

National Council of Churches in India

XXIX General Assembly

21st to 24th April 2023.

Theme: “The hour has come: Let us get going”.

Presidential Address

Your Eminences, Beatitudes, Graces, Revered Clergy, Dear Brothers and sisters in the Ecumenical journey of faith,

It is my great privilege and honour to address this distinguished gathering of religious leaders and esteemed guests. I humbly extend my sincere greetings and offer my utmost respect to each and every one of you.

This assembly is very important to all of us as we emerged from a period of isolation which has lasted for three years. You agree with me that it is by God’s Grace alone that we are here alive and to continue our journey of faith, our pilgrimage. Our task is to continue this pilgrimage in God’s grace. The journey of ecumenical movement in India, under the auspices of NCCI has inspired the churches in India, and I thank God for God’s faithfulness all along the journey. As we gather here, I also thank God for the lives and the valuable contributions of the ecumenical stalwarts of our country for more than a century of our ecumenical pilgrimage.

We had no idea of challenges facing us with the arrival of global pandemic. None of us could anticipate Covid and the need to postpone the assembly. This assembly was supposed to have taken place in April 2020. But there was no in person meeting for more than 2 years. We went from in person to online meetings. It was challenging, but thanks to God and to our vibrant General Secretary and his team and to our different ministries, executive committee members and the general body who adapted to the new situation and innovated remarkably well. We learned lessons of humility and gentleness. We learned to rely more on God’s ways. Above all we were reminded that nothing could separate us from God’s love for us.

Covid has taken its toll on NCCI too. We have lost several stalwarts, our near and dear ones including our staff. I pay homage to all their lives and praise God for their yeomen services to NCCI and to the country. Let us remember them all and observe silence for a minute as a mark of respect for their departed souls. The pandemic and the associated crisis also have made tremendous impact on human life, forcing us to realise human vulnerability and weakness. The vulnerable situation we experienced in our social and communal life reminds us the need of our churches to be mindful in addressing wider social issues as part of our Christian witness in today’s fragmented and vulnerable societies. We are here to reaffirm our faith and trust in God. As sojourners in the land of living, let us walk hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder with people of

all faith and ideological persuasions. Here we are again reminded of ecumenical accompaniment and ecumenical journey. The hour has come: Let us get going.

Let me on behalf of my colleagues and myself , place on record our heartfelt gratitude and wholehearted thanks to the Chairperson and the Honourable Board of directors of Henry Martyn Institute to host this general assembly in this prestigious institution. We are indebted to the regional councils of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh and also member churches in and around Hyderabad.

Every general assembly of the NCCI is an ‘ecumenical festival’. This ecumenical festival brings together people from across genders, generations, identities, abilities, faiths, regions and nations to celebrate and affirm the God intended unity. Now we are in Hyderabad, the land of *Shervani, Biryani and Khubani*. The “*Veiled Rebecca*” of Salarjung Museum mesmerizes us with her magnificence. But our coming together in here in Hyderabad is a sheer providence of God since this city has a very historic significance in the history of Christianity in India. The city has a rich history of Christian influence dating back to the first century AD. During the colonial period Hyderabad became an important centre for Christian activity. Hyderabad is known for its religious diversity and tolerance with people of different faith co existing peacefully. Henry Martyn Institute where we are now is the best example of peaceful coexistence of people of different faith and interfaith dialogue.

We shall take a look at the New Testament to see what Jesus Christ’s attitude was to other religions and religion in general. Late Joseph Pathrapankal, CMI, in his book, *Critical and Creative Studies in Bible and Theology*, says that “It is important to note that the various events narrated in the Gospels are to be seen not only as narratives but also as symbol-stories.” The story of Greeks coming to Jesus and the response of Jesus is seen also as a symbolic story, not only as a narrative. In our present day pluralistic society, this story throws much light on our inter religious approach and attitude. The Greeks who came to worship at the temple had an open mind to see Jesus, a Jewish guru and learn of him.

There are other stories too. The Canaanite woman cries before Jesus pleading to heal her daughter severely possessed by a demon, (Matthew15:21-28). The Roman Centurion of Capernaum approaches Jesus in distress beseeching Him to cure his paralysed servant (Matthew8:5-13)

The Greeks were keen to see Jesus as a Jewish leader to have a discussion on religious matters. Then Jesus says ***The Hour Has Now Come*** for the Son of Man to Be Glorified, and not the son of Jew.

Jesus says “And when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). It speaks of the moment of overcoming the limitations, boundaries and barriers of one’s human condition. The limiting conditions for Jesus were the fact of his being a Jew. He wanted every human person to rise above the limiting factors of human nature, such as narrow sectarianism.

Jesus marvelled at the faith of Roman Centurion, He graciously acknowledged the faith of the Canaanite woman who belonged to other religion. Neither the Roman Centurion nor the Canaanite woman was asked to change their religion. Jesus lays emphasis on faith and trust.

The Samaritan woman's story brings out clearly the essence of tolerance for other religions; in fact it speaks about what true religion is. "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ***The Hour Is Coming And Now Is***, the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

Jesus inaugurated a new era in religious history with His radical exposition of what true worship means. The simple answer of worship in spirit and truth is that worship should be sincere, earnest, non-communal, non-sectarian beyond limitations of place, time, tradition and class. If such worship found anywhere in any land or in any community is acceptable to God. In our contemporary context Jesus would be telling the same to the Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other religionist. Now

The Hour Has Come: Let us worship the God in spirit and truth.

As we are here to reaffirm our faith, it is very important to listen to the warning or the alarm given to us by Jesus Christ. As we are meditating on the theme "*The Hour Has Come*" is a very significant statement in the Gospel according to St Mark. Throughout the gospel Jesus speaks about the 'Hour' as a reference to the time of His crucifixion and death. Here begins the crisis of Passion. Behaviour of Apostles in contrast to that of Jesus is shocking. Soul of Jesus is in deep anguish; the apostles enjoy the bodily rest. Discipleship is a way of life. Good intentions and brave words are not enough. The apostles here represent the antithesis of discipleship. But in this there is also a message for us. The community of believers is the fellowship of those who stay awake and alert until the triumphant coming of the Son of Man to gather His elect. *The Hour Has Come: Let Us Get Going* is a very deep theological theme and is the very identity of our faith. Let us awake from the slumber. It's a powerful call to actions. It speaks to the momentousness of the present moment and the need for decisive action in the face of great challenges. Let us get going reinforces the sense of urgency and emphasis the need for movement and momentum. Also it emphasises the importance of unity and collaboration in achieving our goals and encourages us to work together towards a common purpose with passion and determination.

NCCI being a centenarian, our journey was spectacular pulling together to empower the local congregation in mission through which we reached out to the groaning world with the good news. We deliberated and identified the need for a just and inclusive community as the paradigm of defining the ecumenical movement. Now we have to rededicate ourselves for the hard work our predecessors had ventured into. Now the hour has come for action. But before we act, we should deliberate on what is grass root level ecumenism which is the need of the hour. Ecumenism is a movement. It is not a static institution. We are on a pilgrimage and it speaks our

identity not terms and conditions, but the pilgrimage of inclusivity. We have to find the basis for co existence. As we gather here as an ecumenical gathering, this is the time for an evaluation or retrospection.

Have we become stalemate in the ecumenical movement?

There are of course theological differences, which are basic, but created, in large measure by accidents of culture and history. Most of these can be overcome, if the will, the love and openness are there. It is in this matter of love, trust and openness that we still have to make much progress before we can come to real unity in Christ.

Do we ever pray privately for other Churches?

Or

Do we speak of other communities with disrespect or disdain?

These things I leave it for contemplation or for pondering

These are certain test of a basic attitude. Love can never be tested by external actions alone. But the major causes for the stalemate in ecumenical relation today all over the world are lack of Love and inability to trust and to be open to each other. When all churches come nearer to the character of Christ, the character unites us to each other as well as to Him who is our Lord. The one insight I have is that, without love, there is no lasting amity, whether inside a church or between the churches. Love would mean not only understanding each other's point of view in theological matters, but also a measure of identification with the views which differ from ours.

As partners in the ecumenical movement, do we have a shared understanding of ecumenism and its main goal?

Ecumenism should be understood within the context of God's incarnation in Christ. This revelation disclosed God's love towards all human kind and that is the central point. If so, ecumenism itself should be an actualization of God's love for the world. When we emphasise centrality of Christ, ecumenism reaches the level of incarnation in people. Once it has come to suffuse spirituality, liturgy and ethics on a broad scale and has become incarnated in social action, it will have taken on a contextual form that directly addresses the current needs of the people. This is not an absolute form of unity. Now the *Hour Has Come* we need to take action that reflects the centrality of Christ. We need to witness to incarnation among the people. When ecumenism is sign of incarnation in the people's midst, then ecumenism has realized its promise and its essence.

To bring the ecumenism into practice we need to bring Church functionaries, Professional theologians and the people into unity and work together to bring ecumenism down to earth. Otherwise ecumenism will remain in the position of being an alien thing for the common people.

On the contrary to traditional ecumenism, contemporary ecumenism is ecumenism in action seeking to encourage the fullness of humankind. While being so NCCI has found its way or in other words NCCI has realised its direction and given emphasis now for achieving the same. NCCI has been able to reach the marginalised, destitute, weaker sections and those who are discriminated based on caste, creed and gender and by its commitment, joint effort and social action to a remarkable extent and are stated here with great pleasure and as a matter of satisfaction. The social action covered areas like Gender justice, sustainable development, climate justice, water conservation and many more.

When we deliberate on sustainable development goals in which whole world has agreed to achieve by 2030, goal no 5 refers to gender equality, i.e.; empowering all women and girls. As we understand in very common language, gender equality means that both women and men, girls and boys should have an equal opportunity to do what they are best at and they should be valued equally. Further, trans persons have also to be reckoned. We believe all people are created in the image of God and God intends for everyone to flourish. As God's people, we believe we are called to seek justice and equality for all. But what does that mean for us today? And how are we responding? Throughout history, trans persons, women and girls have suffered harm and injustice due to sex, gender or both. This has roots in patterns of power, privilege, and prejudice with in a patriarchy. This leads to gender based violence and violence against women and discrimination of trans persons. The NCCI along with WCC are working to stop violence against women. Our General Secretary's report will give us a clear picture about the activities of NCCI to stop violence against women and also about the actions for the inclusivity of trans persons.

We are living in a time when our planet is facing unprecedented challenges. Climate change is one of the biggest challenges of our time. A lake in Bangalore was in fire for many years .Many lakes disappeared. The air quality in Delhi hit 999 in the last few years. We read about many environmental issues, it could be disappearing of forest, climate change, water scarcity or environmental degradation which threatens our very existence. We talk a lot about climate justice. It's not a trendy word that we invented today or yesterday. It has its origin from the day of creation which is part of our faith. In faith we speak about incarnation which means that God assumed in Christ's creation. Our body created are elements of creation. Without creation you and I will not exist as human. We are interdependent. So careful creation is not a contemporary topic but is as old as Christian faith. As Christians we have the responsibility to educate our communities about ecological stewardship and sustainable development. We have limited time to save our planet. I can see faces of young people sitting inside this hall. You are the first generation to experience the wreck of climate crisis and the last generation to be in place to stop global warming. Discussions, deliberations, dialogues, debates are not enough and now, *The Hour Has Come: Let Us Get Going*. We have to act now to address these challenges.

We must also recognize that our efforts of single hand alone may not be enough. The power of concerted joint efforts can be recognised here. NCCI is always open to work with the member

churches, regional councils and we are ready to collaborate with other stake holders including Government, civil society organisations, academic institutions etc. to achieve our goals.

Especially the role of regional councils in this journey cannot be underestimated. They are the link between the NCCI and member churches, other ecumenical bodies and society at large. As we are here as the highest decision making ecumenical gathering, I wish and pray that this general assembly will come with a resolution asking for action to protect the environment and to deal with climate justice.

With heart full of gratitude, let me place on record my gratefulness to my colleague Vice Presidents, Treasurer, working committee members, the General Secretary Rev. Dr. Azir Ebenezer, Executive Secretaries and staff, members of the executive committee and general body, Leaders of all the member churches, Related agencies, Regional councils, and All India Christian organisations and all those who have made this possible, this pilgrimage of faith. Also, I would like to thank former General Secretary Rev. Dr. Roger Gaikwad for his services.

Before I sum up, let me look back into the unprecedented and unpleasant circumstances in which I had to shoulder the great responsibility of president ship of the NCCI from September 2022. We as church leaders in India have a responsibility to maintain the highest moral and ethical standards in our lives and be witnesses to Jesus Christ. It is our duty to be bearers of true faith and join together for the Glory of the Mighty kingdom and work for the growth of our nation. In this regard, the most important areas where we have to guard ourselves are on matters on financial propriety and adhering to the laws of the land. I would like to emphasize the importance of financial transparency, accountability and responsibility to Christ consciousness in our activities and in our institutions. We have to uphold the highest standards of integrity in our words, actions and deeds. Unless we are transparent in our financial matters and delivery of social justice, our existence itself will be in peril. Let us be faithful stewards of the resources that we have been entrusted with and let us be true witness to the ethical standards of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ.

Let me close my address by narrating a story from a world famous film titled “**Becket**” released in 1964, nominated for 12 academy awards, starred by Richard Burton and Peter O’Toole. The film tells about the story of Henry the IInd, the Norman king of England and his drinking buddy Thomas a` Becket. King Henry wanted a free life with all vices and for his extravagance he overburdened the citizens with taxes. But his one obstacle to complete licence was the Arch Bishop of Canterbury, who had his own independent authority as the leader of the Church of England. The Arch Bishop often frustrated King Henry’s designs and decisions. In order to solve this problem King Henry decided to put an end to the interventions from Arch Bishop and also decided to appoint his companion, his drinking buddy Thomas a` Becket as the next Arch Bishop. Debauched King Henry II installs his longtime court facilitator Thomas Becket as the Archbishop of Canterbury, assuming that his old friend will be a compliant and loyal lackey in the King's ongoing battles with the church. But Becket unexpectedly finds his true calling on the

ecclesiastical side, and aligns himself against the king's selfish wishes, causing a rift and an eventual showdown not only between the two men, but also the institutions they represent. Thomas decided to take his new vocation – his calling to be God's servant- seriously and to serve God rather than the king. King Henry tried to persuade him to compromise and accommodate to his old friend's wishes. But Arch Bishop Thomas remained steadfast. The film ends with the tragic end of Arch Bishop Thomas, the only canonised saint of Anglican Church .He was murdered in the Cathedral. In the film, the day before the murder, there was a conversation between God and The Arch Bishop Thomas. Here God says "Thomas, you need not be holy. You only have to be obedient to my call" and Thomas responded ***"God, I will be loyal to you with all my being till my last breath"***.

Let this be our prayer. Let us be loyal to God with all our being till our last breath. Let us all remember that with the gift of the Holy Spirit we are made to be people that God wants us to be.

May God fill you with every good and remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. May God give you all a heart to worship Him and fulfil His will with generosity and well disposed Spirit. May God incline your hearts to listen to His law and precepts, and give you Peace. May God hear your prayers and reconciled with you and not abandon you in the time of misfortune. This is my prayer and wish for all who have gathered here.

In closing, I would like to remind that ***The Hour Has Come: Let us get going***. Let us continue our ecumenical journey by working together transparently and moving forward towards a sustainable and just future for all. May god bless our efforts and guide us in our journey together

Thank you

Dr. Aleyamma Thomas

President, NCCI.