EVANGELISM IN THE CONTEXT OF SINGAPORE'S POVERTY AND PLURALISM
THE NEED FOR A NEW MODEL OF APPROACH

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FROM THE METHODIST CHURCH IN SINGAPORE
1. SINGAPORE – ISLAND OF PROSPERITY

Singapore is widely perceived as an Island of Material prosperity. For example - John Naisbitt says in 'Mega Trends 2000':

'Singapore enjoys high growth (10% in 1988), low inflation, full employment, positive balance of payments, large financial reserves, and one of the highest savings rates in the world - 42% in 1988. In the 10 years ending in 1988 per capita income increased from $2810 (U.S.) to about $7,500 (U.S.) in 1988 per capita GNP reached $8772' (pg 167)

Other achievements of outstanding economic significance can be multiplied Ad Nauseam. Enough has been cited to indicate to us the challenge of proclaiming Good News to the Poor in the context of Singapore's national material prosperity.

2. WHO ARE THE POOR IN SINGAPORE?

a) What is poverty?

The Traditional thinking and experience of the church in general has been to distinguish poverty according to the following categories:

* absolute v. s. relative poverty

  absolute poverty being the condition of those who are destitute of all temporal goods and the necessaries of life and need the help of others.

  relative poverty is the condition of those who have no superfluous goods, having only what is strictly necessary for life i.e. the honest common labourer.

* involuntary v. s. voluntary poverty

  involuntary poverty is due to extrinsic conditions.

  voluntary poverty is due to the spontaneous surrender of temporal goods i.e. those taking the vow of poverty

* effective v. s. affective poverty

  effective poverty is the actual lack of material goods

  affective poverty is the detachment of the heart from whatever wealth one may possess. (the humble poor)

  (See Msgr. Luigi Civardi's 'Christianity and Social Justice' pg. 19-20)

b) Ministry to the poor in Singapore

There is a great extent of upward social mobility in the nation. In fact more than 82% of Singaporeans who were at the top of the 2 measures of high education and high occupational status, in 1972 came from families of lower positions. ('Studies in ASEAN SOCIOLOGY', Peter Chen pg 28)

The point that I am trying to make is this - that the church seeking only to minister to the absolutely poor in Singapore would have actually marginalised her relevance for the entire nation.
The church must reach out to:

- Singaporeans in relative poverty
- Singaporeans who have material wealth but are of the 'humble poor'
- Singaporeans in absolute poverty

But in order to reach out to the 'poor' in Singapore with the Good News, I believe the church must be like Christ becoming poor in order to help the poor become rich. Therefore to reach Singaporeans in the 3-fold poverty (relative, humble, and absolute) the church must first practice affective and voluntary poverty: being liberated intrinsically and extrinsically from material possessions to do the work of proclaiming good news to the poor.

3) LINKAGE BETWEEN MATERIAL 'POVERTY' AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN SINGAPORE

Studies of Social Stratification have shown quite clearly that there is a strong class bias in Membership of the different religions in Singapore.

By socio-economic status Protestant Christians are only 11.7% lower class, but 77.7% middle class and 10.6% upper class. For Roman Catholics the percentages (in the same order) are 13.1, 81/4, 5.5

For Hindus 29.1, 70.9, 0.0
For Muslims 60.8, 39.0, 0.2
For Buddhists and Chinese Religionists 44.6, 55.0, 0.4

Of the middle class category most Protestants and Roman Catholics are middle/upper middle class, while for the other religions most are lower middle class

Education is an equally revealing indication

For Protestants 62.0% are English stream educated, 37% Chinese Stream, 0.0% Tamil Stream, 0% Malay stream and 1% other.

For Roman Catholics – 81.5, 16.7, 0.0, 1.8, 0.0;
For Muslims – 28.8, 1%, 3.8, 59.6, 6.8;
For Hindus – 70.3, 0.0, 24.3, 0.0, 5.4;
For Buddhists – 30.4 60.1, 0.8, 0.0, 8.7;
For Chinese Religionists – 15.9, 80.5, 0.0, 2.4, 1.2;

The pattern is clear -

While Christianity and Hinduism are predominantly middle class religions, Islam and the Chinese Religions tend to be heavily lower and lower middle class.

In terms of education there is a heavy concentration of Christians and Hindus in the English stream, a heavy concentration of the Buddhists/Chinese Religionists in the Chinese Stream (taken together 23.15% English & 70.3% Chinese Stream)
The conclusion is obvious -

There is a strong association of English Education with upper middle class status/Christianity and Hinduism, of Chinese education with lower class status/Chinese religion and of Malay medium education with lower class status/Islamic religion.

The Implication is undesirable -

This seems to support one’s intuitive observation that Christianity especially is regarded as a middle class and English and/or Mandarin language religion whereas the 'vernacular' languages and religions (with the exception of Hinduism) go together. (See John Clammer's Singapore - Ideology, Society and Culture)

Therefore Good News to the Poor in Singapore must be carried out by the church in a context of Religious pluralism in order to authentically engage the relatively and absolutely poor of the nation.

4. CHRISTIAN WITNESS - SINGAPORE STYLE

There is a People Movement daily gaining momentum in Singapore, one that has caused the church to grow from somewhere between 1 & 3% of the population in 1959 to over 11% in 1985. (Hinton's 'Growing Churches in Singapore Style' Pg 3)

In 1982 a survey was conducted, studying 12 fairly typical Protestant Churches in Singapore (Hinton, pg 119 & 120)

Respondents were asked what attracted them to Christianity. The answers given can be grouped into 3 categories -

Looking for a true religion - 41.2%

Attracted by the corporate life of Christianity - 35.4%

Faced a crisis in life - 18.4%

Respondents were also asked about Factors that influenced them in conversion

Brought up in a Christian Family - 10.5%

Regular Church Programme - 36.1%

Personal Evangelism, by family member - 7.2%

Personal Evangelism by friend - 17.3%

Student para church organisations - 13.3%

Special evangelistic meetings - 5.7%

Other - 9.7%

The obvious conclusions are that Most conversions took place through the regular on-going work and witness of the church and Christians rather than through special crusades. Most conversions happen through friendships evangelism rather than kinship evangelism. (Hinton pg 119)
2. Criticisms can be legitimately leveled at Christian witness - Singapore Style

1. As we have seen above - the impact of the outreach is imbalanced - where certain sectors of Society are being ministered to at the expense and neglect of others i.e. the poor and poorer citizens of the nation.

2. Christian witness in Singapore seem to lack much variety according to Margaret Scott writing for the Far Eastern Economic Review 2 July 1987 "Halting the Crusade"

'Christianity in Singapore has become a critical issue. Two contrary varieties of Christianity have been rapidly taking root in the republic. One is a Conservative Protestant variety, keen on evangelizing, and the other a more socially activist Catholic form which is, as is the case elsewhere in Asia, often critical of government policy'. (pg. 44)

In fact - 'Protestant Proselytising - especially among Muslims is seen as a potential threat to stable relations among Singapore's various races'(Scott pg 61)

Hence the Church is seen as adopting a confrontative and adversarial stance with both non-christians and Government

5. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE - SINGAPORE STYLE

Going back to Scott's article:

'Catholic Social activists and Protestant Proselytises, are 2 facets of the same problem facing the government.'

'Trouble broke out with the Catholics first, with the rounding of the ten who were active in Catholic Social Work'.

'Recently (1987) a group of Protestant pastors were asked to meet with officials from the Government Internal Security Dept. The Pastors were reminded that the Government did not condone evangelical activity, particularly among Malays'. (Scott pg 61)

6. THE NEED FOR A NEW MODEL OF APPROACH:

CAN MOTHER TERESA BE A METHODIST?

If the Singaporean church ignores the Signs of the Times as reflected in her nation, then she may be missing out on what the Spirit may be saying to her churches. Business cannot remain as usual for any of the churches in the Republic of Singapore.

The church must do some heart searching. Something is wrong. Is it the way we have conducted our evangelism and our prophetic witness or is it, that the very practice of evangelism and social witness itself results in social disintegration and hence deemed undesirable.

One's theological pre-suppositions take prominence here.

I believe that Jesus Christ alone is the Saviour of the Whole World and hence evangelism must never stop until every tongue confess and every knee bow to Christ.

I also believe that Jesus Christ must be Lord over every part of our lives, not just the affairs of the Church and hence even Social relationships and Institutions can find enlightenment and redemption in Jesus Christ.
Consequently I do not believe the solution to be dialogue with other Faiths to replace our Evangelistic and Prophetic witness. Rather the need of the hour in Singapore is for a new approach in witness - evangelistic and prophetic dialogue.

This new approach must

1. be gracious in challenging the wrongs of Society and Government
2. be gracious in presenting Christ to the non-Christian of various persuasions
3. be sensitive to the needs of the poor (absolute, relative and humble)
4. be able to simultaneously affirm Christ and traditional culture, with primary and final authority in Jesus Christ.

Is there such a model available for us today?

I believe that Mother Teresa of Calcutta can provide a useful model for a situation of faithful witness in the midst of tension between Church and State, non-Christian and Christian communities.

a. Mother Teresa and her Sisters are not Social Workers but Missionaries of Charity

- A Special Order within the larger Roman Catholic Church

"Your vocation is not to work for the lepers. Your vocation is to belong to Jesus. The work for the lepers is only your love for Christ in Action; and therefore, it makes no difference to anyone as long as you are doing it to Him"

b. Mother Teresa and her Sisters pay special attention to the poor in their Ministry -

'We want to bring them to Jesus and bring Jesus to them”

"Feeding the Hungry Christ
Clothing the Naked Christ
Visiting the Sick Christ
Giving Shelter to the Homeless Christ
Teaching the Ignorant Christ"

c. Mother Teresa and her Sisters do not neglect evangelism as they minister to the poor

'The Special aim of the Society is to labour at the conversion and sanctification of the poor in the slums; that is by nursing the sick and the dying, by gathering and teaching little street children, by visiting and caring for beggars and their children, by giving shelter to the abandoned.'

d. Mother Teresa and her Sisters fearlessly engage in evangelism with people of other faiths but in a manner that is winsome rather than insensitive.

'At the opening of Baroda a group of Hindus came to me and said 'You have come to convert us?' I looked at them and smiled and said 'Naturally that’s the treasure I have; I would like you to be Christian, but I will not force it on you. Even God cannot force Himself on anyone who does not want Him'.

5
'A Muslim Mualavi was standing with Father Gabrie and looking at a Sister bandaging the wound of a leper with so much love. She didn't say anything, but she did something. He turned to Father and said, 'All these years I believed that Jesus was a Prophet, but today I know He is God because He has given so much love into the hands of this Sister.'

e. Mother Teresa and her Sisters do not have an adversarial relationship with Governments but rather have convinced some of them of the usefulness of their Ministry to the larger Society.

'In Addis Ababa, where the Government is expelling missionaries, a few hours on notice, the Governor said to me, "Even if I have to send away everyone else, yet I will not let your Sisters go, because I know and see that the Sisters love and care for our poor people.'

(All Mother Teresa's quotations taken from "Contemplative at the Heart of the World", 1986, Fount, London)

I do not claim that the Model of witness adopted by the Missionaries of Charity to be the cure-all for all our problems in being witnesses for Christ in a world of many religions and many poor.

Rather I believe that the approach she takes points us in the right direction especially if we want to bring good news to the poor and pagan.

Several characteristics commend her approach to Christians of the Wesleyan Tradition.

1. As Methodism was 1st a Society within the established Church even so the Missionaries of Charity is a special order of the Roman Catholics given to contemplation, evangelism and ministry to the poor.

2. Methodism was originally contemplatively sacramentarian

3. Methodism originally had a zeal for saving lost souls for Christ


5. Methodism was originally a peaceful agent for Social Change in Society.

7. TOWARDS THE DAWNING OF A NEW MILLENNIUM

Evangelism 2000 - The Uplook for Asia is the basis for the Outlook.

current deterministic pessimism of the future of an Xian Xty. using 12 of a minority status could be the result of our own lack made to every minority community Xian should be encouraged by the words of Christ Mt 10:31-32

Case in point: The Church in China in the 1950's was said to be on the verge of extinction yet subsequent events proved otherwise