the mission to the world that these two things must not be allowed to fall apart. On the one hand, if the ministry of the Word and Sacraments of the Gospel becomes isolated from the business of caring for the whole life of the community, if it becomes something shut up within the walls of a congregation which is interested only in its own growth, if it is not obvious that sharing in the Word and Sacraments of the Gospel and being a member of a Christian congregation means being committed to caring for your neighbour-



hood, then our witness to the Gospel is distorted. On the other hand, when social action becomes separated from this congregational, sacramental, preaching ministry it also loses its character as witness. If one thing is certain it is that these efforts are not going to solve the problems of society. They will always be absurdly small in relation to the infinite needs of a big city. But as *signs* which point beyond what is now visible and create the possibility of hope, they are infinitely precious.

I do not mean that each bit of social action has to be visibly tied up with some kind of verbal Christian witness. It does not need to be argued that this destroys the integrity of both. But it does matter that both the action and the verbal witness should be recognisable as manifestations

of one reality – which is the reality of a community that lives in hope. The presence of that reality, and of the double witness of word and action, enable people who are without hope to begin to see the possibility of hope.

And that brings me to the third experience which I want to share.

I can perhaps introduce it by referring to a small incident which happened a few days before I left Madras. It was at a meeting in one of the very depressed areas in the north part of the City. The meeting was called to review the work done in the name of 'Community Organisation' in that area. Using the techniques of 'conscientisation' and skilful political organisation, two trained organisers had been able to achieve substantial improvements in the amenities of the area. Water, lighting, sanitation and transport had all been tackled, and the authorities at the Corporation Offices had learned to treat the demands of the people with respect. The meeting was held in the open street, and the local leaders of the main political parties were taking part. The last speaker before my turn came made a rousing speech which concluded with the assertion that every person, if he is to live a decent human life, needs food for his belly, clothes for his body, and a roof over his head. I took up where he had left off. I said that I agreed with his three points, but wanted to add a fourth: a man cannot live a human life without something to hope for. I was surprised by the response. But I should not have been. The hunger to find some shape, some meaning, something which gives direction to human life, is as basic as the needs to which my friend referred. Men cannot live for long in an ideological vacuum. That was an illusion of theologians in the '60s which has vanished even more quickly than most theological fashions.

There is, in the last analysis, no place in human history where the issues of human life and death are finally exposed and settled except the dying and rising of Jesus. There is no other place where an unshakeable hope can be anchored. But to make that hope credible, there has to be a place where it is made manifest by words and deeds which are not separated, or opposed to each other, but held together in the life of a fellowship which is open to human beings of every sort.

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