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EDITORIAL

Justice to be Served...

The undulations of protest worldwide over the murder of George Floyd are yet to calm down and meanwhile another incident of police brutality has been recorded in India at Sathankulam in Tuticorin district, Tamil Nadu. The death of Jayaraj on 23 June and his son Fenix on 22 June as a result of brutal violence unleashed on them by the police, has sparked public outrage and triggered conversations on issues of police brutality in India. Many statistics on custodial violence indicate the subaltern nature of the victims of this systemic violence, thereby establishing that the vulnerable and weaker sections of society are the ones who repeatedly become targets of police violence.

There is no denying that the police force has significantly lost the general public's trust due to their approach in dealing with civilians. The Government's lethargy in investigating violations by law enforcement agencies has paved way for frequent violence against those in police custody. NCCI strongly condemns these atrocious actions of the police force and the apathy of the Government towards such acts. The statement of Rev Asir Ebenezer, the General Secretary can be read on page number 291.

World Environment Day was celebrated on 5 June, 2020. Ecosystems around the world, from the Amazon to the Antarctic, are on the verge of collapse, endangering the existence of life on earth. This exposes human encroachment and exploitation of other creatures and over earth. Human encroachment is necessitated in a context where human centric life is visualised and legitimised ignoring the natural design of creation in a web of relationships. The breaking of this chain of relationships results in pollution, water scarcity, global warming, wide spreading pandemics, ecology related calamities and food scarcity, leading to the emergence of a life and death situation. This situation is disturbing, raising questions about the future of living-kind and hence it turns into a justice issue demanding our attention in redeeming nature and its resources with a hope of fullness of life.

Therefore, the environmental crisis now points towards the need for immediate political decisions. The future of the biota depends on policies and ecology and is hence linked with politics and people. Within this context emerges the fundamental concept of ‘Biodiversity’ in global environment management. Biodiversity deals with the diversity of species, genes and ecosystems with an understanding that maintaining diversity is significant to living life in its fullness. While it focuses on understanding the phenomenon of life it also evaluates the impact the activities of humans have on it. However, the response to environmental crisis should not only be scientific but also social, since the response depends on action, including management and governance.

Responding to climate change, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams said “climate change is an issue that impels us to think about God’s justice and how we are to echo it in our world.” Echoing God’s justice as people of God, is a mission we are all entrusted with. Therefore, as part of church’s mission mandate it is imperative for the churches to participate in building up eco-friendly churches.

In this issue; the ecological involvements of a church are highlighted as a model to be followed and developed further. In light of the present ecological crisis resulting from a broken relationship between humans and nature, this issue challenges us to engage in conversations, reflections and actions to heal broken relationships. It is impossible to be ecological while being profit oriented and therefore a sustainable life has to be imagined in leading an environment friendly life. The challenges of ministry during corona and concerns related to child labour are also dealt with in this issue.

Rev Dr Abraham Mathew

The Executive Secretary

Policy, Governance and Public Witness



The Broken Relationship Between Humanity and Creation

- Manoj Kurian*

God, Creation, and Humanity- a relational perspective

In the Creation narrative in Genesis 1: 1-31, God creates the heavens, Earth and all life in it. It describes humanity being created in the image of God, and humans being given the stewardship over Creation. God then relishes and appreciates all that is created (Verse 31a). In this context, we acknowledge with humility, that God is our Creator and the source of all life, - *'The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.* Psalm 89:11 (NRSV). The Psalmist reminds us further in Psalm 104: 14- 18, that God bestows life, satiety and sustenance for all Creation- plants, birds, animals and all forms of life and not exclusively for humanity.

Early Christian teaching pointed to Creation as a manifestation of God's love towards humankind and all Creation. The ongoing process of Creation continues to reveal the infinite love that unites the world with God, as affirmed by the Saint Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Ninevah, in the 7th Century, when he stated – *'Love is a salvation for the whole Creation'*.¹ Saint Hildegard of Bingen 12th Century Christian mystic, lifts up the role of humanity as 'co-creators' with God. In her illustrated work 'Scivias' she said, *'God gave humankind the talent to create with all the world.'* She added that *'with nature's help humankind can set into Creation, all that is necessary and life-sustaining. Everything in nature, the sum total of heaven and earth, becomes a temple and an altar for the service of God.'*² Protecting the environment and preparing for a sustainable future depends on how we are accountable to God, to our fellow beings, and on how we live our lives in this world, ensuring equitable just and dignified relationships. The environment and Creation should not be approached to be exploited and consumed.

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¹ Grdzeldze, T. (2002), Creation and Ecology. The Ecumenical Review, 54: 211-218. Doi:10.1111/j.1758-6623.2002.tb00146.x

² Fox M, Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen, Chapter 4: Egg of the Universe, pg 69, Bear & Company 1985, 259 pages

Fellow human beings and fellow creatures should not be reduced to mere subjects to be taken advantage of, for our own benefit and self-preservation. Instead, humans need to learn to live and work with respect, concern and love, leaving no one behind.

How is humanity faring in its relationship with each other, with Creation, with the environment and with God?

Earth's ecosystems demonstrate diverse and complex biological communities living in balance with their environment. The underpinnings of indigenous cultures are eco-centric models of relationships with the environment, which are deeply influenced by holistic, non-materialistic world-views³. In the modern era, Alfred Russell Wallace introduced the idea of the historical interconnectedness of all biological things through their evolutionary history. Alexander von Humboldt was instrumental in introducing the concept of the interconnectedness of all biological things through their ecological and environmental relationships⁴. Unfortunately, the situation in the world today is dire and indicates a rapidly deteriorating disruption of this relationship, demanding urgent transformation. Healing and transformation are needed to ensure that justice and dignity are brought to relationships we have with each other, with Creation and the environment.

COVID-19 pandemic – a sign of Humanity's broken relationship with Creation

Apart from the mounting loss of life being caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also causing untold suffering in communities due to the global economic shock that is destroying livelihoods. The number of people facing acute food insecurity is expected to rise to 265 million in 2020, from 135 million in 2019, as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic⁵. The disruption caused by the pandemic is

³ Gratani M et. al. (2016) Indigenous environmental values as human values, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 2:1, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2016.1185811

⁴ Morrison D, book review, *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science* (UK). *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (USA). - By Andrea Wulf, *Systematic Biology* 65, 2016/08/02, DO - 10.1093/sysbio/syw062

⁵ WFP Chief warns of hunger pandemic as COVID-19 spreads (Statement to UN Security Council), 21 April 2020. <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-hunger-pandemic-covid-19-spreads-statement-un-security-council>

contributing to the reduced capacity to work, harvest, transport, process food and market it. To make matters worse, more than 60 % of the world's workforce accounting for 2 billion workers are in informal employment⁶. Most of them do not have access to a social safety net to fall back on, if there is a disruption to their livelihoods, adding to their vulnerability in accessing food.

COVID-19 is the latest of several recent zoonotic diseases emerging in people which demonstrates how human health and nature are closely interconnected. A zoonotic disease is a disease that can be transmitted from animals to people or, more specifically, a disease that normally exists in animals, but that can infect humans. Over the last 30 years, approximately 60-70 per cent of the new diseases that emerged in humans had a zoonotic origin. Approximately three to four new infectious diseases emerge each year, most of which originate from wildlife⁷. Climate change, destruction of wild habitats and trading in wild animals- all increase the interactions with nature that can expose people to a wide range of animal diseases⁸.

Climate Change: The Warming Earth and Oceans

Greenhouse gas (GHG) absorbs infrared radiation emitted from Earth's surface and reradiating it back to Earth's surface, thus contributing to the greenhouse effect. Carbon dioxide, methane, water vapour, nitrous oxides, and fluorinated gases also trap infrared radiation. Carbon dioxide, a key greenhouse gas that drives global climate change, continues to rise every month. Without naturally-occurring, heat-trapping gases—mainly water vapour, carbon dioxide and methane—Earth would be too cold to sustain life as we know it⁹. Carbon dioxide emissions mainly come from burning organic materials- coal, oil, gas, wood, and solid waste. This rapid increase is bringing about catastrophic changes to life on earth. Human activities

⁶ Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture (third edition) / International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2018. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf

⁷ World Wildlife Fund for Nature, COVID 19: URGENT CALL TO PROTECT PEOPLE AND NATURE, June 2020

⁸ Jones KE, Patel NG, Levy MA, et al. Global trends in emerging infectious diseases. *Nature*. 2008;451(7181):990-993. doi:10.1038/nature06536

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/science/greenhouse-gas>

since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution have produced a 45% increase in the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, from 280 ppm in 1750 to 415 ppm in 2019¹⁰, contributing to global warming.

Climate change is also leading to the acidification of oceans. The vast majority of heat from global warming is absorbed by the world's oceans. The year 2018, set a new record of ocean heating, surpassing 2017, which was the previous warmest year ever recorded. The previous five years were the five hottest years on record. The heating of oceans is destroying life in the oceans. About half of coral reefs have been lost in the last 30 years. If this trend in global warming continues, we can also anticipate substantial reductions in fish and sea life populations¹¹.

Climate change and warmer oceans are causing more torrential rains and stronger storms and more unpredictable weather, and have become the leading cause for people being displaced within countries over the last decade – forcing an estimated 20 million people a year from their homes. Today, any given individual is seven times more likely to be internally displaced by cyclones, floods and wildfires than by earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, and three times more likely than by conflict. Eighty per cent of those displaced in the last decade live in Asia, which is home to over a third of the world's poorest people¹².

The wealthier you are, the greater your impact on the environment¹³. The world's richest 10% produces half of the carbon emissions while the poorest 3.5 billion account for just a tenth¹⁴. However, it is the poorest and the most vulnerable who suffer the most due to the

¹⁰ <https://www.co2.earth/>

¹¹ Cheng, L., Zhu, J., Abraham, J. et al., 2018 Continues Record Global Ocean Warming, *Adv. Atmos. Sci.* (2019) 36: 249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00376-019-8276-x>

¹² Oxfam, *Forced from home: climate-fuelled displacement*, Policy Paper, 2 December 2019.

¹³ Pang M. et al. "Urban carbon footprints: a consumption-based approach for Swiss households." *Environmental Research Communications* 2019.

¹⁴ Gore, T, *Extreme Carbon Inequality : Why the Paris climate deal must put the poorest, lowest emitting and most vulnerable people first*, Oxfam Policy Paper, 2 December 2015.

consequences of climate change. Therefore, global warming is an ethical, moral and a political issue, rather than one that is purely environmental or physical. Climate Change is a matter of justice¹⁵!

Destruction of Life, Ecosystems and Biodiversity

Food.

Food production now takes up 40 per cent of the Earth's land surface¹⁶. Agriculture also makes use of 70 per cent of all available water resources¹⁷. Unfortunately, a third of this food that is produced with great efforts is wasted¹⁸. Despite significant increases in food production, a shocking 820 million people, (one in nine), now suffer from hunger. When we consider both moderate and severe levels of food insecurity, an estimated total of 26.4 per cent of the world's population, amounting to about 2 billion people are affected. A similar proportion of our population is also consuming drinking water contaminated with sewage¹⁹. However, we produce enough food for the more than 7 billion people in the world today, and the hunger or malnutrition that people suffer is caused mostly due to poverty and unequal distribution²⁰. In addition, millions experience acute hunger requiring urgent food, nutrition and livelihood assistance due to conflict insecurity, climate shocks, economic turbulence²¹ and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁵ Samson, J., D. Berteaux, B. J. McGill & M. M. Humphries. 2011. Geographic disparities and moral hazards in the predicted impacts of climate change on human populations. *Global Ecology and Biogeography* 20(4): 532-544

¹⁶ Farming Claims Almost Half Earth's Land, New Maps Show National Geographic-2005 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/12/agriculture-food-crops-land/>

¹⁷ FAO. 2011. The state of the world's land and water resources for food and agriculture (SOLAW) – Managing systems at risk. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome and Earthscan, London. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i1688e.pdf>
¹⁸ <http://www.fao.org/food-loss-and-food-waste/en/>

¹⁹ The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Rome, 2019. <http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition>

²⁰ Alexandratos, N. and J. Bruinsma. 2012. World agriculture towards 2030/2050: the 2012 revision. ESA Working paper No. 12-03. Rome, FAO. <http://www.fao.org/3/ap106e/ap106e.pdf>

²¹ 2019 Global Report on Food Crises, Food Security Information Network. <https://www.fsinplatform.org/report/global-report-food-crisis-2019/>

Forests.

Deforestation and forest degradation continue to take place at alarming rates, which contributes significantly to the ongoing loss of biodiversity. Since 1990, it is estimated that some 420 million hectares of forest have been lost through conversion to other land uses, such as large-scale commercial agriculture (primarily cattle ranching and cultivation of soya bean and oil palm) accounting for 40 per cent of tropical deforestation between 2000 and 2010²².

Indigenous people or people defending the rights of Indigenous communities are being killed, marginalised, exploited and expelled from their lands by people who target the resources of those lands and water bodies. In 2018, at least 164 land and environmental activists were murdered for defending their homes, land and natural resources from exploitation by mining, food and logging firms²³. The rights and entitlements of 5 per cent of the world's population, which is constituted of Indigenous peoples are critically linked to the very survival of humanity facing a climate emergency. An astounding 80 per cent of the world's biodiversity is protected in 28 per cent of the world's land surface²⁴. These areas are ecologically intact diverse forest areas, which are primarily managed by indigenous peoples and their families. These territories and forests are crucial for curbing gas emissions and for maintaining biodiversity. The genetic pool for plants and animal species found in the lands, rivers, lakes and marine areas are being guarded and preserved by the indigenous people who are living naturally sustainable lives.

Decline and death

Human activity is primarily responsible for the decline by nearly 60 per cent of global populations of 3,706 monitored vertebrate species—fish, birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles from 1970 to

²² FAO and UNEP. 2020. The State of the World's Forests 2020. Forests, biodiversity and people. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8642en>

²³ ENEMIES OF THE STATE? How governments and business silence land and environmental defenders, Report from the Global Witness July, 2019, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/enemies-state/>

²⁴ World Resources Institute publication, World Resources Institute (WRI) in collaboration with United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme, and World Bank. 2005. World Resources 2005: The Wealth of the Poor—Managing Ecosystems to Fight Poverty. Washington, DC: WRI, pages 83-87.

2012. Species population declines are especially pronounced in the tropics, with South and Central America suffering the most dramatic decline, an 89% loss compared to 1970²⁵. If this is compared to human populations, this 60% decimation can be equated to wiping out the whole human population of Asia in a period of 40 years.

Today, the total biomass of human and livestock is nearly 23 times that of all wild mammals.²⁶ Worldwide, rearing of livestock plays an important role in climate change, with emissions representing 14.5 per cent of human-induced Green House Gas (GHG) emissions. Beef and cattle milk production account for the majority of emissions, respectively contributing 41 and 20 per cent of the sector's emissions. Together, the world's top five meat and dairy corporations are now responsible for more annual greenhouse gas emissions than Exxon, Shell or British Petroleum²⁷.

The human impact on wild and domesticated birds is also shocking. The biomass of domesticated poultry (dominated by chickens) is nearly threefold higher than that of all wild birds on Earth²⁸. Over 65.8 billion meat-chicken carcasses were consumed globally in 2016²⁹. Industrial chicken farming is now widespread all over the world, and in 2006, it was estimated that 70% of chicken were intensively reared³⁰.

²⁵ Ceballos G, Ehrlich PR, Dirzo R, (2017) Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signalled by vertebrate population losses and declines, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* July 25, 2017 114 (30) E6089 E6096; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1704949114>

²⁶ Bar-On Y.M, Phillips. R, Milo. R, The biomass distribution on Earth, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, June 19, 2018 115 (25) 6506-6511; <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1711842115>

²⁷ GRAIN & the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) 18 July 2018, Emissions impossible: How big meat and dairy are heating up the planet, <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/5976-emissions-impossible-how-big-meat-and-dairy-are-heating-up-the-planet>

²⁸ Ceballos. G, Ehrlich. P.R, Dirzo.R, (2017) Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signalled by vertebrate population losses and declines, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* July 25, 2017 114 (30) E6089 E6096. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1704949114>

²⁹ FAOSTAT - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. FAOSTAT database. <http://faostat3.fao.org>

³⁰ Bennett CE et al. 2018 The broiler chicken as a signal of a human reconfigured biosphere. *R. Soc. open sci.* 5: 180325. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rsos.180325>

Three companies worldwide supply 90% of broiler chicks, and selective breeding has resulted in 50% or more of genetic diversity loss in commercial lines compared with ancestral breeds³¹.

The Key to Biodiversity

Peasants breed and nurture 40 livestock species and almost 8,000 breeds, as opposed to the industrial food chain, which focuses on far fewer than 100 breeds of five livestock species. Corporate plant breeders work with 150 crops but focus on barely a dozen. What remains of the world's declining fish stocks comes from 336 species accounting for almost two-thirds of the aquatic species we consume. Fish provide 20% of animal protein to about 3 billion people. Only ten species provide about 30% of marine capture fisheries and ten species provide about 50% of aquaculture production. The only group that has demonstrated the capacity to monitor and manage the wide variety of fish in an ecologically sound manner are artisanal fisherfolk. Smallholders and peasants, indigenous communities and artisan fisherfolk represent the most impoverished communities in society, and they are pushed to the margins of society by this powerful and market-driven world. Their living knowledge and experience are crucial for the survival of the world in an age facing climate change. They remain closest to the Earth, the guardians of the world's Biodiversity and are our best hope to help us adapt and flourish in the changing environment³².

However, agricultural policies bypass the majority of small-scale producers, who are still locked in a poverty trap of high vulnerability, land degradation and climatic uncertainty. The increasing dependence on industrial crop and livestock production rather than diversified agroecological farming has serious consequences. Industrial crop and livestock production rely on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, antibiotics, and protein feed, in order to thrive in uniform, intensive

³¹ Muir W M et al.2008 Genome-wide assessment of worldwide chicken SNP genetic diversity indicates significant absence of rare alleles in commercial breeds. Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA 105, 17 312-17 317.

³² From Uniformity to Diversity: A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems. International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2016 http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/UniformityToDiversity_FULL.pdf

systems³³. Lopsided policies are also affecting the small-scale farmers, who feed the nation. For instance, in India, the huge Central government annual subsidy on synthetic fertilisers has ballooned to ₹75,000 crores (nearly US\$ 10'000'000'000.00), while the organic sector gets barely ₹500 crores (nearly US\$ 67'000'000.00). The ruinous and flawed policies have contributed to turning farmers indebted and impoverished and depleting and poisoning the land and water bodies. In contrast, it has made transnational companies and agrochemical industries rich. From 1995 to date, it is estimated that over 3,00,000 farmers have committed suicide in desperation³⁴.

For a sustainable world, we need to shift from industrial modes of agriculture to systems based around more diversified agroecological farming. *Agroecological farming* contributes to transforming food systems by applying ecological principles to agriculture and ensuring a regenerative use of natural resources and ecosystem services. Concomitantly, it also addresses the need for socially equitable food systems within which people can exercise choice over what they eat and how and where it is produced³⁵.

It is vital that we heal and transform the broken relationship of humanity: humans with each other, with Creation and with the environment, if we expect our descendants and fellow creatures to live and flourish on this earth. We have to ask hard questions to ourselves and to the systems on caring for Creation, always keeping justice related to access to resources for all beings. Steps have to be taken in a constructive manner, so that the wealthy few of the world with extravagant lifestyles- consuming much more than what the world can

³³ FAO. 2011. The state of the world's land and water resources for food and agriculture (SOLAW) – Managing systems at risk. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome and Earthscan, London. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i1688e.pdf>

³⁴ The ruinous impact of chemical farming : Mina Anand, Hindu, Published on July 18, 2019. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/the-ruinous-impact-of-chemical-farming/article28562858.ece#>

³⁵ HLPE. 2019. Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition. A report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome. http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_documents/HLPE_Reports/HLPE-Report-14_EN.pdf

sustainably provide, at the expenses of the majority- not only reduce their consumption drastically and change radically, to enable this transformation.

What can we do?

- Strive and advocate for cleaner industries that are less polluting and to improve air quality.
- Encourage investment and maintenance of public transport systems
- Use public transportation, limit driving by carpooling, biking, walking and combine errands.
- Monitor energy consumption and move towards renewable energies.
- Conserve energy – remember to turn off lights, computers, and electric appliances when not in use and utilize energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances.
- Ensure that the most marginalised communities have access to cleaner, more modern stoves and fuels that can reduce the risks of illness and save lives.
- Since consumption of resources is a root cause of biodiversity loss, consume less and be more mindful about what we consume.
- Reuse, repurpose, recycle and buy recycled products.
- Improve collection, separation, and disposal of solid waste. Reduce the amount of waste that is burned or landfilled. Separating organic waste and turning it into compost or bioenergy improves soil fertility and provides an alternative energy source.
- Promote the conservation of forests and woodlands and reforestation.
- Advocate for the regulation and monitoring of pesticides, due to their impact on health, on the food chain and the environment.
- Advocate against the large-scale acquisition (buying or leasing) of large pieces of land or water bodies by domestic and transnational companies, governments, and individuals (land grabbing and grabbing of water bodies). These are usually intended for industrial food and biofuels production.

- Advocate against deforestation and environmental degradation for the development of industrial farms.
- Become “Blue Communities” to recognize water and sanitation as human rights, striving to ban or phase out the sale of bottled water and to promote publicly financed, owned, and operated water and wastewater services.
- Advocate for the rights of indigenous communities, especially for the rights to their traditional lands, resources and cultures.
- Create community gardens, grow more of our food and plant more plants and trees.
- Buy locally-sourced foods from small-scale food producers and reduce dependence on ultra-refined and imported foods.
- Advocate for and conserve local species of farm animals, plants and crops. Reduce the wasting of food and to consume less meat.
- Utilize available resource material such as “Roadmap for Congregations, Communities and Churches for an Economy of Life and Ecological Justice” for guiding your actions³⁶
- Involve in conversations, reflections and actions to heal the broken relationship of humanity with Creation and the environment. A good example is to celebrate the ‘Season for Creation’³⁷, (from September 1, the Day of Prayer for Creation, to October 4, the feast day of St. Francis. The suggested theme for this year is “Jubilee for the Earth.”)



³⁶ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-roadmap-resource-for-eco-justice-available-in-multilingual-versions>

³⁷ Celebration Guide <https://seasonofCreation.org/>

What Environmentalists Can Learn from COVID-19

- Johanna Rabindran*

The Pandemic. That's all I need to say. The rest you already know—doctors in blue plastic suits, patients dying alone in hospital rooms, crowded bus-stops as migrants struggle to get home. This is not the first international crisis to shake our world, and it probably won't be the last, but one way or another, Coronavirus coverage has not left the headlines for several weeks¹. As it stands then, it colours and frames all other news coverage, from US elections to Class XII Board Exams.

With World Environment Day due to be (mechanically) celebrated on 5 June, it is not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic has re-framed environmentalism too. This article explores three ways in which the immediate global crisis (Coronavirus) has shed light on the long-term global crisis (protecting the Earth).

Firstly, although plastic causes great damage to the environment, it is indispensable for preventing infections (in the form of Masks and PPE kits). Put another way, what do we do with polluting industries we literally cannot give up? Secondly, the pandemic is an opportunity to re-examine our place on the Earth, both as humans and as Christians. Thirdly, despite greater popular support for the environment, governments are using the shock of the pandemic to obscure anti-environment actions. Since the ecology is inherently political, it is clear that structural and ideological changes are necessary.

Finally, I turn to the role of Churches in the environmental movement. Apart from adopting eco-friendly technology and practices, we need to directly support local activists and movements.

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¹ I suspect only the media houses will be sorry to see the pandemic end. They've been talking about it for three months straight, but audiences still want more—no human-made drama could compare in terms of sheer juiciness.

We Are Dependent on Plastic

An endlessly useful material, plastic has emerged as one of the unsung heroes of the present pandemic. Without masks², Personal Protective (PPE) kits and disposable diagnostic tests, the death toll would have been unimaginably higher, especially among doctors, nurses and other front-line workers.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the indispensability of plastic, it has actually been a key material for the health sector for several years. Beginning from the twentieth century, plastic assisted with the sanitation revolution in hospitals. It was argued that no matter how well a used item is re-sterilised, it may carry a residue of infective material. Thus, the safest solution was to destroy the item after one use. Disposable surgical gloves, plastic syringes, plastic tubing, and plastic blood and urine bags have become essential for basic sanitation. Plastic is necessary in the operating theatre, for safe disposal of bio-wastes and packaging medicines. Apart from infection control reasons, plastics are more easily available and more cost-effective when compared to glass or metal.

Even as hospitals and medical services become more dependent on the use of plastic to prevent infection and save lives, studies have shown that micro-plastics and plastic pollution cause long-term health issues for human beings. This is the plastic paradox: We need it to survive, but it is slowly killing us.

According to one estimate, humans have cumulatively produced 8.3 billion tons of plastic, a large proportion of which exists currently as waste³. India is likely to generate about 775.5 tonnes of medical waste per day by 2022 from the current level of 550.9 tonnes daily. What happens to this plastic? Although some amount is recycled or incinerated, most plastic (91% by some estimates⁴) is just dumped in

² The filter material of medical masks is usually polypropylene fibre, which is a kind of plastic.

³ Parker, L. (2018). A whopping 91% of plastic isn't recycled. Retrieved 12 June 2020, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/07/plastic-produced-recycling-waste-ocean-trash-debris-environment/>

⁴ Ibid.

landfills. According to govt guidelines, all COVID-19 contaminated bio-medical waste must be incinerated.⁵

Research on the use of plastics in hospitals has tended to focus on safe disposal. As early as 1960s, researchers suggested containment and incineration. Today, there are more comprehensive norms for plastic waste disposal, such as shredding plastic bottles and keeping sharp objects like needles in puncture-proof containers. Contemporary research in India has then studied whether these norms are properly followed on ground. However, despite all these precautions for safety reasons, the total volume of plastic continues to hang over our heads like an evil omen. Inadequate waste management can cause pollution, growth and multiplication of vectors like insects, rodents and worms and may lead to transmission of diseases, pollution of water and soil. Chronic health effects, cancer etc observed in workers exposed to styrene in reinforced plastics industry⁶. BPA has been detected in human blood, breast milk and urine⁷.

Scientists and environmentalists have protested that we are doing nothing about all this plastic. Sometimes it seems that there is nothing that we can do. This entrenched dependence is what casual environmentalism (of the 'Ban Straws' variety) has failed to recognise.

Plastic plates and straws can easily be banned, but it is clear that hospitals cannot completely stop using plastics without reversing decades of development in the health sector. While biodegradable cloth masks are suitable for general use, they cannot replace medical standard masks in high risk environments, such as during a pandemic.

⁵ Mohan, V. (2020). Dealing with biomedical waste in the time of COVID-19 presents huge challenge | India News - Times of India. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/dealing-with-biomedical-waste-in-the-time-of-COVID-19-presents-huge-challenge/articleshow/75905790.cms>

⁶ Kolstad, H., Juel, K., Olsen, J., & Lynge, E. (1995). Exposure to Styrene and Chronic Health Effects: Mortality and Incidence of Solid Cancers in the Danish Reinforced Plastics Industry. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 52(5), 320-327. Retrieved February 26, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/27730326

⁷ Vandenberg, L., Chahoud, I., Heindel, J., Padmanabhan, V., Paumgarten, F., & Schoenfelder, G. (2010). Urinary, Circulating, and Tissue Biomonitoring Studies Indicate Widespread Exposure to Bisphenol A. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 118(8), 1055-1070. Retrieved February 26, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/27822990

As countless front-line workers have said, re-using ‘disposable’ masks (due to the shortage of supplies) is patently unsafe. How can we make a moral choice between creating plastic waste (by using disposable gloves) and allowing infections to spread (by not using them)? Can we make it sustainable at all?

It is clear that we cannot focus on just the safe disposal or recycling of plastic waste. We need to study the ethics of production and use, and re-direct plastic production. Global plastic consumption can be reduced by identifying non-essential uses of plastic. One form of this is reducing or banning products with short life span and high plastic content by mass, such as shopping bags.

One major characteristic of modern technology is the separation of utility and costs. We choose between an act (cold drink in a plastic cup) and some distant, abstract consequence (more plastic in a landfill far away). Similarly, air pollution is almost invisible. It is thus important to make costs more visible and immediate.

Finally, when the pandemic ends, the medical system must re-examine the uses of plastic, and consider changes that can be made to reduce plastic waste in hospitals. One possibility is avoiding the use of plastic gloves when a hand-wash could do instead. These are important discussions for building a more sustainable health-care system. This will, in turn, shape our understanding of the project of sustainable development as a whole.

Humans Need to Re-Examine Our Place in the World

The pandemic turned our world upside down. Schools didn’t start in April. Delhi Metro trains are empty, even at 6 pm. During the long weeks of the lockdown, people learned to work, study and entertain themselves at home. With many offices, schools and other public places shut for several weeks, there has been reduced energy use and lower carbon emissions. Cities across the world are reporting much better air quality⁸.

⁸ Watts, J., & Kommenda, N. (2020). Coronavirus pandemic leading to huge drop in air pollution. Retrieved 14 June 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/23/coronavirus-pandemic-leading-to-huge-drop-in-air-pollution>

One common conclusion is that it is possible for the environment to recover when humans stay home for a couple of weeks, leading many to draw analogies between humans and the virus. According to Daryush Nourbaha, “Except, rather than a virus disrupting the natural order, we, the humans, have disrupted the system. We have sought to replicate and grow to the detriment of our planet and all of the species within it.”⁹

Maybe this time we have seen the damage done to our environments in a very direct, personal way. When we hear about the residents of Jalandhar seeing the Himalayan peaks for the first time in decades¹⁰, the sub-text is ‘Look at this world we ruined. Shouldn’t we do something about it?’. Arundhati Roy writes;

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.¹¹

There is a hope that as countries around the world gradually re-open, we will remember the lessons of the pandemic and switch to more sustainable practices. For example, several companies may switch to work-from-home permanently, reducing the number of cars on the roads.

⁹ Nourbaha, D. (2020). What COVID-19 Can Teach Us About Sustainability. [online] Earth Institute Blogs. Retrieved 14 June 2020, from <https://blogs.ei.columbia.edu/2020/04/23/COVID-19-lessons-sustainability>.

¹⁰ Picheta, R. (2020). People in India can see the Himalayas for the first time in ‘decades,’ as the lockdown eases air pollution. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/himalayas-visible-lockdown-india-scli-intl/index.html>

¹¹ Roy, A. (2020). The pandemic is a portal. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

Others contend that this is only a temporary improvement. According to them, the return of ‘normality’ will bring with it the familiar smog and consumerism. Additionally, as governments struggle to manage the coming recession, there is the fear that ecological concerns will slip through the cracks.

However, all is not lost. Some activists argue that this experience will help us when making dramatic changes in human behaviour in the future:

There is the possibility that the experience of collective, coordinated action and so many individuals quickly changing patterns of behaviour resilience and human adaptability, will help us take better decisions for sustainability and taking effective action to halt the climate emergency.¹²

There is another aspect of re-examining our place in the world. While humans have long had anthropocentric views of the environment, this is particularly true for Christians. Anthropocentrism (or Human-centeredness) assumes that only humans have intrinsic worth and all other beings are means to human ends.

This ethics has often been traced back to the first chapter of the Bible. Genesis 1:28 reads, ‘Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that [a]moves on the earth.”’ This verse has been used to argue that God effectively gave us the Earth to use and rule as we please. It is this argument that has historically given Christians the reputation of being anti-environment. E. Calvin Beisner, for example, argues that since “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good¹³,” it is not possible for the Earth to be so fragile that human

¹² Anand, M. (2020). Here’s What COVID-19 Teaches Us About ‘Social Learning’ And The Environment. [online] WEFForum. Retrieved 13 June 2020, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/here-s-what-COVID-19-can-teach-us-about-environmental-action>.

¹³ Genesis 1:31 “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.”

activity could upset it. According to him, God wanted humans to multiply and dominate the Earth, and it is ludicrous that humans could destroy the environment in the process¹⁴.

However, contemporary environment destruction cannot be denied. One way to resolve this tension (between anthropocentrism and the environment) is by arguing that protecting the environment indirectly protects humans. Thus, we need to control pollution because it impacts human health.

Beyond this, there is a growing recognition of human responsibility¹⁵ and stewardship. Since all created things belong to God¹⁶, we are accountable to God as stewards of the creation.

Recall that in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, the steward who merely buried his talent out of fear of losing it was severely chastised. What little he did have was taken away and given to those who already had a great deal. When Christ returns, His earth may well be handed back to Him rusted, corroded, polluted, and ugly. To what degree will you or I be held responsible?¹⁷

Although there are some differences between the two, this perspective is closer to eco-centric environment ethics. In this case, the environment has value in itself (rather than simply being useful to humans).

Ecology is Political

In the long run, it is not enough for individuals to change their perspective on the environment. More than individual families and institutions, protecting the environment requires structural, systemic

¹⁴ Beisner, E. (2020). Environmentalism: A Biblical Perspective. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://answersingenesis.org/environmental-science/climate-change/what-about-environmentalism/>

¹⁵ Genesis 2:15 “Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.”

¹⁶ Psalm 24:1-2 “The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein. 2 For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters.”

¹⁷ Christian Environmentalism | Bible.org. (2009). Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://bible.org/article/christian-environmentalism>

change. One reason for this is that the ecology is inherently political. Who gets to make decisions? Who has money for law suits and bribes? Whose rights can be trodden over? What responsibility do courts have? Another reason is that environmental norms are rigid and slow to change. It sometimes takes decades of activism for a few symbolic policy changes.

In one sense, the COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity to rebuild, to dismantle the polluting, unequal, undesirable systems that have a stranglehold on human lives and dignity. If we took this as a warning to expand access to affordable health care, to reduce pollution and consumption, a better world is within reach.

Unfortunately, we're going in the wrong direction. In India, the environment ministry's expert panels reviewed projects virtually during lockdown, leading to sloppy work and environment clearances granted without proper scrutiny (and without fieldwork). Over the last few months, there have been several attempts to chip away at India's remaining protected areas¹⁸. Meanwhile, in the US, President Trump has signed an Executive Order in light of the 'economic emergency', effectively allowing 'action with significant environmental impact' without observing the requirements of long-standing environmental laws. Fortunately, it is unlikely that many companies will take advantage of this, out of fear of later lawsuits¹⁹.

What went wrong? What happened to all those lessons we thought we were learning about the environment?

A crisis is a crisis, and it's often easier to rebuild worse systems than better ones. In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein argues that the strategy of "shock therapy" exploits national crises (disasters or upheavals) to establish controversial and questionable policies, while citizens are excessively distracted

¹⁸ Aggarwal, M., Ghosh, S., Aggarwal, M., & Ghosh, S. (2020). While everyone was in lockdown, India cleared infrastructure projects in protected areas. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://scroll.in/article/964660/while-everyone-was-in-lockdown-india-cleared-infrastructure-projects-in-protected-areas>

¹⁹ Eilperin, J. and Stein, J., 2020. Trump Signs Order To Waive Environmental Reviews For Key Projects. [online] The Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/06/04/trump-sign-order-waive-environmental-reviews-key-projects/> [Accessed 15 June 2020].

(emotionally and physically) to engage and develop an adequate response, and resist effectively²⁰. She argues that such shocks are partly responsible for the prevalence of neoliberal free market policies, as the aftermath of a crisis is characterized by “disaster capitalism.”

While this explanation has been criticised for being a simplification of complex political phenomena, it is clear that governments are ready and willing to take advantage of the crisis to implement unpopular policies²¹. Popular outcry has halted some of these policies, but much more needs to be done.

What can the Church do?

I’m not going to repeat any pithy slogans from twenty years ago, or tell you to switch off the lights or fix leaky taps. These things are important, but they are not enough to stave off environmental destruction. Today, we need a commitment to sustainable architecture and practices, and immediate action.

Although Church services have migrated online to avoid putting the congregation at risk of infection, we cannot forget that churches are also physical buildings. As such, they need electricity, ventilation, and waste disposal systems. Adopting eco-friendly solutions for these problems is a good place to start.

As far as possible, we must avoid installing air-conditioning units in church buildings, especially in larger halls. Even a few hours of use every week leads to a huge amount of energy consumption (not to mention the major dent in the budget). Instead, we can all make it through the two-hour service with regular fans²².

Churches could consider switching to renewable energy, especially in regions with year-round sunshine. It may also be possible for members

²⁰ Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

²¹ Shock therapy also applies to politics and the economy. Thus, in the middle of the pandemic there has been a turn towards authoritarianism in Israel, China, Philippines, Brazil and other countries. Similarly, during a pandemic and nation-wide Black Lives Matter protests, the Trump administration in the US has rolled back protections for transgender patients.

²² Besides, I’ve always felt too cold when the AC is running

of the congregation to purchase solar panels for their homes in bulk. Apart from reducing running costs, this will be an opportunity for churches to lead by example in the neighbourhood. Imagine a row of blue solar panels on a red-roofed church. What better symbol of a church's commitment to the environment? If the objection is that the solar panels will disfigure the church, I would argue that they are at least more eco-friendly than the ugly outdoor AC units which some churches have installed.

Turning to waste disposal, it is about time that we stopped using disposable plates and plastic cups at every Church event. I have seen people throw away their plastic cup, and then take a fresh cup fifteen minutes later. We already have solutions for these problems; they just have to be implemented with enthusiasm. True, after Coronavirus, it seems impossible for the entire congregation to share one or two reusable metal cups for water. Instead, just as we are encouraged to bring our own Bibles, we must all bring our own bottles/reusable cups. It will not take too much time for this to become a habit (and perhaps this habit will spill over into other public spaces).

At some Christian retreats, it is already common for the attendees to wash their own plates after every meal (although I suppose that practice was implemented for the sake of fraternity and reducing labour, rather than environmentalism). With a little change in infrastructure, this could be possible for Church fetes, Christmas dinners etc. I would rather wash plates after a wedding feast than see hundreds of single-use Styrofoam plates stuffed into over-flowing dustbins.

As I mentioned earlier, it is not possible to save the Earth without systemic and ideological change. Apart from being more eco-friendly, we need to align ourselves with environmental movements, both local and at the national level. Churches must reach out to people affected by environmental destruction (people living near landfills, displaced populations) and engage with activists, NGOs and grassroots environmental movements, supporting them financially and offering institutional assistance. Ultimately, we need a broad-based coalition of social actors to bring real change, and we need to recognise our responsibility to help.

On a more ideological level, humanity needs to stop focusing on the money. What else but wealth motivates corporations to turn blind eyes to established laws, or for politicians to happily uproot the results of decades of activism? Instead, we must be neighbourly, generous and empathetic. We've always known it's no use valuing treasures here on Earth²³.

Environmental issues are often juxtaposed with problems of economic development. There is still a vain hope that we can maintain (or improve) our current standards of living while protecting the environment. This is extremely unlikely. Along with our commitment to sustainable development, we need to recognise that material prosperity cannot be created as efficiently if nature is also taken into account. I believe this is a trade-off worth making.



²³ Matthew 6:19-20 “19 Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

A Road Runs Through It...

- Aagney Sail*

You cannot tell a tiger to stay inside the tiger reserve¹. The tiger will roam and explore the forests outside the reserve. So, a buffer² zone gets created around the reserve to ensure that the tigers have inviolate spaces to roam. All's well till now for nature... But, some 55,000 kms of roads³ are cutting India's forests and protected areas (wildlife corridors). And this dear reader is how we will lose the forests and the tigers and the wildlife, if we don't change our ways...

India has the second largest network of roads in the world spanning 5.9 million kilometers⁴. National Highways are a miniscule 1.7% of this network but they carry 40% of the traffic, thereby becoming arteries for development⁵. As on December 2018, 1,29,000 kms length of National Highways were notified and every day 27-35 kms constructed⁶.

We are learning that roads can be built and should be built with care and minimal damage to the trees, forests etc. Last year the Ministry of Roads ordered to avoid roads through forests even if means taking a

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¹ Tiger reserve – an area notified under Section 39V of The Wild Life Protection Act, 1972 i.e. There are at present (as on 25.06.2018) about 50 tiger reserves in the country having a core area of about 40,145.30 sq. kms., a buffer zone of about 32,603.72 sq. kms. (Source: www.protecttiger.nic.in)

² Buffer – A Tiger Reserve consists of a 'Core' or 'Critical Tiger Habitat', which is to be managed as an inviolate area, and a 'Buffer' or Peripheral area immediately abutting a Core area, which may be accorded a lesser degree of habitat protection. This is the typical zonation of a Tiger Reserve.

³ A wild wild road – THE HINDU, 07.09.2019 <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/a-wild-wild-road/article29360610.ece>

⁴ List of countries by road size - From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_road_network_size

⁵ National Highways Authority of India, Ministry of Road, Transport and Highways - 19th Report of the Committee on Public Undertakings (2017-18), Sixteenth Lok Sabha. Presented to Lok Sabha on 02.08.2017 and Laid in Rajya Sabha on 02.08.2017. Downloaded from http://164.100.47.193/lsscommittee/Public%20Undertakings/16_Public_Undertakings_19.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

longer route/bypass⁷. Since 2014, the Environment Ministry had clarified that no new roads shall be proposed through National Parks and Wildlife sanctuaries and no widening / upgradation of existing roads shall take place⁸. So far so good... Contrast this with the 4948 hectares of pristine forest land located in National Parks and Sanctuaries diverted last year between January to June, for linear projects alone which include roads, railways, transmission lines, pipelines etc.⁹

And what about trees cut for roads outside the designated forests... Lets go to the Himalayas to find out!!

This Himalayan epic will widen 900 kms National Highways connecting the four pilgrimages known as Char Dhams sacrificing even the 'tree of the Gods' – Deodar trees among its 29818 trees officially cut. The unofficial count runs to more than 70 to 80 thousands. The epic will dump millions of tonnes of muck from cutting hills in the Holy Ganges and its tributaries. It'll destabilize the fragile Himalayas with its hill cutting, muck dumping, tree cutting activities increasing the risk of landslides, flash floods, seismic activity etc. And all this is orchestrated by cleverly evading the Environmental Laws. Here's how...

In December, 2016 the foundation stone for the *Chardham Mahamarg Vikas Pariyojna* project was laid¹⁰. The Chardham project includes

⁷. para 3.1.5 of TOR of RFP for appointment of Consultancy Services for preparation Of Detailed Project Report (DPR) in respect of National Highways and other centrally sponsored road works issued vide OM no H- 39011/30/2015-P&P(Pt-I) dated 15.02.2019 - <https://morth.nic.in/principles-be-adopted-while-considering-highway-near-or-within-wildlife-sanctuariesnational>

⁸. Guidelines for Roads in Protected Areas (Recommendations of the Sub-Committee of National Board for Wild Life issued by Wildlife Division, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change vide F.No. 6-62/2013 WL, dated 22nd December 2014) – [https://projecttiger.nic.in/WriteReadData/PublicationFile/Compendium%20of%20Guidelines%20Advisories%20and%20Orders\(1\)\(1\).pdf](https://projecttiger.nic.in/WriteReadData/PublicationFile/Compendium%20of%20Guidelines%20Advisories%20and%20Orders(1)(1).pdf)

⁹ High rate of green clearances continue, puts forests and wildlife at risk - <https://india.mongabay.com/2019/12/high-rate-of-green-clearances-continue-puts-forests-and-wildlife-at-risk/>

¹⁰. PM to Lay Foundation Stone of 'Chardham Mahamarg Vikas Pariyojna' - Press Information Bureau Government of India <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=155788>

widening 900 kms of national highways in Uttarakhand at a total cost of Rs. 12,000 crores (NH94 – Rishikesh to Yamunotri, NH108 – Dharasu to Gangotri, NH58 – Rishikesh to Badrinath, NH109 – Rudraprayag to Kedarnath, NH125 – Tanakpur to Pithoragarh)¹¹. The undervalued ecological cost of part of this project came to a mere 29,818 trees spread over 508.6 hectares of forest land¹². The actual ecological impact to the fragile Himalayan ecology was never officially studied. Why? Because the 900 kms of continuous stretch of national highways was fragmented into proposals less than 100 kms each to evade the law¹³. This way the hurdle to obtain an Environment Clearance prior to commencement of work is evaded. Environment Clearance, a monster to many, entails an Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report of the proposed project prepared by scientists and experts which undergoes through a rigorous process of appraisal by an expert committee of the government. This process of appraisal also includes a public hearing wherein the affected villagers are told about the likely impact of the project on their land, the mitigation measures that'll be taken, and the villagers' objections are heard and incorporated¹⁴. But all this legalese melted away in the highway sun.

The law from 2006 till 2013 was that all National Highways expansions greater than 30 kms mandatorily required Environment Clearance¹⁵. However, this limit of 30 kms was increased by the Government to 100kms in August 2013. The recommendation of a Committee setup by the Environment Ministry that the typical length of a highway project in past three years is 100kms so, instead of 30 kms

¹¹. <https://www.euttaranchal.com/uttarakhand/char-dham-project>

¹². Annexure – II of Reply affidavit dated 12.03.18 of Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change (MoEF&CC).

¹³. As per entry 7(f) at column 3 of the Schedule to the Environment Impact Assessment Notification, 2006 ('EIA Notification, 2006' for short) (as amended) projects of expansion of National Highways less than 100 kms are exempt from obtaining prior Environment Clearance.

¹⁴. Para 7 of the EIA Notification, 2006 lays down the various Stages in the Prior Environmental Clearance (EC) Process for New Projects.

¹⁵. Entry 7(f) at column 3 of the Schedule to the EIA Notification, 2006 since date of its coming into force i.e. 14.09.2006 till its amendment on 22.08.2013 exempted projects of expansion of National Highways less than 30 kms are exempt from obtaining prior Environment Clearance.

road length limit a 100kms should be inserted in the law, was accepted by the Government¹⁶. Thence, it has become easy to evade the Environment Clearance by making proposals of highway projects less than 100 kms.

Another climax of this Himalayan epic is that about 25,000 trees were axed without obtaining the required approvals under the forest laws and placing them in public domain¹⁷. The law requires that the permission to divert forest land has to be put in public domain for scrutiny and legal challenge, if any before commencement of work (tree felling)¹⁸. The hilly people of Uttarakhand woke up in December 2017 to a rude shock of cutting of trees on the Chardham route on a massive scale unseen in the past.

The legal battle challenging this Chardham project is another epic which is for another time. By the time the law intervened the axe had fallen on about 30,000 to 40,000 trees officially, millions of tonnes of muck was dumped on hill slopes waiting for rains to wash it down to the streams and tributaries of rivers. In August, 2019 the Supreme Court of India set up a committee of experts to consider the cumulative impact and independent impact of the Chardham project on the entire Himalayan valleys. The task of revision of the entire Chardham project, if found necessary, was also given to this committee apart from recommending mitigation measures where the damage had already been done. The final report of this Committee is much awaited¹⁹.

¹⁶. Report of the High Level Committee constituted by MoEF vide OM No.21-270/2008-IA.III dated 11.12.2012 obtained by the author through Right to Information Act, 2005.

¹⁷. As per pleadings filed in Original Application No. 99/2018 titled 'Citizens for Green Doon & Ors. Vs Union of India & Ors.' before Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal at New Delhi through the author who was counsel for the Applicants.

¹⁸. Guidelines for diversion of forest land for non-forest purpose under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 – Simplified procedure for grant of permission for felling of trees standing on forest land to be diverted for execution of linear projects: reg – F.No.11-306/2014-FC (pt.) dated 28.08.2015 of MoEF&CC – [http://forestsclearance.nic.in/writereaddata/public_display/schemes/1276770977\\$Guidelines_002.pdf](http://forestsclearance.nic.in/writereaddata/public_display/schemes/1276770977$Guidelines_002.pdf)

¹⁹. Supreme Court of India order dated 08.08.2019 passed in Civil Appeal Nos. 8518-8520 of 2018 titled 'Citizens for Green Doon & Ors. Vs Union of India & Ors.' available on <https://main.sci.gov.in/>

Roads through forests don't just kill wild animals, cut trees and become impermeable walls splicing habitats. They disrupt the delicate balance of forests in ways which we humans are only beginning to comprehend. How? Lets come back to where we started – the tiger...Genetic data collected from 9 tiger reserves in central India in 2018 showed that if fragmentation of tiger landscapes and intrusions like roads, human settlements continue at the current pace the genetic variability would decrease by 50% in the next century and small tiger reserves / habitats will have a high risk of local extinction²⁰.

Now where do we go from here dear reader... how do I conclude... is it going to add to the never ending 'roads vs tigers', 'tribals vs tigers', 'development vs forests' debate ... OR are you and I going to secure for our children and grandchildren a beautiful exquisite world, full of tigers, forests, deodar trees, the hills... I end here with this prayer for change and action.



²⁰. Joshi A, Vaidyanathan S, Mondol S, Edgaonkar A, Ramakrishnan U (2013) Connectivity of Tiger (*Panthera tigris*) Populations in the Human-Influenced Forest Mosaic of Central India. PLoS One 8: e77980 - <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0077980>

Eco-Ministry of CSI

- Mathew Koshy Punnackad*

Today most Churches have programmes related to ecological concerns even though ecology is not in the mission mandate of these Churches. Why it is not in the Mission Mandate of the Churches is a very valid question. To find the answer for this, we have to go back to the history of the early theological formation. In the Greek view, the soul was said to be the highest among the created order. It finds its true destiny by escaping from nature, creation and the world. The created world is purely material and fleshly, and a full expression of evil¹.

St. Augustine (354 –430 AD)² was the most significant Christian thinker after St. Paul. Following his baptism and conversion to Christianity in 386, Augustine developed his approach to philosophy and theology, accommodating a variety of methods and perspectives. He was the bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa and is viewed as one of the most important Church Fathers³ of the Latin Church. His arguments for the existence of the soul are tightly reasoned and he draws heavily from Plato. He concludes that the soul is immortal and capable of intelligent thought. His conclusion that the soul exists separate from the body and only inhabits it temporarily and leaves at the time of death is a crucial component of Christian thought. We are eternal, he says, the body is not. Luther, Barth and Bultmann held somewhat similar positions.⁴

Most of the nineteenth century evangelicals took this dualistic position. The evangelicals recognised God's revelation only in Jesus Christ, not in the entire creation of God. One can know God only through Jesus Christ but not through creation. The teaching of heaven and hell further reinforced negligence towards and the undermining of

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¹ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise Dare to care for God's world*, Inter-varsity press, 2008 p14

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Augustine>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Fathers#Latin_Fathers

⁴ Wati Longchar & David Reichardt, *Cross cultural Eco-theology in an Indian Ocean Context*, ISPCK 2018 pp 5-24

God's creation. Evangelicals believed that the world is coming to an end, all that is material will be destroyed, but only the souls will be saved and live eternally in heaven; other materials will perish. This doctrine made people think 'This world is not our home. We are just passengers'.

Consequently, if this world is not our home, why should we take care of it? Because of their great interest in the uniqueness of God's action in history for human redemption, they were indifferent to the rest of creation. Serious attention was not given to creation theology as they did not face an ecological crisis as we do today.

A new turn in theological thinking came with the articles of Lynn white and the book of Rachel Carson. It is a fact we need to acknowledge that the dominant Christian theologies have been too anthropocentric, hierarchical, mechanistic and dualistic in their approach and content. The Judeo-Christian tradition bears to a certain degree the responsibility for today's ecological destruction. But there is no doubt that Christians have for too long neglected the theme of creation in their theological reflection and teaching, and have accepted values and perspectives which are foreign to the Biblical tradition. They have uncritically supported the modern domination of nature. The Bible is clear in pointing out that we are not merely spirits or souls, and that our material bodies are also of vital importance. You will not find a single New Testament passage that speaks about 'saving souls', because Jesus was not interested in disembodied souls⁵.

The CSI heard the call of the earth in 1992. The CSI accepted caring for life on earth as a spiritual commitment. The CSI Synod instituted a committee for ecological concerns in 1992. Later the CSI incorporated ecological concerns in its constitution. The CSI is the only Church in India which mentioned Ecological Concerns as a mission in its constitution and Mission statement. The Church of South India recognizes that God's mission has various dimensions. The constitution of the CSI specifies the mission of the Church - 1) Proclamation of the Gospel 2) Nurturing the people of God, 3) service 4) establish justice in society 5) the stewardship of creation. In their constitution, it is written "The Church seeks to create awareness

⁵ Dave bookless, Planetwise Dare to care for God's world, Inter-varsity press,p14 2008

among all people about environmental and ecological concerns and thereby to care for God's creation. It endeavours to encourage people to refrain from excessive exploitation of nature's resources and to strive to keep the earth a habitable place for the present as well as future generations."⁶

The Church of South India has been educating the values of sustainability through 94 Aided degree colleges, 341 High/Higher Schools, 1704 Primary Schools, 47 Technical Institutions 24 Para Medical Institutions 14 Professional Institutions 50 Hospital and Medical Centres and 343 Hostels. It aims to develop communities with the values of sustainability – in their personal lives and within their community⁷. The CSI brought out a green protocol with 12 points to be 8-9 followed in the life and ministry of the Churches⁸.

The programmes of the Church of South India, Department of Ecological Concerns help to empower congregations to take a prophetic stand against Climate injustice and support any development that fulfils the requirement of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. The Department focuses on educating the sustainable development goals of UN through Eco-Ministry, campaigns for Climate Justice ministry, Green Protocol and Green School Programme⁹.

The CSI Department of Ecological Concerns promotes sustainable agriculture by encouraging churches to set apart a Sunday to honour local farmers, encouraging people to make vegetable gardens and give awareness about the farming methods using grow bags and also on the land, thus promoting organic cultivation and bee-keeping in the farms for facilitating better cross-pollination and livelihood.

The Green School Programme (GSP) which the CSI Synod Department of Ecological Concerns initiated in 2015, aims to develop

⁶ CSI Constitution

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OR5Cg637CsY>

⁸ Green Protocol –Guidelines <http://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/archives/9>;
Green Protocol for CSI Weddings <http://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/archives/8>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lteiAOKJx-U>

students, schools and communities with the values and the motivation to take action for sustainability – in their personal lives, within their community, build awareness and knowledge of sustainability issues but also to develop students and schools that can think critically, innovate and provide solutions towards more sustainable patterns of living. In GSP, students are learning sustainable development issues, such as climate change and biodiversity. Green Clergy and Green teachers are working as facilitators in moulding the future generations. Environmental audit of the Schools by the students helped the schools in sound environmental management. The Green School Programme (GSP) empowered students to use natural resources responsibly and efficiently and practice effective and sustainable methods that will become a way of life. The schools that use little water, optimise energy efficiency, minimise waste-generation, catch and recycle water and provide a healthier space for their students as compared to a conventional building. Students eating habits also changed a lot. Instead of mugging up the subject, students are enjoying studying and memorising. The teaching became student-centred. Hidden talents of the students are brought out. Teachers became facilitators. The Academic results of the schools that participated in the Green School programme have improved a lot¹⁰.

The Department is promoting the harvesting of rainwater from the rooftops and make pits on the land, for water recharging. In 2014, 2500 rainwater harvesting pits were dug. The Department is propagating a plant called Vetiver, to enhance groundwater recharge, avoid soil erosion, reduce Coliform bacteria in water, purification of water, stabilise river banks and roads and reduce global warming.

¹⁰ <http://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/archives;>

CMSLP School, Ennooramvayal, Pathanamthitta <https://youtu.be/KmVb0lCGgBc>;

Noyes School, Madurai <https://youtu.be/rvtttdSanG10>;

CSI Girls Higher Secondary School, Pasumalai, Madurai <https://youtu.be/ABH04yYkVas>;

OCPM School, Madurai <https://youtu.be/ycMZAqDBgg8>;

CMS High School, Mundakayam https://youtu.be/5ch_KW9vno;

The Edwin Centre CSI School and Home in Satchiyapuram, Madurai <https://youtu.be/264yeF2-D0s>;

Malabar Christian College, Calicut <https://youtu.be/TpJSj9emWhg>;

Bishop Heber College, Trichy <https://youtu.be/feqOb0xGuNg>;

CMS College, Kottayam <https://youtu.be/rq1kJsZfiw>;

Ms SUNITA NARAIN - Key Note Address https://www.youtube.com/watch?V=NMIO4SkLiAY&feature=emb_logo

The CSI is promoting the use of LED light system, Solar energy, biogas wherever possible. The CSI Coimbatore, Madras and Madhya Kerala Dioceses have installed solar plants of 50 KW in their diocesan offices. The Synod office installed 100KW Solar panels and Sewage treatment equipment. Diocesan offices, Parsonages, institutions and houses are now tapping solar energy.

Regarding waste management, the slogan is to reduce, reuse and recycle waste. The Department discourages the burning of plastic materials which produce a carcinogenic substance called dioxin. Instead of giving water in plastic bottles, water is served in glasses or steel tumblers. Lenten Season 2019, the Moderator of the CSI Synod issued a pastoral letter. "If we live a life committed to avoiding all kinds of disposable plastics, the manufacturers would be forced to avoid all disposable plastics, and thus we would be contributing towards a lesser carbon footprint. If lent is a time to reflect on how to foster life, rather than destroying life, it is our spiritual commitment to avoid plastics since it 'kills' life. As I hope that this year's lent would be a meaningful time to reflect, repent, reorient and rededicate our lives to accomplish God's will, I ardently pray that God would enable all of us to continue our life in an eco-spiritual pilgrimage fighting against all causes of ecological catastrophes, particularly the disposable plastic catastrophe. To begin with, let us during this Lenten season avoid all disposable plastics, especially flex, plastic bottles, cups and plates, and instead use cloth banners, steel plates and glasses. For a total ban of disposable plastics, we urge the Central Government to formulate strict laws and ensure the systematic and strong implementation of their pledge to ban disposable plastic materials"¹¹.

The CSI does believe that the present development paradigm promoted by the 'developed' countries is responsible for the global ecological crisis, and thus 'Climate Injustice'. The 'developed' countries have to change their present development paradigm which exploits the fossil fuels resulting in Climate change. Those who are responsible for climate change should change their development paradigm and lifestyle. Rich countries have to compensate for the damage caused to developing countries. As developing nations are struggling on the

¹¹ GREEN CONFESSIONS' A LENTEN CALL FOR A DISPOSABLE PLASTIC-FREE WORLD CIRCULAR BY THE MODERATOR Most Rev. THOMAS K. OOMMEN <http://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/archives/8>

development ladder, rich countries should write off the debts of developing countries. The developed countries should transfer their technical knowledge to the developing countries. The CSI Synod Department of Ecological Concerns believes in the proverb 'Think Globally and act locally'. Hence, the CSI requests all its members to do their best to mitigate global warming. Lenten season 2018, the Moderator of the CSI issued a pastoral letter. "'Carbon fast' challenges us to look at our daily actions, to reflect on how they impact on the environment. It challenges us to take some small steps, some of which will reduce our carbon dioxide output while others will help the environment for a more sustainable world. In the process, we may come to rediscover a different relationship with God, with His Creation and with one another. Most of the CSI Congregations belong to the communities that are vulnerable to Climate Change. The Department is creating awareness on 'Climate Justice' at the congregational level in these dioceses.

The CSI is inspiring the congregations to discern climate justice as an integral part of the churches' public witness today. "We hope that the congregations would be equipped to involve in saving creation, and those whose life and livelihood are under threat. This 'Carbon Fast' shall provide myriad ways for our congregations to get involved in enhancing climate justice. Join the Carbon Fast because you can change the world a bit in 40 days, but more importantly, you could change yourself a lot! Look back over the year and observe how much petrol we used, how much we spent. Reflect on how we have treated the environment. Commit ourselves to living simply during Lent, with simple food, less travel and sharing with those in need. Practice effective waste management; Reduce, Re-use, Refuse and Recycle waste. Plant saplings and nurture them since trees can directly remove carbon dioxide and store it as wood and foliage. Reduce energy used for light, power and transport and thus, reduce emissions. Conserve water, knowing that water is a divine blessing to be treasured, to be shared with all creations, to be protected for the future generations. Join in the struggles by those fighting for life and livelihood, exploited through ecological injustice"¹².

¹² Moderator of the Church of South India Encourages Christians for a Carbon Fast During this Lenten Season <http://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/archives/20>

The Church of South India, Department of Ecological Concerns is encouraging people to plant a sapling on the Church Campus during important functions and also planting a tree commemorating the visit of prominent personalities. After Wedding Services, the newly wedded couple can plant fruit-bearing saplings¹³. Encourage planting of fruit-bearing plants in public places which can be used by other creatures of that area. The CSI has been promoting biodiversity. Our slogan is "Plant fruit-bearing plants outside your boundaries and nurture it", highlighting our spirituality of caring for all and ensuring that the saplings planted are watered and manured well. Welcome the guests not with bouquets or shawls, but with a sapling.

The CSI is promoting the values of sustainability in all our development projects. Living sustainably is about doing more and better with less. The well-being of humanity, the environment, and the functioning of the economy, all ultimately depend on the responsible management of the planet's natural resources. Christian ethics also goes a long way in cultivating sustainable lifestyles. The right place to teach the importance of sustainability is school. Hence the CSI Synod Department of Ecological Concerns promotes Green School Programme. A clergy is an influential person in a village. Every week he/she addresses hundreds of people in different ways. The Department published twenty-one Eco theological books and environmental storybooks as resource books for Clergy and teachers¹⁴. Through this, the Church of South India is giving training and resource materials to Clergy and Teachers, thus making them Green Clergy and Green Teachers. Green Clergy and Teachers are moulding the future generation with sustainable values.

UNDP has honoured the ecological contributions and long-term commitment of the CSI and we were privileged to receive the award from Mr. Baan Ki Moon, Secretary-General of UN on 3rd November 2009. The Hon. director of CSI Department of Ecological Concerns has been invited by UNEP to address the Faith for Earth in United Nations fourth Environment Assembly held at Nairobi from 10th to 15th March 2019.

¹³ Green Protocol for CSI Weddings <http://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/archives/8>

¹⁴ <http://ecologicalconcerns.csi1947.com/resources>

The CSI Department of Ecological Concerns is working in the community with the support and cooperation of local bodies, government agencies, other faith groups and NGOs. Different Departments of Church of South India, Youth, Seva, Dalit and Adivasi Concerns and Women's fellowship are also involved in the eco-educational work in other areas. The Mission of the Church is about the proclamation of the kingdom of God, which has a social, political, ecological and economic dimension. A great responsibility rests on the Church to deepen the awareness of churchgoers to what the Bible says about social injustice. With all the issues raised by Amos regarding the need for social action, believers need to remember that prayer combined with the proper exegesis of scripture will help them to gain a comprehensive knowledge of God's will for personal, social, and governmental reform. The Church has also been called to faithfully speak the truth and to "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute; Defend the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31:8) The CSI is deeply concerned that the poor and vulnerable in our country and around the world will have little or no voice in this vital discussion. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). We have to build an economy that will support, not undermine, future generations. It is not only the responsibility of the respective union and state governments but also of the citizens to engage in efforts to establish climate justice. We know the kind of restructuring that is needed. To put it in the simplest of terms, the fossil-fuel-based, automobile-centered, throwaway economy is not a viable model for the world. The alternative is a solar/hydrogen energy economy, an urban transport system that is centred on advanced – design public rail systems and a comprehensive reuse/recycle economy. The cities are to be designed for people and not for cars. We have to build an economy that will support, not undermine, the future generations.



Ministry in the Context of the Corona Virus Pandemic

- Roger Gaikwad*

“I am just waiting for Covid-19 to be over so that I can go out and preach the gospel and do faith-healing!” says a Christian minister. You might have seen this clip posted in one of your WhatsApp groups. The statement of the Christian minister is indeed an irony. During the Corona Virus pandemic and the government restrictions even his ministry is suffering from a Lockdown. Moreover this faith healer is not able to heal people of the Corona Virus affliction!

Be Real: The pandemic is here to stay!

Therefore let us be realistic. Let us realize that the Corona Virus is here to stay with us. There are other viruses also in our region. Just a month ago, swine flu virus adversely affected parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Northern Assam. We keep on experiencing periods of avian flu virus causing havoc among birds, but taking human lives as well. In April 2020 the Ebola virus (which spreads through animal or insect bites or stings, blood products, saliva, and touching of contaminated surfaces) has also erupted in the Democratic Republic of Congo. And let us not forget that HIV and AIDS is still around. The virus can be transmitted through contact with infected blood, semen and vaginal fluids. A scientist is now warning us about the possibility of an assault from an apocalyptic virus from commercial chicken farms, which would be deadlier than the Corona virus and wipe out half the world's population.

Draw upon God's Grace!

So the Corona Virus is here to stay along with other viruses. How ardently we have been praying that God would remove this virus from our midst. It is like a thorn in the flesh of all humanity! Remember Paul suffered individually from some thorn in the flesh (2 Cor.12:7). Three times he besought the Lord to take it away from him. However God did not remove the thorn, but assured Paul saying, “My grace is sufficient for you.” (2 Cor.12:8). Similarly in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus

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prayed three times that the cup of suffering (the Cross) pass away from him (Matt.26:39-44). In that case too, the prayer was not answered. The cup remained, but there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him to face the cross.(Luke 22:43).

Be Responsible!

Therefore while we pray that we would find a vaccine to help us ward off the destructive effects of the virus, remember the virus would still be around. While we depend on God's grace to help us, we also need to live responsibly in the present pandemic situation. Let us not make any claims that the virus will not affect Christians who assemble together to pray, even if they do not wear face masks, do not follow sanitary requirements, and do not practice physical distancing. Rather as responsible ministers let us encourage and teach our church members to follow all the precautionary measures related to defending ourselves from the virus. Many of us in urban set-ups have resorted to conducting on-line worship services, online counselling, online Vacation Bible School and so on. In some cases, ministers have used a mobile altar and pulpit. Instead of the people coming in big numbers to the worship place, ministers have set up mobile altars cum pulpits, and gone to localities where their congregation members live and conducted services while the people participated from their respective homes, apartments, balconies and compound spaces. In some rural places, presbyters have conducted slam group/family cottage meetings rather than having the whole congregation assembling in the church building. Also let us keep in mind that all the SOPs that have been laid down for assembling together for worship from 8th June 2020, will make our worship a tedious exercise; there will be no joy of meaningful congregational worship.

Be careful about the theology of your message!

Coronavirus as Satan?

Another important concern related to ministry in the context of the corona virus pandemic is the message of our preaching. Some of us have been influenced by slogans such as "War against Corona!", "Nation battling corona virus" and so on. In such slogans the virus is considered to be an enemy, a hostile force which is causing widespread harm and destruction. In our theological language the corona virus is considered to be Satan, who is engaged in a war to destroy humans. One book being sold by Amazon is titled, "Jesus versus Satan: the

origins of Coronavirus.” The leader of a South Korean Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony declared in February 2020, “This disease case is seen as the devil’s deed to stop the rapid growth of Shincheonji.” We have heard stories of how some church leaders have attempted to exorcize satanic corona virus by declaring during their gatherings, “I command you in the name of Jesus: Corona go!” The Corona Virus, my friends is the product of our own human making. Our irresponsible life styles, our commercialized consumerism, our political-economic ideologies, our scientific experiments, our biological warfare and so on are responsible for the new viruses and diseases which are spreading all over the earth. The corona virus is not a person intent upon deliberately harming humans. The virus is caused by our irresponsible living.

Coronavirus as God’s Curse?

There is another theological perspective which we should be wary of. The Corona Virus Pandemic is considered to be the curse of God. It is akin to the plagues that God subjected the Egyptians to, when the Hebrew people were unjustly and cruelly oppressed. Steven Andrew, pastor of the USA Christian church in San Jose (CA) has declared, “Our safety is at stake since national disobedience of God’s laws brings dangers and disease, such as coronavirus...” Rick Wiles a Florida minister stated, “My spirit bears witness that this is a plague that is coming on earth...” These perspectives assert that such a plague is part of the “end times,” a period of tribulations that precedes the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Should sufferings be interpreted as God’s curse? In John 9:2-3 when they come across a person born blind, the disciples ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Jesus made the disciples understand that neither the man nor his parents were responsible for the natural disability and therefore it could not be considered as a curse or punishment of God. When Job was afflicted with sores all over his body (Job.2:7-8) his three counsellor friends tried to convince him that his suffering was the result of his sin thereby implying that it was a curse of God. Job could not accept this judgement of his three counsellor friends. We also ought to be careful in articulating such a perspective with regard to the coronavirus which people are suffering from.

Preach the God of Compassion!

Rather at times such as this, we as ministers have to preach about compassion. The word ‘compassion’ is derived from a Latin expression which means “to suffer with.” God is suffering with all creation as it goes through the sufferings caused by the coronavirus and other problems created by us with our un-ecological lifestyles and pursuits. When Jesus was trying to find some quiet space for the disciples and himself, the crowd followed him there as well and so Matt.14:14 tells us that when Jesus saw the great throng he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. Matt. 9:36 states that when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. As St. Augustine put it, “What is compassion but a kind of fellow feeling in our hearts for another’s misery, which compels us to come to his help by every means in our power?” Even the cross can be seen as evidence of compassion, when Jesus suffers with all victims of injustice and cruelty in the world, absorbing the evil and releasing new life.

Compassion implies Mission

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the suffering of the poor, particularly of unorganized labour, migrants who have left their homes and travelled far and wide for earning their daily bread. The pandemic has left them helpless: loss of jobs, no shelter, inadequate protection from the virus, lack of food, and no proper facilities for them to return home. We have tended to be carried away with the middle class selfish ideology, “Stay home! Stay safe!” As ministers we need to join our hands with those engaged in relief and rehabilitation work.

Express compassionate solidarity!

In Deut.15:11 God says, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.” In Deut.24:14 God goes on to say: “You shall not withhold the wages of the poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or foreigners who reside in your land in one of your towns.” James 2:15-16 asserts: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

Avail all possible help for those in need!

As facilitators of help and support, ministers should do their best to ensure that the poor, the needy, the hungry, and the jobless get the

benefit of whatever welfare schemes the governments are announcing: The Jan Dhana Scheme for women account holders by which cash should be deposited in their accounts; The Ujwala Scheme by which free LPG cylinders are made available to BPL families; The relief rations of food under the Pradhan Mantri Kalyan Scheme; the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Scheme; and so on. We should ensure that the schemes are implemented and that too justly. Remember how Moses in his time pleaded with Pharaoh's government for better treatment of the people.

Encourage the church to be a giving church!

During times of distress, people tend to be lost in self-pity. As ministers we need to inculcate the spirit of grateful giving. Jesus has given us the exemplary model of the widow who gave her two coins as a thanks offering to the Lord. Remember that she was a widow. Remember that she was poor. Yet she gave! The church in Mizoram went through difficult times in the middle of the twentieth century because of the devastating famine caused by the flowering of bamboos and the rapid multiplication of rodents who consumed whatever food they could get their mouths too. This gave rise to the movement for justice and welfare for the people. The Central Government came down harshly on the movement and imposed hardships on the people in the name of ensuring peace in the land. The church went through difficult times but the church members still gave to the Lord whatever they could. Today in the context of Coronavirus pandemic, the churches in Mizoram have voluntarily come forward to offer quarantine hospitality for persons in their respective pastorate church halls, apart from generous donations to the government in addressing the challenges of the pandemic.

Cultivate ecological living!

Another important ministry which church leaders have to seriously engage in is the nurturing and encouragement of ecological living. Much of the problems which we are facing today are arising because of our un-ecological living. Our consumerist life-styles are leading to the rapid depletion of non-renewable natural resources. The motive of corporate businesses to maximize profit makes them use extractive technologies which are leading to greenhouse emissions; air, water and land pollution; and, loss of bio-diversity thereby posing threats to human health, environment and ecological balance. Therefore we have viruses, global warming, cyclones, earthquakes, floods, acid

rain, expansion of deserts and so on. While the rich are so self-concerned about their comforts and pleasures at the cost of the suffering of the masses including mother earth, little do they realize that eventually they too will perish because of their life-styles and technologies. They are like the proverbial man cutting the branch of which he himself is seated!

Actualize the Nazareth Manifesto!

Therefore the Nazareth Manifesto of Jesus (Luke 4:18-19) once again comes to us as our manifesto for ministry in our times:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

● ● ●

Desiderata

- Arun Kumar Wesley*

In the present situation that we are in, the pandemic has affected all of us – in various ways. Some are affected physically, and some mentally, while others are suspected to be and may be carriers; many others have the risk of getting affected in every other way by way of physical touch or in contact with others affected or things in touch with the affected and of course the medical personnel who are at risk in every corner. In this traumatic situation, while maintaining physical distance, wearing masks and hand washing are the immediate and the handy precautions one can take, the very feeling of being affected unseen and in invisible manner creates panic among all.

In this the covid 19 has been an equaliser – affecting high and low, the rich and the poor and so on, at will. It is still an equaliser with a caveat as some affected can get better treatment than others by virtue of being the political class, rich and the affluent etc. As such the virus has put everyone at risk, and the people are at a loss – without a cure or vaccine, who had so far felt that they were all sufficient and independent, depending on their prowess of being logical, rational and scientific etc. This all sufficient sense of independence was being tested now by this virus.

In this situation one has to look for this self sufficiency in one's self by one's own efforts if it is still possible, or with some external help – seeking support of others or with some external power or divine power. Or one has to bridge that confidence in one with the external help as with divine grace and build up that self sufficiency.

It sounded appropriate that the prime minister at this time advocated building up confidence in terms of *Atmanirbhar* to address the present situation of the virus and the situation that it has brought one into. Would that be the way one can go? Can this remedy the lack of healthcare facilities around, the lack of concern for the people in distress as the migrant labourers, the displaced the poor and the jobless etc? Can this confidence come out of the dire straits one is in? Is that

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possible with much rhetoric and oratory that is not in touch with reality? Is that an individualistic approach of Karma and conscience?

Even for this move, as with *Arogya Setu*, one has to bridge the polarities of life and living as it were in the light of Covid 19 attack – bridge the bravado of one’s self sufficiency with the reality of dependency (on the assurances of our leaders or medical dons; divine grace; the economists etc) or boost one’s morale with *Mann Ki Baat* admonitions of being ‘careful as the nations get unlocked in stages;’ read the ‘Letter to the Nation’ or the ‘Letter to the Mother Goddess’?

In this situation, the following poem makes sense to give direction to our move in addressing the reality – to be humble and surrender one to the higher powers; listening to others; to speak the truth and be at peace.... living a balanced life – of reason and faith. One can also add that with this, one needs to be compassionate with the needy and the marginalised to help succour their misery with empathy and concern.

This poem was written by Max Ehrmann to his daughter way back in 1927, Though it was written long ago in a different context, it seems appropriate in our situation in a way. I give below the full text of the poem *Desiderata* (plural of *desideratum*, Latin for “things required”) as it is:

Desiderata

GO PLACIDLY amid the noise and the haste,
and remember what peace there may be in
silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be
on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to
others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too
have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are
vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself
with others, you may become vain or bitter, for
always there will be greater and lesser persons
than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.



Child Labour...Some Concerns

*-Rajesh Jadhav**

Children have worked for as long as families have needed all hands to pitch in. Beyond defining work as a means of survival, however, defining what work is appropriate for children and what (if anything) to do about inappropriate work involves more complex judgments especially for firms doing business in the global economy.

This write up will explore the business economics of child labour in few areas. The first area outlines three dimensions of business linked directly and indirectly to child labour. The second area discusses the basic question that must be answered before any further discussion begins: What is child labour? Differentiating between child work and “child labour” is key to any assessment of the scope of the problem as well as appropriate responses. It will also discuss the basic economics of child labour and some of the ways in which economic theory fails to account for the actual political economy of child labour. The next section presents examples of industries and firms that have been accused of using, or benefiting from, child labour, and how some have responded to the criticism. This section will draw from the previous discussions to assess trade and child labour.

First and foremost, we need to understand that not all work done by children should be classified as child labour or targeted for elimination. Whether or not particular forms of “work” can be called “child labour” depends on the child’s age, the type and hours of work performed, the conditions under which it is performed and the objectives pursued by individual countries. Child and adolescent participation in work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling, is generally regarded as being something positive. This includes activities such as helping their parents around the home, assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays. These kinds of activities contribute to children’s development and to the welfare of their families; they provide them with skills and experience, and help to prepare them to be productive members of society during their adult life.

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The term “child labour” is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children and interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. For instance all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances, the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties, work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. The worst forms of child labour involve children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities often at a very early age.

Child labour has been a concern of the formal, industrial economy since the beginning of the Industrial Age. By the end of World War II, however, most developed countries had passed laws against child labour, at least in industries. Child labour had declined in developed countries, due to a combination of several factors. These include the increasing sophistication of technology in the workplace (reducing the demand for low-skilled workers), greater productivity and consequently higher wages (reducing the need to send children to work instead of school) and higher school attendance (reducing the supply of child labour).

Child labour re-emerged as a public concern in the 1990s and 2000. This time, worry was expressed across a broad spectrum of opinions from United Nations agencies, to Churches, non-governmental organizations, educators, social workers, trade unions, cause driven investors, and the news media that “globalization” was increasing the incidence of child labour. In this context, “child labour” meant more than children working in an industry. “Child labour” is now understood

to mean children working in both the formal and informal economic sectors, in legal work and illegal occupations such as bonded labour, slavery, soldiering, and prostitution. That poses a new question: What kind of “child labour” should be of concern to national or international businesses?

From the disparate groups mentioned above has emerged a global campaign to eradicate child labour. Our understanding should involve an effort to ban international trade goods made by children. This linkage between child labour and trade makes child labour at least an indirect concern for many businesses. Even if firms do not themselves employ children, they operate within a global system of commerce, manufacturing, procurement and trade that in part does.

The International Labour Organization estimates that 250 million children, around the world, between the ages of five and fourteen are working, about 120 million of them full-time. Some of these children work in factories and other workplaces in the formal economy, but the vast majority work in informal enterprises, agriculture and in homes. International firms are part of this economy not only in terms of hiring child labourers, but also in buying goods or services from children or from companies that make such purchases. International business has come under increased pressure from social activists, trade unions and others to help find new solutions to end the exploitation of children and help them get the education and training they need to become meaningful citizens. Companies in the spotlight include respected multinational corporations as well as many other lesser known businesses.

I think there are many ways of dealing with this issue.

There is vigorous work to be done in this regard and the solutions vary from country to country, as well as among sectors within countries. A concerted effort from all walks of life and intervention from government including the Churches is the need of the hour.



BIBLE STUDY

Creation Challenges the Creatures: A revisit to Psalm.19.1-6

People try to ascribe different levels and phases of knowledge and wisdom according to their own life experiences in the universe, where human beings coexist with the rest of creation. The whole creation continues to be a mystery. Science and technology, faith and religion, and history and tradition have significant roles in understanding the world. Currently, this generation is witnessing a great pandemic, COVID 19, and this has become a great challenge to the life of human beings. However, the lockdown declared by the authorities provides an opportunity for the creation to regain its sustainability. In such a context, a revisit to the sustaining power of the cosmic elements and the presence of those unheard voices which continue to carry out its functions incessantly proclaims the incomprehensibility of God. The Psalmist provides a great picture of God and God's creation which are beyond human comprehensibility. The power and action of God is incomprehensible to human beings and the Psalmist presents a concise articulation. The Psalmist considers the creation, acknowledges the visibility of God's glory, and accepts the invisible voice of creation which continues to glorify God and perform the assigned tasks unconditionally.

Literary Genre of the Psalm

Psalm¹ 19.1-6 is a hymn of nature² and the Psalmist praises God's work during creation. This Psalm does not follow the pattern of other hymns, so Kraus calls it as a song of Praise.³ It is identified as a hymn of praise of Yahweh⁴ directed at nature and probably it can be an adaptation from an ancient Canaanite hymn of the sun for the purpose of

¹ Psalm 19 is a fusion of two independent psalms: Ps. 19.1-6 is a Creation or Nature Psalm and Ps.19.7- 14 is a Torah or Wisdom Psalm. This Psalm proclaims the idea that the voice of God can be heard through the creation and through the Law.

² Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 268.

³ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, 268.

⁴ The English translation of the divine name 'Yahweh' is 'Lord,' but I have retained the Hebrew term 'Yahweh.' I have used the divine names God and Yahweh in this article to represent the two different theological features and the literary patterns.

Yahwistic praise.⁵ This Psalm is identified as a morning hymn of praise for the glory of God as witnessed by heaven and sun.⁶ This psalm can also be considered as a theological commentary⁷, in which the creation proclaims in silence the great creative power of God. The major common themes for the hymns of praise are Yahweh as creator, king, liberator and so on, and here the theme is ‘Yahweh the creator.’

The Setting of the Text

When the New Year Festival was celebrated in the life of ancient Israel, this Psalm was used as a praise.⁸ In such a context of worship, worshippers affirm God as creator. It could have been a yearly practice. But it could also be a morning hymn for any other day because each day can be a ‘new creation’ and the Psalmist reaffirms the cycle of a day over that of a year (vs.2). This song has a cultic tone; therefore it is used in the context of worship.⁹ Origin of the Psalm is ascribed to the pre-exilic period,¹⁰ where the Psalmist artistically presents the incomprehensibility of Yahweh revealed in creation.

Exposition of the Text

In the Hebrew poetry, a hymn always starts with a summon to raise a song of praise to Yahweh and it is absent in this psalm. It is an affirmation that the starting of this Psalm is not intended to praise God in a particular time. Intentional absence of the summon rhetoric affirms the incomprehensibility and inestimable time and power of God in creation. From the time of creation without ceasing, creation keeps praising God. This Psalm has two sections: Song of praise of creation (19.1-4b) and the Hymn in praise of the sun (19.4c-6). The whole creation is serving the Supreme Being and the duty is to praise God and be a vehicle of God’s revelation.

⁵ Mitchell Dahood, Psalms I 1-50, *The Anchor Bible*, (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 121.

⁶ C. A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol. I*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1906), 162.

⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50, Word Biblical Commentary*, (Texas: Word, 1993), 179.

⁸ Elmer A. Leslie, *The Psalms*, (New York: Cokesbury, 1949), 134.

⁹ If an analysis is done for Ps 19 as a single unit, it helps the reader or the worshipper to visualize the glory of Yahweh in the Torah transcending God’s glory in the heavens.

¹⁰ W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*, (New York: Alba, 1974), 168.

Song of Praise of Creation (Verses 1-4b)

Rhetoric of Stewardship: Heaven and Firmament (Verse 1)

Heavens and firmament appear as live powers that declare and proclaim the glory of God. Heavens and firmament are poetic synonyms and they are cosmological concepts. The heavenly area praises God for the glory and for the handiwork. The divine (glory) and the anthropomorphic (handiwork) natures of God are reflected in this verse at once. The glory of God is commonly used in the Old Testament to indicate ‘something that may be experienced in a striking way.’ It is like theophany (presence of God). This verse calls the reader’s attention to God who is enthroned above the heavens (Ps.29.9, 10), who is present in Zion and whose brilliant light fills all the land (Isa.6.3). Therefore, this hymn of praise is presenting Yahweh’s glory in Yahweh’s appearances and in Yahweh’s creation. In short, the glory which Yahweh has granted the creation is an image of Yahweh’s own glory, and that is reflected back.

For an artistic writer and for the reader the very existence of nature itself is an affirmation and witness to Yahweh’s glory. The Psalmist specifically projects the heavens and firmament of the universe. In the Hebrew language the word used for heavens is a noun dual form and not a singular form. Heavens is personified and is understood as having allusion to the divine beings who serve Yahweh, and in reality, a service to the whole creation which can be termed as stewardship. The power and majesty of Yahweh is manifested in nature and in history. God’s handiwork refers to God’s creative power understood by watching the stars, moon, sun, and the world. Probably firmament is the canopy of the earth or sky. The intensifying action word used in the Hebrew language is *Piel* (Participle form and translated as indeed declaring or indeed one who declares) and the causative action word *Hiphil* (Participle form; and is translated as cause to proclaim or one who proclaim) affirms the never ceasing work of God’s creation. The interminable works of God’s creation is emphasized by these usages. Rhetoric of Silence (Unheard voice): Pours Forth and Declare ((Verse 2-4b)

The words ‘pours forth’ and ‘declare’ denote ecstatic, bubbling, excited speech. This proclamation is the hymn of the heavens. The

Psalmist does not mention it as singing or praising.¹¹ It is a singular message which is transmitted in the heavenly world. The words ‘speech’ and ‘knowledge’ are employed to present the real message of the invisible and unheard voice of God’s creation. The narration of the heavens is word and it entails the theological knowledge. But on the earth the priestly tradition would project the theological creation tradition. Knowledge about the Creator and God’s handiwork is transmitted by the heavenly powers. This process is like two choruses taking turns, both day and night. This chain of transmission at work is equally mysterious and marvelous.¹² Here the Psalmist has transferred the hymnic and didactic tradition of creation of the priestly circles of Israel to the heavenly realm. It can also be understood as the music of spheres. The invisible and unheard voices of the heavens, firmament, day and night are self-accompaniments to the divine self-revelation. These are all media of revelation and they proclaim the mystery of creation. Scholars opine that the heavens proclaim God’s righteousness and this action calls the humanity to communicate this message.

‘Day and night’ is a word-pair which communicates the ongoing nature of the universe and it conveys God’s glory. The unheard rhetoric witnesses the eloquent testimony of the day and night bubbled forth at every crack and cranny of the universe. The very existence of day and night in the form in which they function itself is the proclamation of Yahweh. Each day is bringing its glory and has never been interrupted throughout the ages. The Psalmist draws the reader’s attention not only to the majesty of the creator but also to the creatures because they are vehicles of revelation of the divine wisdom and order.¹³ The mentioning of the day and night deduce the notion from personification of the heaven or firmament to the harmony of spheres.

The Sun rises every day with a new message, that is, to give for God’s glory. God’s wisdom is understood through the rest which is provided for the creation.¹⁴ Planets, moon and constellations, as primordial creatures, are the real witnesses of the mystery of creation and are hidden in the eyes of living. God’s glory is addressed by nature to

¹¹ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, 270.

¹² Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, 270.

¹³ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, (London: SCM, 1962), 198.

¹⁴ W.O.E.Oesterley, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*, 169.

nature. Weiser writes, “Heavens are the book from which the whole world can derive its knowledge of God! This is by no means simply an idea born of a momentary religious enthusiasm which has been roused by the contemplation of Nature”.¹⁵ The question raised here is, whether the Law of Yahweh is important or the Creation? Or is the written word of God or the creation important? The Psalmist claims both have importance. Creation, which is accessible to all witnesses the power of God rather than the Law, which is accessible only to countable persons. Both sun and moon as inanimate entities are God’s creation and their speech is addressed to God as praise and to humanity as a revealer of knowledge.¹⁶ Leslie calls it ‘a perpetual anthem of the heaven’.¹⁷

The Psalmist provides more information about the inanimate entities and these are beyond the comprehension of the humanity. The Hebrew word used for sun is šemeš and its vocalization is similar to the Babylonian mythological elements which refer to the sun god Shamash. The voice of the sun is not audible to the human ears.¹⁸ An unknown hierarchical structure is visible in this rhetoric. This represents the possibility of a priestly realm and a secret knowledge which is high above the human beings. Day and night and nature’s course of action can also be identified as the silent action which is a revelation of divine order and wisdom.¹⁹

Hymn in Praise of the Sun (19.4c-6)

Rhetoric of Incomprehensibility (Verse 4c-6)

The Psalmist exposes the fact that the sun has its own resting place in the heavens. The artistic rhetoric of the psalmist places the sun under the creative wisdom of God. The Psalmist says God created or set a place for the sun, but in ancient myths, it was the sun god who built a place for himself. But here without destroying the beauty of the hymn, the Psalmist discards the mythological rhetoric.²⁰ This unheard voice

¹⁵ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms : A Commentary*, 199.

¹⁶ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 179.

¹⁷ Elmer A. Leslie, *The Psalms*, 134.

¹⁸ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, 271.

¹⁹ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms : A Commentary*, 198.

²⁰ W.O.E.Oesterley, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*, 170.

or speech is spread across the universe and it is compared with the stammering utterance of an ecstatic prophet's expression. This is a strange sound. It is a hymn with instructive words, and Kraus questions whether the rhetoric power of the words (speech) penetrate? It is a cosmological concept which denotes the bright and life sustaining speech. The entire creation is filled with a mighty and yet inaudible intelligence that extols the glory of God and God's handiwork. The sun is only a part of the creation but now the focus is changed from heaven to the sun. The Psalmist reaffirms that God had fixed a tent and resting place for sun, and confirms the incomprehensible power of God as creator and all other elements as God's creation. Every element in the universe is accountable to God and the rhetoric of God's supremacy is expressed in these verses. The resting place for the sun is not a palace but a tent either placed in heavens or in the sea.

The terms like bridegroom and the strongman or hero is an allegory. But these terms are very much present in the myths or in other ancient West Asian Texts. In the Sumerian hymn, the sun god is called 'a hero who goes out'; in the Babylonian hymn, Shamash, the sun god is a judge who has insight into all deeds of humanity. The rhetoric of bridegroom or hero presents powerful youth, strength and beauty. With this strength, the sun rests during the night in the sea, lying in the arms of its beloved. The psalmist strongly holds the theological affirmation of Yahwistic and Elohist patterns. The Psalmist says that the sun goes from one end of the heavens to the other end and every day it repeats the same function but without any tiredness. Nothing is hidden from its light or heat. That illustrates the power of the sun and it gives light to the whole universe. The Psalmist portrays that every day the sun covers a vast distance.

Through scientific discoveries and inventions, human beings realize the mysterious functions and actions of the planets and its positioning. By the knowledge or wisdom of God, the psalmist and the readers were able to analyze the cosmic actions and the stewardship of the creation. Yahweh is the creator and all creatures with their own language and rhetoric continue to glorify Yahweh. After the affirmation of the heavenly proclamation of God's glory, the Psalmist joins with the chorus of praise and describes the sun as a crowning achievement of God's creation of the heavens.²¹

²¹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms* 1-50, 181.

Relevance

The Psalmist was able to identify the invisible and unheard voice of creation, which is the self-revelation of divine wisdom, divine order, divine righteousness and incomprehensibility of Yahweh. In the context of COVID 19, the world witnessed an inability to comprehend the struggles of human beings which made the life of the people miserable at both the local and global level. Human beings are forced to experience alienation from work, and service to overcome the pandemic situation. This endeavor has caused the poor and the needy to struggle for their daily sustenance, which resulted in their loss of lives. The struggles of migrants, attempting to journey by foot made women, children and men victims of this pandemic and projected the lack of human discernment to handle the situation. Human beings' actions and approaches to solve problems always have limitations and scores of people continue to be the victims of structures, policies and so on. But in this context, nature was able to regain sustainable existence.

The Psalmist contemplates on the natural course of action of heaven, firmament, sun, day and night. The rhetoric of incomprehensible power of Yahweh, that is invisible and unheard voice of the nature or creation is more powerful because it continues the stewardship of the Creator. The pathetic situation and the irony which is witnessed in this world should penetrate the hearts and minds of every human being. The loud cry of the migrants, marginalized people and the sweat and blood of the victims continue to sound like ringing cry (example Abel's and Naboth's blood) with a thundering voice, but they continue to be invisible and unheard. Where is stewardship of each individual when creation continues to challenge the created world order?

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REPORTS

Webinar on SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT: CHURCHES IN ACTION ON 4 JUNE 2020

To mark the World Environment Day a webinar on the theme **“Sustainable Environment: Churches in Action”** was organized by National Council of Churches in India in collaboration with World Council of Churches on 4 June 2020.

This webinar was the first of a series in *“Rebooting as Ekklesia”* by National Council of Churches in India.

In Christian theological understanding the literal meaning of the Greek word ‘Ekklesia’ is understood in English as “gathering of those summoned” and which is specifically used to denote church with a meaning of “Called out” community.

In the opening remark Rev Asir Ebenezer, the General Secretary of NCCI, said that, though coronavirus has shut people out of most places, they are, in some ways, able to be more Christian in the world, particularly in caring for the environment and caring for each other. “We shared food, we shared our shelter, we shared our hospitals, we shared our schools, we shared our colleges,” he said. “We were Christ-like even though we couldn’t go to our churches.”

We were reminded by the panel of speakers that humans cannot take nature for granted. The time has come for us to initiate actions to protect and restore our environment. We cannot survive in isolation as biodiversity is part of our daily lives and livelihood and constitutes the resources upon which families, communities, nations and future generations depend. As development is equated with growth of cities and development of infrastructures, it adversely affects nature’s ability to provide food, oxygen, clean water and seasonal climatic changes. The significant positive effect due to lock down can be seen in the reduction of carbon emission and hence reduction of pollution level, although it is a temporary phenomenon. It shows that nature can still flourish, if we give it the chance. The improvement of the quality of life could be envisaged if we lived in harmony with nature. It is imperative to sustainably manage our planet’s resources and ecosystems to promote life in its fullness for all. And this is the challenge before the Church and to the faith communities.

The panel of speakers of the webinar were Mr. Dinesh Suna, Coordinator-Ecumenical Water Network, WCC, Dr. Manoj Kurian- Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, WCC, Ms. Athena Peralta, -Economic and Ecological Justice, WCC, Ms. Renemla Ozukum- Council of Baptist Churches in North East India and member of WCC- Climate Change Working Group, Mr. Angelious Michael - Coordinator, Partnership Desk - Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church and Dr. Mathew Koshy – Hony. Director of the Ecological Department of CSI Synod. The webinar was facilitated by Rev. Asir Ebenezer, General Secretary of NCCI and Mr. Pradip Bansrior, Executive Secretary of NCCI- Dalit and Tribal/Adivasi Concerns.



NCCI, CMAI Webinar on **REBOOTING EKKLESIA SERIES: YOUTH AND MENTAL HEALTH IN CONTEXT OF COVID-19**

The outbreak of coronavirus disease in 2020 led to public health emergency internationally. The epidemic has been a challenge of survival for humankind. The situation in many countries is worse than ours. Government of various nations has declared lockdown and work from home. In a situation like this, when the lifestyle and living pattern of people has changed, it is obvious that their mental health will be affected as well.

In India, where 65% of the population is less than the age of 35 years and 50% below 25 years of age, many of them are undergoing mental breakdown because of the instant and rapid change in their lifestyle. Through NCCI's **Rebooting Ekklesia Series**, National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) and Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) has taken initiative to address various concerns keeping the present context underlined. NCCI Youth Concerns and CMAI pioneered webinar **"Rebooting Ekklesia Series: Youth and Mental Health in Context of Covid-19"** on 13 June 2020 to address the issues related to mental health faced by youth during the covid-19 pandemic.

Dr. Kimneiath Elizabeth Vaiphei, Assistant Professor PSW, NIMHANS, Bengaluru, addressed the issues highlighting four major points – Youth & Mental Health, Common Mental Health problems Among Youth, Covid-19 & Mental Health, Ways of Coping. She specified some common mental health issues among youth, such as, depression, anxiety, suicide, substance abuse disorder/addiction and other psychiatric disorders. She further mentioned the major impacts

of covid-19 on us as loss of routine, loss of peer relations, boredom – loss of recreation, fear and worries about corona, increased screen time, gadget addictions, uncertainties about future, parent-child conflicts. However, to cope with the situations we can keep record of certain things, like, Structure and routine that will eventually promote positive mental health. Handling emotions by expressing, venting, reaching out to people and reliable resources, staying connected and decreasing screen time. And mostly focusing on the things that one can control instead of what cannot be controlled.

Rev. Dr. Israel David, Assistant Professor Christian Ministry – pastoral care and counseling, Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, brought focus on three important points – problems, pastoral perspective/paradigm, and pastoral practices. He highlighted mainly two types of youth group: work from home and work for home. The problems in both sections are different, the youth group working from home deal with the fear of losing opportunities, the need of belongingness, the uncertainty to perform and the question of ability, the anxiety of losing the youth-hood, the physiological impact, and the issue of productivity. Whereas the group working for home deals with the need of security, becoming a stranger, being neglected, unnoticed, labeled and named, physiological impact and wellbeing affected. While talking about mental health of youth in relation to the rebooting series we must seek are we moving towards back to normal or new normal? As church and pastoral groups addressing the issue becomes the very essence of reaffirming the youth and companionship as paradigm for pastoral care has to take place to monitor and assure them their security. Finally he has “Recommended Pastoral Practices” steps that could reach and guide the young people:

1. Responding to social systems-the larger contexts- towards intra, interpersonal and social healing
2. Focusing on constructive handling of conflicts-Responding to both internal and external conflicts
3. Wholistic/wholeness- family as a system- not youth in isolation-
4. Enabling the youth to respond to the present-moving from the past and leaving the future?
5. Communication- Information to Influence- positive (may not be new normal-back to normalcy) –space for expression- Listening-talking- feeling
6. Exploring-to feel safe –adapting not adjusting to changes –discovering alternatives

7. Reassuring- answering- being practical –forgiveness
8. Helping to help themselves-personal rational responsibility- shared responsibility
9. The church needs more will power to move from ‘blaming’ to ‘understanding’ the youth
10. Establish support groups –being close –digital resources
11. ABCD model- Achieving a relationship- Boil down (deconstruction) the major problems- Constructive action plans (construction) - Develop on going plans.

“Possible means” for the congregations:

1. Developing Pastoral Response Resource Team (PaRRT)
2. Establishing pastoral counselling centres in diocese/conference/council levels
3. Clergy in service training and laity training
4. Identifying potential youth for training

Rev. Asir Ebenezer, General Secretary, NCCI and Dr. Priya John, General Secretary, CMAI in their inaugural speech addressed the situation of youth and their problems mainly the mental health where many of this generation youth are undergoing fear and depression during this pandemic, discerning their future, dreams and goals.

Helplines for counseling

- **CMAI:** +91 9597758669; +91 8208158676 (WhatsApp Numbers)

Language Options: English, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Gujarati, Odia, Punjab, Ao-Naga, Mizo, Marathi and Italian.

24 x 7 toll free helpline inclusively for Psychosocial support and mental health services

- **NIMHANS:** 080–4611 0007



NCCI STATEMENT ON CUSTODIAL DEATHS

Sathankulam killing an example of brute force by a civilian police; Calls for outright Condemnation, Accountability to the People, and Systemic Reform

The death of Jayaraj (59) and his son Fenix (31) in Sathankulam, Tuticorin district, Tamil Nadu as a result of police brutality is worrisome that police brutality in India especially against religious and ethnic minorities, children, women and the marginalized is increasing day by day and it also speaks poorly about the bias towards these communities. This incident shows that there is a dreadful familiarity among the police in treating accused offenders inhumanely. The death of the father- son duo exposes the unfortunate criminal tendencies and xenophobic attitudes present in society and its institutions.

It is evident that both the father and son died as a result of the physical torture inflicted on them at the police station. Witnesses have made public statements revealing that the father-son duo left the police station in a disheveled state, with torn and bloodied clothes. It has also come to notice that they complained to their friends about rectal bleeding and severe rectum pain. It is further disturbing to see that the doctors who examined them and the magistrate before whom they were produced did not call this out. These highlight a systemic failure in which the checks and balances have been thrown to the wind ultimately resulting in the denial of justice.

The report of the National Crime Records Bureau of Ministry of Home Affairs of the Indian Government published in 2017 shows a steep hike in the number of civilian casualties resulting from police action from 2014 to 2017. While 2014 recorded the killing of 41 civilians and the injuring of 104 civilians, in 2017 786 were killed and 3990 injured. It is also shocking that the number of civilians killed in 2017 is around six times the number in 2016, while the number of injured is nearly four times more. These statistics from Government sources dangerously point towards the growing tendencies amidst the civilian police force for use of brute force and violence against the common people.

The National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) expresses deep concern over the rising cases of using brute force by civilian police. Many incidents have been reported in the recent past from Noida, Mumbai, Bijapur, Patna, Eastern Assam, and Ghaziabad and also in different parts of Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. Another death of an auto rickshaw driver due to torture by police is reported from Tamilnadu on June 28th 2020.

The NCCI condemns all such acts of violence and urges governments to be vigilant in governance of policing and take immediate action against members of the police force with such delinquent records all over India, especially in the context of the gruesome records of brutality and custodial deaths, which we believe is also mixed with caste and communal prejudices.

The NCCI demands that justice be served to the families of the deceased Jayaraj and Fenix, and those who have met such fate, by taking stringent action against the accused police officers through a fair trial that will expose the offenders and do justice to the victims.

The NCCI calls for reforms to further professionalize the civilian police force and reorient its civilian base and its accountability to people.

The NCCI pays respectful homage to the memory of the unfortunate victims of the Sathankulam incident and such violence everywhere, and pledges its prayers and support to the members of the bereaved families.

Rev. Asir Ebenezer

General Secretary

National Council of Churches in India

29th June 2020



BOOK REVIEW

New Book: CORONA OF THORNS? OR CORONA OF LIFE? CHANGING CHURCH IN A COVID CONTEXT Edited by: Francis Gonsalves & Vinod Victor, Published by 'Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge' (ISPCK), Delhi 2020. Price: ₹ 150; \$6; £5

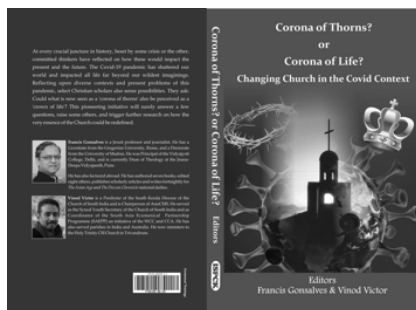
A good book captures the heartbeat of the context in which it is written and treasures for posterity vivid images of the tears and existential angst of the time. 'Corona of Thorns? or Corona of Life? Changing Church in the Covid Context'

(ISPCK, 2020) provides a bird's eye view of how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of life around and how theologians, academicians and practitioners see rays of hope amidst worldwide gloom.

A panorama of authors from different fields of expertise engage in an ecumenical reflection and dialogue—realistically sensing the pain that the pandemic has inflicted on us all, reflecting on how it transformed the very nature of Church and human interconnectedness, and how this could be seen as a fleeting moment of opportunity. Corona (Latin, for crown) could both be of thorns and of life, if understood in the right perspective.

While being critical about the churches' present silence in times of crisis, Felix Wilfred states that there cannot and need not be a return to the 'normal'. "The Indian Church will need to rethink its life and worship, mission and leadership in new terms," he argues. Other writers have creatively tried to verbally paint how the new normal would and should look like. Amidst thorns and darkness, this could be an opportunity to "deconstruct the Church and build Christ communities," says Asir Ebenezer.

There are also specific attempts to reflect upon how the pandemic has affected the vulnerable: migrant workers, slumdweller, unskilled



labourers, women and youth. “There are innumerable people trying to reach the threshold of the Church. These outstretched hands seek security and resistance against vulnerability,” Hemalatha John affirms, calling our attention to the millions of lives being torn apart and our responsibility towards them.

Right from the joy of sharing food with the people pushed into the meandering journeys home—offering light, life and hope to them—as Rini Ralte shares, to the call for a “wedding of faith and science” to creatively respond to the pandemic and to find a panacea as Samuel Richmond Saxena puts it, the book encompasses a myriad of experiences and viewpoints.

Packiam Samuel offers hope suggesting, “To doubt may be to deny, but it is also to await and to await with the ultimate criterion of what must be awaited.” He goes on to add that “phoenix-like, faith must remake a covenantal relationship with God, only thereby not to be posthumously defeated by Covid.”

Francis Gonsalves reminds Christians, families and Church of their societal responsibility, saying: “Jesus warns us that someday we’ll hear the words: ‘Whatever you did—or did not do—to the least of my sisters and brothers, you did—or did not do—to me’.” (Mt 25:40, 45).

The book proposes ecumenical, ecological, interfaith, interdisciplinary and global responses to stem the raging tide of the pandemic. Published within hundred days of the lockdown amidst slow easing of restrictions, these reflections are primary responses to a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. They could just be a trigger for deeper analyses of how different our World and the Church are, and would be.

The prognosis looks bleak. The pandemic shows no signs of retreat. Can you and me, Church and World, find life amidst and beyond the thorns? Several valuable insights are the greatest takeaways this book offers.

Reviewed by: Rev. Vinod Victor is a Presbyterian of the South Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India and is Chairperson of AsiaCMS. He ministers to the Holy Trinity CSI Church in Trivandrum. ● ● ●

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