

Holistic Mission from a Myanmar Perspective

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Introduction

The word “holistic” is totally new both to our Church leaders and believers, when it was first used to interpret Mission and Evangelism in the late 1980’s. The Council of Churches instead of using the word “holistic”, used the word “integrated” to reflect the imperatives of Mission and Evangelism. In other words, doing Evangelism and Mission means embracing the total concerns of a person, that is his or her concerns - spiritual (soul), social, economic, health, education, justice, peace, and prosperity.

We confess that when missionaries came to Myanmar their primary purpose was to win souls to Christianity. They totally failed to share that the biblical understanding of winning souls embraces the total person and his/her concerns. In spite of this weakness in their missionary enterprise they took initiative to promote social activities for the communities, for example, they built schools, hospitals, and clinics. For this they deserve praise and recognition. But it was not the end of the divine task entrusted to them.

One of my colleagues made this reflection on the missionary enterprise of the missionaries. The early missionaries, he said, “only tried to impose Christianity to the non-Church peoples. Their concept was that there was no assurance of salvation in the Asian religions. In other words, they only tried to impose Christianity to the peoples of Myanmar, thereby, failing to take into account their cultures and the faiths of the nationals.” There is truth in his reflection.

Our early missionaries refrained from giving the holistic Christian education to the believers. Their emphasis was on “separation of the Church and State.” It was almost one-sided, that is, giving priority to the nature of the Church and less on the State. The consequence of this dichotomy was that the believers began to nurture a thought that Church is sacred and the State is secular. Therefore, to get involved in the issues of the State was unholy.

Thus even to speak that the Church must get involved in the socio-political concerns of the State was considered unbiblical. Christian participation in the issues of justice, human rights, oppression and exploitation was regarded as not part of the proclamation of the Good News.

The missionaries of the early days were aware of the imperatives of the Gospel but literally failed to conscientise the church members on the holistic nature of Evangelism/Mission. One of the dire consequences was inheriting the “mission-compound mentality,” that is to say, believers must stay together in their own Christian communities. In this way separating themselves from secular (Civil) societies. The bottom line of this understanding was that Church is holy and the State (Civil society) is unholy.

In the 1980s, the country was ruled by the Socialist Regime with no opposition party to counter-balance the regime in the affairs of the country. During the period the church was isolated from the rest of the world. This situation enabled the national church to rethink its life and work and to re-interpret the nature of doing Evangelism and Mission in the given socialist contexts.

The theology we worked out of during that socialist era was “theology in context” that embraces spiritual, socio-political and economic, realities, etc. In other words, doing Evangelism/Mission must be an integration of all these ingredients. In our language it is “Oth-Thon-Tharth-Nar” (the whole Mission).

The “Oth-Thon-Tharth-Nar” simply means that Evangelism/Mission is holistic in its total nature. Since then the churches, especially the fourteen denominations of Myanmar Council of Churches were conscientised on biblical understanding of the holistic theology of Evangelism/Mission. When papers were presented at our workshops and seminars sponsored by Mission and Ecumenism Department of MCC, we always included a paper on doing “holistic” Evangelism/Mission in the given context.

Today, for the member-churches of the MCC, the theology on holistic Evangelism/Mission is no longer an issue. This means the national leaders of the MCC member-churches are now fully committed to the biblical notion of Evangelism/Mission as always holistic in its very nature.

The Executive Committee of the MCC gave the Mission and Ecumenism Unit (now Department) a mandate to conduct seminar at the national level to work-out a mission statement for the Council, that is, for member-churches. It is done. This Mission statement reflects that mission of the Church in Myanmar must always be holistic in its nature and embraces the whole creation and its concerns, that is justice, ecology, integrity of creation, etc.

We believe that doing Evangelism/Mission in context must be according to Christ's way. One may ask what is Christ's way? We say Christ's way has two basic principles or strategies to do Evangelism/Mission in a given context: (1) Incarnational approach and (2) Identification approach, which are biblical.

Doing holistic mission in a given context in our regions (SEA) way not be the same for contextual realities are different, though same way be similar. Our task is to discern the context and its realities with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to receive style and strategies to perform our Evangelism/Mission.