



TOGETHER ON THE EDGE IN GOD'S MISSION

Embracing God's Beloved Community

**Rethinking
Mission in Asia
during COVID-19
and Beyond**



Shiluinla Jamir

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Rethinking Mission in Asia during COVID-19 and Beyond; 1st Edition

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Acknowledgement

This book emerges from the experiences of mission workers in Asia. My task in the book is limited to playing a “midwifery role” between the passion generated in AsiaCMS’ boardroom, for coming out with a book grounded in Asian realities during COVID-19, and the experiences of frontline mission workers.

I want to thank AsiaCMS for the grant provided to me. I should particularly thank the Executive Director of AsiaCMS, Rev. Dr. Nam Chen Chan for journeying with me right from the conceptualization of the book till the finalization of the manuscript. His critical comments and encouragement have helped this book immensely. It was an exhilarating experience working under his guidance.

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Most importantly I thank the frontline mission workers who are my research collaborators and played the role of an interlocutor in helping me develop this perspective of mission in Asia. The content of the book is a product of the animated and passionate conversations we had over Zoom, emails, telephone and in person. Their life experiences during COVID-19 remain the theological imperative and content of considering mission as a virtuous activity that affirms life.

This book is also shaped by the many conversations and exchanges of emails I have had with my friend Dr. Prof. Gerald Boodoo, Head of the African Studies in Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA. I thank him for sharing his works, invaluable insights and his friendship. My perspectives and methodological approaches in this book come from his works.

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Shiluinla Jamir
Nagaland.

Praise for Shiluinla Jamir's Embracing God's Beloved Community

Embracing God's Beloved Community is a noteworthy book, intense, passionate, nuanced, and critical-eyed. It engages avidly in the struggles of 'ungrievable lives' in the margins, particularly in the face of the pandemic. Employing a "decolonial approach" Shiluinla Jamir convincingly insists upon the need for reimagining mission in Asia beyond colonial categories and definitions. As a theological and missiological testimonial of the muted and misrepresented subjects of Christian mission, the book offers radically fresh perspectives on mission, informed by the most vulnerable and yet resilient lives of the multitude.

- ***Gladson Jathanna, Senior Lecturer in History of Christianity and Mission Studies, The Pacific Theological College, Fiji Islands***

Concepts, including 'mission' and 'Asia' constantly go through a flux acquiring new connotations. De-constructing those and reconstructing meaning is essential to make engagement with these realities relevant. Shiluinla Jamir succeeds in gracefully connecting grass root experiences and global theological articulations in redefining mission for our contemporary reflections. Belongingness and Resilience become the key to mission which is "the people's capacity to say no to death and yes to life". Prophetic pragmatism, Compassionate Solidarity and Demonstrative Living to ensure fullness of Life to All are the key explorations of this wonderful study. Surely worth a read.

- ***Rev Vinod Victor, Chairman AsiaCMS Board of Trustees***

Shiluinla Jamir's book is a timely reflection and contribution to a world that is mired in anxiety and bewilderment in the true meaning and intent of the Good News. Although the context of the narrative is Asia, the missional implications of the book go far beyond the physical boundary of the continent. Everyday virtuous activity testifies to the work and the teaching of the Incarnate Jesus and a fitting reminder to all Christians who are called to priesthood in their own contexts. This is a must read to mobilize and empower believers to get involved and be a blessing to many in a world where light and hope are in short supply.

- ***Dr. Francis K. Tsui, AsiaCMS Board of Trustees***

This is a valuable resource for Asia and contributes significantly to the global discourse on recasting approaches to mission. It offers a viable methodology as Jamir fleshes out the concept of “decolonial thinking,” reframes Asia from the margins, and draws credible insights from the wealth of local narratives. The resulting praxis is real, relevant and uniquely Asian.

- ***Dr. Tan Sooi-Ling, Academic Dean of Asia Graduate School of Theology Alliance - S.E. Asia***

Using ‘decolonial thinking’ the author analyses the testimonials of several missional practitioners in different parts of Asia during and in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though Asia is such a vast and diverse (fragmented) continent, Shiluinla Jamir manages to draw some great lines that help understand the specifics of the missiological challenges the pandemic has posed to Asian missions and how God’s mission can be - and is - done through the ‘hands’ of His people as an ‘everyday virtuous activity’ and what that practically includes. Not an easy book, but definitely a ‘must-read’ for people involved in God’s mission in Asia and around the globe.

- ***Rev. Jan C. Wessels – Faith2Share (UK)***

Preface

As the Covid-19 tsunami swarmed across Asia through the first half of 2020, it soon became all too apparent that the world as we knew it had changed. AsiaCMS, as with churches and Christian organisations everywhere, had to scramble and change tack. The urgent needs on the ground required an immediate response and we had to change how to better serve the Christian leaders and organisations we work with.

There was a real sense that we “have not passed this way before” (Josh.3:4). As the AsiaCMS board and core team sought to make sense of the changed scenarios, it was obvious that new lenses are needed to understand and serve God’s mission in Asia - old perspectives may not be as relevant or effective as before. We needed alternative lenses that do not solely originate from the textbooks, but perspectives from grounded realities.

This lined up with a need we identified a few years ago when we went through a season of realignment. That need became part of our 3-fold strategic focus. We seek to facilitate fresh reflections by Asian thinkers on the critical missiological questions; questions raised by the Asian Church. It was on this basis that we got in touch with Shiluinla Jamir - she fitted the bill. She was also in transition.

Her expertise is in theological ethics, not missions, but that tied in with our preference. We preferred someone outside our circles who may have a different take on the issues. The parameters were simple - hear from mission practitioners serving on the ground from across the spectrum, from as many types of missional engagement as possible, and as many countries as possible. Then integrate it with the written wisdom of other mission thinkers.

I therefore commend to you Shiluina's proposal of mission in Asia as 'everyday virtuous activity'. Her findings from mission practitioners across different countries in Asia confirm what we already - there is no singular monolithic "Asia" and no singular approach to God's missions. Instead, we find a breadth of perspectives and creative approaches from mission practitioners. Their 'testimonials' or stories are in simple terms, inspiring, as they each serve their own unique context.

Her proposal of mission as everyday virtuous activity is a reminder that participation in God's mission is not the responsibility of a special cadre of Christians. Rather, God's mission belongs to all Christians as an everyday activity. It is 'prophetic pragmatism' that leads to action. It has its foundations in the cross of Christ, drawing strength from it and bridging it with ordinary folks.

Rev Chan Nam Chen (PhD)
Executive Director
AsiaCMS

To

That boy in Southeast Asian Massif

Re-stitching his single use disposable mask

So that he might live and

Others might live too

1. Introduction

COVID-19 has disrupted lives and human relationships. It has also curtailed human interactions. This curtailment and disruption are felt in all spheres of life including Christian participation in the mission of God. Christian mission agencies and individuals are scrambling to explore the best way to react and respond, with many finding that either webinars or relief work are the most efficient bridges. However, in terms of mission, how one can best respond to the changes brought by COVID-19 in Asia needs a broader critical approach, but one that is centred in one's everyday Christian life.

To achieve this, this book looks at mission in Asia through “*Decolonial thinking*” and uses the idea of “fragmented Asia” as a starting point from which to explore the implications for our approach to mission. The book brings out “epistemologically local driven” initiatives of mission agencies, churches and individuals during the pandemic and uses these testimonials as the premise from which to assess a mission paradigm.

Methodology

Methodologically, the book engages with Gerald Boodoo's analysis of mission through “decolonial thinking.” He persuasively argues on the need of looking at mission through “*decolonial thinking*” and calls for a mission approach that is epistemologically local driven. Though he speaks from a Caribbean context, his approach is applicable to Asia too. His contention is that “mission still needs decolonizing.”¹ According to him, the dilemma today is not whether mission is helpful or has relevance but

¹ Gerald Boodoo develops on the work of Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh to analyze mission through decolonial thinking. Gerald Boodoo, “Mission and Coloniality: Christianity and the Caribbean,” in *Mission for Diversity: Exploring Christian Mission in the Contemporary World* edited by Elochukwu E. Uzukwu (Zurich: LIT, 2015), 75. Boodoo has also employed “decolonial thinking” in his other works. Gerald M. Boodoo, “Spaces of Possibility: Contributions of Local Theologies,” *CTSA Proceedings* 74 (2019): 46-61. Other missiologists like Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch have also observed the entanglement of mission and enlightenment thought and the way the thinking of the West has shaped mission in general and in Asia in particular. Newbigin like Boodoo had suggested that there is a need to “disentangle the alliance between Christian faith and Enlightenment ideas,” so that “the word of the gospel can be heard distinctly in its own right and not as part of the worldview into which it has been so generally domesticated.” Lesslie Newbigin, “Preface,” in *Toward the 21st Century Christian Mission: Essays in Honour of Gerald H. Anderson* edited by James H. Philips and Robert T. Coote (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 5; Also see Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 352; Anthony Kalliath, “Preface: Asian Challenges to Christian Mission,” in *Mission in Asia: Paths and Paradigms* edited by Anthony Kalliath and Ernest W. Talibuddin (Bangalore: FOIM and ATC, 2011), vii; For a comprehensive understanding on decoloniality see Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

“what epistemological locations drive mission today and how we can undertake missiology speaking from the colonial difference.”² Colonial difference for him is that which is outside of the thinking of modernity, which promises [false] benefits for the people. Colonial difference, therefore, will mean knowledge and experiences of the people that do not come under the rhetoric of modernity and is not driven by the “logic of inferiorization.”³ This will mean finding ways of doing mission that are embedded in the experiences of the people and informed by their locations and geographies. This implies questioning even our understanding “induced by colonial mindset” of our approach to mission, and the way we conceive of Asia. “Decolonial thinking” is therefore, that which seeks to “produce knowledge formed from the colonial difference.”⁴ Mission engagement in Asia, as we shall see in the later stage of the book has been shaped by the logic of modernity. For instance, our intervention programs - be it empowerment programs, development programs, our claims on the state, and uncritical reliance on democracy - are shaped by the way modernity produces and interprets these constellations of ideas. Stephen Neill and others have already pointed out this problem, yet our mission thinking is still shaped by the rhetoric of modernity.⁵

Approaching the book through “decolonial thinking” helps in unmasking these discrepancies. It aids in re-articulating important missional trajectories and transcending the current models of mission in Asia. This is not designed to arrive at a totalizing approach but to “make visible” the “multiplicity of knowledges, forms of being, and visions of the world.”⁶ Seeing mission through “colonial difference” also immediately brings out the need to reassess the term “poor” and rethink the dominant way of framing Asia. The re-assessment of such categories plays an important part in showing why a rethinking of mission is relevant.

² Boodoo, “Mission and Coloniality: Christianity and the Caribbean,” 75.

³ Cited from Gregory A. Banazak & Luis Reyes Ceja, “The Challenge and Promise of Decolonial Thought to Biblical Interpretation,” *Postscripts*, 4.1. (2008): 113-127 in Boodoo, “Mission and Coloniality: Christianity and the Caribbean,” 68.

⁴ Boodoo, “Mission and Coloniality: Christianity and the Caribbean,” 68.

⁵ In his work, *The Cross over Asia*, Stephen Neill (notwithstanding the fact that his language was also laced with *Orientalism*) lamented that Asia like others is moving from a “primitive” society to the age of mechanical power represented as “progress.” Looking back at the experiences of the West and the failure of industrial revolution, he wondered whether it can be really called “progress.” He expressed the same doubt about the working of democracy and “naturalization of ideas.” Bishop Stephen Neill, *The Cross over Asia* (London: The Canterbury Press, 1948), 25-26.

⁶ Cited from Gregory A. Banazak and Luis Reyes Ceja, “The Challenge and Promise of Decolonial Thought to Biblical Interpretation,” in Boodoo, “Mission and Coloniality: Christianity and the Caribbean,” 69.

Re-Assessing “the Poor”

“The poor” are normally considered to be those who are deprived socially, economically and culturally. They are also referred to as the marginalized, the exploited, the oppressed or the vulnerable ones. However, COVID-19 has shown that beneath the term “poor” or “marginalized” lies an array of intersecting issues that tends to be camouflaged by the term “poor” or “the marginalized.”

I borrow Judith Butler’s articulation of “precarity of life” in order to unpack the term “poor” and show how these ideas will be used in this book. According to Butler, there is a “differential allocation of grievability,” and the lives who we define as poor are lives that have already been marked as “ungrievable lives.”⁷ The “ungrievable lives” are those whose lives cannot be apprehended as lives lost or injured, or even lived, because from the start they have not been “framed” as lives (ontologically and epistemologically).⁸ Therefore, “ungrievable lives” are those who have not lived their lives in the full sense.

Butler claims that this kind of framing of lives can be seen in torture chambers, in imprisonment, and in the way racism projects certain lives as ungrievable. These lives can include lives of Dalits, indigenous communities, migrants, refugees, stateless people and others whose lives have not been framed as lives from the beginning, so that such people have been reduced to the status of being a migrant or a refugee. The social processes, neo-imperialism, and development projects of the nation states have rendered these lives as non-living. It is more than exclusion; it is a rendering of lives as non-human because they have already been framed as non-being. Such populations are at higher risk when calamities strike, including a pandemic such as this. Butler calls this situation the “precarity of life.”

“Precarity of life” also means those lives whose lives are “exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the state for protection.”⁹ Normally it is these people, described here as “ungrievable lives,” who require the protection of the state more than

⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), xiv-xv.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 1.

⁹ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 26.

anyone else, but the state is one of the main originators of violence in their lives. These lives are caught in these contradictions.

Butler writes,

To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection from violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another.¹⁰

The poor and the marginalized are not just “poor,” but victims of the “vicious spiral of political violence” that leads to uprooting, displacement, trauma and injuries.¹¹ For example, the indigenous people, who are driven out of their homes or forest land due to developmental projects of the state, are forced to migrate to cities and, in those cities, they are marked as refugees, migrants or stateless people, thereby forcing them to seek protection of the state, from the state. And it is these people that COVID-19 has impacted disproportionately. Therefore, when we think and talk of the poor in the context of COVID-19, we need to understand “being poor” or “marginalized” within these perspectives. This will help in assessing the kind of missional engagement that needs to be prioritized in Asia. It will also help us grasp what we mean when we speak of embracing God’s beloved community.

Framing Asia from the Edges

Re-assessing “the poor” requires a reframing of Asia. A reframed Asia provides the stimulus for re-aligning mission in Asia locally and, trans-locally (through people’s networks and connections), and provides the rationale for considering mission as a virtuous activity, committed towards a “habitual and firm disposition to do good”¹² in the light of God’s redemptive activity and the existential realities of the marginalized. But, in relation to mission, the challenging questions are: How do we perceive Asia? Whose context needs to be prioritised? From whose space and location do we connect Asia

¹⁰ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 26.

¹¹ Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, “Introduction,” in *Social Suffering* edited by Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), x.

¹² Cited in Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, “What is Virtue? Why is it important in the Christian life?” accessed November 12, 2020.

<https://www.archspm.org/faith-and-discipleship/catholic-faith/what-is-virtue-why-is-it-important-in-the-christian-life/> (11 November 2020)

and mission in Asia? And whose voices do we amplify, especially in the context of COVID-19?¹³ Amitav Acharya categorically states that “there is no singular idea of Asia.”¹⁴ Asia, he says, “is a multitude (although not always mutually exclusive) conceptions, some drawing on material forces, such as economic growth, interdependence, and physical power, and others having ideational foundations, such as civilizational linkages and normative aspirations.”¹⁵ This implies that Asia is not one homogenous exoticized unit. Thus, different countries, regions and sub-regions have their own unique problems and possibilities. Therefore, to work out a “homogenous” framework of Asia would not only be a monumental task, but such an attempt would seem perilous.

Generally, when one defines Asia, one immediately thinks of China, South Korea, Japan or India. According to Albert Tzeng and others, this thinking has to do with the “production and dissemination of scholarly knowledge about Asia,” often “framed by changing geopolitical context.”¹⁶ Asia is also defined and organized according to economic, political, cultural or historical hierarchies. These are further augmented and strengthened by institutions involved in the process of knowledge production, - such as foundations, professional associations, research institutes, governments, multinational agencies, and even organizations like the World Bank, through funding with particular agendas.¹⁷ Subsequently “the intellectual landscape of human knowledge about Asia”¹⁸ is generated and circulated for public consumption. Like Acharya, Tzeng et al. also argue that the currently circulated concepts of Asia, as a universality, and also as an epistemological category are contestable, because, in part this has been framed for more than two millennia through the European framework.¹⁹ Uncritically, Christian missions and missionaries engaged with Asia through these lenses.

¹³ Namsoon Kang also observed that charting a discourse on Asian theology is problematic. Some of the problems he sees is around questions of “Who/What is Asia?” or “Do Asians make up any kind of consistency? On what basis? Can we assume that Asian’s theological constructions are necessarily *Asian*?” The other problematic related to the formulation of Asian theology is, he adds, “Which/Whose history do we draw to chart this map of Asian theologians’ engagement with the construction of Asian theology? Who has produced knowledge about Asians and their experiences, and from what space/location?” Namsoon Kang, “Who/What is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Diversity and the Empire* edited by Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004), 100.

¹⁴ Amitav Acharya, “Asia is not One,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 69/4 (November 2010): 1001.

¹⁵ Acharya, “Asia is not One,” 1001.

¹⁶ Albert Tzeng, William L. Richter, and Ekaterina Koldunova, eds., *Framing Asian Studies: Geopolitics and Institutions* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018), 1.

¹⁷ A reading of Walter Mignolo is helpful in understanding and unpacking how this works. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics and Praxis*.

¹⁸ Tzeng, Richter, and Koldunova, eds., *Framing Asian Studies*, 2.

¹⁹ Tzeng, Richter, and Koldunova, eds., *Framing Asian Studies*, 2.

Thereby, mission in Asia is measured by what happens in China, India, Korea or the Himalayan region, and mission work focuses on issues that matters to these countries.

Mission agencies need to move beyond the dominant concept and definition of Asia. There are regions and sub-regions that are often forgotten, and thereby hardly make it onto the map of mission books in Asia. One such area is the Southeast Asian Massif²⁰ which Agrarian scholar James C. Scott calls “the last enclosure.”²¹ Regions like this are consciously or unconsciously excluded from the imagination and description of Asia. For example, this is what Willem van Schendel has to say about the slicing of Southeast Asia:

Anyone interested in finding fairly detailed modern maps showing the region covering Burma, Northeast India, Bangladesh, and neighbouring parts of China knows that these do not exist. This is a region that is always a victim of cartographic surgery. Maps of Southeast Asia may not even include the northern and western parts of Burma, let alone the neighbouring areas of India and Bangladesh. And maps of South Asia not infrequently present Northeast India (and sometimes Bangladesh) as an outlier that is relegated to an inset. Odd bits of Tibet and Yunnan may show up in far corners merely because of the need to fill up the rectangular shape of the map.²²

The question then is how do we think of doing mission in those places and among those people, who do not even appear on the map? Or are we also ignoring those geographies and people who do not form a part of the dominant map? Our reframing of mission in Asia should also pay attention to these locations and not adhere to how power defines Asia.

Asia is also made up of stateless people and the attempt to “incorporate them has been culturally styled as development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration.”²³ These “state projects of social control, rational simplifications, and the creation of “good” citizens through the operation

²⁰ For an exhaustive work on this see Jean Michaud, Margaret Byrne and Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, *The Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of Southeast Asian Massif* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

²¹ James C. Scott, *The Art of not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 4.

²² Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 20, (2002): 652.

²³ Scott, *The Art of not being Governed*, 4.

simplifications, and the creation of “good” citizens through the operation of various ideological and repressive apparatuses”²⁴ have created peculiar problems that do not surface in the dominant conception of Asia and the issues it faces. Most of them live without access to proper electricity or mobile towers and phones, far off from the seat of power and therefore neglected by the state. This differentiation implies the vital need for sensitivity to such locations in framing a possible mission paradigm.

Asia as a continent is also marked by experiences of colonialism. It was equally affected by imperialism, and neo liberalization. In fact, as Mary Steedly notes, “No part of the world has suffered so wide a range of foreign rulers. These include China, Japan, and the United States, as well as most of the major European imperial powers.”²⁵ It is also marked by militarization, including in democratic countries like India, where the state has been using the military to quell any sort of dissent to the central government since its inception as a postcolonial state. International border disputes that emerged due to colonial cartographic work and imperial policies have also resulted in border disputes between countries in which Asians that inhabit these borders live life “in a state of exception.”²⁶ Steedly remarks, “Under Western colonial rule, fluid boundaries became fixed, and power was gradually extended (in theory if not in practice) uniformly throughout each realm, stopping abruptly at the colonies borders.”²⁷ This led to the emergence of ethnic groups laying claims on their rights, conflicts between the state and the ethnic minorities, and conflicts among ethnic communities. Laws were adopted to frame these minorities as “recalcitrant” and “anti-nationals.” As a result, ethnic minorities continue to exist as “expendable lives.” However, in the popular consciousness, “Incidents of extraordinary brutality, such as the 1965 slaughter of communities in Indonesia, the Cambodia “killing fields,” or even the massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers at My Lai, seem to define (Southeast) Asia.”²⁸ Discussion on Asia therefore impels one to take into consideration the presence of these people whom the state tags as anti-nationals and whose locations it designates as “conflict zones.” Asia is also not only characterized by religious and cultural diversity,

²⁴ Mary Margaret Steedly, “The State of Culture Theory in the Anthropology of Southeast Asia,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol. 28 (1999): 441-442.

²⁵ Steedly, “The State of Culture Theory,” 435.

²⁶ State of exception is the kind of condition that “allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system.” Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

²⁷ Steedly, “The State of Culture Theory,” 435.

²⁸ Steedly, “The State of Culture Theory,” 444.

but it is also made up of these people whose vulnerability is valued differently, depending on the “where(ness)” of their location and “who(ness),” according to the framing instituted by power. Considering these scales will enable one to rethink the diversity of missiological engagement that is required in order to respond contextually and locally to Asia. It also means moving beyond the dominant mission discourses centred on religious diversity and intercultural theology.²⁹

Method of Research:

Testimonies from frontline mission workers were collected in a span of three months from seven countries in Asia. Due to travel restrictions, testimonials were gathered through Zoom meetings, telephonic conversations, through exchange of emails, collection of news reports, websites and at times over one to one meeting. Through the help of AsiaCMS fourteen frontline mission workers were identified from Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Conversations were also held with other mission workers identified through friends and with people known to the author. Attempts were also made to reach out to mission workers in other part of Asia, however that proved to be a failure. Therefore, the data collected are mostly from South Asia and Southeast Asia making the usage of the term Asia in the book a contentious one.

Testimonials serve as an important source of knowledge in this book. The idea of *testimonials as an important source of knowledge and information* has already been in the offing for quite some time.³⁰ In traditional societies, constituted by “unlettered races”³¹ until written forms of communication were formalized, testimonials, story-telling and narratives acted as a means

²⁹ Simon Chan critiques the way how this works in the Asian context. He writes, “Elitist Christologies begin with how the doctrine of Christ might serve the “big” questions regarding the churches’ relation with the sociopolitical and cultural-religious contexts, and the answer is through the cosmic Christ who liberates the poor and oppressed and is enculturated in Asian religions and cultures. They seek to show how the Church’s involvement in these contexts can be achieved primarily through dialogue. They often do not ask the more fundamental questions: How do ordinary Christians experience Christ?” Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 103. v

³⁰ *Testimonia* is a distinct literary genre that was popularized in Latin America since the 1970s. It is a “hybrid form of writing that blurs the boundaries of politics-narrative, fact-fiction, individual-collective, and as such, defies normative literary classification.” *Testimonia* is considered an alternative to autoethnography that “offer a way of seeing the communal in the private and allow its authors to assert knowledge claims and articulate political visions on behalf of their social groups without sacrificing the specificities of individual lived experiences.” It allows feminists to “insert themselves into the fraught terrain of knowledge production.” Patricia K. Connolly-Schaffer, “Staging Cross-Border (Reading) Alliances: Feminist Polyvocal Testimonials at Work,” A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of University of Minnesota, October 2012, 1-3.

³¹ Jangkhomang Guite, *Against State, Against History: Freedom, Resistance, and Statelessness in Upland Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

of information and knowledge formation. The court cases in the tiny village republics were held on the basis of *testimonials*. Western epistemologists also agree that “testimony is an invaluable source of knowledge.”³² Jennifer Lackey even suggested that “if we refrained from accepting what others told us, our lives both practically and intellectually, would be unrecognizable.”³³ Testimonials are therefore powerful tools of knowledge sharing especially for communities and people whose voices are either silenced or not recognized in “the fraught terrain of knowledge production.”³⁴ I appropriate this form of the communication of knowledge to develop the themes in this book.

The criteria for identifying and selecting the research collaborators were influenced particularly by their work among the communities and their day-to-day engagement with people in their localities. The research was carried out in two settings. The first setting comprised of speaking to mission workers attached to mission agencies, organizations and churches. Some of the mission workers work as part of the church ministry, while some work in the field of education, development, economic empowerment, advocacy, church planting, theological education, drugs and rehabilitation programs. However, due to paucity of space, not all the testimonies are included, but a few have been chosen, keeping gender, location (e.g. rural or urban) and other dynamics in mind.

The initial conversation involved getting responses through questionnaires. Questions revolved around asking the research collaborators about the background of their organization, the people they work with, their activities prior to the pandemic, problems they encountered due to COVID-19 in their mission work, the strategies of change they adopted, and the opportunities they saw. These testimonials help the book in three ways; 1) they provide “locally driven epistemologies” to frame mission in Asia; 2) they provide a mosaic of the context of Asia; and 3) they inform how mission workers in Asia, depending on their location responded to the COVID-19 situation. This collection of testimonials also provides theological imperative and content for rethinking mission.

³² Jennifer Lackey, *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

³³ Jennifer Lackey, *Learning from Words*, 1.

³⁴ Patricia K. Connolly-Schaffer, “Staging Cross-Border (Reading) Alliances: Feminist Polyvocal Testimonials at Work,” 3.

The second setting for gathering information involved interviews on a one-to-one basis, at a personal level. was done on a one-to-one basis at a personal level. The research collaborators in this group consisted of people known to the writer therefore the conversations were held in an informal way and questions were posed according to the way the conversation unfolded. No prior questions or questionnaires were distributed to them.

The testimonials of the mission workers were first transcribed and analysed using the decolonial lens, with a keen eye to pick the “local epistemological drive” that might have helped the mission workers in responding to the COVID-19 crises. Dominant themes that emerged out of the analysis of the testimonials were noted and synthesized to propose the concept of mission in Asia as an everyday virtuous activity. The testimonials of the mission workers also intersect with the “lived realities” of the people whose lives were disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Thus, *testimonials* of the mission workers, the existential realities of the people and the theological interpretation of mission as *Missio Dei* help shape the formation of mission as an everyday virtuous activity.

Chapterization

The book is arranged in seven chapters, including introduction and conclusion. This first chapter introduces the rationality of the book and its methodology. Chapter two brings out some of the major concerns COVID-19 has generated in the lives of the people, both globally and in Asia. Chapter three projects mission as an activity of God, in which human beings have been called to participate. We are to proclaim the good news of the reign of God in words and deeds and develop characters individually and collectively that exemplify the values of the kingdom of God. *Missio Dei* functions as the theological context for treating all Christians as participants in the mission of God and also for insisting that any activity that lends towards the enhancement of life or reduces “social suffering” can be considered a mark of mission.

Against these grains of thought, and the context of COVID-19, the testimonials of frontline mission workers are analysed in chapter four. The testimonials serve three purposes: 1) it brings out their mission practices; 2) it informs about the existential realities of vulnerable communities; and 3) it functions

as the source and content for a developing a paradigmatic and theological basis for mission.

The fifth chapter draws out paradigmatic and theological themes from the testimonials of the mission workers. Their testimonials help us see the way mission is practiced and enhanced by local cosmologies and spiritualities. On the basis of the themes developed, the sixth chapter provides a framework for appropriating the proposed mission paradigm: mission as everyday virtuous activity that is committed to the preservation of the lives of the communities, both individually and collectively.

Literature Review:

A brief literature review of some of the missiologists who have articulated the shift in mission paradigm is provided in order to understand the mission discourse, both in academia and outside. These books provide a glimpse of the methodological shifts that have taken place through the centuries, the current crises and opportunities in mission and mission approaches both theologically and pragmatically. The books reviewed here functions as basic mission text for this book.

David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* is considered magisterial and foundational for understanding mission. The book begins by recapturing the approaches of mission until 1950. Mission till then was understood as the sending of missionaries to a designated territory, the activities undertaken by such missionaries, the geographical area where the missionaries were active, the agency which dispatched the missionaries, the non-Christian world or "mission field," or the centre from which the missionaries operated on the mission fields.³⁵ These traditional interpretations of mission gradually changed in the course of the twentieth century. His work investigates the factors that have led to these changes.

Bosch also rues the attack on the traditional interpretation and practice of mission from within and outside and the crises in mission this has generated. He also shows how crises in mission has arisen from factors such as the advancement of science and technology, the process of secularization, the

³⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1.

dechristianization of the West, the non-feasibility of dividing the world into Christians and non-Christians territories, and the emergence of a religiously pluralist world induced by factors such as multiple migrations, the complicity in the subjugation of people of colour, the division of the world on the bases of the rich and the poor, the nascent churches' refusal to be dictated to, viewing Western theology as irrelevant, speculative and a product of ivory tower institutions. Bosch claims that the changes unfolding are the result of changes in the experiences of the people and whole world. He is of the opinion that the solution to the problem does not lie in a return to an earlier missionary consciousness and practice; rather, one requires a new vision to break out of the present crisis towards a different kind of missionary involvement which need not mean foreclosing everything generations of Christians have done before us or condemning all blunders.

After a detailed analysis of the contours of successive missionary paradigms, from the first century to the twentieth, he concludes that there was no single theology of mission through this history, nor different theologies of mission that excluded each other. Rather, they formed a multi-coloured mosaic that compliments and mutually enriches while challenging frames of reference. His contention is that, instead of trying to formulate one uniform view of mission, one should rather attempt to chart the contours of "a pluriverse of missiology in a universe of mission."³⁶

For Bosch, mission should be multidimensional in order to be credible and faithful to its character and origin. The credibility and character of mission is seen in the six major salvific events captured in the New Testament. This includes the incarnation of Christ, his death on the cross, his resurrection on the third day, his ascension, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the *Parousia*.³⁷ These Christological, salvific events should not be viewed in isolation but must be placed together. The content of mission according to Bosch is proclamation of the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, ascended Christ who is present in the Spirit among us and taking us into a future. Each of these events intersects with the other. For Bosch, mission is *Missio Dei*, which seeks to subsume into itself the *Missio ecclesiae*. It is the *Missio Dei* that makes up the church, purifies and sets it under the cross. As the community of the cross, it invites the participation

³⁶ Cited from Soares-Prabhu, "Missiology or Missiologies? *Mission Studies*, No. 6, (1986): 87 in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 8.

³⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 512.

of “Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus wagering on a future” with the “good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.”³⁸

Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder in their work *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, develop a missional model that stresses “Mission as Prophetic Dialogue.” Their book, as they claim, is a response to the challenges brought out by Bosch in his work *Transforming Mission* and by missiologists, J. Andrew Kirk and Wilbert Shenk, to “construct a theology that is inspired by God’s constant missionary action in the world and that has as its aim not only greater knowledge of God and God’s purposes but more reflexive and intelligent participation in those purposes.”³⁹ The second problem to which they respond in their book, as expressed in Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist’ work, is “to write a history of the Christian church that is really a history of the world Christian movement, one that incorporates all the diverse streams of Christianity and so tells the story of Christianity as it really happened.”⁴⁰ After an elaborate comparative study of mission documents and the perspectives of theologians and missiologist of Roman Catholic tradition, the World Council of Churches Document and the Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions of the last quarter of the twentieth century, they synthesize the three strands of missional thought to recast “Mission as Prophetic Dialogue.” They are of the opinion that mission should be “characterized as an exercise of *dialogue*. Just as the interior life of God is a perfect communion of gift and reception, identity and openness to the other, communion in relationship and communion in mission, so the church that is called into being by that mission must be a community that not only gives of itself in service to the world and to the peoples of the world’s cultures but learns from its involvement and expands its imagination of the depths of God’s unfathomable riches.”⁴¹ They also claim that, just as the Triune God’s missionary presence is about persuasion and freedom-respecting love, mission needs to proceed in ways that affirm the freedom and dignity of human beings. Similarly, church that is rooted in God’s act of salvation through self-emptying cannot think of itself as culturally superior. Mission as participation in the mission of the

³⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519.

³⁹ Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Bangalore: Clarentine Publications, 2004), 2.

⁴⁰ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 2.

⁴¹ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 348.

Triune God, they contend, can only proceed in dialogue and in humility and in a way that is prophetic.

Scott W. Sunquist's work *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* emerges out of his participant observation enquiry and from his own experiences of having worked for twenty-five years in ecumenical contexts, writing global history. His work is held together by three thoughts: history, theology, and ecclesiology. Like other missiologists he also examines the history and globalization of Christianity since the sixteenth-century reformations, the works of the Jesuits in Asia and Latin America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the work of the Moravians and German Lutherans in the eighteenth century, as foundational for contemporary missiology. He finds their work in identifying with people in mission, in studying local contexts, and in taking personal risks to be still germane to mission work today.

He also articulates missiology, theologically and biblically. He is of the opinion that missiology must be firmly rooted in a Trinitarian understanding of God, from which emerge various structures (means of accomplishing mission) and practices. The thesis of his book is that *Mission is from the heart of God, to each context, and it is carried out in suffering in this world for God's eternal glory*. He also postures that the central importance in the understanding of integral participation in Christian mission includes, first, "that mission is from God's heart-grounded in God's love. Secondly, mission is to particular contexts - it is contextual or incarnational. Thirdly, mission has a temporal reality-it participates in the suffering of God. And finally, it has an eternal dimension-reflecting God's character, God's glory."⁴² He also suggests that Christians are always participating with the Triune God who is always sending out to reconcile and redeem. Like Bosch he also illustrates *Missio Dei* as a foundational concept that launches the church from the place of worship and fellowship into the frontiers of God's reign. However, he moves beyond Bosch by insisting that to live such a live, participating with God in such a movement, is costly and painful, and yet, in the end, glorious.

⁴² Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 2013), xii.

Michael W. Goheen in his work, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues* seeks to locate “*Missio Dei* as narrated in the biblical story and place the mission of that church in that narrative context.”⁴³ For Goheen, mission is “participation in the story of God’s mission and the role that the people of God play in that story gives them their missional identity.”⁴⁴ In the light of this, he interprets the very life and existence of the “church as missional by its very nature, and the whole of its mission springs from this identity.”⁴⁵ According to him, the changing global scenario marked by the collapse of colonialism, the spread of globalization, urbanization, socio-economic problems, cultural shifts, and the resurgence of religion impels one to attend to the context and thereby adopt a shift in mission thinking. He affirms that the church is always contextual and, must discern the times and address them. But he adds that missiology must be rooted in the gospel and the Word of God, while also addressing the time and place in which it finds itself. This indicates that missiology will vary from place to place and from time to time. In the context of the changing scenario that he has highlighted, Goheen feels that mission studies should pay attention to “fresh reflection on Scripture and Mission,” “reassess the way we understand the history of mission,” reflect “on the nature of mission,” “contextualization,” “the issue of the gospel and Western culture,” and the “missionary encounter with other world religions,” “urban mission,” and find meaning of a “world church” in the changing scenario.

All these authors emphasize the changing scenario and the need to realign mission perspectives accordingly. They all fundamentally agree that mission is God’s mission and Christians, and the Church, are called to participate in that activity of God. It is on the basis of the wisdom offered by these missiologists that this book tries to locate a mission paradigm embedded in the current experiences of the pandemic.

⁴³ Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission: Scripture, History and Issues* (Illinois: IVP Academic Press, 2014), 12.

⁴⁴ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission*, 12.

⁴⁵ Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission*, 2.

2. Covid-19 and the Asian Experiences

The novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a new strain of coronavirus, first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. It is a new virus linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold.⁴⁶ On 31st December 2019, the World Health Organization was formally informed about a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan. By 5th of January, 59 cases were reported, but none were fatal. A few days later, 282 confirmed cases were reported in countries like Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. By then there were six deaths in Wuhan, 51 severely ill, and 12 in critical condition.⁴⁷ On 11th March 2020, there were more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries, and 4,291 people had lost their lives. The WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on 11th March 2020 declared COVID-19 a pandemic.⁴⁸ A month later, on 22nd April 2020, the Director-General announced that the virus would be there for a long time, the virus remains extremely dangerous and most of the world's population remains susceptible to it.⁴⁹ A sense of fear, uncertainty and hopelessness sunk in all over the globe, as COVID-19 began to expose human vulnerability.

Impact of COVID-19: An Overview

Some of the major impacts COVID-19 has had on human lives are re-articulated here, drawing primarily from WHO documents.

Rhetoric, Stigma and Discrimination

During the outbreak of the virus and given the impact it had on a global scale, the WHO suggested that the best way to arrest the spread of the virus was to be well informed about COVID-19, its causes and how the virus

⁴⁶ UNICEF India, "All you need to know about Coronavirus in India," accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/india/coronavirus/covid-19>

⁴⁷ Steve Chaplin, "COVID-19: A Brief History and Treatments in Development," May 21, 2020, <https://www.prescriber.co.uk/article/covid-19-a-brief-history-and-treatments-in-development/>

⁴⁸ World Health Organization, "Who Director-General's opening remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19," March 11, 2020, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-mon-covid-19---11-march-2020>

⁴⁹ World Health Organization, "WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19," April 22, 2020, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--22-april-2020>

spreads. It also proposed routines such as washing hands or using alcohol-based solutions to disinfect one-self. However, the information that COVID-19 spreads primarily “through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes”⁵⁰ made everyone weary of the other- this constructed the “other” as a potential threat. This fear was further reinforced by the recommended measure of maintaining at least six feet distance and avoiding crowds. The virus was construed as an enemy, and the race against COVID-19 projected as “war against the enemy.” This sense of seeing the virus as an “enemy” and fight against it as “war” has impacted the way we perceive people and families who have been affected by COVID-19. Along with the virus, the presence of the other has become an anxiety.

In this document, the WHO also observed that there has been a manifestation of stigma and discrimination with COVID-19 being associated with some specific nationalities and races. Stigma and discrimination were also directed towards migrants and people who have travelled to affected countries. Even emergency responders and health care workers were discriminated against. Such stigmatization and discrimination have had influence on health behaviours, with negative physical and mental consequences on the stigmatized people and communities.

Increased Domestic Violence: The other problem the WHO observed was the rise in violence against women during the lockdown. Similar concerns have also been raised by the UN Women Forum. According to a UN Women Report that was published in April 2020, (around that time) there were 90 countries that were in lockdown, with four billion people staying at home, sheltering themselves from the global contagion of COVID-19. While this was a protective measure, it also brought out the dangerous reality of violence against women. They noted, “We see a shadow pandemic growing of violence against women.”⁵¹ They projected that with the pandemic growing, with more cases being reported and more lockdown being enforced, there would be more domestic violence and more need for helplines and shelters across the world. They claim that even before

⁵⁰ World Health Organization, “Coronavirus,” accessed October 15, 2020.

https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_

⁵¹ UN Women, “Violence against Women and Girls: The Shadow Pandemic,” Statement by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, April 6, 2020.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

COVID-19, domestic violence was already on the rise. In the previous 12 months alone, 243 million women and girls (aged 15-49) across the globe were subjected to violence, including sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner. With COVID-19, they predicted this number would increase.⁵² The WHO also assessed that existing gender and social inequalities have been further exacerbated by COVID-19 and impacted girls and women differently than boys and men. The exposure to violence, it cited, was due to “the social norms and expectations around” women’s caregiving role. According to the WHO’s estimate, seventy percent of caregivers are women. Moreover, the curtailment of their mobility also impacted their access to essential health service, and brought economic challenges induced by COVID-19 restrictions.⁵³

Impact on Vulnerable People: The WHO also pointed out the way the threat and experience of COVID-19 has impacted different people in different ways. The health risk of COVID-19 to older adults and people with pre-existing conditions are considered higher than for the rest of the population. However, there are people with greater vulnerabilities to COVID-19, depending on the variables of “their living arrangements, financial instability and lack of specific safeguards impacting the risk of infection, such as persons with disabilities, people who are homeless, refugees, migrants, and prisoners.”⁵⁴ This implies that those who were already vulnerable in the social and economic hierarchy have now, with COVID-19, become all the more vulnerable.

Impact of Restrictive Measures: The fourth factor the WHO has identified includes concerns surrounding the quarantine and restrictive measures related to COVID-19. Once COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, many countries enforced “large-scale public health and social measures in an attempt to reduce transmission and minimize the impact of COVID-19, including quarantine and the restriction of movement of individuals.”⁵⁵ These restrictions have disproportionately affected the poor and the vulnerable, who depend on their day-to-day earnings for their livelihood.

⁵² UN Women, “Violence against Women and Girls: the Shadow Pandemic.”

⁵³ World Health Organization, “Addressing Human Rights as Key to the COVID-19 Response,” 21 April 2020. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/addressing-human-rights-as-key-to-the-covid-19-response>

⁵⁴ World Health Organization, “Addressing Human Rights as Key to the COVID-19 Response.”

⁵⁵ World Health Organization, “Addressing Human Rights as Key to the COVID-19 Response.”

Besides the above factors that have been identified by the WHO and other agencies, there are also other pressing concerns raised by COVID-19. The UN's Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 warned that "The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than health crises: It is affecting societies and economies at their core. While the impact of the pandemic will vary from country to country, it will most likely increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale..."⁵⁶ According to an estimate that was published by the World Bank, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown between 88 million to 114 million into extreme poverty, by far the largest increase in extreme poverty since 1990. The World Bank estimates that a total of between 703 million and 729 million people are in extreme poverty, and that the number will rise further in 2021. Josh Zumbun in his analysis of the World Bank findings, states that the pandemic is also creating new demographics of extreme poverty. Before the pandemic, the population of the extreme poor was concentrated in the rural areas, among the uneducated young and in the agricultural sector. But the pandemic has pushed poverty among "people in congested urban areas, with higher levels of education, and who work in industries such as informal services, construction and manufacturing."⁵⁷ He further underlined that, "The new poor are more urban, better educated and less likely to work in agriculture than those living in extreme poverty before COVID-19."⁵⁸

The discussion initiated in the above section provides only a bird's eye view of some of the impacts. Problems caused by COVID-19 remain deeper and bigger. There is no doubt that COVID-19 has fractured human lives and communities.

The Asian Experiences of the Pandemic

COVID-19 in Asia needs to be seen against the pre-existing conditions of disparities and vulnerabilities in which Asian societies exist. The virus, unlike in other parts of the world, has not spread rapidly in most of the

⁵⁶ UNDP Asia and the Pacific, "COVID-19: Socio-Economic Impact in Asia and the Pacific," accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/covid-19-pandemic-response/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19.html>

⁵⁷ Josh Zumbun, "Coronavirus has thrown around 100 million people into Extreme Poverty, World Bank Estimates," *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-has-thrown-around-100-million-people-into-extreme-poverty-world-bank-estimates-11602086400>

⁵⁸ Zumbun, "Coronavirus has thrown around 100 million people into Extreme Poverty, World Bank Estimates."

Asian countries.⁵⁹ The United Nations Policy Brief attributes this to the measures taken by the governments who recognized the problems, communicated early, leveraged existing institutions, outlined effective mitigation efforts and spoke with a coherent voice.⁶⁰ These efforts translated into citizens' compliance with preventive measures and rules.⁶¹ Initiatives taken by local communities have also contributed to arresting the spread of the virus. Biswanath Sinha claims that "ownership at the village level" by local communities contributed to the controlling of the spread of virus. Historically these institutions have played an important role in managing the norms of the communities. Today they play "a critical role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in the region by enforcing social regulations."⁶² The other factor in arresting the spread of the virus can also be seen in the way various bodies came together to tackle the spread of virus. In Mizoram and Nagaland, the state government roped in citizens by involving civil societies, Self Help Groups, student bodies, local community leaders and churches.

But the Asian experience of COVID-19 does not end there. According to reports, the "health, economic and political impact of COVID-19 has been significant" particularly across Southeast Asia.⁶³ The United Nations, in its policy brief on the impact of COVID-19, stated:

"[T]he pandemic has inflicted real suffering, with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable, and it has highlighted prevailing inequalities, concerns over governance, and the unsustainability of the current development pathway. It has exacerbated existing risks and revealed new challenges, including to peace and security, as well as human rights."⁶⁴

Added to this has been the confluence of COVID-19 and disasters. As the pandemic unfolded, the region was hit by Cyclone Amphan and Cyclone Nisarga along with widespread flooding. The "collision of disasters"

⁵⁹ United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia," July 2020, <https://www.un.org/ldportal/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-south-east-asia/>

⁶⁰ Not everyone agrees to this suggestion. For a critical analysis see Sebastian Strangio, "The Riddle of COVID-19 and Democracy in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/the-riddle-of-covid-19-and-democracy-in-southeast-asia/>

⁶¹ United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia."

⁶² Biswanath Sinha, "Controlling COVID-19: Learning from the Northeast," *India Development Review*, April 22, 2020.

⁶³ United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia," 2.

⁶⁴ United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia," 2.

further aggravated the risk for the affected population and hampered the recovery process.⁶⁵

It has also surfaced that in Asia there is a hierarchy in the distribution of the impact of COVID-19 propelled by the vulnerabilities in which some social groups of people are already located. These groups of people include women, the economically poor, marginalized communities like the Dalits, ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, stateless people, migrants, refugees, and people in detention or other institutions. These groups of people are often left out of formal policy and social protection measures adopted by the governments and often lack access to health services.⁶⁶ At the same time, they are the ones that have the greater need of more social and economic safety nets. Another concern that needs to be taken into account when assessing the impact of COVID-19 in Asia is the collision of conflict and COVID. The UN Policy brief estimates that in Myanmar approximately 130,000 internally displaced persons from different communities are confined in Rakhine State, while more than 800,000, mostly Rohingya forced to flee in 2017, are refugees in Bangladesh. The outbreak of COVID-19 coupled with the ongoing hostilities among the different ethnic groups has resulted in displacement of communities, caused casualties, and undermined civilian and humanitarian efforts in response to COVID-19.⁶⁷

But what stands out in Asia about COVID-19 experiences is the way the state militarized the COVID-19 measures. Li-Li Chen alerted that “All Southeast Asian states responded to COVID-19 crises through a militarized approach, such as suspension of political and civil rights of citizens, surveillance, controlling or blocking access to information, quarantine, hygiene, travel bans, border closure and increased border control, detainment, and legitimizing military and police use of force.”⁶⁸ Some of the examples include the President of Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte’s announcement that empowered the military and the police to shoot lockdown violators, extended the coerced community quarantine in the island of Luzon and

⁶⁵ Mihir R. Bhatt, “When Disasters Collide,” *The Impact of COVID-19 in Asia Pacific*, 188, (September 2020):2. <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/impact-covid-19-asia-pacific-southasiadisastersnet-issue-no-188-september-2020>

⁶⁶ United Nations, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia,” 14.

⁶⁷ United Nations, “Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on South-East Asia,” 14.

⁶⁸ Li-Li Chen, “Human Rights and Democracy Amidst Militarized COVID-19 Responses in Southeast Asia,” *E-International relations* (May 13, 2020): 1.

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/05/13/human-rights-and-democracy-amidst-militarized-covid-19-responses-in-southeast-asia/>

other high risk regions that included curfew, shelter-in-place, and closure of non-essential businesses. It is estimated that more than 10,000 were arrested for violating the curfew, and human rights violation by the police surged. These violations include confining violators in a dog cage, a coffin, and forcing them to sit for hours in the midday sun.⁶⁹ In Cambodia, the National Assembly passed “a state of emergency law granting” Hun Sen, the Prime Minister, “greater power in handling the pandemic.”⁷⁰ Besides, these, Murray Hievert notes, “COVID-19 has been tough on the health and economies of Southeast Asia, but the region’s fledgling quasi-democracies are also under threat. Efforts to control the virus are giving authoritarian rulers the perfect cover to adopt draconian levers to rein in their opponents and critics.”⁷¹ According to a report published by Asia Foundation, in Malaysia the government responded to COVID-19 by enforcing a lockdown and distributing food and supplies to vulnerable communities through local distribution centres; relief materials were delivered by the military since the officials believed the military was best equipped to handle this effectively. However, it is reported that many undocumented migrants and refugees were prevented from going to the relief distribution centres for fear that they might be arrested, detained or deported.⁷²

COVID-19 brought out the many complex realities that beset Asian society and exposed the already poor to extreme vulnerabilities. Along with the virus, the need to attend to other dynamics and social processes that reduces people to non-being has become an urgent need in missional engagement.

Why must we embrace our Beloved Community?

The virus has also brought out the vulnerability of all human lives and our interdependence with each other for our wellbeing. Pope Francis, in his recent Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, spelled out that “a worldwide tragedy like the COVID-19 pandemic” has “revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems

⁶⁹ Li-Li Chen, “Human Rights and Democracy Amidst Militarized COVID-19 responses in Southeast Asia,” 1.

⁷⁰ Murray Heibert, “COVID-19 threatens Democracy in Southeast Asia,” EastAsiaforum May 25, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/25/covid-19-threatens-democracy-in-southeast-asia/>

⁷¹ Murray Heibert, “COVID-19 threatens Democracy in Southeast Asia.”

⁷² However, local authorities recognized this problem and allowed civil societies to take charge of the relief distribution centers. See Nicola Nixon, “Civil Society in Southeast Asia during COVID-19: Responding and Evolving under Pressure,” *GovAsia* 1, September, 2020, <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GovAsia-1.1-Civil-society-in-Southeast-Asia-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

of all.”⁷³ Drawing upon the parable of the “Good Samaritan,” he calls for love in a time like this; a love that “is more than a series of benevolent actions,” that seeks “the best for the lives of others.”⁷⁴ The World Council of Churches also, in its document *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity*, suggested adopting “new forms of solidarity reaching across all boundaries,” in the event of the “heightened awareness of our shared vulnerability.”⁷⁵ This realization of a sense of shared vulnerability has “created an openness to each other and towards the divine.”⁷⁶ But the virus has also exposed the multiple facets of vulnerability, including; the “scandalous gap”⁷⁷ between the rich and the poor and the “scandalous” impact the virus has had on marginalized people. It is this “scandalous” impact the virus has generated on the marginalized communities that makes this book a necessity, and a search for new mission framework in Asia a theological imperative.

As communities called to demonstrate and bear witness to the reign of God at all times, to the end of the earth, and in all nations, the disruption of our lives due to the pandemic also brings to the forefront of our Christian life questions of what we should do. Drawing a parallel between Psalms 137:4 “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” and the current experiences of the pandemic, theologian Miroslav Volf reminds that it is as though we are in exile in our own homes. He says that, although the pandemic has disrupted our lives, our lives have to go on, since our lives cannot be interrupted, paused or stopped. For him, the question is “[H]ow do we live with this disruption? How do we live with the menacing cloud that is over life...?”⁷⁸ We are to continue to seek and search for meanings that make life worth living amidst the fear, uncertainty and despair that surrounds us. How can that be made possible? Volf suggests:

[T]he central question of the Christian faith is what kind of life is worthy of our humanity? How are we to live our lives as the creatures of the God who has

⁷³ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Mumbai: St. Paulist Press, 2020), Chapter 1:32.

⁷⁴ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Chapter 3: 94.

⁷⁵ World Council of Churches, *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action during COVID-19 and Beyond*, (Italics mine), accessed November 18, 2020. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/serving-a-wounded-world-in-interreligious-solidarity-a-christian-call-to-reflection-and-action-during-covid-19-and-beyond>

⁷⁶ Eleonora Dorothea Hof, *Reimagining Mission in the Postcolonial Condition: A Theology of Vulnerability and Vocation at the Margins* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Academic, 2016), 300.

⁷⁷ World Council of Churches, *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity*, 6.

⁷⁸ For the Life of the World, “A Message from Miroslav Volf: Faith in a time of Pandemic,” March 28, 2020, <https://for-the-life-of-the-world-yale-center-for-faith-culture.simplecast.com/episodes/trailer-a-message-from-miroslav-volf-singing-a-song-in-a-strange-land/transcript>

revealed himself in Jesus Christ-Jesus Christ who was the saviour of those who suffered, who was on the mission to free people from power of evil that destroy life and make life difficult and to restore us back to something like true life, life abundant, flourishing life-... And I think the central question is *Might something like that be possible also under the conditions under which we live?*⁷⁹

The questions that Volf raises are relevant for our missional life too. In our rethinking of mission in Asia, we are to explore the life that is worthy of living; we are to continue to demonstrate the mission of God in Jesus Christ exemplified through the work of Christ. In the midst of our own vulnerabilities, we are to create situations that make it possible for lives to flourish like Jesus, whose birth is described as “light shining into darkness.” This pandemic expresses the intensity of the darkness in which we are caught.⁸⁰ Amidst that darkness we are to be like a light shining in the darkness. Our mission mandate, found in Matthew 28:19-20, is intrinsically tied to being the “light of the world (Matt 5:14-16),” and “salt of the earth (Matt 5: 13).” To respond at this time of darkness to human frailty and hopelessness is a mandate that the Christian community cannot evade. How can we realize the meaning of “life abundant” (John 10:10) through our mission work under these conditions of disruptions?

Conclusion

COVID-19 has disrupted human lives, has had the greatest impact on the vulnerable people and communities. It has also brought out the difference in the allocation of vulnerability and grievability of lives. However, the experiences of life during the pandemic have also brought out the importance of our interdependence on each other. The crisis has created a situation for people to practice their faith in their lives with their neighbours. For Christians, this is all the more important because we have been called to be the light in the darkness. We are not to be caught in the moment of darkness, but to move beyond.

⁷⁹ For the Life of the World, “A Message from Miroslav Volf: Faith in a time of Pandemic.”

⁸⁰ For the Life of the World, “A Message from Miroslav Volf: Faith in a time of Pandemic.”

3. Understanding Mission as *Missio Dei*

Mission is an activity intrinsic to a Christian life. However, what constitutes mission, and what are its parameters and goals have been contentious questions. This chapter will look at some of the important contemporary discussions on mission in order to map a framework that will help make sense the *testimonials* discussed in the next chapter.

Christian Mission and its Purpose

The word *mission* derives from the Latin word *mitto*, meaning “to send,” and *Missio*, implying “sending.”⁸¹ The word was first used by the Jesuits Ignatius Loyola and Jacob Loyner in the year 1544 to “describe the spread of Christian faith.”⁸² However, by the seventeenth century, *mission* began to be used commonly. Prior to that, the common usage was *apostolate*, connected with apostles.⁸³ Missiologists suggest that the word *mission* is attached to a purpose of being sent for a “specific task.”⁸⁴ According to Martin Lee, there are two main Greek words employed in the New Testament which are translated as *sent*. The word *apostello* is often translated as “sent forth,” from which one derives the word *apostle*, meaning someone who is *sent forth*. *Pempo* is the other word for *sent*, but this word does not imply a specific purpose. Lee claims that there is generally a purpose in being *sent*, therefore one can assume that “mission is about sending with a purpose.”⁸⁵ Similarly, Christopher Wright also recognizes that at the heart of *mission* lies the sense of “sending” and “sending forth” with a purpose. Drawing from the biblical narratives, Wright provides examples of the purpose of being “sent.” For instance, the sending of Joseph to save lives in famine (Gen.45:7), Moses being sent to deliver the Israelites from oppression and exploitation (Exod. 3:10), Jeremiah being sent to proclaim God’s word (Jer. 1:7), Jesus being sent to preach the good news (Luke 4:16-19), and the disciples being sent to preach and demonstrate the reign of God through healing and other activities (Matt. 10:5-8).⁸⁶ All these examples

⁸¹ Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), xiv.

⁸² Ott, Stephen J. Strauss and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, xiv.

⁸³ Ott, Stephen J. Strauss and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, xiv.

⁸⁴ Martin Lee, “The Five Marks of Mission,” *Global Connections Occasional Paper*, No. 29, (Autumn, 2008): 1.

⁸⁵ Lee, “The Five Marks of Mission,” 1.

⁸⁶ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), 23-24.

demonstrate that there is a definite purpose for being sent and the purposes are varied. The examples provided by Wright also suggest that there are a range of biblically sanctioned activities for which people are sent by God. These activities can include relief, preaching, evangelism, teaching, healing, action for justice etc.⁸⁷

Mission as the Activity of God

Closely related to the word “sent” is the “goal-orientation,” which, according to Wright, can be understood by first asking, “Whose mission it is?” Mission, he says, is the mission of God, in which God himself has a mission, a goal and a purpose for the whole creation; and, as part of the divine mission and initiative, God calls people to participate with God in the accomplishment of that mission.⁸⁸ This implies that “mission flows from the prior mission of God.”⁸⁹ Prior to Wright, David Bosch had also described mission as God’s mission or *Missio Dei*:

God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate.⁹⁰

This implies that mission means being sent by God for a purpose, with a specific goal, through different activities, to fulfil the purpose of God. Mission is expansive in its purpose, all embracing therefore inclusive, and infinite, for it is in the coming of the reign that is to come that, it will be realized.

Traditional Understanding of Mission

In the traditional sense, mission was seen as “the sending of the missionaries to the heathen, non-Christians or the uncivilized people.”⁹¹ According to this understanding, conversion, church planting and expansion of Christianity was the main goal. Mission was also seen through a geographic lens. Lee writes:

⁸⁷ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 24.

⁸⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 24.

⁸⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 24.

⁹⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

⁹¹ Asai Soror, “Methodological Trends in Missiology: An Exploration on the Evolution of *Missio Dei*,” (D. Th Assessment Paper presented at United Theological College, Bangalore, 2020), 2.

It [mission] was conceived mainly in geographical terms, with the purpose of taking the gospel from the Christian West to the mission fields of the non-Christian world. Sending was perceived as trans-cultural in nature. The purpose was to save souls and to plant churches, mainly in foreign countries, by means of the preaching of the gospel. The agents of mission were principally missionaries.⁹²

The trans-nationalizing of gospel to those people who had not heard of it coincided with the spread of colonialism, paternalism and an *orientalised* mentality of representation and difference.⁹³ Thus, “the course and practice of Western Christianity’s geographical expansion were deeply shaped by colonialist patterns.”⁹⁴ Ideologically, it was shaped by the Enlightenment’s understanding that “explanation of all things was now, in principle, accessible through use of human reason and that the conscience was set free from the shackles of tradition and superstition.”⁹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin observed that mission agencies influenced by such thinking started using education as a means of liberating people from the influence of traditions and superstitions. Schools functioned as agents of enlightenment, and missionaries accepted this idea and paid much attention to schoolwork.⁹⁶ The entanglement of Enlightenment ideas, colonialism and Christian mission has also been discussed by Bosch. Bosch explains that mission, in its work, thinking, and practice was “a child of the Enlightenment.”⁹⁷ He outlines five theological responses, shaped by the “Enlightenment’s elevation of reason as the only faculty by means of which human can arrive at knowledge and insight”⁹⁸ which further shaped mission engagement in the twentieth century. These include projection of Christianity as a unique religion, as something for private life, more rational than science, a rule for all society, and as humanity’s liberator from every redundant religious attachment.⁹⁹ Bosch was also of the opinion that the idea of progress, which was another of the Enlightenment period’s constellation of ideas, provided the impulse for colonial expansion and “benevolent colonialism.” Christian mission enterprises

⁹² Lee, “The Five marks of Mission,” 1.

⁹³ *Orientalism* is a term popularized by Edward Said. According to Said, *Orientalism* denotes “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident.” It is a process of creation of the Orient through ways of representation and knowledge formation. See Edward S. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 2.

⁹⁴ Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission: Scripture, History and Issues* (Illinois: IVP Academic Press, 2014), 16.

⁹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, “Preface,” in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, 2.

⁹⁶ Newbigin, “Preface,” in *Toward the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission*, 3.

⁹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 274.

⁹⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 352.

⁹⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 352.

took up the idea of progress and reflected it in the project of development.¹⁰⁰ By the 1960s, development plans were executed both by the post-colonial governments and the church. Development was projected as a solution to solve all human problems.¹⁰¹

However, Bevans and Schroeder contend that Protestant mission at this time was motivated by other factors too. They claim that love was one of the most important missionary motivations during this century. Love led to compassion, missionary dedication, and a genuine concern for others. Closely knitted to this idea was the ultimate purpose of saving souls or salvation.¹⁰² However, the missionary motivation of love “often led to a condescending attitude of the missionary toward the “innocent” and “placed the recipients of the missionary efforts in an inferior position.”¹⁰³ The missionary motivation of love shifted from seeing the recipients as God’s object of love to “the pagan’s pitiable state.”¹⁰⁴ The missionaries motivated by such a feeling “were blind to their own ethnocentrism and followed a more *tabula rasa* [clean slate] approach in terms of the interaction between gospel and culture.”¹⁰⁵ This was further reinforced by colonialism, and imperialism, which can be seen in the way William Carey saw civilization and the spread of the gospel as hand-in hand goals to be accomplished.¹⁰⁶ Bevans and Schroeder, however, cautions that there were missionaries who were against the imposition of Western culture, who defended and safeguarded the interests of the colonized people, and that the cultures brought by missionaries also had some positive impacts.¹⁰⁷

One can conclude that, in the traditional sense, mission till the twentieth century was “generated by the church (*Missio ecclesiae*), while aligning with the state (*Missio stati*) for the purpose of civilizing and Christianizing, resulting in a cultural hegemony (*Missio culturae*) where Western ‘civilization’ supplanted indigenous cultures.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 356.

¹⁰¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 356.

¹⁰² Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 230.

¹⁰³ Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 230.

¹⁰⁴ Cited from Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 290 in Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 230.

¹⁰⁵ Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 231.

¹⁰⁶ Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 230.

¹⁰⁷ Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 231, Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009); Joseph Prabhakar Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, “Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists, and Perspectives,” in *Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists, and Perspectives* edited by Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, Joseph Prabhakar Dayam and I. P. Asheervadham (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Saror, “Methodological Trends in Missiology.” 2.

Missio Dei as the Theological Basis of Mission

Missio Dei was a phrase introduced in the twentieth century. It is a Latin term, translated as “mission of God.” It refers to the “Christian theological understanding of mission” which grounds “Christian missionary theory and practice in the missionary activity of the Triune God.”¹⁰⁹ This understanding of mission served as a “corrective to the Christendom notion of western mission of the past centuries” and move towards a new and unifying thought of mission.¹¹⁰ By the middle of the twentieth century, mission as *Missio Dei* had come to occupy a popular place in mission understanding. In the preceding century, mission has been seen as saving souls, or introducing people to the Western ways of life, or was seen in terms of the expansion of the church, or the transformation of the world underpinned by kingdom of God values.¹¹¹ However, by the mid- twentieth century, a theological articulation of *Missio Dei* took shape.¹¹² Karl Barth is reputed to have been the first exponent of this theological paradigm, which was a shift from the Enlightenment approach to mission, which had emphasized on human ability to solve the human predicament. His influence is said to have reached its peak at the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council, in 1952. It was during this conference that the idea of *Missio Dei* emerged clearly, though the term was not used.¹¹³ According to Nguyen Kim Son, though the idea of *mission Dei* “was not used at once” at the fifth IMC conference, yet it had already appeared in “Karl Hartenstein’s report from his essay in 1934.”¹¹⁴

The primary reference of *Missio Dei* was “the purposes and activities of God in and for the whole universe.”¹¹⁵ In this:

¹⁰⁹ L. Pachau, “*Missio Dei*” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* edited by John Corrie (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 232-233; Also see Saror, “Methodological Trends in Missiology,” 2.

¹¹⁰ Saror, “Methodological Trends in Missiology,” 8.

¹¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.

¹¹² J. Nelson Jennings, “Broader Implications of the *Missio Dei*,” in *Reflecting on and Equipping for Christian Mission* edited by Steve Bevans, Teresai Chai and Nelson Jennings (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2015), 40. For the development of the idea of *Missio Dei* theologically see John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth and the nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010); For a discussion on the debates surrounding *Missio Dei* among mission organizations and the development and formalization of the term in mission see William Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission: A Study of the Encounter between the Missionary Enterprise and the Church and its Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1956).

¹¹³ Pachau, “*Missio Dei*” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 233. Karl Hartenstein, who had articulated a similar idea two decades earlier, is credited with having first utilized the term *Missio Dei*.

¹¹⁴ Nguyen Kim Son, *Cultural Integration and the Gospel in Vietnamese Mission Theology: A Paradigm Shift* (Cumbria: Langham, 2019), 73.

¹¹⁵ J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 25.

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *Missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.¹¹⁶

In this approach “mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God” and “the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission,” and “to participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.”¹¹⁷ This was not without its problems. Missiologists have identified two problems associated with this. The first was the apprehension that “[t]he limitless broadening of mission leads to the loss of its cutting edge,” which was particularly cautioned by Stephen Neill, who said, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.” The second problem was concerning the “identification of God’s work in secular history as God’s mission...”¹¹⁸ After Willingen, two major competing approaches emerged with regard to *Missio Dei*. The first approach understood *Missio Dei* “as God’s evangelizing work in the world through the church.” The other saw *Missio Dei* “as God’s activity in the secular world over and beyond the church.”¹¹⁹ L. Pachuau in his assessment of the theology of *Missio Dei* concluded that in the history of missionary thought *Missio Dei* has played a corrective role by:

upholding the missionary nature of the Triune God from which it seeks to draw the theological basis and meaning of the church’s mission. It is not the church that has a mission, it is God’s mission that has a church. Mission is wherever God is at work fulfilling his missionary purposes. The strong corrective element in the concept has helped to relinquish mission from the ownership of the Western churches and to make it a truly worldwide phenomenon.¹²⁰

An assessment of these developments of the idea of *Missio Dei* suggests that the church no longer remains the custodian of God’s mission, but all Christians who claim their lives in the ever-living presence of Christ are to participate in the mission of God. This understanding helps in articulating mission as an activity of all those who are called into faith in God.

¹¹⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

¹¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

¹¹⁸ Pachuau, “*Missio Dei*” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 234.

¹¹⁹ Pachuau, “*Missio Dei*” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 234.

¹²⁰ Pachuau, “*Missio Dei*” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 234; Also see Son, *Cultural Integration*, 75.

Whither the term Missionary?

By considering each Christian as someone called to participate in the activity of God the tendency to send specialist, assigned as missionaries to carry out the mission needs to be re-assessed in the context of Asia and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, a missionary is understood as one who is sent.¹²¹ According to Sunquist, theologically a missionary is one sent by God, and “practically and ecclesiologically” sent by a church or an ecclesiastical body.¹²² Thus, a “missionary is an apostle, one who is sent from the heart of God to proclaim the present and coming kingdom of God to all the nations of the earth.”¹²³ However, in the recent past, this word has begun to have negative connotations, especially in Asia. It is seen alongside proselytization, imperialism and paternalism.

Moreover, the realities in Asia are such that mission needs to be every Christian’s concern. Nam Chen Chan sums up this reality succinctly. He says, “The vastness of God’s mission and the changed global realities demand the cooperative efforts of all God’s people, in all of its breadth, with all of its diverse strength and resources.”¹²⁴ This changed scenario implies that one cannot have specific people tagged as missionaries to be involved in God’s mission. It is the calling and responsibility of all Christians to be involved in God’s activity.

In the contemporary situation, as Chan has pointed out, a “diverse spectrum of Christian individuals, agencies and denominations” are involved in incarnating “the truths of the Gospel through words and deeds into a vast breadth of human needs and existence.”¹²⁵ Therefore involvement in God’s mission can no longer be limited to “selected” individuals. This dislocation of the term *missionary* and the idea associated with it as a specialized agent indicates that the mission spectrum has enlarged and requires the involvement of all in the quest for proclamation, teaching, witnessing and healing. It involves living out each day lives of love, compassion, and solidarity with people, witnessing and proclaiming the good news “to the least.” Mission

¹²¹ Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 7.

¹²² Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 7.

¹²³ Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 8.

¹²⁴ Chan Nam Chen, “God’s Mission in the face of Global and Asian Realities,” *Church and Mission Society*, accessed October 15, 2020.

<https://churchmissionsociety.org/our-stories/five-reality-checks-mission/n>

¹²⁵ Chen, “God’s Mission in the face of Global and Asian Realities.”

therefore is a practice both within and outside, a virtuous action exemplified by God in Jesus Christ through his activity. As Bosch said, “The entire Christian existence is to be characterized as missionary existence.”¹²⁶

Content of Mission

The content of mission is grounded in the reality that God the Creator, has called people to be reconciled to him, which has been made possible through his son Jesus Christ. Christ in turn prepared his disciples to bear witness of this message of reconciliation and redemption. The disciples were therefore to go and “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). They were enabled to bear witness through the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁷ D. Claydon claims that in this reality there “is a consistently strong call on people of God, who have benefited from the knowledge of God’s covenant love, to go and make that love known to others.”¹²⁸

The content of mission is “to make known God’s revelation about himself and that reconciliation is available through Christ’s sacrificial death.”¹²⁹ The end goal of proclaiming this message is that the hearers would turn to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. As Claydon has suggested, it is also to realize that they have been conforming to values that needed a re-orientation (repentance). This was made clear in the announcement of the kingdom of God which signified the reign of God and the transforming impact it had on communities (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:18-19, 43). For this to become a reality, the disciples are to make new disciples by teaching them the values of God, or the kingdom values, and to reflect the character of Christ and promote those values by living them out in the society and community. Kingdom values include love, mercy, compassion, working for justice and caring for the least. This involves the creation of a new relationship with God, and with fellow beings including the whole creation, and living responsibly in that relationship.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 9.

¹²⁷ D. Claydon, “Aims of Mission,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 15.

¹²⁸ Claydon, “Aims of Mission,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 15.

¹²⁹ Claydon, “Aims of Mission,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 15.

¹³⁰ Claydon, “Aims of Mission,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 15.

However, pragmatically, the discussion about the content and prioritization of mission was also plagued with its own share of disagreement. The geopolitical climate, the decolonization process, shifts in the centre of gravity of mission from North to South, the rising level of poverty, globalization, migration, urbanization etc. created a scenario where social action was seen as an element of mission equally as important as proclaiming the gospel. But some groups were weary that paying special attention to social action might lead to preaching merely the social gospel, thereby deprioritizing the proclamation of the gospel. On the other hand, other traditions considered “solidarity with the poor, engagement in liberation, campaigning for justice”¹³¹ as tenets of mission. Yet there were efforts from others that brought these two differing views together under “holistic mission,” in which both proclamation of the gospel and social sensitivity were combined. These two approaches were brought together to express what can be considered as the content of mission.¹³²

In the year 1984, the Anglican Communion expressed five marks of mission which are:

To proclaim the good news of the kingdom; to teach baptize and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.¹³³

This lays equal emphasis on proclamation, baptizing, responding to people in need, and transforming unjust structures, while also being responsible to fellow creation. These marks provide a rich and potentially enlarged perspective in understanding the content of mission.¹³⁴ This approach has been adopted by many mission organizations and agencies and continues to be one of the most accepted approaches to mission amongst Protestant churches. This book also appropriates these aspects as content or marks of mission.

¹³¹ Lee, “Five marks of Mission,” ii.

¹³² Lee, “Five Marks of Mission,” ii.

¹³³ Anglican Communion, “Marks of Mission,” accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

¹³⁴ Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008).

Conclusion

Mission is an activity of God and Christians have been called to participate in the mission. Though the initial venture of mission activity was clouded by colonialism, difference and representation, yet there was also a sense of love and care that was directed towards the people among whom they engaged. These engagements were also marked by paternalism, benevolent colonialism and a culture that privileged Western liberal values. But, with the changes in human history and context, mission began to be interpreted as activity of God directed, in justice, towards the enhancement of the common good of all people.

4. Testimonials: Embracing God's Beloved Community

The approach of this book is *decolonial*. “*Decolonial thinking*” allows one to shape one’s sense of being in the world and with one another by grounding one’s knowledge in one’s location and time. Location, time and our understanding of the world helps adapt to “certain” ways and express them in a “particular” manner, in contrast to a “uniformed” method of doing and thinking. The *testimonials* in this chapter bring out mission thinking, and engagement shaped by one’s local sensibilities, time, and space that provides particular knowledge. It will most importantly demonstrate how local geographies and sensibilities have helped shape missional responses that enhanced redemptive living during this time. The purpose of this chapter is not only to provide life stories and experiences of the mission workers but to extrapolate mission trajectories that emerge from the testimonials, keeping *decolonial thinking* in mind.

Embracing God’s beloved community through Accompaniment and Service

The testimonial of Rev. Dr. Chandran Paul Martin, the South Asia Regional Representative for the Global Mission Unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is instructive for answering missionally how we can be a better neighbour.¹³⁵ He also points us towards seeing vulnerability as a “prodigious site of theology” and abundant life. His testimonial comes as a corrective to many Asian mission agencies’ appropriation of development as a mission paradigm without paying attention to the subtle power dynamics attached to development discourse.

Dr. Martin began his conversation by stating, “We do God’s work with our hands.” Mission for him is doing God’s work in the struggle of the people. His usage of the expression hand carries multiple meaning and spectacular energy, especially for marginalized communities like Dalits, indigenous communities, and all those who are burdened by the “the weight of the world.” The metaphor of hand is symbolic. It symbolizes struggle, hardship, at the same time it is through the hand that communities earn their

¹³⁵ Interview held at 8 am (Indian time) on December 8, 2021 on Zoom.

livelihood and feed each other. It is the blistering hand that toils the Asian soil and it is that hand which also heals the soil. It is the hand that blesses, that gesture towards life's abundance and hope. Among the indigenous community in Northeast India, one would often hear tired voices saying, "As long as God keeps my hand and feet fit, I will be able to survive." Hand is a symbol of life, of resilience and a symbol of the strength to stay alive amidst the cloud of death that threatens lives. Such localized metaphors connect with the people and energizes them. Retrieval of such metaphors and symbols can also help mission in Asia peel away some of its Euro-American centricism.

One of the core activities of the ELCA Global Mission, that he represents is development - besides intervening during disaster emergencies and engaging in church relations. For his church, development means serving in the context of justice. It is not based on Modernity's understanding of development as "progress," "catching up," "growth" or a paradigm that comes from outside. For them, development means enhancing people's power for affirmation of life through accompaniment at the local level. He said:

We do not go with packages. In our invitation for proposals, we do not even mention our priority areas. We listen to communities. The local realities and needs shape the people that in turn shape and influence our thinking. Our theology of mission is grounded on accompaniment.

They also see development as transforming together and changing together. He also claimed that all their diaconal intervention and accompaniment is based on locally driven vision and initiative. Therefore, there is no hierarchy between giving and receiving. Through an example of the COVID-19 experiences, he shows how their idea of development works. He said:

When in early March the WHO announced the pandemic, we got in touch with local companions and churches with a letter asking them about their welfare, their protection, their security and the challenges they might have. My job was to follow up. From a general letter, it came to specific phone calls being made to each of the organizations and churches. But even before we got involved, the churches and organizations we work with had already engaged themselves in

COVID-19 awareness program. They had already sourced money from the congregation and had gone to the district administration asking, “What shall we do as churches and as organizations?” They had started printing and distributing leaflets on COVID awareness, distributing masks, moving around villages in auto rickshaws announcing through public loudspeaker system about COVID-19. We joined the process of their initiative when they told us they needed to do more and sent proposals. That is the time we embarked on a journey of accompaniment and partnership by providing them the grants. We did not go to them saying, “We have money for relief, therefore distribute relief.” We waited for them to develop their own priorities on the basis of their needs, while assuring them of our support.

By that time, the migration phase had begun. Many of the migrants had returned home. The first concern of the churches (Bodo Evangelical Lutheran Church and Manipur Evangelical Lutheran Church) was to provide livelihood security for the returnees. Most of the migrant returnees had small agricultural land and were from the farming community. The churches used these available local resources for developing an alternative livelihood by encouraging farming, making bamboo and cane baskets and taking up silk weaving. The churches provided them training and small grants to the migrants to start their alternative livelihood initiative. This program also brought people together and contributed to community bonding. The migrants shared their stories of struggle, of being hungry, of sleeping in the railway stations for days, of travelling back home without or with little food for nearly a week. Stories of struggle became the source of community bonding and their collective determination to overcome the pain collectively. The bottom line is that, in our development approach, the vulnerabilities of our community partners become our own vulnerability.

Three important insights can be extrapolated from the testimonial of Dr. Martin for reconfiguring mission in Asia during COVID-19 and beyond. The first lesson is the importance of using local imageries, metaphors and symbols with people among whom we work. Being attentive and developing sensitivity to these imageries helps our mission work in three ways: It erodes the “paternalistic logic” that is generally associated with mission; it creates a sense of companionship; and, most importantly, it helps mission workers delink from the “logic of inferiorisation” of our partners that has come to shape mission in Asia.

The second insight that can help us develop a nuanced mission paradigm is their approach and understanding of development as serving in the context of justice. It requires a keen eye and a critical mind not to fall prey to the development discourse of modernity that comes packaged with nuanced vocabularies like transparency, governance, empowerment, sustainability, and participatory and wholistic development.¹³⁶ Development discourse also projects development as locally driven. But there is a marked difference in how the Global Mission unit of ELCA defines development as local initiative and how development discourse has generally constructed grassroots initiative. A cursory reading of the development documents will show that development comes planned by organizations like the World Bank, with an elaborate explanation about people's initiative and participation.¹³⁷ But the projects are planned and discussed in the boardrooms, and it is always measured by the logic of economics. In the process, natives who resist such a Eurocentric model are termed as an "insurgent subject."¹³⁸ In the light of many mission agencies adopting development and economic empowerment programs as mission activities, mission agencies need to understand these dynamics - instead of appropriating uncritically the development model offered by Modernity. For Global Mission, development means letting local realities and needs shape the people who in turn shape and influence their thinking. Such an approach can help mission play a "midwifery" role or an enabling role.

The third lesson that can be drawn from Dr. Martin's testimonial is the way vulnerability is employed as a key theological site from which to weave a theology of mission that is grounded in people's suffering, agency and resilience. He helps us see vulnerability as the site from where "the prodigious power" to survive emerges thereby helping communities ascend towards abundant life.

¹³⁶ There has been a strong criticism on development for decades. However, the idea continues to be re-created and re-produced under different imageries like sustainability, equitability, democratic participation etc. and continues to shape much of our idea of "development." Wolfgang Sachs's remark provides a sense of the "power" of development and explains why we cannot do away with it. He writes, "For development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavor; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies, and a fantasy which unleashes passions." See Wolfgang Sachs, "Introduction," in *The Development of Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* edited by Wolfgang Sachs (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1997). 2.

¹³⁷ For example, see World Bank, India, *Development and growth in Northeast India: The Natural resources, Water, and Environment Nexus* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2007) <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/7760> ; Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region and North Eastern Council, *Northeastern Region Vision 2020*, accessed September 2020, http://necouncil.gov.in/sites/default/files/Vision_2020.pdf

¹³⁸ Samir Kumar Das, *Governing India's Northeast: Essays on Insurgency, Development and the Culture of Peace* (New Delhi: Springer, 2013), 17ff. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-81-322-1146-4> (10 October 2020).

Mission among the Migrant Returnees

The Pfutsero Town Baptist Church in Pfutsero, Nagaland, India like many of the churches in Asia was equally concerned about how to tackle the problems created by COVID-19 and how to re-align its missional activity.¹³⁹ According to Ms. Metsoteu Kenye, the Youth Director of the church, the problem of the returnee migrants was overwhelming, and they had to find a way to tackle it. According to Kenye, many of the youths from their town go to nearby bigger towns for part time jobs or to larger cities in search of jobs. Kenye noticed that most of the migrant youths who returned were spending all their productive time on mobile phones. At the same time, she was already confronted by the reality of many working parents who wanted to go to the church or attend prayer fellowships but were forced to stay back at home to take care of their children. Most of the time, it was the mother who had to stay back. Some mothers were able to attend church services only once or twice a year due to this problem. She combined these two problems to respond creatively to the crisis.

Kenye and her team came up with the idea of employing the returnee youths part time to baby sit when parents had to go out. They also realized that, if the migrant youths were offered a full-time job, they would not be interested because a sense of resignation had already set in due to COVID-19 and people were not very excited about life. Keeping these realities in mind, they introduced part time employment program during one Sunday youth service in their church. Kenye mentioned that, surprisingly, many youths registered for that pilot program. Simultaneously, seeing the overwhelming response from the youths, the church members arranged other additional services where their youths could be employed.

Pfutsero is basically a town that relies on farming. According to Kenye, seventy percent of the population are farmers. They cultivate paddy, fruits, vegetables, and supply their products all over Nagaland and beyond. Therefore, it was only a natural expansion for Kenye and her team to explore work in the agricultural sector too. Kenye said farmers are happy that they are able to provide employment to the youths. They are even happier because these youths have been able to do much more work than a normal labourer in a given day. A kiwi fruit farmer had this to say; “In

¹³⁹ Interview held over WhatsApp at 10 Am (Indian time) on 12 September 2020.

three hours' time, the migrant returnee youths cleared the whole kiwi and passion fruit farm, which in normal circumstances would have taken more days and more labour force and more money.”

The youths have also started getting involved in house construction work. They carry bricks, sands, and stones, and are happy to learn, while the employers are happy to help them. A youth typically earns INR 500-600 in a day. One returnee youth, who had been working in a call centre in a metro, had this to say: “I went looking for job to the metro from Nagaland with much expectation. I got a job in a call centre that paid me INR 5,000 a month. Life in the metro was difficult. Moreover, the accommodation was very poor. If I earn INR 500-600 a day, I feel there is no need for me or my friends to go outside looking for job. There is nothing like being home and earning, rather than staying outside, struggling, and earning very less.”

This testimony of the Youth Department of Pfufrsero tells us of human vulnerability, resilience and creativity, driven by the faith to love compassionately. The Youth Department of Pfufrsero Town Baptist Church reminds us of how these qualities can be maximized and appropriated in our Christian commitment to mission during this pandemic. What we also find here is the involvement of the whole community in coming together to address their problem, thus reinforcing the Christian ethics of relationality, interdependence, and the sense of community, which are also core tenets of Asian communities. This is what *decoloniality* implies: thinking through our problems and finding solutions within communities and our localities, according to our context, and responding to it in Christian love to enhance the kingdom values that Christ perfected in his life and ministry. One also sees here the role of mission in creating an enabling condition for affirmation of life and liberation.

Prophetic Mission

Many countries in Asia resorted to militarization of COVID-19 relief and restrictive measures. Observers feared that militarization of the state and the preventive measures would disproportionately put vulnerable people in a disadvantaged position. Voices against such practices of the state have been raised. One such voice, which is prophetic in nature, is a statement

written to His Excellency Gotabhaya Rajapakse by various heads of churches under the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL).¹⁴⁰

In the statement, the heads of the churches expressed their fear over the order of the President dissolving the parliament in Sri Lanka. The letter says, “As a country still recovering from the effects of a 30-year war and with the memories of the attacks of Easter 2019 still fresh,” a constitutional crisis would mean a tragedy. The letter also pointed out apprehension over how such a situation could lead to an unfair electioneering system, especially with restrictions due to lockdowns etc. It reads, “It is important to bear in mind that the country needs an election that is free and fair. This requires a level playing field for all parties and their candidates to campaign and have equitable access to media. This is not possible when there is a curfew or a lockdown. Until the election is held the country also need a legislature (parliament) to ensure that all three organs of government discharge their duties during the crisis, as required by the Constitution.” The letter also expresses concerns over “increased militarization” around “the civil life” of the country and the danger of relief measures being politicized and being given only to some sections of the community by the government in power.

This letter is an unfolding of what Cornel West calls “prophetic pragmatism,” and an expression of what Shawn Copeland termed “solidaristic discipleship.” “Prophetic pragmatism” is an act which not only critiques culturally but is a material force that has the power to make a difference in the world.¹⁴¹ The statement not only serve as a critique to the way the state functions, but it also provides alternative ways of doing things that enhances the life of the people or helps people realize abundant life. The statement is also an expression of solidaristic discipleship because it involves a kind of solidarity that is risky, but one that is persistent and endearing. One can no longer afford to align uncritically with the state, but our alliance with the state should be based on a conscious effort to ensure justice and peace. The tendency for mission agencies has been to open schools, do charity works and initiate development works among the poor. These activities have been interpreted as Christian participation in nation building, but without realizing that most of these intervention works that we do can have the effect of

¹⁴⁰ National Christian Council of Churches in Sri Lanka, “Statement by National Christian Council Heads of Churches on the Current Crises,” 18 June 2020, <http://nccsl.org/web/statement-by-national-christian-council-heads-of-churches-on-the-current-crisis/>

¹⁴¹ Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Cavitas Books, 1999), 170. Much of this will be discussed in the later chapter.

stripping the nation state of its accountability. This is not to undermine relief and development works carried out by the Christian organizations, but these activities need to be done while simultaneously pointing out the gaps and lacuna in the functioning of the state in its delivery of social justice. COVID-19 calls for mission actions that critically assess the political life of the state and that pays attention to question, “*Why is the situation so?*” These questions and assessments point towards a mission paradigm that contributes to the realization of democratic principles and justice for all. Democracy in principle looks good, but it can equally be manipulated by the powerful and the rich elite of society. In order to ensure that democratic principles are upheld, and citizens have access to certain rights, mission in Asia should focus on playing the critical roles of prophecy and discipleship.

The sphere of this prophetic role is not limited to the state or our own countries. Like Jeremiah, we are to speak to the kings, the global leaders, to the nation states, and to institutions like the World Bank, who determine the destiny of many people.

Nurturing Community through Writings

Due to the absence of contacts with each other, Zoom and E-newsletters functioned as important medium through which the good news of hope was communicated to the people. The *Presbyteral Letter* of Holy Trinity Church, Church of South India, Thiruvananthapuram is examined here in order to grasp the way the church continued to instil hope in the midst of loneliness, pain, and loss of life. Every month the Presbyter sent out *Presbyteral Letters* through WhatsApp and emails to both the congregation of Holy Trinity Church and others. For paucity of space, only the content of the June newsletter is considered here. However, all the six newsletters that were read and analysed contained messages of hope and solidarity.

In the month of June, the Presbyter in-charge wrote to the people to continue to trust “*in a God of life and immense possibility,*” and not to be overwhelmed by the lockdowns and the separation, for even this too shall pass. He reassured the people about science finding vaccines and medicines and defeating the virus. The presbyter also reminded people of the positive impact the lockdown has had on the healing of nature, the quality time it has given to families, and also the way it has helped us realize that God is

not confined in the churches but is present wherever one is. He also encouraged the people to consider this time as an opportunity to look out for people in need. He drew lessons from Luke 24:13-33 and encouraged the readers to be aware of the presence of Christ in this difficult time. This activity of writing newsletters may seem like an ordinary and mundane activities, but during crises writings can heal and comfort people. It is also a way of negotiating life in the midst of disruption.

Writings play an important role in the propagation of the good news. Since the early church, we see that letters have played a key role in the formation of Christian community and identity. We need to continue to write to people with contents that help them navigate their Christian life in a time like this. Traditionally, missionary writings comprised of describing how and who “we” were and reports of the work “we” had accomplished. However, today the need is for writings that conscientizes, that creates an awareness of the life that we have been called to live by God.

Finding Churches in the Alleys and below Flyovers

Another mission paradigm can be drawn from the life and ministry of the Bishop of Amritsar, Bishop Pradeep Samantaroy, and his congregation.¹⁴² At the outset of our interview, Bishop Samantaroy said:

The institutional churches were closed during COVID-19, but we found churches in the streets, in the alleys, under flyovers and in the villages. COVID-19 has redefined the church. During COVID-19 one did not see the difference of colour, race and background. All were connected by vulnerability as human beings, by hunger and struggle.

After continuously feeding the hungry in the streets and the villagers for months and rescuing migrant girls from difficult circumstances, Bishop Samantaroy and his wife got infected with COVID-19 but were able to overcome the illness with the same spirit with which they responded to the suffering of the people on the streets. He said, “We passed through the valley of death. We saw people dying, being on ventilators. But we also saw people praying, stretching out to help each other. In this entire journey, from feeding the poor to being in the hospital bed with COVID, we saw God’s continuous presence with us.”

¹⁴² Interview held over WhatsApp at 12 Noon (Indian time) on 14 November 2020.

Lockdown in India was announced at night. No one was prepared for it. There was total curfew. People may have had money, but there was no place to buy food. The whole nation was in chaos. Televisions started playing visuals of people being stranded on the road. Bishop Samantaroy was moved by the visuals he saw on his TV screen at home - people gathered in groups, stranded in different locations of the city. He managed to get two curfew passes and went out immediately to where people were. He says, "In suffering, people were together; newly married couples, laborers, beggars, waiters in the hotels, all waiting for food and trying to go back home." At that time, the church did not have money for the relief work, but they mobilized whatever they could and packed 300 packets of food, went out and distributed them to the stranded people and also to police and front-line health workers. Bishop Samantaroy also mobilized their women's Self-Help Group to make face masks and they distributed them to the people. Later, their food packets increased from 300 to 500 each day. Every day at 5 in the morning, in the bishop's official residence complex, the bishop and his team, including office workers and his wife would start cooking. By 12 noon, they would be out in the street distributing food. In the afternoon, they would take the road to the villages to distribute dry ration to the villagers.

As they continued to accompany the people and went to the communities, bishop Samantaroy received a call from a pastor informing him about eleven girls (from the Northeast region of India who, for the general population in India looks Chinese and were seen as potential carriers of the virus) who were locked up by their landlord in a house. They were not paid by the employers and were living in pathetic conditions. Bishop Samantaroy, along with his wife and media personnel, went to the house. He says, "Even animals will not be able to live in such a condition." The civil administration and the police were informed, and these girls were rescued from the landlord.

The girls were immediately provided with a gas stove, food and other necessities. After a few days, the girls were shifted to a school run by the church. Around that time, the bishop came to know of two other girls who were in a similar condition. They succeeded in rescuing them too. All these girls were kept in the school of the Diocese. A few weeks later the Naga churches and the Naga students' organization requested the bishop to shift

the girls to Nagaland. Till they left for home (Nagaland), the bishop and his team took care of the rescued girls. The bishop said, “The beauty of this incident is that, till today, we are contacted by the girls, their families and friends. They attend our online Sunday worships all the way from Nagaland. It has helped us build a long-lasting relationship and friendship.” The bishop says, this incident is a story of liberation, of joy and of reconciliation - the moment the girls saw the bishop and his team, they started crying. But once they reached home, there were tears of joy - it was a transition from tears of suffering to tears of joy.

Another incident the bishop found to be moving is his experience with a migrant family of three generations from Bihar, consisting of 14 members. As they went distributing food, they came across a fruit vendor. When the bishop and his team gave him the food, the fruit vendor said, “I need the food, but give it to that family (pointing his finger to that family from Bihar). They have not eaten for the past three days.” They gave them the food. There was a child in the family that needed milk. Every morning the bishop’s wife would send milk to that family on the bishop’s motorcycle, till they left for Bihar. Once they reached home, they called the bishop and said, “Today is our wedding anniversary. Please point the phone to your wife’s feet. We want to touch her feet and seek her blessing. What you have done to us can never be forgotten. You are our parents.” The bishop said, “More than thousand words, these few words from that family is a treasure.” During all these times of their engagement with the people, the bishop kept telling people that they were doing what Jesus had done and what Jesus would have done today.

This testimonial brings out one important feature: the ability and the spirit of people to forge together in times of crises during which the difference in identity, colour, race, and caste are cut across. Glancing through books on mission in Asia, one will not fail to miss the stress on poverty, and on religious and cultural diversity. These three features are taken as the context for encouraging inter-religious dialogue, enculturation and charity work. But Bishop Samantaroy’s testimonial demonstrates that, despite the diversity of religious belongingness and cultural diversity, common people in Asia have also learned to co-exist and respond to each other in times of need. This provides a mission paradigm that centres on capitalizing on the strengths and values that communities in Asia practice.

Patriarchy, Women Vendors and Displacement

Ms. Van Lal Hming Sangi, Women Secretary, Presbyterian Church of Burma (Myanmar), shared that, as soon as the COVID-19 outbreak occurred, fear and gloom descended over people in Burma.¹⁴³ According to Sangi, people were worried that a pandemic of this scale would wipe out the population, since Myanmar was one of the poorest countries, with poor medical facilities. Even before the government announced a lockdown, people on their own opted to practice stay-at-home measures. When the Myanmar government enforced lockdown, the impact of the lockdown began to be felt in the lives of the vendors and daily wage laborers in the urban areas. In the villages, the village councils distributed rations, to help residents tide over the crisis due to the lockdown. But the women vegetable vendors in the villages were faced with other set of problems. They had no place to sell their vegetables. Their vegetables were either seized or they were chased away by the village councils. They were forced to go to another place to sell their vegetables, which was around ten kilometres from their villages. But most of the women vegetable vendors could not go since they had no vehicles to transport their goods and it was too far to walk.

On the other hand, the internal conflict in the country created another set of problems during COVID-19. The conflict between the Myanmar army and the Arakan Army (a separatist armed group) affected civilians in Rakhine state and Paletwa township in Chin state. Sangi claims that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of her church members were caught in the middle of this conflict and did not get any care or aid. The government announced a stay-at-home policy, but civilians in these areas were driven out of their homes. Their homes were burned down, and villages destroyed. The displaced civilians were forced to stay at Hmawbi (near the capital city Yangon) in a displacement shelter. But the fear about people in the displacement centre getting infected with COVID-19, due to the close proximity in which they were living in the shelter home, became a major concern.

The case in Myanmar speaks of the many dynamics that occurs in most Asian countries when disaster strikes. In an already pre-existing conflict

¹⁴³ Taken from Life and Work: The Magazine of the Church of Scotland, "The Coronavirus Diaries: "We will Overcome this Hardship," August 5, 2020, <https://www.lifeandwork.org/features/features/view/469-the-coronavirus-diaries-we-will-overcome-this-hardship>

zone and a hierarchal society, to experience a pandemic brings a number of problems to the surface, especially in poorer countries like Myanmar. This, however, provides a vantage point from which to assess how and in what way mission organizations can intervene. Sangi mentioned that relief materials were provided in the name of Myanmar Council of Churches and Ecumenical Women's Work (MCC-EWW) to the people, yet these are stop-gap measures. These intersections of issues require paradigms that are broad based and long term.

One important concern the testimonial from Sangi demonstrates is the existence of multiple stake holders in Asian traditional societies. For instance, the village councils that Sangi mentioned are powerful bodies in Southeast Asian societies. They function as the final authority in their respective village republics. Most of them are men, and they decide how the village should function. Their decision to send women vendors ten kilometres away without a vehicle to transport their goods shows how decisions without gender sensitivity can hamper women's lives, thereby marginalizing many women-headed households who work as vegetable vendors to sustain their families.

A closer analysis of the way the local and traditional bodies have functioned during the pandemic also raises some concern. While the village councils have played a key role in arresting the spread of COVID-19, this has also simultaneously strengthened the hands of patriarchy. Their power gets more concentrated in a time like this, as the state authorizes and empowers them in ensuring the safety of the villages. A cursory glance will show that most of the people manning the village gates or localities would be men, once again reinforcing the image of men as guardian and women as the ones to be protected from "external threats." These kinds of imageries have been one of the bases in Southeast Asian traditional society for considering women as weak and therefore to be protected. This is also one of the bases for excluding women from the political sphere of life in the villages.

These realities show that the mission of God, in which we participate, should be rooted in the "lived realities" of the people among whom we exist. Mission is God's activity, and the content of God's mission is salvation and liberation from ideologies that oppresses. If that is what mission is,

mission agencies, institutions, churches, and individuals should pay attention to the findings of social analysis, cultural studies, feminist studies, and other disciplines so that these disciplines enrich our mission engagement. The existence of the “poor” moves us to respond to them in the same way God has acted, but our responses should be equally informed by other disciplines—in the same way that our understanding of mission is informed by our faith and theology. This will mean removing colonial mission thinking, of seeing the poor as poor and providing food as the end of mission. The existence of a “poor Dalit” has to be seen within the dynamic of caste and class. The life of a “poor tribal” has to be seen through the ways they are represented and portrayed, and in the light of the faulty development programs the postcolonial nation states have taken up, which have resulted in their displacement. Similarly, the life of a woman needs to be seen in the context of the ideology and practices of patriarchy. We are not only to fill the gap, but also to enable a new life. This involves a drastic change in the way we see a problem and in the way we engage in mission.

This means that priorities in providing relief and aids should not be measured by the scale of being poor alone. Factors such as women-headed households, landless women, laborers, stateless people, migrants, and others need to be prioritized. Especially in a conflict zone, these prioritizations are necessary because many of the men have either been killed or are in detention camps and the responsibility of the whole family falls on women, whose activities are further curtailed by patriarchy, caste, class, and the pandemic.

Being a Better Neighbour and Resilience

The Asian story during pandemic does not end with the problems alone. A lady vegetable vendor in one of the Northeastern State in India shared that, when the lockdown was announced suddenly, people had nowhere to go to buy food and some of them started calling her up saying they needed vegetables and food.¹⁴⁴ This particular vegetable vendor lives in the border area between Assam and Nagaland, close to Dimapur, which is the commercial hub of Nagaland. Her village is surrounded by many other villages in which

¹⁴⁴ Personal interview with the research collaborator in her home at 7 in the evening (Indian Time) on 22 September 2020.

women cultivate and collect wild vegetables, roots, and tubers to sell in Dimapur. During the lockdown, she used to go from village to village to collect vegetables or would ask other women farmers to bring the vegetables to her house. Every morning, during the complete lockdown, she would load the vegetables into a car used for transporting cash to refill ATM booths (these vehicles were considered ‘essential services’ and were exempted from restrictions) and take it to Dimapur, passing through the police check gates or community check gates that had come up to restrict people’s movement. When their vehicle was stopped, she would identify herself as one of the bank staff and escape from the police. I enquired why she had to take the risk, because there was always the danger of police asking her to open the vehicle and seeing the vegetables inside. She simply said, “That is mission.”

Her story brings out the sense of survival and resilience that people have, and the coping mechanism people employ when confronted with a crisis such as the pandemic. We have been taught to understand mission through the perspective of virtues that the West have considered important. Obedience, “becoming “good” citizens” and responsibility to the state are important virtues for them. However, in a situation like this, one is confronted with the question of whether to obey the state law or to save lives. Mission in Asia has to be seen within these contradictions. The question is not always about doing “good” as defined by Western liberal society. What might appear as wrong can be a life-sustaining measure, especially in situations where the very survival of human lives is threatened.¹⁴⁵ This has been very well demonstrated in the life and ministry of Christ. The Sadducees saw certain actions of Jesus to be unlawful and therefore wrong, but for Christ the choice was about freeing people from the clutches of evil.

Remembering the Forgotten in the race for Technology

Despite the talk of connectivity, there are also areas in Asia cut off from “civilization.” One such area lies in between Nagaland and Assam, in India. A mission worker working among children in this area reported that the villages among whom she works have no electricity, no mobile phones, and are even unaware of intensity of the pandemic. They live life as normal,

¹⁴⁵ The discussion on the understanding of virtues differently by the dominant and the oppressed has already been shown by Martin Luther King and other Womanist ethicists and theologians. See Martin Luther King, Jr, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” accessed September 2020, https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf

as it was; going to their paddy fields, and collecting firewood and other necessities they require for their sustenance. These villages have no access to medical health or education. According to Meyila, who has started a ministry called “The Little Diamond Club” among the children in this area, out of eighteen villages, there is only one school.¹⁴⁶ The mission workers have been providing awareness on COVID-19, providing relief, and continuing to conduct classes under the trees. She also mentioned that, if the education stops, children will have nothing to do and their learning periods will be wasted. Therefore, despite the emergencies created by COVID-19 in other parts of the country, they carry on with their mission work with some restrictive measures.

Many churches and mission agencies have stressed the importance of net connectivity and used it to bridge the chasm the pandemic has created. Many see it as a solution to many of the restrictions created by COVID-19; online worship, counselling, webinars, seminars, meetings etc. Yet in our race to use technology in our mission work, we should not leave out those people who live without access to internet and electricity, or money to buy internet data. There is a danger that the technological divide might further push some of the disadvantaged people to the periphery due to lack of access to proper information and technology. Least we develop a sense of arrogance in our mission engagement created by the technological advantage and access to information, we need to consciously pay attention to ways through which these lives can be accommodated. The race for a mission based on maximization of the use of internet technology should not become a point of exclusion for people who need the redeeming love of Christ more than anyone else.

Underground Churches, Statelessness and New Mission Paradigm

Talking about mission in the Mekong Delta is talking about mission in the context of underground churches and house churches, due to the restrictions under which Christianity finds itself. According to David, the regional head of a mission agency based in Vietnam, evangelism in the Mekong

Also see Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

¹⁴⁶ Drawn from conversation held with Dr. Meyila for a period of one week in Dimapur from October 1-7, 2020, during which the author also participated in their COVID-19 relief distribution work.

region has to be seen in the context of economic and environmental concerns.¹⁴⁷ For this to be achieved, he feels the local people need to be encouraged, since no one will understand the local context much better than the locals themselves. Environmental concern is important to the Mekong Delta because of the challenges the people have been encountering due to the activities taking place along the Mekong river, which is the lifeline of the people here.¹⁴⁸ David also shared that, as soon as COVID-19 broke out and was declared a pandemic, missionaries based in the region left their mission fields and countries. Much of the mission work came to a standstill and was left to the local people, which have become a challenge now. One of his primary concerns, since the outbreak of COVID-19, has been about equipping the underground churches to be equipped for and involved in humanitarian work and encouraging more community involvement in economic and environment concerns. According to David, there are 1.5 million people in Cambodia who are Vietnamese with no citizenship. They are very poor, and nobody takes care of them. David observed that the statelessness of a person means that they live under constant threat. When crises or disaster strikes, they are the least likely to be taken care of and no government takes responsibility for them. David feels that there is a need to bring these people into the mission map.

In Cambodia, according to Stephen who is a mission worker in Cambodia, experiences of “killing fields” have left many dejected about religion.¹⁴⁹ He said, “God did not help us during the killing fields, therefore religion makes no sense; but we need healing and peace.” He also added, “In situations like Cambodia, missional context is recovery, healing and peace.” Stephen explained that after the “killing fields,” only a few Christians are left. He is a first-generation Christian. He added that fifty percent of the local people whom he has been training, including pastors, are illiterate. It is through reading the Bible that they learned to read and write. They have no role-models to follow at the moment, and they are starting things from the scratch. Countries like Cambodia and Vietnam presents very distinctive mission situations.

¹⁴⁷ Name has been changed for security and safety concerns. Interview was held over Zoom on 2 October 2020 at 10 am (Indian time).

¹⁴⁸ An analysis on the importance of the Mekong river, the connection it has with the people settled along the river, the overtly exploitation of the river and how that impact lives and the river can be found in Stefan Lovgren, “Southeast Asia’s most critical river is entering Uncharted Waters,” *National Geographic* January 31, 2020. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/01/southeast-asia-most-critical-river-enters-uncharted-waters/#:~:text=Originating%20in%20the%20icy%20headwaters,into%20the%20South%20China%20Sea>.

¹⁴⁹ Name has been changed for security concerns. Interview over zoom at 3 Noon (Indian time) on 2 October 2020.

Stephen was also critical of the way some of the missionaries were reporting about “the business” of accepting Christ in Cambodia and the numbers being projected. He insists that one needs to understand mission in Asia in the context of discipleship. The current tendency is to have open air worship and ask people to receive Jesus Christ by raising their hands. He finds this sort of evangelism to be problematic and colonial. It still shows the colonial mentality of increasing numbers. For him, the question is how many of them continue to be disciples of Christ or a witness to Christ. He also cautioned that, in the light of many churches, Christian organizations, and mission workers distributing relief during the COVID-19 pandemic, our relief work should not be traded for conversion that happens at the superficial level. The motive should not be conversion through relief or aids. Rather, our relief work should be based on love, accompaniment, compassion, and a solidarity that emerges from Christian love, so that the people we interact with will see through our “good” work the distinctiveness of being a Christian. Stephen also shared that there are many Christian organizations in Cambodia who are involved in NGO works. He says that one should not confuse developmental or NGO works with mission work. The premise of mission work is God and to enhance the kingdom of God. We carry out that work with the humility and acknowledgment that we are doing God’s work. This means our wisdom and the source of doing good to others come from God and all this does not rest merely on human achievement.

This situation in Vietnam shows that unlike countries where Christianity can be practiced without much hindrance, they still have a problem in practicing Christianity. Moreover, in their region, there is a need to develop Christian leadership that can steer them during crises such as this. They also feel that mission work in the region should focus on environmental issue, since many people rely on the Mekong River for survival. Another important factor that needs to be considered while conceptualizing mission in Asia is the concern of statelessness. The situation of statelessness opens up questions about how to intervene among people who are outside the framework of the nation state, who are not protected by the constitution and whose lives remain exposed to various vulnerabilities. Moreover, our responses to people’s needs are marked by various factors that include race, ethnicity, caste, class, and culture etc. The general perception of them as “the other” puts them in a disadvantaged position. These people need to be brought into the mission map, while conceptualizing mission in Asia.

Another important observation that emerged from the region is the need for a shift in mission paradigm- to move from a colonial mentality of calculating numbers to ensuring discipleship; not to trade relief for conversion and not to confuse NGO work with the mission of God. Mission begins with God and relies on God, whereas NGOs are human initiatives that rely on human will and capacity alone. The Mekong Delta also offers us the need to work with people who do not fall within the strict and hard definition of citizen, nationality and belonging. Mission work in Asia generally follows the way the nation state defines its people and places, or who is in and who is outside of its borders. Mission work in Asia should begin to read the state through the ways people who are marginalized, or are at the borders, read the state. Veena Das and Deborah Poole provides an interesting explanation about the state-making project of the nation state and how margins of the nation states or specific places are produced as “sites of disorder” and the people who constitute these spaces as “unruly subjects” imagined through an “invocation of wilderness, lawlessness and savagery.”¹⁵⁰ These invocations impact our perceptions about the people and the places and often shape our ways of engaging with them. In order to faithfully engage with people that the state defines as stateless, or aliens or refugees, a critical reading of the state is needed so that our mission paradigms are not determined by the discourses controlled by the nation state.

Accompanying the Urban Poor

Ms. Anita works with the urban, poor, Muslim community in Indonesia.¹⁵¹ The role of their ministry is to be a catalyst both to the church and society. They understand mission as wholistic, which involves proclamation, practicing, and demonstrative living. She sees mission work not only as charity work, but also as preaching and demonstrating through the lives and witness of the church and the people. This implies that mission is about practicing virtues that enhances the preservation of the lives of the others, through which the redemptive activity of God is actualized.

Anita’s urban poor ministry focuses on providing basic needs to the poor, building relationships, and engaging in economic empowerment activities. According to Anita, through these three activities, they try to show the

¹⁵⁰ Veena Das and Deborah Poole, “State and its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies,” in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* edited by Veena Das and Deborah Poole (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2004), 7.

¹⁵¹ Name changed. Interview over Zoom at 4 in the evening (Indian time) on 29 September 2020.

content of a Christian life, so that gradually people among whom they work can learn about Christ, Christian living and its values. She says her ministry is not only about building the kingdom of God, but even sustaining it through praxis and demonstrative living. Her understanding echoes well with what Stephen from Cambodia has already shared; accepting Jesus Christ is not about raising hands but sustaining that faith in practice through discipleship.

Anita also mentioned that, due to the sensitivity of the country towards religious conversion, and the negative attitude people have towards Christians in Indonesia, they cannot “directly” tell people to accept Jesus Christ, but they encourage them to depend on the Lord, and tell them to pray and rely on God when they encounter problems. Anita also said that, unlike the way evangelism was carried out earlier which stressed on preaching to bring people to God, she and her team talk about God in a normal way. Their conversation about God is centred on their everyday lives and activities. She said, “We talk about God normally.” This indicates that our understanding of mission needs to be embedded in people’s everyday lives, seeing God and understanding God in the daily interaction and everyday relationships and activities.

Their mission work came to a standstill due to COVID-19 and operational funds were diverted to help the urban poor tide over joblessness and loss of income during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, she also came across churches and rich Christian businesspeople who had resources but did not know how to intervene. Anita’s ministry played the role of a catalyst by showing the resource-rich churches and people where to put their resources. She spoke to them about the realities and difficulties of the urban poor during the COVID-19 crisis and encouraged them to work among them. Anita mentioned that being situated in an urban area helped in sourcing enough resources to help people in crisis. In order to tide over the loss of income, her team members also started stitching HazMats, gloves, and masks, instead of bags and other things that they used to make prior to COVID. Anita and her team also saw in the pandemic an opportunity to help each other more compassionately. The pandemic, she says, is not only about suffering, but also an opportunity to follow Christ more faithfully through demonstrative living. A crisis like this, she insists, is a time to attentively show what it means to live like Christ.

Some compelling lessons can be drawn from Anita's testimonial. Mission involves playing the role of a catalyst, especially in a time like the pandemic. Churches or mission organizations do not have readymade solutions to all the crises that occurs. Churches themselves are constantly struggling with how to be a Christian witness. Playing the role of a catalyst provides a direction to the churches and Christian mission organizations. Another important lesson that can be drawn from her testimonial is their understanding of mission as demonstrative living. In contemporary Asia, demonstrative living becomes more meaningful and powerful than preaching. Another point that needs to be noted is the way her ministry locates mission in the everydayness of people's lives, and how normal everyday conversation is used as the medium through which the love of God is made known. It provides a framework to conceptualize mission in Asia in the everydayness of people's lives and experiences.

Mission among the Rural Poor

Adam is a mission worker among the rural, poor, Indonesian Muslim population.¹⁵² Their mission organization has been carrying out their mission work through education. Due to COVID-19, two of their schools, out of three that they were running, had to be closed. The school from which they collected fees and was used for paying some of the expenses of their mission work closed down since children stopped coming to school. But these situations did not stop them from being involved in God's mission. Once COVID-19 stalled their mission activities, they immediately explored ways to keep going through the crisis.

One of the first things through which they tried to overcome the disruption in mission work was by capitalizing on the available human resources. They started doing construction work for small houses, to generate income as well as to "keep the members together." They also took up agricultural work or farm work and they started practicing multi-cropping on their farmland. According to Adam, this farm provides not only food for the community but also, through farming activity, they are able to continue to engage with the people they have been working with. "Keeping the folks together," according to Adam was a priority, because reviving the relationship with them all over again would become difficult. It has been five years

¹⁵² Name changed. Interview over Zoom at 4: 45 in the evening (Indian time) on 29 September 2020.

since they started working in this area and they are still in the stage of building relationship with the community. He says it has been a slow process of gaining their trust and just, when that was happening, COVID-19 struck. Now it has become important for Adam and his mission centre to sustain that trust by working out ways through which they can work together as a community.

Unlike Anita's urban ministry, Adam indicated that mobilizing resources during the COVID-19 crisis was a problem in the rural area, because most of the population consists of poor farmers, or small-time construction workers. Moreover, the few churches that are there in the area where Adam works are focused in their own respective mission work. Therefore, Adam found it difficult to work without funds and resources from outside during this COVID-19 crisis, though this has also helped them explore mission work through construction, and farming. It has also helped them under. It has also helped them understand the importance of self-reliance. Adam's experiences indicate the importance of assisting and supporting small rural mission organizations like his in crises. This sometimes involves moving beyond the powerful mission organizations based in the capitals of the country and partnering with small agencies like Adam's.

The crisis generated by COVID-19 has definitely affected mission work, but it has also created opportunities for mission workers to explore ways of doing mission according to local sensibilities. It also shows the importance of alliance-building among mission agencies across the globe, so that the small mission agencies that struggle to stay afloat can be supported.

Zoom and Theological Education

Mr. Anil, who teaches in Nepal, shared that like many others they also embarked on conducting online classes through Zoom.¹⁵³ Although it helped in enabling students to access education, yet it has also exposed problems that lie beneath the surface of projecting online classes as a solution, especially in poor countries and regions that lie far from the urban centres. Some of the problems they encountered included connectivity problems, the students not having smart phones, since most of the students come from poor rural areas, and the high cost of data cards for accessing

¹⁵³ Name changed. Interview over Zoom at 2 in the evening (Indian time) on 1 October 2020.

online classes. While online classes provide a solution, mission agencies need to develop sensitivity to these predicaments caused by pre-existing conditions of economic vulnerability, inaccessibility due to “backwardness of the region,” and the cost factors, especially for what would normally be “residential” programs that have to be done online with students based in their respective villages.

Understanding the Context within the Context

The rise of fascism in India and fundamentalism in Pakistan present unique situations of doing mission. The very existence of minorities has become a problem in both the countries. In such a context, doing mission work can be a risky business. One of the mission workers by the name James, based in Pakistan, involved in theological education through extension had this to say when asked how he understood mission during such a crisis coupled with the rise of fascism and fundamentalism.¹⁵⁴ According to him, preaching-witness and evangelism are the heart of Christian existence. Without evangelism proselytizing cannot happen. “But,” he says, “We have a colonial mission, professional mission supported by agencies. Everybody who is a follower of Christ is a mission worker. We need to do away with this concept and consider every Christian a mission worker.” He illustrated his argument by narrating a finding that came out in the study of missionary work in the 1960s in Pakistan. According to that finding, ninety five percent of the people who converted heard about Christ through friends and neighbours. He also narrated a story of a lady who is a Christian and works in a bank in Pakistan. This lady faced questions about Christianity in her workplace. She took that as an opportunity to share the gospel. Considering these findings and testimonies and the realities of the context, James feels that mission in Asia should be every Christian’s business. With regard to mission in context, he said, “In Pakistan context (like in many other Asian countries) there cannot be one uniform paradigm. Within the context, there are sub context, and it is a complex context. We cannot have one mission paradigm in a country or in Asia. Rather we need to develop sensitivity to a particular area and accordingly plan our mission activity.”

Responses from mission workers in South Asia indicate how important it is to take the context into consideration; it is this that makes one think of a

¹⁵⁴ Name changed. Interview over Zoom at 3 in the evening (Indian time) on 1 October 2020.

“fragmented Asia” when one conceptualizes mission in Asia. It also means redefining what a mission field is. Mission fields in the Asian context can be our workplace, the restaurants, streets or bus stops. This means the church as an institution need not be the only place or the pastors and assigned missionaries the only people who share the gospel.

Love in Times of the Pandemic

Dr. Rini Ralte is a feminist theologian and heads the Women’s Studies Department at the United Theological College in Bangalore. Besides teaching, she has also been actively engaged with the migrant community from the Northeast regions of India who are living in Bangalore.¹⁵⁵ According to Dr. Ralte, the estimated population of migrant community in Bangalore from the Northeast India is roughly five lakhs. However, it came to light during the COVID-19 pandemic that the population could be double that.

The announcement of the complete lockdown in India was on the 24th of March 2020, just before people received their salary. The moment the lockdown was announced, people started panicking, and she received many phone calls from the migrants from that night itself asking for ration help. Offices were closed; their employers’ phone numbers were out of reach. She observed that, for the migrant population here in Bangalore, not to get salary for one month is tough and in fact life threatening. They survive month by month, if not week by week. The immediate reactions among the migrant community were therefore, naturally, fear and panic. Everyone was worried about food and survival.

From 27th March onwards, on the fourth day of the lockdown, she and her team responded to the crisis by distributing food to the migrant communities. Vehicles were not allowed to move during that time and Dr. Ralte and her team needed a vehicle to distribute the food. That was the first hurdle she had to tackle. She used her connections and contacted a police officer in Bangalore city and requested for a vehicle to transport the food packets. Meantime, one person by the name Sajjan George called Ralte and told her that one retired army officer was ready with food packets and enquired whether they needed it. Later the police department also arranged food so

¹⁵⁵ Personal interview with Dr. Rini in her residence in Bangalore at 4 noon (Indian time) on 31 October 2020.

that she could distribute it to the migrants. As the lockdown continued, the government started issuing passes for vehicles that were on “essential duties.” The police team in Bangalore was sensitive to the needs of the migrant community and issued around 100 vehicle passes to her so that they would be able to distribute the dry ration and vegetables without difficulty. But the need for food started to mount. Dr. Ralte shared the concern to the Nodal Officer of Northeast India migrant communities based in Bangalore who helped mobilize rations and gave them to Dr. Ralte and her team. By June 2020, Dr. Ralte and her team had distributed 51,500 kilograms of rice alone, besides other dry rations. Another army retired Colonel, Christopher Rego also managed to request his close friends who contributed in large numbers. Gobbachi Learning Community contributed two full truckloads of rice and other provisions, and many individuals and NGOs contributed. She was overwhelmed by the way people came forward to extend their help in her journey with the migrants. She says those phone calls asking her whether she needed food packets to be distributed were a deeply spiritual experience for her.

Dr. Ralte also posted a caption, “Hunger is real” on her Facebook page, especially when confronted with a dire situation such as when a three months old baby had no mother’s milk because the mother did not have proper food or when a mother survived with only one cup of tea over-night and could not sleep due to hunger and had to call Dr. Ralte at three in the morning asking for food, or a lady who ate only mangoes for two weeks, since that was the only thing available with her. Dr. Ralte says she and her team were moved by the Christian commitment to act compassionately. For her, mission means our willingness to respond to people’s needs in crises and the most powerful spirituality is to live like our Saviour Jesus Christ, who would have done something similar in times such as this pandemic.

Dr. Ralte’s mission experiences also demonstrate that we need to capitalize on these virtues embedded in people’s lives and creatively respond to crises. It also underlines how important it is for mission workers to collaborate with people and other agencies in order to overcome the crises and to respond individually and collectively to human suffering.

Observations

While many of the mission workers were comfortable in food distribution or relief distribution to “the poor,” yet many of them did not see the differentiation among the poor in terms of gender, caste, and other categories. Some of them preferred to limit their work within their “mission field,” not being able to transcend their boundaries, and were concerned about “keeping the sheep together.” The mission field mentality and relief as the end of mission are colonial concepts that have nurtured the colonial mission through the ages. While relief work is a fine way to feed the hungry, yet the Christian calling for mission and the context in Asia calls for mission work that should transcend these categories.

The testimonials also show that the context in Asia is not one. There are contexts within a context, each with its own complexities and peculiarities even within a country. Therefore, there is a need to develop local sensibilities while thinking about mission in Asia. The concept of having a universal idea of mission is couched in Eurocentrism. Their thinking and assumptions are often presented as universally applicable. The same trend can also be seen in the work of early Asian theologians, who projected religious dialogue and enculturation as ways of doing mission in Asia. But the realities in Asia today, especially in the context of the COVID-19, calls for a mission in Asia that capitalizes on virtues and ethics of belongingness that have sustained communities in Asia while at the same time being critical of culturally and traditionally sanctioned ideologies like caste and patriarchy that alienates others. Sensitivity towards such practices makes it an imperative for mission workers to critically analyse Asian society instead of generalizing the problems in Asia.

Mission workers and agencies also need to be critical of models of development and empowerment programs patterned on Western thinking. They need to look for knowledge in and among communities, that has sustained communities, instead of bringing a development model that is alien to the thinking of the people. The development programs that mission agencies promote should not be centred on “catching up” with the rest but must be based on equity and justice. They should consciously make an attempt not to contribute to the existing hierarchy of the society but generate thinking and consciousness that questions the social and cultural hierarchy.

To do this, mission workers need critical thinking and awareness of the political dynamics, the social life, and cultural patterns that either affirms life or delineate, and work in such a way that people experience transformation.

Conclusion:

The testimonials examined above have helped us understand some of the realities of our Asian context during COVID-19 and the opportunities COVID-19 has provided for people to come up with new mission strategies. It also helped us understand how uniquely each location is positioned and how our responses need to be shaped and framed by the surroundings and local dynamics. The testimonials have informed us how mission agencies and workers thrived in crises without letting the disruptions in life overwhelm their understanding of how to be a better neighbour. The next chapter will bring out paradigmatic and theological themes from the testimonials.

5. Paradigmatic and Theological Themes from the *Testimonials*

Liberative theologies have shown us the possibility of approaching and articulating theology and with it our understanding of mission, in various ways. One way is to appropriate and re-articulate theological themes making them relevant for our experiences, our struggles and our liberation. The liberative motif derived from the Exodus event and the re-appropriation of atonement theory to express the suffering of Christ and his solidarity with the people, are some examples of this approach. The other approach is to analyse the human condition and re-articulate theological themes in the light of the human context, experiences, and everydayness of life. In this, the experiences of the people become the source through which one tries to understand God, and other theological categories.¹⁵⁶

In this project while *Missio Dei* provides the mission mandate, it is the experiences of people that shapes our understanding of *Missio Dei*. In the light of the testimonials and unseemingly stories of mission work done by ordinary mission workers we develop theological and paradigmatic themes.

Christianity in Asia

The role of the mission workers in Asia has to be recast in the light of the experiences of Christianity in Asia as a marginal religion. Felix Wilfred's work *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* is instructive in grasping the reality of Christianity in Asia. Wilfred claims that Christianity in Asia has not been able to fully flourish in terms of its impact in both the political and personal sphere. Politically, the influence of Christianity has been marginal; economically, it has been promoting charitable works through education and other development programs, but in the recent past the state (he particularly mentions Islamic countries and Socialist regimes, but even democratic countries like India) has put in place various measures to curtail Christian developmental and welfare activities. He also observed that charitable and development work undertaken by mission agencies suffers from "isolation," as it is managed in parallel to

¹⁵⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 147.

other public institutions. Moreover, Christian theologies have little influence in public life. Wilfred's observation is that by and large Christianity remains isolated from the public life in Asia.¹⁵⁷ One can deduce from his observations that Christianity in Asia remains on the margins, despite its efforts through being involved in various social and economic empowerment activities. Wilfred also recognizes that, despite its marginality, there have been groups of people who "draw inspiration from the gospel and try to engage in action in public life."¹⁵⁸ The testimonials that have been examined can be considered as efforts of some of these people who, despite being constrained by various complexities, continue to express the redemptive activity of God.

As indicated in the methodology section of the introduction, there has been a tendency to define mission in Asia using the parameters of countries like China, Korea and India. Intrinsic to these parameters is the discourse of how Asian churches, have grown and progressed into sending churches and giving churches, thereby equating that with the "kingdom expansion" in Asia.¹⁵⁹ There is no doubt that mission in Asia has taken a shift and there has been development of mission movements in Asia. The edited volume by Bambang Budijanto discusses these mission movements. Some of these movements are "Business as Mission," "Incidental Missions and the Overseas Filipino Workers Phenomenon," "Cross-Cultural Mission Movements in Asia," and "The-Back-to-Jerusalem Movement in Mainland China."¹⁶⁰ However, the testimonials clearly indicate that, despite the "progress of some churches" in Asia, the reality of the marginality of Christianity - for example the existence of underground churches and house churches due to difficulties in professing one's faith - also equally confronts us. There are also churches handicapped by the absence of leaders in providing humanitarian relief aid, and this was compounded by the departures of missionaries from the mission fields due to COVID-19. Despite being a sending continent, one cannot evade the reality of the existence of churches that are in a nascent stage struggling to build first generation leadership, especially in countries like Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

¹⁵⁷ Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), xvi.

¹⁵⁸ Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times*, xvi.

¹⁵⁹ Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma, eds., *Asian Church and God's Mission: Studies Presented in the International Symposium on Asian Mission in Manila, January 2002* (Manila: OMF Literature and MWM, 2003), 5-6; Sang-Bok David Kim, "Foreword," in *Emerging Missions Movements: Voices of Asia* edited by Bambang Budijanto (Colorado Springs: Compassion India and Asia Evangelical Alliance, 2011), x.

¹⁶⁰ Bambang Budijanto, "Introduction," in *Emerging Missions Movements*, xv-xvi.

Christianity and Christian mission in Asia need to be seen in the light of these contradictions.

Themes: Pluriversality and Belongingness

One dominant theme that has emerged from the testimonials of the mission workers is the sense of belongingness that people experienced during the crisis, despite the differences in class, caste, ethnicity, and religion. The differences in identities transformed into belongingness in the “lived realities” and everyday transactions of life. Therefore, the ethnic differences or religious differences need to be interpreted as a “multiplicity of visions” and plurality of awareness of oneself, and not as difference. This helps us to move from over-emphasis on difference to spiritualities that shape people’s lives and everyday interactions with each other.

There are communities in Asia that stress on spirituality rather than on religiosity. Spiritualities provide moral and ethical values for community living.¹⁶¹ Spirituality shapes people’s self-understanding and the way they interact with each other. The testimonials from the ground suggest that there is a need to focus on reviving Asian spiritualities that stress on responsible living as neighbours and the practice of virtuous activities that promote community growth and resilience. This does not mean “romanticizing the past,” but, as suggested by Kwok Pui-Lan, “searching for cultural and spiritual resources to live in a world” marked by crises.¹⁶²

Asia, and the Global South in general, are sites of contextualization. In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, what can contextualization mean? What does experience as the central basis for articulating our mission engagement mean? The testimonials indicate that mission workers have tried to proclaim and witness through demonstrative living, by loving and accompanying the people on the road. This means contextualization should be rooted in the suffering and “discomfort” of the people. When one speaks of experience as the basis for forming mission engagement, one needs to think of the kind of experience we are using to articulate our mission. By taking the experiences of suffering as the epistemological space for articulating mission, our mission becomes “rooted” in and participates in the

¹⁶¹ K. Koyama, “Contextualization of Mission,” in *Mission and Evangelism* edited by Somen Das (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 147.

¹⁶² Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 228.

crucified Christ, [that] demonstrate the quality of Christ's glory in suffering his exaltation in rejection."¹⁶³

We need to be confronted by concern about how to respond to those who are vulnerable. This implies our contextualization should be sensitive to signals and warnings that might be subtle yet life threatening for many. This also means that, in the process of contextualization and identification with Asian culture, one should be critical of patriarchal and casteist mindsets and norms. Pui-Lan cautions us to be careful of initiating a sweeping process of contextualization without paying attention to details. In her work, she critiques the way Asian theologies used the paradigm of accommodation, adaptation and enculturation in the sixties, and their inability to see the patriarchal traits present in Asian traditions.¹⁶⁴ The situation created by COVID-19 calls us to be attentive to such subtle forms of discrimination in order to truly usher in "redemptive living."

The theme discussed here shows that our concept of Mission in Asia cannot be generalized. Every generalization tends to conform to what is fixed and to the interpretations of the dominant. The testimonials inform us that "only by moving beyond such fixation can new forms of intellectual alliance be built, and new solidarities forged" during this strange time and context of the global pandemic.¹⁶⁵

Resilience as Source of Survival

Another important theme that can be extrapolated from the testimonials is the spirit of resilience. The image of a boy stitching a disposable face mask is a gripping reality in Asia, that demonstrates people's desire to transcend the given situation. His poverty did not stop him from doing what needed to be done—to wear a mask so that he can save himself and his neighbour. Adapting to agriculture, providing jobs to migrant returnees, ferrying milk every morning to a breast-feeding mother, and the village communities taking on their traditional assigned roles in the Southeast Asian context in arresting the spread of COVID-19 and distributing COVID-19 relief are

¹⁶³ Koyama, "Three Modes of Christian Presence," in *Mission and Evangelism*, 149.

¹⁶⁴ Kwok Pui-Lan, "The Emergence of Asian Feminist Consciousness of Culture and Theology," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* edited by Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology and The EATWOT Women's Commission in Asia, 1989), 98.

¹⁶⁵ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

examples of recovering from “grievous injuries” and manifesting courage and hope, and of fighting back by making use of resources available with oneself.

The resilience shown by people during COVID-19 can be described as “the haunting power of the dispossessed.”¹⁶⁶ Although Lewis Mark Taylor uses this in the context of the sovereign violence, however, one also finds among the people the same spirit and will to survive amidst the pandemic. These actions are political actions. Taylor writes, “[T]he political is much more than what is usually referred to as politics. It refers to a certain mode of organizing the human practices that structure social interaction and the dynamics of collective action in history, but also by extension, the interests, beliefs, and ideologies of individual actors.”¹⁶⁷ During COVID-19, people and communities organizing lives according to their localized views and needs are political acts of saying yes to life.

Resilience is not only a coping mechanism; it is also about bringing our resources within us, to confront the crisis. Resilience here does not simply mean surviving against the odds, but “living well as God’s people in terms of recognizing, appreciating and promoting the values and reality of the location.”¹⁶⁸ In our resilience, we “forge vital and enduring bonds with others,” refuse “to be denied by these painful events,” and invoke memories such as “recollections of generous care and attentive concern.”¹⁶⁹ In resilience, we also see the resolve of “those who have suffered grievous injuries and yet continue to manifest courage and grit.”¹⁷⁰ The spirit and practices of resilience among the community can be taken as one of the strengths that will make possible the realization of abundant life.

Biblical examples of resilience can be found in 2 Cor 4:8-10. It says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” For Paul, “a correlative of the recognition

¹⁶⁶ Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 180.

¹⁶⁷ Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ Gerald Boodoo, Email to author on 7 November 2020.

¹⁶⁹ James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *The Virtue of Resilience* (Bangalore Theological Publications in India, 2017), 3.

¹⁷⁰ Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *The Virtue of Resilience*, 3.

of human weakness is always the opportunity it gives to God.¹⁷¹ Resilience is found not only in our human ability to come out of a situation of despair, but we draw courage from the resurrection of Christ that followed suffering and death. For Christians, resilience is always attached to the life and ministry of Christ.

Closely linked to resilience is the acknowledgement of our vulnerability. It is from the depth of our exposure to vulnerability that we emerge to be resilient. The testimonials help us articulate and rethink vulnerability as a condition that creates possibilities of change. The interpretation of vulnerability of Butler et al. is insightful here. They argue that the “Dominant conceptions of vulnerability and of action presuppose (and support) the idea that paternalism is the site of agency, and vulnerability, understood only as victimization and passivity, invariably the site of inaction.”¹⁷² In their work, they posture vulnerability “as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance.”¹⁷³ Thus exposure to the pandemic can be “both perilous and enabling.”¹⁷⁴ Their discussion on vulnerability and the work of the mission workers help us to rethink vulnerability, not as a site of victimhood, but one that gives rise to possibilities. Such a thinking of vulnerability enables us to disentangle our thinking from the enforcement of “paternalistic logic” in our mission work. It helps us appreciate that “we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance [resilience].”¹⁷⁵

Resilience is people’s capacity to say no to death and yes to life. It is an effort to create ways of living in a situation where there is no way out. The resilience of the people and the mission workers becomes the site from which theology of life can be conceptualized. It is a space from where mission as a project of impossible possibility emerges.

Acknowledging Suffering and Hope in Solidarity

Capitalizing on resilience does not mean foreclosing on suffering and pain. Suffering in the context of COVID-19 can be seen in the way human lives

¹⁷¹ Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, Press, 1987), 40.

¹⁷² Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay, “Introduction,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance* edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

¹⁷³ Butler, et al, “Introduction,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 1.

¹⁷⁴ Butler, et.al, “Introduction,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 1.

¹⁷⁵ Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, 12.

are exposed to death, isolation, hunger, and desperation. Like Ralte's slogan "Hunger is real," so is suffering real. Suffering and vulnerability during COVID-19 is real and all human beings, rich and poor, are inescapably tied to that reality, though at different scales. But suffering becomes the site through which we understand hope. David Carr's work is helpful in understanding how suffering becomes the site from which one weaves faith, hopes, and dreams. Carr comments that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures "were formed in the context of centuries of catastrophic suffering" and the scriptures are testimonials of "how the Jewish and Christian Bible both emerged as responses to suffering, particularly group suffering."¹⁷⁶ So Scripture presents suffering as part of the "broader story of redemption," as a way forward.¹⁷⁷ The death of Jesus on the cross is one such story of suffering.

Similarly, the testimonials also depict the way communities endured suffering without letting it overcome them. The activities of the mission workers were nothing but a response to human suffering. Through their responses they enacted hope which was an expression of the enactment of the redemptive drama initiated by God. Walter Brueggemann's reflection on hope is helpful here. He says, "Only the new and lively hope-one that does not have to ignore the data of despair-can deliver humankind from the oblivion..."¹⁷⁸ Hope in times of COVID-19 is a hope that is aware of the enormity of the suffering. Thus, suffering and hope go together, as seen from the works of the mission workers in Asia. These narratives of hope that we have sieved from the testimonials impels us to "embrace the promise that this reality, suffused with suffering, will be transformed into God's new world."¹⁷⁹

The actions of the mission workers are also purposeful actions of solidarity. Solidarity does not only imply distribution of food, but consciously siding with communities who are out of the preview of a state's protective or safety measures or speaking up for them and accompanying them. However, this decisive action requires grace. If it is devoid of the intervention of grace, mission ends up being a human endeavour alone or an NGO-ized project. To opt to travel with the migrants under the hot Asian sun, to choose

¹⁷⁶ David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 3-5.

¹⁷⁷ Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 5.

¹⁷⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "Hope from Old Sources for a New Century," A Consensus Paper on *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context* edited by Walter Brueggemann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

¹⁷⁹ Miroslav Volf, *Against the Tide: Love in a Time of petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 49.

to speak for the stateless people, or to smuggle in food for the deprived requires the grace of God. The actions of the mission workers point towards the necessity of grace in our mission work in Asia. Copeland's discussion can enlighten us about how this can be theologically and pragmatically articulated. She writes:

[In mission] [w]e need the *grace of interruption*: to change our course, to accept fully the challenge of transformation in the concrete. We need the *grace of liberation*: to free us from the gravity that impedes the human spirit and anesthetizes our deepest desires for more fruitful, more creative living and loving. We need the *grace of risk*. This grace opens us to the promptings of the Spirit, to respond to the World that calls, to speak and to listen to and to love and to act for and with one another. Grace nudges us to dis-ease and discomfort with whatever obscures the sight of the glory of God on the face of another human being.¹⁸⁰

The testimonials of the mission workers not only point to redemptive actions of hope and solidarity, but they also fundamentally teach us the importance of constantly acknowledging the need for the grace of God in our mission work in Asia. In a complex situation like Asia, where most of our actions amounts to speaking truth to power, grace becomes an important ingredient in achieving the purpose for which we have been called to participate. Copeland says, "To live as Jesus' disciple, to live in solidarity means to live as he lived - at the disposal of the cross, exposed, vulnerable, hungry, and open to the wisdom and power and love of God."¹⁸¹ We see this in the actions of the mission workers, living at the disposal of the cross, exposed and vulnerable to sickness and even death. Such commitment should form the crux of the character of mission in Asia during COVID-19.

Mission as an Everyday Activity

The testimonials tell us of the everydayness of mission work. The activities that were taken up by the mission workers revolved around everyday activities and lives. Whether talking about God in normal conversation with Muslim friends, or distributing food among people of different religious

¹⁸⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, "To be the Body of Christ: Discipleship (Solidarity) and Eucharist," *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers*, 134, (2019): 10, https://scholar.valpo.edu/ils_papers/134/

¹⁸¹ Copeland, "To be the Body of Christ: Discipleship (Solidarity) and Eucharist," 3.

groups, or taking up agriculture, being concerned about a mother not breast feeding her child, all these are embedded in everyday realities. Such actions demonstrate mission as an everyday activity. Mary Blaufuss informs us that, “When mission is considered an integral part of the mundane world of everyday life, rather than as a journey into exotic territories, it becomes a part of the web of relationships on which we all operate.”¹⁸² She adds, “Goals of abundant life require mission to be set in the context of issues which affect people’s everyday lives.”¹⁸³

The testimonials of the mission workers also demystify a general tendency embedded in contemporary mission thinking, that equates giving money to church as participating in God’s mission. David Kim claims, “The work of the Holy Spirit in China is as exciting as the country’s economic growth. We often witness that the two go together.”¹⁸⁴ Though he does not explicitly mention this, yet it is implicit in his statement that giving money is equated with mission. While this is important for mission work, yet the context of Asia, especially during COVID-19, requires mission activities that stress on demonstrative living. Demonstrative living is required because the problems that the pandemic has generated are overwhelming and requires everyone’s involvement, individually and collectively, that signals the breaking in of the kingdom of God. The testimonials also suggest that when mission workers live among people of other religious communities, where talking about God, Jesus or conversion is not feasible, demonstrative living becomes a theological and practical imperative. COVID-19 provides us that opportunity to exercise this demonstrative living in a more compassionate and just way. A demonstrative life is a life lived in everydayness.

Mission as forming the Character of God

Considering mission as an everyday virtuous activity through demonstrative living points toward grasping mission as forming the character of God. This then leads us into exploring what kind of a people we are; we who have been called to participate and cooperate in God’s mission. According “If our mission is to share good news, we need to be the good news people

¹⁸² Mary Schaller Blaufuss, “Relationships rather than Frontiers: Contributions of Women-in-Mission and of Women’s Issues to the Field of Missiology,” in *Ecumenical Missiology: Contemporary Trends, Issues and Themes* edited by Lalsangkima Pachuau (Bangalore: United Theological College, 2002), 178.

¹⁸³ Blaufuss, “Relationships rather than Frontiers,” 181.

¹⁸⁴ Sang-Bok David Kim, “Foreword,” in *Emerging Mission Movements*, ix.

If we preach a gospel of transformation, we need to show some evidence of what transformation looks like.”¹⁸⁵ This involves developing characters and traits that expresses “redemptive living.”

The first task is to develop character and traits according to the righteousness of God, that enables us to consciously take decisions and act upon those that conform to the activities of God. The purpose of forming characters according to the righteousness of God means practicing activities that leads to the flourishing of humankind and the whole creation and groping towards abundant life. The formation of characters shaped by God means putting on redemptive actions that enhance eternal life. This means living in the presence of the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. As Sahron Bogusz has indicated, “The Holy Spirit helps us to rely less on our own strength and more on the strength of God. The Holy Spirit vivifies and enlightens the mind to distinguish altruism from selfishness, good from evil and manipulation from loving activity.”¹⁸⁶ It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that one can discern the content and strength of putting on the character of God, so that our mission work is life-changing and transformative among those with whom we interact and transact. The testimonials inform us of the importance of putting on the character of God, so that our living itself becomes a part of proclamation and witness.

Mission as Building Relationship

It has been deduced from the testimonials that at the core of all their activities lay the importance of networking and building relationships with the communities and institutions among whom we work. Wilfred has already pointed out that one of the problems of Christian mission in Asia is its tendency to run its programs in parallel to other public organizations, or to run as compact, separate mission fields. However, the experience of COVID-19 has brought out the importance of networking with other public offices and the need to pay attention to building relationships institutionally. It was the ability of the mission workers to connect, network, and build relationships that enabled many of them to play a liberative and transformative role.

¹⁸⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 29-30.

¹⁸⁶ Sharon A. Bogusz, “Virtues: Gospel Proclaimed through Good works,” *Catholic Review*, November 8, 2020, <https://www.archbalt.org/virtues-gospel-proclaimed-through-good-works/>

Secondly, a mission that pays attention to relationship and networking with those among whom we live leads to mutually impacting one another's lives in people's everyday experiences.¹⁸⁷ According to Blaufuss, a mission that stresses building relationships "operates from within a web of relationships," and "recognizes our mutual needs as well as the gifts we have to offer one another." It also "facilitates mutual recognition and correction among different real-life issues in order to participate with God in the mission of love that embodies God's fullness of life in all of humanity and in all of creation."¹⁸⁸ Emphasizing building relationships in our mission work also helps us in seeing others not as mere objects of charity, but as people to whom we owe an obligation to do good, as demonstrated by God in Christ. This means being humble in our mission engagement. Humility prevents us from getting trapped in the spirit of paternalism. Rima Saane, who proposed a network metaphor of mission, suggested that to be humble is an important virtue in networking and building relationships because it makes one consider everyone as equal, in which:

mission moves away from previous images of heroism where one party perceives itself as rescuing other. Standing on equal ground, we acknowledge that all goodness comes from God alone. It is not our human effort that is saving people but God's initiative. We are humbled as we realize that we do not own all knowledge nor can we control all factors.¹⁸⁹

Building relationships finally involves asking ourselves how we might be a better neighbour to those among whom we live. This means recognizing our own vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of the others. Asking such a question also leads to an acknowledgement that mission is God's mission, and we are only "translating" His activity in humility so that human beings and the creation may experience a foretaste of the reign of God.

Conclusion

Mission in Asia takes place in many different contexts and communities. Here, if mission is to be contextual, it needs to be embedded in people's everyday experiences- especially people's experiences of suffering and

¹⁸⁷ Blaufuss, "Relationships rather than Frontiers," 183.

¹⁸⁸ Blaufuss, "Relationships rather than Frontiers," 185.

¹⁸⁹ Rima Nasrallah van Saane, "Mission-Religion-Value in a Fragmented World: Mission as Connection," in *Mission in Solidarity-Life in Abundance for All: Proceedings of the EMS Mission moves Symposium in Bad Boll 2017* edited by Edwards-Raudonat, Uwe Grabe, and Krestin Neumann (Zurich: LIT, 2018), 28.

resilience. Vulnerability can become an opportunity for affirmation of life, belonging, and enhancing life together, so that solidarity and hope can emerge. This perspective helps us see mission as everyday activity marked by a character that reflects God being humble and relational.

6. Mission in Asia as Everyday Virtuous Activity

During this pandemic “The World finds itself again in the presence of the God who speaks. And the people hear again the voice of the Creator God who summons us to existence, who generates and blesses, who commands and calls.”¹⁹⁰

Christian mission are those actions by which the will of God is proclaimed and demonstrated to the world and in the world.¹⁹¹ Mission is about being a new humanity, a distinctive community made up of people that is formed by the character of God. It is a sign of the kingdom, a community that embodies the new life.¹⁹² As a community that reflects God’s redemptive activity manifested in and through the life of Jesus Christ, Christians are to practice a certain lifestyle that orients him or her as a participant in God’s mission. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a situation for Christians in Asia that requires a re-orientation of mission embedded in the everydayness of one’s Christian life. This calls for conceiving mission in Asia as everyday virtuous activity.

Defining Mission: Mission as an everyday virtuous activity

Mission in Asia needs to be seen as an everyday virtuous activity shaped by the realities COVID-19 has generated. COVID-19 has made every life vulnerable. But what is peculiar to Asia is that it has also exposed the sharp disparity that exists between communities and people. The second chapter has demonstrated that migrants, refugees, Dalits, indigenous communities, stateless people, women, and immigrants have been disproportionately affected. The “precarity of life” in which they exist has exposed them to heightened risk and vulnerability during COVID-19. Moreover, countries like India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and others have used this time to silence democratic voices and have capitalized on preventive measures like “lockdown” and “curfews” to strengthen state power. There has also been an increased militarization and securitization since the onset of COVID-19,

¹⁹⁰ Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 293.

¹⁹¹ Wilbert R. Shenk, “Foreword,” in *Mission from a Position of Weakness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), xi.

¹⁹² Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 78.

with many Asian countries using military and other security apparatuses for both preventive and relief measures. The suspicion that people have about Christianity in Asia, the rise of aggressive nationalism, the intrusion of the state into civic spaces, and the shrinking religious freedom have made public proclamation of the gospel increasingly difficult. Therefore, as suggested by S. Tan, in a repressive yet a demanding context like this, “witness to the power of God demonstrated in healing and transformed lives will carry its own power of persuasion.”¹⁹³ It is in the light of these realities that mission in Asia needs to be seen as virtuous activity reflecting “the breadth of His creativity.”¹⁹⁴ Virtuous here will mean activities that are in line with God’s plan for the created order, centred on the “restoration of our full humanity.” Our activities can be called virtuous activities and missional only if they are motivated, informed, and coloured by the reality of God’s coming kingdom, centred on Jesus the Son, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹⁶ Any action that leads to an experience of redemptive life in God can be considered a virtuous activity.

The complexity and enormity of the problems presented by COVID-19 calls for missional action that cannot be separated from one’s day-to-day life. Providing food to migrants stuck under flyovers, informing the police and district administration of girls being locked up by landlords due to their racial features and rescuing them, using the church newsletters as means of comforting people during isolation, conducting online worship, checking on elderly people during lockdown, comforting the grieving families who have lost their loved ones to COVID-19, writing letters of dissent to the people in power are all everyday virtuous activities. Through such diverse activities our actions become the good news of Christ, a light in the darkness and the salt of the earth.

Considering mission as an everyday virtuous activity also means creating a conducive environment for realizing human dignity. I draw on the work of Joseph Prabhakar and Peniel Rajkumar to explain this assertion further. Writing about the role of missionaries amongst the Dalit community in India, particularly in Andhra Pradesh, they concluded that mission

¹⁹³ S. Tan, “Witness,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 432.

¹⁹⁴ Tan, “Witness,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 432.

¹⁹⁵ Jonathan P. Pennington, “A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing,” *Institute of Faith, Work & Economic*, March 4, 2015, <https://tifwe.org/resource/a-biblical-theology-of-human-flourishing-2/>

¹⁹⁶ Pennington, “A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing,” 17.

involves a “midwifery role - a role which involves both creating those conditions which give birth to new realities which people yearn for as well as eliminating the various impediments which impose constraints on the flourishing of the communities on the margins.”¹⁹⁷ This means respecting the agency of the people and consciously delinking oneself from the idea of paternalism and a mentality of benefactor and beneficiary. It involves seeing people neither as *objects* nor *targets* of our mission activities, but as partners and companions in collectively furthering the purpose of God’s mission. The youth department creating jobs for the migrant returnees in their small rural town or the Bodo Evangelical Lutheran Church using agriculture, basket, and silk weaving as means of earning livelihood are examples of creating enabling conditions or playing a midwifery role.

Theologically, mission in Asia during COVID-19 as a virtuous activity is founded on the understanding of mission as God’s mission. C.S. Song rightly says, “God is the chief actor in this drama. It was initiated by God, is carried out by God, and is to be brought to fulfilment by God.”¹⁹⁸ This indicates that we have been called to participate in that mission, a call that was first extended to Abraham, to Israel, and then to the Gentiles through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. All those who enter into faith in Jesus Christ are called to participate in that mission. Such a theological understanding of mission as God’s activity serves two purposes: first, it assigns mission work to every Christian, thereby rescuing God’s mission from the exclusive “monopoly of the ecclesiastical Christianity” and “transcends being an enterprise which can be solely in the service of the church.”¹⁹⁹ Secondly, and more importantly, it calls for the involvement of all people at all times. Mission as God’s activity also enables us to recast mission as a process “which offers itself to further the liberative agendas” of the people.²⁰⁰ Such thinking helps us to depart from collapsing mission as a “development package” or a “scheme,” but to see it as an activity centred in the love of God for all, until the end of time. Such a mission thinking also ensures that we rely on God in humility, with deep acknowledgement of our own limitations, therefore always in need of His grace to carry out a missional life and commitment. Our conceptualization of mission as *Missio Dei* also helps us realize that we are participating in the line of

¹⁹⁷ Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rajkumar, “Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns Protagonists, and Perspectives,” 8.

¹⁹⁸ C. S. Song, *Jesus the Crucified People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 210.

¹⁹⁹ Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, “Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns Protagonists, and Perspectives,” 8.

²⁰⁰ Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, “Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns Protagonists, and Perspectives,” 8.

and sinners who have gone before us.²⁰¹ Such an acknowledgement helps us overcome our dependence on our human ability, abandon our triumphalism, move beyond paternalism and desist from caricaturing the poor as objects.

Mission as a virtuous activity calls for a life that reflects God's character. The fundamental question for us as participants in God's mission during this pandemic is to discern more profoundly, as people and communities, ways of living that best "reflect God's love," that "dares us to act in that direction."²⁰² The interpretation of Christian responsibility of Bruce Birch et al. is insightful here in discerning the direction. They point towards the Christian claim of human beings being called to love one another in response to God's love as the foundation for taking up the responsibility of mission. Human beings are to "receive and trust this love and then breathe it into the world, not as a mere feeling but as a guiding norm for all that we say and do."²⁰³ This implies that the love of God for us becomes the motivation for and the measure of our missional action. These actions include "serving, preserving, and seeking well-being for God's good creation."²⁰⁴ They also at the same time remind Christians of the existential predicaments that limits human actions. They write:

Every moment of our lives, while blessed with the presence of God and the goodness of the world and the life that God has given, is also subject to monumental forces that betray God's love and tempt human beings to serve other gods... Equally problematic for the moral life are the structures that weave oppression into our lives, even while we try to live morally in our personal lives.²⁰⁵

Their analysis shows that we live our lives bounded by both structural evil and individual evil. In the midst of that, we are called to be a moral witness of what it means to be God's partners in mission. This also initiates us into employing love, which God gives us freely, to redeem social and structural systems of oppression.²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 25.

²⁰² Bruce C. Birch, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Cynthia Moe and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian life: A New Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 109.

²⁰³ Birch, et. al, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian life*, 109.

²⁰⁴ Birch, et, al, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian life*, 110.

²⁰⁵ Birch, et, al, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian life*, 110.

²⁰⁶ Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 15.

Mission as everyday virtuous activity means that mission can be seen as translating the work of God. Gladson Jathana suggested that. “Translating Christian theological belief and dogmas in a ‘non-Christian’ world is the core of Christian mission.”²⁰⁷ Similarly, human participation in God’s redemptive work is a translation. Translation means an enactment on our part of what God intends “for the life of the world.” Understanding human participation as *translation* helps us realize that our works are never perfect, but we are at the same time striving to live *like* and *do* like Him. Looking at our participation through the lens of being translators saves us from the danger of looking at mission as our initiative and the tendency to rely too much on our human endeavour. Mission ultimately is an act of faith, continuously renewed by the grace of God. Mission as *translation* informs us of our shortcomings, our struggles as human beings and yet being open to be transformed for the redemption and transformation of God’s beloved creation.

Elements of Mission as Virtuous Activity includes “Prophetic Pragmatism”

COVID-19 has exposed the systemic evil and culture of alienation in which human lives are trapped. We are confronted with a situation in which to grieve, to speak the truth, and even to risk our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, whose lives remain exposed to violence, death, and danger. It is in this context that “prophetic pragmatism” is suggested as one of the core elements of looking at mission as virtuous activity.

“Prophetic pragmatism” is a phrase borrowed from Cornel West. According to West, “prophetic pragmatism” is “not only a cultural criticism, but also a material force.”²⁰⁸ By “material force,” he means “a practice that has some potency and effect or makes a difference in the world.”²⁰⁹ For West, “prophetic pragmatism” calls for actions and consciousness that will effect changes through practices of “tragic action in an evil-ridden world.”²¹⁰ It proceeds from the impulses of the prophets of the biblical narratives, whose lives provide resources for “existential empowerment and political

²⁰⁷ Gladson Jathana, *Mode of Mutuality in the Margins of Mission: Hermansburg Women’s Mission in India* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2015), 137.

²⁰⁸ West, *The Cornel West reader*, 170.

²⁰⁹ West, *The Cornel West reader*, 170.

²¹⁰ West, *The Cornel West reader*, 170.

engagement” and the courage “to speak the truth in love with courage come what may.”²¹¹ Walter Brueggemann’s exhortation to re-experience the prophetic tradition, to rehearse and re-speak their languages and texts with “fresh contemporaneity” is also a powerful reminder of our prophetic role, as we re-configure mission in Asia.²¹² The COVID-19 situation calls every Christian to practice prophetic pragmatism. Like Jeremiah, we are to wear a yoke around our neck, walk through the streets and alleys, and speak (Jer. 27-28); in “wordless gesture and witness, and in powerful spoken and written messages” we are to offer “hope and comfort” to the people in distress.²¹³

Closely tied to the role of “prophetic pragmatism” is the act of grieving. One of the fundamental requirements of playing a prophetic role is to bring ourselves to grieve at the way things are and take that grief to the public sphere. Brueggemann’s understanding of grief is insightful here. According to Brueggemann the act of grief is “the most visceral announcement that things are not right.”²¹⁴ It means stripping off the pretention of living life as normal. Drawing upon the Exodus narrative and the experiences of the Israelites in Egypt, Brueggemann claims that the grieving of Israel, that included self-pity, and complaint, but not resignation, was the beginning of criticism. Through the act of grief, they brought the hurt to public expression, through which a new reality was envisioned.²¹⁵ Similarly, our role as prophets entails bringing the grief of the people to the public sphere, through which we announce that things are not right and begin to envision a new heaven and a new earth.

The other role of “prophetic pragmatism” is to nurture communities. According to Brueggemann, the task of the prophet is “to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture...”²¹⁶ Thus the role of the prophet is to create an impulse for working out an alternative social order. In this, criticizing the dominant perception of life and energizing communities towards the newness that is to come are important categories. We are to tend

²¹¹ West, *The Cornel West reader*, 171.

²¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Texts that Linger Words that Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices* edited by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 18.

²¹³ Stephen B. Bevans, “A prophetic Dialogue Approach,” in *The Mission of the Church*, 7.

²¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 21.

²¹⁵ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 21.

²¹⁶ Brueggemann, *Texts that Linger Words that Explode*, 13.

to the broken by speaking along with them the language of grief while pointing towards the promise provided by God and moving beyond resignation.

Compassionate Solidarity

Compassionate solidarity means being moved by the existential realities of the poor and consciously opting to journey with them in their quest for justice. This means taking risk, making tough choices, giving up certain privileges, and deciding to walk with the least. Copeland provides a helpful explanation of what compassionate solidarity can mean:

to stand up for justice in the midst of social oppression, injustice and domination; to take up simplicity in the midst of affluence and comfort; to embrace integrity in the midst of collusion and co-optation; to contest the gravitational pull of evil's power.²¹⁷

It also means to live as Jesus lived, “at the disposal of the cross, exposed, vulnerable, hungry, and open to the wisdom and power and love of God.”²¹⁸ Our response to follow him and participate in his mission involves “a commitment to justice and compassionate solidarity as well as surrender to the startling embrace of Divine Love.”²¹⁹

Compassionate solidarity is not limited to acknowledging the struggle and grief of people whose lives are precarious, but it is also to appreciate the mechanisms with which vulnerable communities cope with their struggles.²²⁰ This includes framing perspectives and articulating values along with them and not imposing our value system. Our overall motivation, the objective of compassionate solidarity, should be “consistent with the motivation and purpose” of God’s redemptive mission.²²¹ According to Wright, the clear motivation of God’s redemptive action in the Exodus was driven by “God’s compassionate concern for people suffering under cruel oppression—that is God’s passion for justice.”²²² Both in the Old and the New Testaments, God stands as the champion of the people, with the cross event

²¹⁷ Copeland, “To be the body of Christ: Discipleship (Solidarity) and Eucharist,” 9.

²¹⁸ Copeland, “To be the body of Christ: Discipleship (Solidarity) and Eucharist,” 9.

²¹⁹ Copeland, “To be the body of Christ: Discipleship (Solidarity) and Eucharist,” 9.

²²⁰ West, *The Cornel West Reader*, 171.

²²¹ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 102.

²²² Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 102.

as the “supreme moment of redemption” which ushers in for them a new relationship with God.²²³ Our compassionate solidarity should therefore lead to a “quality of mission that responds to, reflects, and in some way embodies the redeeming purposes of God.”²²⁴

Proclamation and Witnessing through Demonstrative Living

A fundamental question was raised by Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya many decades back and it still finds relevance even today. He asked, “Why is it that despite so much dedication and self-sacrifice of Christian apostles of the faith, the way Jesus Christ has been presented in our land has been seen as Bad news for the great majority of our people?”²²⁵ This attitude can be attributed to the past. Pui-Lan assessed that, during the peak of mission work in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century missionaries were sent out to “win souls for Christ, while bodies were colonized and foreign land violently confiscated.”²²⁶ Today there is a need for alignment of our intent and purpose in mission, that takes the good of the whole person and society into consideration.

COVID-19 provides us with an opportunity to tend to the body and the soul, the personal and the communal, with compassion, in words and action, both in witness and in proclamation. Witnessing and proclamation are practices that are central to God’s mission. They are practices that belong together. While our mission schools, colleges, and other mission enterprises bring empowerment and liberation, we are to pay attention to witness and proclamation through our demonstrative living. This involves living a life which reflect the righteousness of God, at home, and workplaces, and in the public sphere. This is not to undermine the work of educational enterprises. For instance, Prabhakar and Rajkumar write, “Much of the transformative effort of Christian mission can be traced to the education ministry of the Christian missions...creating access to education for the Dalit communities, who were denied education under the caste system, was a strategic intervention which fostered the empowerment of the Dalit communities.”²²⁷ As Christians continue to provide education, and medical help,

²²³ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 104.

²²⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 109.

²²⁵ Tissa Balasuriya, *Jesus, Kingdom, Church, Mission* (Colombo: CSR Pamphlet, 1990), 7-8.

²²⁶ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic press, 2000), 16.

²²⁷ Dayam and Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, “Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns Protagonists, and Perspectives,” 4

and create an ambience of alliance, we also need to witness and proclaim through the ways we live our lives: This means loving justice and doing it; loving God and loving others in practice.

Demonstrative living means living a lifestyle “modelled on the life of Jesus” and shaped by the patterns of biblical narratives.²²⁸ The purpose of this should be to communicate the message of salvation so that others with whom we interact might respond in faith and be saved.²²⁹ Proclamation and witnessing through demonstrative living involves bringing out the connection between ethics and mission. Wright provides an example through exposition of Genesis 18:19 and informs us of how this connection can be employed in our missional living. Abraham was to teach his descendants “to walk in the way of the Lord, by doing righteousness and justice.”²³⁰ It is to be “a community who live by the ethical standards of the ways of God, so that God can fulfil his promise to Abraham and bring about the blessing of all nations.”²³¹ Wright underlines that the phrase, “the way of the Lord,” means “following someone else on a path, watching his footsteps and following along carefully in a way that he is going. In that sense, the metaphor suggests the imitation of God” or “reflecting his character.”²³² The other metaphor of “walking in the Lord,” can mean “setting off on a path following the instructions that someone has given you.”²³³ This implies obedience to the command of God so that one reflects the character of God.²³⁴ From this one can deduce that God’s election of Abraham was to bring about a community who are taught and committed to ethical life that reflects the character of God and the existence of such a community is the fulfilment of God’s mission.²³⁵ Through our ethical life, we proclaim and witness so that others are brought to the realization of the love of God.

Our ethical living is integrally bound to the mission of God. This can be found in the way Jesus lived his life. He was sent to the broken and the afflicted, and he journeyed with them by pledging his life. Through the “audacious proclamation of the reign of God” and his healing ministry he

²²⁸ John Barton, *Ethics and the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 21.

²²⁹ M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1971), 2.

²³⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 83.

²³¹ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 83.

²³² Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 89.

²³³ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 89.

²³⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 93.

²³⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 93.

attracted disciples.²³⁶ Similarly, we are to announce the signs of the kingdom of God through our demonstrative living and making disciples of the nations. Loving God means obeying God, walking his ways of righteousness and justice, centering our life on God and being a blessing to the people amongst whom we live. The COVID-19 situation calls for such living, so that people in despair and uncertainty are provided with hope and healing through our lives. Our living should proclaim the good news.

Ethical life here does not mean an individualized ethical life. It involves communities and societies. The moral and ethical character of a society influences the individual ethical life. Therefore, our quest for an informed ethical life should be structural, societal and individual. As we seek to answer, “how we become people who live the love of God into the world - we must attend to the intervening of individual and societal moral character.”²³⁷

Prayers

Prayers are an important means of healing and touching each other’s lives. Through prayers, we become a “moral witness” in the lives of others. During the pandemic, prayers became a powerful tool for many to bear witness to the love of God, to heal, and to express their solidarity. In the mountains and valleys, balconies and streets, communities and families prayed and sang, bringing cheers to people. The closure of the ecclesiastical buildings (the churches) did not stop people from announcing the redemptive and healing power of God through prayer. Prayer is one of the elements of virtuous activity of mission and compliments the other elements. Our demonstrative living or prophetic pragmatism revolves around prayers. The importance of prayer in mission emerges from our understanding of mission as *Missio Dei*. Prayer is an acknowledgement that mission begins from God and is authored by God. Prayer “is the expression of a living relationship with God and God’s people: God with me, God with us.”²³⁸ We pray because of our relationship with God. Prayer is also “the central act of memory, and the rehearsal of the good news of Jesus Christ.”²³⁹ It

²³⁶ Copeland, “To be the body of Christ: Discipleship (Solidarity) and Eucharist,” 4.

²³⁷ Birch, et.al., *Bible and Ethics*, 111.

²³⁸ Adrian Chatfield, “Prayer and Mission: Entering into the Way of God,” *Journal of Theology and Mission*, 32/1: 11, <https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/prayer-and-mission-entering-ways-god-adrian-chatfield-anvil-vol-32-issue-1/>

²³⁹ Chatfield, “Prayer and Mission: Entering into the Way of God,” 11.

involves remembering what God in his love has done for us and it helps reshape our lives as we shape the lives of others. Prayer is essential to mission because it “leads us deeper into an active relationship with a missional God.”²⁴⁰

People as Key Agents of Mission

In the drama of salvation, traditional Christian theology teaches that God is the author of salvation. Then Jesus Christ enters, as representative of God to human beings and as representative of people to God. He plays the role of the mediator in salvation history.²⁴¹ However, C.S. Song insists that the role of the people also needs to be equally stressed, since they are the “objects” of this salvation drama. He claims that people are not mere objects, waiting for something to be done, nor are they in a passive state, rather, they respond to the salvation drama. Song also demonstrates that a traditional theological understanding of seeing people as passive objects, subjected to external forces, pushes believers to inactivity both in faith and in their social and political responsibilities. Therefore, people need to be seen as subjects of salvation history, actively engaged in the salvation drama along with God and Jesus. Jathana, Prabhakar, Rajkumar, and others have demonstrated in their work, pointing out that the natives were not mere recipients of the good news, but played an equal role in proclamation of the good news.²⁴² Without people there is no salvation history. Similarly, without people who are broken, maimed, and sick there is no mission. That is why Jesus, in words and deed, did what he could to “empower people for the part they must play in God’s reign.”²⁴³

During COVID-19, we have seen people playing an active role as participants in their liberation and salvation. For instance, many of the “poor” communities mobilized their community resources and manpower during COVID-19 to adopt measures to arrest the spread of COVID-19, knowing very well that if the virus spreads their communities lacked the basic facilities to handle it. They made makeshift quarantine homes in the community halls and, schools, and in the outskirts of their villages using cheap bamboos. The villagers took turns to guard the village gates, and distributed

²⁴⁰ Chatfield, “Prayer and Mission: Entering into the Way of God,” 17.

²⁴¹ Song, *Jesus the Crucified People*, 210.

²⁴² Prabhakar and Peniel Jesudason Rugus Rajkumar, “Mission At and From the Margins,” 7.

²⁴³ Song, *Jesus the Crucified People*, 210-211.

food and rations. So, the rural “poor” were not mere objects of COVID relief, but, through the use of their own wisdom and resources, they played a role in saving themselves from the virus and in saving others too. Thus, mission as virtuous everyday activity recognizes the agency of the people and considers them as co-partners of mission as much as we are partners in God’s mission.

Human Flourishing as the Purpose of God’s Mission

Human flourishing is at the heart of God’s mission. Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, we find “God is at work redeeming his broken, sinful, and rebellious creatures.”²⁴⁴ From the promise of redemption enacted in Genesis through God’s revelation, he “reveals himself to be actively and graciously redeeming his people, saving them from oppression, forgiving their disobedience and dishonouring acts, and leading them into a time and place of his full presence.”²⁴⁵ Informed by these realities, we are called to turn to the world and engage in the mission of redemption so that our missional actions contribute towards our flourishing.

The fundamental purpose of mission as virtuous activity should be to realize human flourishing, including the flourishing of all creation. Our understanding of human flourishing should be measured by our love for God and our love for our neighbours.²⁴⁶ Such an understanding of flourishing, points towards embracing our beloved community in compassion.

Embracing our beloved community entails paying attention to lives that have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and which were already lives that were not regarded as lives. The ones that we are to embrace so that their flourishing is enhanced are lives who have in a real sense “never lived nor lost.”²⁴⁷ At the same time, these marginalized and exposed lives are each a life “whose loss is no loss, and who remains ungrievable.”²⁴⁸ Such a situation calls for a mission imperative that infuses radical hope and a living faith in the “presence of the life-giving God.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Pennington, “A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing,” 16.

²⁴⁵ Pennington, “A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing,” 16.

²⁴⁶ Miroslav Volf, “Human Flourishing,” *Institute for Theological Enquiry*, accessed September 2020, 5. https://huwhumphreys.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/miroslav_volf-human-flourishing.pdf

²⁴⁷ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 1.

²⁴⁸ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 24.

²⁴⁹ Miroslav Volf and Matt Croasmun, “Six Traits of a Pluralist Christian vision of Human Flourishing: Can Christianity make Universal Claim about being Exclusivist?” *The Christian Century*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/six-traits-pluralist-christian-vision-human-flourishing>

What then does human flourishing in the Christian sense mean? According to Volf and Matt Croasmun, “Christian vision of human flourishing address every person and the entire world.”²⁵⁰ They claim:

For one person to truly flourish the entire world must flourish; for the entire world to truly flourish, every person in it must flourish; and for every person and the entire world to truly flourish, each in their own way and all together must live in the presence of the life-giving God.²⁵¹

This shows that the Christian understanding of human flourishing involves the interconnectedness and interdependence of our lives with each other, and the need for all to flourish together. It is the preservation of the self along with the preservation of the other, growing together. Our idea of human flourishing should be informed by the values of the kingdom of God. This necessitates a shift from a church-centred theology to a kingdom-centred theology. That way one can be more concerned about loving the neighbour than living with exclusivist interests.²⁵² Balasuriya claims that, when priority is given to the values of the kingdom of God, disciples of Jesus will also be concerned with the common good of all in their personal and social lives. This change in accent in kingdom values will also enable the church to direct communities to common good.²⁵³

The kingdom of God not only generates values for human flourishing but also generates the hope of an impossible possibility which provides us the energy and courage to seek abundant life in the midst of “the menacing cloud that is over our life.”²⁵⁴ Richard Horsley reminds us that the kingdom of God should lead to the renewal of life, because Jesus “proclaimed and enacted God’s renewal of the people in promise of the kingdom’s blessings, and in healings and exorcisms of the debilitating effects of [power].”²⁵⁵ The focus of our mission should be among communities whose lives are exposed, and like Jesus, to proclaim an “alternative social order of corporation and social justice free of oppression.”²⁵⁶ The kingdom of God also serves as an ideal that we grope towards in our mission commitment and engagement.

²⁵⁰ Volf and Matt Croasmun, “Six Traits of a Pluralist Christian vision of Human Flourishing.”

²⁵¹ Volf and Matt Croasmun, “Six Traits of a Pluralist Christian vision of Human Flourishing.”

²⁵² Balasuriya, *Jesus, Kingdom, Church, Mission*, 6.

²⁵³ Balasuriya, *Jesus, Kingdom, Church, Mission*, 6.

²⁵⁴ For the Life of the World, “A Message from Viroslav Volf.”

²⁵⁵ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 14

²⁵⁶ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 14

In Galatians 3:28, the text reads, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Practically, this is a difficult model to be achieved, but it provides us an ideal to make our quest.

Claiming human flourishing as the purpose of mission is also about claiming hope in the midst of the interruptions in life. According to Volf, “Hope, in a Christian sense, is love stretching itself into the future.”²⁵⁷ It has to do “with good things in the future that come to us from “outside,” from God.”²⁵⁸ This hope is an impossible possibility because of what God has already done before.

God brings about “a new thing”- aged Sarah, barren womb, gives birth to a son (Genesis 21:1-2; Romans 4:18-21); the crucified Jesus Christ is raised from the dead (Acts 2:22-36); a mighty Babylon falls, and a New Jerusalem comes down from heaven (Revelation 18:1-24; 21: 1-5), more generally, that good that seemed impossible becomes not just possible but real. The expectation of good things that come as a gift from God-that is hope.²⁵⁹

Writing from an Asian context, Roland Chia also commented that Christian hope is “established in God, who, through his Word, has promised the renewal and perfection of humankind and the creation.”²⁶⁰ According to Chia, such an understanding of hope underpins some basic Christian affirmations. That Christian hope is intrinsically related to faith. As an act of faith, it transcends the “now” and is tied to the promise of God. In this schema, God is the basis of hope. Therefore, hope is not only about what is to come, but it is connected to our experience here and now. Chia also claims that Christian hope is embedded in God’s promise of the final transformation of the world into perfection through love.²⁶¹ In this sense, human flourishing is not only about the future; rather, it exists here and now. God in Christ has already inaugurated the Christian affirmation of human flourishing and we in our mission engagement carry out the process that Christ began.²⁶²

²⁵⁷ Volf, “Human Flourishing,” 1.

²⁵⁸ Volf, “Human Flourishing,” 1.

²⁵⁹ Volf, “Human Flourishing,” 2.

²⁶⁰ Roland Chia, “Eschatology and Hope in Asia,” in *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* edited by Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (Cumbria: Langham, 2019) 171.

²⁶¹ Chia, “Eschatology and Hope in Asia,” 171.

²⁶² Chia, “Eschatology and Hope in Asia,” 172.

To claim human flourishing as the purpose of mission is also to acknowledge the contradiction that surrounds our lives. The early Christian community found that there had been a tension between the delay in the eschatological experience of resurrection and the initial radical expectations. There has been a tension between what is and what will be. Similarly, our work will be tempered by such contradictions; however, with patience and perseverance, we are to work towards the realization - or at least the approximation - of that idea. We are to continue to seek the possibility of experiencing the kingdom of God under the current conditions of darkness and despair. Despite the contradictions, what is important is that Christian understanding of human flourishing generates hope.²⁶³ These contradictions point us toward the cross. Chia demonstrates that “through the cross we come to understand that the worst events can be meaningful and that disappointments and tribulations are part of the course of life in the fallen world.”²⁶⁴ The cross also “enables us to see that every disappointment and suffering we now face can be integrated into the story God fashions.”²⁶⁵ The paradoxical nature of the cross reminds us that the contradictions that exist in our lives are realities that we encounter with grace and wisdom, with the hope and assurance that these contradictions will lead us to better possibilities.

Conclusion

The crisis generated by COVID-19 calls for missional actions that are embedded in our everyday lives and shaped by our everyday realities. This also demands a role that is prophetic in nature, shaped by compassionate solidarity. Compassionate solidarity and prophetic pragmatism build into each other; both of them are to be at the “disposal of the cross,” and involves “tragic actions” that contribute towards the realization of life abundance. Prayers forms an important element of missional life, for the author of mission is God and it is prayer that links us to that missional God. It is in prayer and contemplation that we are renewed, enriched, and empowered for missional engagement. The goal of mission as everyday virtuous activity is to be an act of embracing our beloved community that leads to the preservation of the life of others and their flourishing.

²⁶³ A discussion about the difference in ideals and the existential contradictions in early Christian community can be seen in Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement-Volume 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001).

²⁶⁴ Chia, “Eschatology and Hope in Asia,” 174.

²⁶⁵ Chia, “Eschatology and Hope in Asia,” 174.

7. Conclusion

The exploration of a probable mission paradigm is a continuation of the conversation initiated by missiologists who have indicated the need to develop mission paradigms that respond to the realities that shape our world and our being. They have also indicated that there cannot be one single approach to mission, but that we need a variety of approaches. The discussion of this book represents only some of the way in which Mission in Asia can be configured.

The definition of mission in Asia during COVID-19 and beyond as everyday virtuous activity is only a pointer towards the many options that lie ahead as the world continues to wrestle with the pandemic. Recasting mission as everyday virtuous activity will be, in practical terms, no easy task. It will “stretch us in more ways than one and will require the marshalling of all our faculties both individual and corporate.”²⁶⁶ However the assurance of God’s presence till the end of the world provides us with the impulse and courage to continue to imagine and hope in the midst of uncertainty and despair. His presence and empowering Spirit provide us with the needed resources to understand the world we live in and to weigh up the best ways of doing mission.

This book is an attempt not to be “interrupted” by the times, but to continue to sing the Lord’s song in this strange time. This book is not a book on mission among the vulnerable or mission at the margins. Rather this book calls for an enlarged thinking and mentality in mission that pays attention to local cosmology, location, and practices, especially in the context of the precariousness of lives caused by the pandemic. It constructs the goal of mission as one that enhances the flourishing of all lives. To construe mission as one that enhances life in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic is to honour God’s promise of eternal life and life abundance.

²⁶⁶ Roger E. Hedlund and Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj, “Conclusion,” in *Missiology for the 21st Century: South Asian Perspective* edited by Roger E. Hedlund and Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj (Delhi: ISPCK/MIIS, 2004), 657.

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About the Book

In the face of the precariousness of life rendered by the pandemic, Shiluinla Jamir's *Embracing God's Beloved Community: Rethinking Mission in Asia during COVID-19 and Beyond* needfully proposes mission as an "everyday virtuous activity". It is rich with "testimonials" (stories and testimonies) that the indigenous communities and the so-called "unlettered races" in Asia use to give meaning to life and to relate with each other.

When these stories and testimonies are analysed through the lenses of decolonial thinking, they give voice to the local communities - the world as seen through their eyes, and in how they process and communicate their thoughts. Decolonial thinking in mission also overcomes the tendency to make undue generalisations. Instead, it gives value to the multiple voices and many effective practices in the engagement of God's mission.

About the Author

Shiluinla Jamir is a Christian ethicist and a feminist theologian from India.



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