

Ministry from the Margin

*D K Sahu**

Theological students trained for Christian ministry have to ask first a question whether one is being trained to take up a profession or vocation. It may seem an obvious question but a right one that needs to be addressed continuously in the changing scenario of our time. Vocation is the bridge between theological education and spiritual formation. Vocation is a calling and one is called by name. The vocation articulates one's name. Spirituality cannot be fully addressed in purely academic terms but it is something that people experience from their own context. This involves faithful listening and obedience to the will of God and the outcome is of an integration of theological education and spiritual formation. Spirituality has to do with the response of the whole person to God and to neighbors. So it is deeply engaged with the daily life of people. Personal spirituality goes hand in hand with public spirituality that includes action, promotes life and engages society.

The primary purpose of ministerial formation is for those who enable others for their participation in God's mission. In other words, empowering people for mission. It arises out of the option for and participation in and learning from the pain of others. It is out of such a process of formation that comes the capacity to envision an alternative. That requires a search for new paradigm. It is part of the over all landscape in our common struggle in quest of a different mode of conceiving the world and our intricate relationship to one another. In other words, some form of crises triggers it. We need to interpret the crises. We must name our pain: must have the courage to name our pains.

We often hear it is said that the Christian minister today is in search of an image. With the secularization of society, functions once performed by Christian ministers have been taken over by others-educationists, social workers and counselors. Even within the church, the new stress on the responsibility of the laity has led some to question whether a full time ministry is necessary. Therefore, there is a need to think about the role of ministers in our world today. According to Thomas Kuhn a paradigm or worldview or vision is always a community issue. In the world of science, it is the scientific community that needs to be re-educated when there is a paradigm shift. But how does a paradigm shift? Kuhn says first an anomaly awakens the scientist to new questions. When there is a paradigm shift, there is a growing awareness that 'something is amiss' in the current paradigm. Secondly, in a paradigm shift, there is involved a crisis or a breakdown. For example Einsteinian relativity theory can be accepted only with the recognition that Newtonian physics was wrong. Finally the

* Rt.Rev.Dr.D.K.Sahu is the General Secretary of the National Council of Church in India, Nagpur.

supporters of the old always resist the new paradigm. Resistance is a sign that something deep is being challenged. A paradigm shift requires both courage and sacrifice.

Marginalization is a term associated with political, gender and economic realities of oppression. The increased number of publications on 'marginalization' from various fields invites attention to examine the experience for theological insight and challenge for mission. The groups or persons who are silenced, excluded or edged out are almost too numerous to identify. We have heard from anthropologists and sociologists about the dynamics of the margin. Margin can be the site of creative envisioning or a center for critical reflection and clarification rather than as merely a site opposed to the center or as a state of peripherally. David J Bosch reminds us that mission itself has been marginalized in theology but the voices of those who have interpreted Christianity from the margins are becoming more numerous and more articulate. It is always tempting to move in from periphery and find a place at the center, whatever that center may be. The need of the hour is to re-perceive the margin as a place pulsating with critical activity and creative discourse. The margin could be perceived as a center for critical reflection rather than a mere site opposed to the center or a state of peripherally.

In our present context, everyone is aware of the intensity and pathos of the 'Dalits' in our social fabric. There are hopeful signs that there is serious analysis and reflection on this issue. Our social system has festering and bleeding wounds of human suffering caused by caste, religion, ethnic barriers, language affiliations and diverse cultures and traditions. It is a historical fact that the Dalits in India are one of the earliest indigenous communities who had been denigrated as *dasa* (slave), *avarna* (without caste) or *achhuta* (untouchable) and who now prefer to address themselves as *Dalit*. With their disability of untouchables which is linked the state of extreme poverty, which has reduced them to the status of 'no people'. Atrocities on dalits have become a common feature and many of these go unnoticed and unreported. The story about tribals, adivasis and the indigenous people of India are different from that of the dalits. They have somehow clung to their culture and retained their tradition, language and tribal identity. For the adivasi, land and space is more basic to his worldview than time. His land is a place where trees, plants, creepers, animals, birds, insects, human beings and ancestral spirits share in their common destiny. The land is life. It is not an economic commodity to be owned individually or to be bought and to be sold. The inroads of heavy industries, dams, water, energy and mining projects in the heart of the adivasi habitat have hit their very life resources: land, water and forests.

Theological education cannot ignore the significant changes of our time. The process of globalization, liberalization and privatization which can be understood in the simplest way as increasing relationships from local to international scale through movement of production and economics. In the initial stages the movement of luxury items, manpower and raw materials characterized this process. This change has accelerated during the last decades of the twentieth century and we are witnesses to an unprecedented process in the world history. Globalization has become a key word in economic, political and cultural life. The term has many facets and dimensions. Economic globalization involving free movement of capital goods, resources, technology and services, even though hailed in many developing countries, has come under dispute due to its negative consequences such as increasing unemployment, worsening poverty, reduction in health care and other safety nets. Biotechnology is becoming more and

more influential in our daily lives. The thrust of bio-technology which has occurred in health care as well as in food production, through genetic manipulation of plants and animals is exciting. No doubt, biotechnology promises a great contribution to the improvement of life, however it also raises serious ethical and theological questions, especially with regard to genetic manipulation which alters the inherited characteristics. In addition to that the information revolution has turned upside down the assumptions and theories in the industrial world. For example, we do not consume information like other resources. It is generative. We have become participants, and actors in this process. We have become consumers of the products of the information society.

Ministerial formation is not simply a matter of theological education of a class or of a people identified as the ordained; but the equipping of the people of God as a whole in discovering the potentialities of the people and engaging in continuing learning process to discern God's will for our time. It is said that if there is a reduction of 5% per year for five years in the defence spending by India and Pakistan, universal primary education can become a reality in both the countries. It is a human tragedy that to a starving, thirsty, hungry and illiterate population the bomb is offered as opium. It is easier to make a bomb than to educate four hundred million people. All education proceeds only through relationship. Persons are shaped, formed, educated, and freed, by persons and through relationships. 'Relationship is reciprocity' said Buber: "My you act on me as I act on it." "The universal reciprocity' relationship is education.

We often talk about people 'having power'. The rich 'have power' over the poor or men 'have power' over women. But power is more complex. Power does not only come from 'above', it also comes from 'below'. Although formally subordinate to Pilate, the chief priests were able to maneuver him into being just what they wanted. Even Jesus, having stayed quiet, responds not to Pilate's power but to his weakness, his fear, as he reassures him: "The one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin". Pilate's last attempt at escape is to go over the heads of the Jewish leaders to appeal to the people themselves. But there too finds no support. Despite the formal authority he commands, Pilate is caught. It is not only those at the top who have power, but those at the bottom have some power also. Power is always (at least) two-way."

To say this is not to down play the reality of power. Power is a part of every relationship. Power cannot exist in a vacuum. It is easy to see power at work where there is open conflict. Measuring power by observing conflict is one-dimensional view of power. A two-dimensional view of power would take into account the 'off stage' maneuvers that determine the outcome of formal decision-making process. It is well known that decisions in practice often owe more to lobbying than to formal discussions in the meetings that follow. In negative terms, it is having power over others. This is power of domination, manipulation, of subtle coercion. But there is power in creativity, in healing, in the resolution of conflict. Power and authority are generally understood as paternalistic or bureaucratic, that is the power to say 'no' and to dole out favours at discretion only when begged for. If, on the other hand, power were conceived as the ability to build others up, inspire them and help them do great things, that is to empower them in turn then surely such power would be a positive help. The exercise of power may empower others. The emphasis on power in Jesus' ministry is positive as he exercised power to heal, to release, to forgive, to convince, to restore. If more people gain confidence and skill

to resist economic and political exploitation, the end result will be more whole and a more just society, which will be in the ultimate interest of poor and non-poor alike. If it is to result in real change, the empowerment process will be a long struggle, in which deep conflicts of interest between the poor and non-poor have to be confronted. ¹

The ministry of Jesus takes place in a world diminished of dignity and saturated with violence. The context of Christian ministry is a world of dehumanizing forces. The world in which the gospel enters is a world that is not the 'best of all possible world' but a world in which where so much of outrage to human dignity is perpetrated either with impunity or with benign neglect. The ministry today is not to be an exercise in fantasy but exercise in recognition of the fact where human dignity and human rights are not reflected & recognized. There are destructive & dehumanizing forces in our world both around us and within us. But our ministry arises from a firm confidence that the vulnerability of Christ's witness is clear in the figure of the cross. Stripped and beaten, Jesus was reduced to his essential humanness. He could not convince the leaders and the people of Israel that the liberation he wanted to bring about was something other than the fulfillment of an earthly Davidic kingdom. The kingdom, which he saw, was a kingdom of reversal, where the last would be first, love would replace force, and leadership would be shown in service. But the hope of Christianity is that the cross - is not the end but the means for resurrection. Where one died many have found new life.

The vision for justice, freedom and peace are worth trying for the service of humankind to create a new human community, which is inclusive. It demands and makes community in fact more shockingly inclusive, more astonishingly boundary-crossing. It includes not only the so-called normal but also so-called abnormal, not only the familiar but also the so-called abnormal, not only the familiar but also the strange, the alien, the different, the marginalized. It is to bring into being a community where all live by grace, where those once silent now speak, where once despised are equals, where being different male or female, young or old, black, brown or white- no longer threatens but enriches the common life.

There is a growing awareness that academic theology and pastoral ministry are reciprocally related, there remains a problem in knowing precisely how to relate the two. In what ways can the contributions of each to the other be made? The aim of the present article is to think and address this problem from the vantage point of pastoral theology since the task of facilitating the interaction between academic theology and pastoral ministry belongs in a pre-eminent way to pastoral theology, at least as it is being defined and practiced today. Pastoral theology, as formerly understood, referred to those principles and skills, a pastor needs to fulfill the primary duties of the ministry: preaching, catechizing, evangelizing, liturgizing and counseling.

Karl Rahner has argued for a view as forcefully as anyone in the Roman Catholic Church.² According to Rahner, pastoral theology (or practical theology) is not limited to the work of the clergy but extends to everything which the church as such has to do. This leads to the conclusion that practical theology is both a discipline in its own right and a constitutive dimension of all the other theological disciplines. As an individual discipline, pastoral theology takes up the task of comprehending the present situation in which the church finds itself and in relation to which the church must actualize itself. This is different from doing the work of sociology, economics, psychology, cultural anthropology, and the like, because it is an assessment. As a constitutive dimension of all other theological disciplines, pastoral

theology acts as a critical conscience, helping theology to shape its agenda and formulate its conclusions in conscious relation to the world in which it lives. At the same time, pastoral theology seeks to draw out the inherent practical orientation of theological research and insight thereby helping the church to plan its pastoral enactment, and in this sense apply theology to the pastoral scene.

Pastoral theology is a mutual interaction between the experiential situation and theological reflection: concrete experience is the starting point and effective pastoral ministry of the church is the goal. Neither theology nor pastoral ministry may function in isolation if pastoral theology is understood in this way. More than that, both theology and pastoral ministry must function in an integral manner, according to the nature of each. Their integrity is required by this concept of pastoral theology because each includes the other as an essential moment of its own development. Thus, for pastoral theology to occur theology must be theology and pastoral ministry must be pastoral, but always in relation to each other. This constitutes one of the key challenges for pastoral theology or any theological reflection based on ministerial experience, because for the most part academic theologians and pastoral ministers determine their agendas separately and differently and proceed with them on the basis of their own internal methods and goals. Anyone attempting to integrate the two is called upon to act in a sort of mediating role, trying to facilitate genuine communication for everyone's benefit.

One difficulty in determining theological basis for ministry is the necessity of disengaging Christian faith from the cultural forces in which it has been embedded throughout history. The whole movement of the expansion of the church and distinctly 'missionary outreach' has been intrinsically bound together with phases of culture. Perhaps a close alliance between colonial governments and missionary movement has resulted in many instances in grave misunderstanding of the fine works of missionaries. However, missions have often been in direct conflict with their own governmental or commercial interests. Early missionaries to India were in constant battle with East India Company. In the Epistle to Diognetus, possibly of the second century, there is a significant early statement about the church:

"For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind in country or speech or customs. For they do not live somewhere in cities of their own or use some distinctive language or practice a peculiar manner of life. Though they live in Greek and barbarian cities, as each man's lot is cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and the rest of their living, their own way of life, which they display, is wonderful and admittedly strange.³

A superficial reading of this passage would seem to indicate that everything had worked out nicely but a second examination will show that there was tension even at this stage. Christians were to be in the world but not of it. They were enmeshed in the activities of culture, but they possessed quite a different system of values. A comprehensive analysis of the tensions which have characterized the church in its various segments throughout history is offered by Richard Niebuhr, who distinguishes three major positions of the church: a. Christ against culture b. Christ of culture and c. Christ above culture in which the last position is subdivided into three classes:

i. The synthesists ii. The dualists iii. The conversionists.⁴ It is inevitable that in all these

attempts to solve the problem of the church and culture, there has been a co-mingling of behaviour, motivation and beliefs.

We speak of the church as 'one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic'. But disagree on how their meaning is determined by different assumptions and theologies. Adolph Harnack, who unlike some other devotes much space in his history of Dogma to the development of ecclesiology, can find little systematic reflection upon it in Eastern theology and, points out that there is no dogmatic treatment of it in John of Damascus' 'On the Orthodox Faith'. In the West, attention is centered on the clergy. It is not much of an over-simplification to say that ecclesiological discussion in our time nearly always centers on, or generates into, disputes about clergy, bishops, and sacraments. In way of contrast, the efforts of early work on Christology were devoted to an examination of the question of the being of Christ: of who and what kind of being he is in relation to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, one the on hand, and, on the other, to the rest of the human race.

In the West, the theology of the church appears to have derived in large measure by analogy from the conception of an earthly empire. A crucial phase in the development is to be observed in 'Cyprian's idea of the church, an imitation of the conception of a political empire: one great aristocratically governed state with an ideal head. The letters of Cyprian breathe a spirit of authoritarian commitment to the unity of the church but one has to recognize the constraints under which Cyprian was operating. When we come to Augustine, the picture is complicated. A conception of the church as the community of believers is important for him, but it is overlaid by developments deriving from the church's change of status after Constantine. The official recognition of the church meant that it was no longer certain whether it was a community of believers at all, so that it appeared rather to be a mixed community of the saved and the lost.

"This in turn led to two developments: the first a strong stress on the institutional nature of the church, which fostered a tendency, with us to this day, to see the clergy as the real church. The church does not have its being from the congregating of the faithful – because not all of the faithful are faithful but from its relation to a hierarchical head. The mixed nature of the church necessitates in turn an imposed, rather than freely accepted, discipline. The second is the platonizing distinction between the visible and invisible church."⁵

If the effect of Constantine's settlement was a movement towards the clericalism of the invisible-visible polarity, the waning of that social order is calling attention again to the need to rethink the structures of the church as a community. If we look at some representative figures, we can note a pattern beginning to emerge. First among them is Tertullian:

"The church itself is, properly and principally, the Spirit himself, in whom is the trinity of the one divinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (The Spirit) gathers (congregate) that church which the Lord has made to consist in 'three'. And so every number which has combined together into this faith is accounted a church by its author and sanctifier."⁶

The point is that Tertullian is drawing links between three terms: the trinity, the community of faith and its free act of congregating. The catholic intention of the Reformers was to initiate change in the church, but not with the aim of founding a new church or propagation of a new

faith. They called for reform in order to preserve the church's true identity. The Reformers' understanding of the church is implied in their understanding of the nature of Christian faith and its practice, and of that which makes it possible: the action of God, Father, Son and the Spirit in reconciling sinful humanity to himself by disclosing the truth about the relationship of the creator to his creation as the certainty of faith. We are today painfully aware of the gap between the factual existence of the church in society and the theological formulae in which its nature is expressed. This leads to a situation in which the practical questions of day-to-day living in the church are often decided on the basis of pragmatic and wholly untheological consideration, while the ecclesiology of academic theology, operating, as it seems, at one remove from the social reality of the church, seems often unable to relate to the practical questions which face the church in its struggle for survival in a modern society.

The inter-relationship of theory and practice which characterizes the ecclesiology of the Reformers is made possible by relating both aspects to the central point of their understanding of Christian faith: the distinction and relation of divine and human agency. The understanding that the church is the creature of the divine word decisively shapes Luther's conception of the church. The church is constituted by God's action and not any human action. The church is created by the divine word insofar as it evokes the human response of faith. The Word of God creates the certainty that makes the human act of faith possible. Calvin's conception of the Church is the outcome of a different historical situation. As Owen Chadwick remarks: Luther married an ex-nun, Calvin the widow of an Anabaptist; and the difference is symbolic. His last edition of the 'Institutes' of 1559 develops the ecclesiology from the perspective of the 'visible' church as a response to the practical problem facing the new Reformed community: the radical wing of the Reformation.

"Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the church of God has some existence."⁷

The church as an organized human community of witness is open to change as long as these changes help the church to fulfill its fundamental task of witnessing to the truth of the gospel of Christ in the specific historical, cultural and social circumstances. What can never be changed is the truth of the revelation by which God disclosed His unchanging faithfulness to his creation. That the church is related to the whole world & that the church is sent, is one of the fundamentals given of the Christian faith. But that does not alter the fact that in the course of history, the tension of origin and vision has been experienced in a great variety of ways, depending on the empirical reality of the church. It is true that European discovery of the non-western world and the associated movements of expansion have for centuries been the frame work within which Christianity learned again to understand the fundamental world-relatedness of the church. Moreover, the context of that learning has produced a large number of essential insights and experiences, which we cannot dispense with in our reflection on mission. But it would be shortsighted to equate that framework of expansion with mission. Therefore a fresh return to the origin of the church has to take place.

God calls people to bear witness to the gospel of hope revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is characterized by people's openness, trust and dependence to God and on one another in every day face-to-face living. Listening is radical openness to God and to

another. The decision to enter in to the dialogical co-presence with God results in a radical openness to God who loves us. It results in the feeling of being constrained to listen intently to the still small voice of God and the voices from the margin to find our true center. To acknowledge the voices from the margin is not to condone the darkness of evil but to recognize the face of Christ in all humanity. As capitalism has become established, its underlying culture has shifted. The 'Protestant ethic' of hard work and high saving remains in the tendency to value people in terms of the work they do. But the drive for profit means high levels of unemployment resulting in a vicious downward spiral of poverty and depression, and those on the margin still struggle to make ends meet while the non-poor are encouraged to acquire ever more comforts and luxuries. The work hard ethic is complemented by the consumer ethic with instant gratification by urging to buy now and pay later. If one cannot wear the styles of last season because they have become outmoded, there is a pressure to buy again long before the clothes are worn out. When potential for sales of cassette players falls off, the only way to listen to music is on compact disc. Perhaps now the fastest turnover of all is computer, where it appears that new models come to the market almost daily, faster and compact. Competition, not cooperation is the rule of the game. People get caught up in the race to get on. It is not what they are, but what they do and what they have matters. The vision of socialism remains powerful, but so far it has failed to match this in practice. Despite their egalitarian rhetoric, the collapse of the communist parties in Eastern Europe revealed tremendous power, wealth and privileges concentrated at the top of the political and military bureaucracy. For those lower down the scale, both material good and personal freedom were in short supply. The centrality of the state meant bureaucracy became massive, invasive, inefficient and corrupt. Competition in the market was replaced by maneuvering in practical and ideological politics; those better at playing the game won over others.

The commitment to a living, simply by choosing against the cultural pressures towards conspicuous consumption and achievements at other's expense has been seen as a means of allowing one's mind to concentrate more fully on God. In Christian tradition, it is reserved for monks and nuns. The problem is that while they might own nothing as individuals, the communities to which they belong are often very rich. This limits the capacity to be with the poor and the institutions might be oriented towards the rich, providing medical care or school towards the rich.

We need to be careful in discerning the will of God for ministerial formation in our time. One possible way is to overcome the tradition that sees the mission of the church as primarily as obedience to a command. Bishop Newbigin says that it is customary to speak of the 'missionary command' and this way of saying is not without justification. But it tends to miss the point. It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy. Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. It is striking that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the church. This is the case of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost; encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian, Peter's meeting with the household of Cornelius and of preaching of Paul in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia. There is something present which calls for explanation.⁸ The search for that explanation is an ongoing task to shape the ministry from margin.

NOTES

1. **Doing Theology & Development**, Sarah White & Romy Tiongco, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1997.
2. **Rahner, K. *Theology for Pastoral Action*** New York: Herder and Herder, 1968.
3. **Good speed, Edgar, J. *The Apostolic Fathers***, New York: Harper Brothers. 1950.
4. **Niebuhr, H, Richard, *Christ and Culture***, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951.
5. **Gunton,C. & Hardy D. (Ed). *On Being the Church***, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989, p.52.
6. ***Ibid.***, p.55.
7. **Inst.IV, 1.9.**
8. **Lesslie Nebigin, *Gospel in a Pluralistic Society***, SPCK, 1989, p.116.