

The IELC after almost 50 Years

Since I accepted the call to the faculty of Concordia Seminary St. Louis in 1995 I have taken several trips to my homeland. I have gone back almost annually to visit my extended family. I have also gone to India with my colleagues and/or students from Concordia Seminary St. Louis, or with representatives of the LCMS World Relief. During these trips, by interacting with the leadership of various Christian denominations in India I have learned more about the ministry of the Gospel in India over the years, and have taken a closer look at some of the challenges and opportunities for ministry and mission the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC) faces.

A hands-on experience with the pluralism of religions and cultures and the co-existence of a multitude of Christian denominations in an inherently pluralistic culture has fascinated my fellow travelers. India is one place where they have been able to see in real life what some of them have been reading in books or gleaned from scholarly conferences and lectures. Our visits have helped us interact with a variety of Indian people connected with Hindu temples, Mosques, Synagogues, and Christians of the St. Thomas, Roman Catholic and the Church of South India traditions. Some of us have acquainted with the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India and Gurukul Theological College Chennai, and most of all the membership and leadership of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church.

In the summer of 2006, with colleague Robert Kolb, I participated in the IELC Pastors Conference on the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary, Nagercoil studying the theme, "Our Lutheran Heritage." The 2007 trip, however, had a specific purpose: to encourage the IELC membership in partnership with the LCMS to reach 100 million people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ by the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. These two most recent trips prompt me to make the following observations particularly about the IELC. As one who grew up in the IELC, and was directly involved in the ministry of the IELC for almost two decades from 1971 to 1990, I would like to bring my remarks directly to the attention of the LCMS Board for Mission Services.

As one of the youngest of the traditional Christian mission church plants in India, the IELC is a textbook example of some of the major challenges a mission church of the 21st century is facing in its own native soil. My comments on the IELC are based on my reflections on three major areas of its life and mission: the IELC's self-understanding, its organizational structure, and its specific relevance in India, its native land...

Self-understanding: The IELC has been a longstanding, ongoing experiment. Unlike most other Christian denominations in India, a multitude of castes co-exist in this church of a hundred and ten years. As in all Indian societies, caste is a significant socio-political component that steers and dictates almost everything that the IELC does as a community, society, and even as a Church. Perhaps following the McGavran principle, albeit inadvertently and anachronistically, the organizational structure of the majority of the mainline Christian denominations in India have a certain specific caste orientation. It stands to reason that as such this subculture functions as an infrastructure that has brought a certain stability to these churches institutionally, perhaps based on the homogeneous unit principle. This does not mean that other caste Christians are not included in the membership of any particular denomination. They are, although continuing to remain a minority in terms of headcount. Certain particular castes visibly dominate the entire organization and administration of the districts and dioceses of these Churches. Even today there are at least some examples of congregations that maintain their membership with a particular diocese transcending their geographical locations, practically on caste grounds.

Arguably, the IELC is one church that has in its membership a multitude of castes represented, for better or for worse. For a Church of her size, the IELC membership has come from numerous castes and sub-castes, the majority of which were deemed outcaste in the antiquated but practically omnipresent Hindu caste system. Although given birth in Tamil Nadu in 1895 as the first foreign mission of the LCMS, during the early decades of the 20th century this church had spread to the Malayalam speaking areas in South India. Through diaspora and other mission work, the IELC mission has since spread among some of the Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Kannada, and Telugu speakers as well. The presence in one church body of numerous castes and the use of several languages for mission and ministry are privileges few other church bodies in India can claim. Perhaps unique is also the fact that Concordia Theological Seminary Nagercoil India is the only institution that trains pastors, deaconesses and lay ministers by employing three different languages in the same classroom. Historically this church has worked hard at establishing unity in spite of diversity, to live up to its name, the *India* Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The first order of business as the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission morphed into the IELC in the mid 50's was to start IELC's own home mission. Gundalupet was chosen as the new field. The member congregations participated actively in this mission, and in the service of the Gospel indigenous missionaries from the Tamil and Malayalam speaking areas were sent to this new language territory. Furthermore, the three districts that comprise the IELC began their own mission work in their neighborhoods. Missionaries and church planters were sent to outlying area of each district, north Malabar, and to Mumbai and Chennai to reach out to metropolitan cultures. These missionaries reported to pastors' conferences, and connected well with the congregations of their home districts. The intent has been for this church of a humble beginning with a humble people to spread the Gospel throughout India. The IELC has been a church in mission.

This oldest of the LCMS' daughter-sister-partner churches, has had other major challenges to deal with. Initially this church began with converts directly from the Hindu (out) castes. Over the years, people from other castes who had initially converted to Christianity and since had become members of other Christian denominations have also joined this church. Economically, not everyone in this church has the means to make life's ends meet. Over half of the membership today is deprived of their caste rights and privileges in independent India simply because they are Christian, and worse, the government considers them 'forward' because they identify themselves as Lutheran. Geographically the IELC is spread too thin, about 70, 000 baptized, and not localized in any one particular geographical district or village. As such this church is not an entity any politician or a government official will show any interest in. The Salvation Army is. This Church is vulnerable on all sides as an overlooked minority in the community. Except for the warm embrace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the IELC sustains its unity as one church body.

Organizational Structure: Although chronologically ready for its golden jubilee celebration, the IELC is still learning the ropes of church leadership and administration, much of which is self-taught. If I may abuse a biblical imagery, this church unfortunately continues in its struggles like sheep without shepherd. Shepherds do not succeed in leading the sheep, nor are sheep willing and able to follow the shepherd. A Church that has less than 200 clergy on the roaster (the IELC does not have a roaster that the public is able to access) has by the book too numerous administrative positions to fill with ordained clergy at the Church, District and Circle levels, whether executive, committee, board or commission.

Administrative instability is a chronic disability that has plagued this church for 30 years now. Practically, and I think, technically, the entire administration is centered on the president of the IELC. He is chair of a number of boards and committees that decide and execute the mission and ministry of the church in its entirety – no little task. He is also the official election commission for the entire church including election to the office of the president. However, although an elected official ought to be aware that the community that elected him has elected him for a term, he does not on his own prepare the community for the next election. Following the MELIM era, the IELC was headed by General Secretaries elected for a two year term. The last General Secretary's office was changed to that of the president since the Rev. L. A. Raj. Dr. G. Thomas Edward was the first to be elected president for a triennium. For lack of a central office for the IELC president, the president's office moves around to wherever the president would be elected from.

After Dr. Thomas Edward's second term as president expired in 1977, the IELC has sought counsel repeatedly from the secular court to run the church mainly because the church's membership and clerics on their own could not agree on principles and values that would best serve the church's mission. Since then the church got used to approaching the secular courts for settling their internal issues. These involved appointments within the system, transfer of properties, hiring and transferring employees including teachers and pastors and so on. There were attempts at making the seminary principal as the final arbiter for settling ecclesiastical litigations. Unfortunately, however, after the first national principal Dr. B. H. Jackayya retired, the appointment to that office of all who followed has been held suspect and critiqued vigorously. Consequently, the neutral and impartial nature of that office was neither acknowledged nor respected fully. This meant that the secular court became the final refuge for both the officers and the membership of the IELC to settle church issues.

After Dr. Thomas Edward, the IELC was for five years run under the court's direction by the General Treasurer of the Church, its official legal representative. As elections could not be held, the senior-most of the three district presidents was authorized by the court to run the office of the IELC president, pretty much as a figurehead.

In this context, some laymen of the Trivandrum Synod filed a "scheme suit" for the entire church seeking in their own way the secular court's directions to straighten out the IELC's faulty administration, beginning with the Trivandrum Synod. Experience has shown that the courts do not engage such civil suits with much haste even if there is prima facie evidence to sustain such prayers as such issues are not life-threatening or endangering property. That suit was compromised after five years as The LCMS authorized Roger Ellison to aid the IELC in rewriting her constitution. All the hard work that was put in, the series of Church-wide Bible Studies and spiritual life conferences aside, the church was drawn to the court regularly and more frequently since than ever before. For administrative and leadership directions the IELC has trusted more the courts of the land than any other authority.

Towards the end of the Rev. John Hus' second term as president, some attempts were made by that lame duck administration to create a stalemate in order to prolong their term. However, in a few months a lot of the issues were overcome and in the summer of 1988 the Rev. Isaac Moon was elected president. I had the opportunity to be present at President Moon's inauguration. In his one hand Moon held the IELC's constitution and in the other the Holy Bible and sat in the official chair. His message was clear. Unfortunately, Moon ended up studying more the law of the land than following the Church's constitution. Moon entered the presidency as an accomplished evangelist and church planter. The burden of administration has since gotten the better part of Moon.

As a growing mission field and a young church the IELC has been following the trail of the three self church movement. The Gundalupet mission was a prime example of self propagation. That mission has closed after 40 years. The mission expansions to Malabar, and Mumbai have not yet been recognized as congregations and given voting rights after 50+ years. In 1958 The LCMS BFMS introduced an annual 5% cut in the subsidy for the IELC, encouraging the Church in India to become fully self supporting by 1978. In spite of the socio-economic struggles of much of the church's membership, a significant number of the member congregations took this challenge rather seriously. Several of them started their own bank accounts, prepared their own budget, paid their pastor, and some of them sent their synod contribution on a regular basis, and a few of them had their own independent mission going on a side.

The IELC has in its custody material wealth highly disproportionate to its membership much of which this church has been privileged to own first as huge mission compounds, bungalows, and properties where other charity institutions had been located. Unfortunately as the expatriate missionaries left India several of the mission compounds have not been maintained and cared for. Many of the missionary bungalows have been dilapidated, and many more fallen. Many IELC employees and occasionally pastors themselves do not leave the office or vacate their official residence after their terms end or even after retirement. Families that have rented have stopped paying rent and have claimed ownership of those properties. Neighbors have intruded, nomads have settled in church property and established and claimed right to own these properties.

President Moon in his wisdom chose to help out those congregations and church workers that were not capable of taking the annual 5% cut in subsidy in good stride. His reasoning was perhaps to sell some of the unused land and put that money to good use by paying the church's employees. With that in mind he entered the sellers market with great enthusiasm, but ill-prepared to do grand-scale business. Moon also introduced the 'central payment system'. This meant that all employees of the church including pastors and church workers would be paid directly from the central treasury of the IELC. All congregations, those that generate enough revenue to compensate their pastor and those who do not, will remit their entire income to the IELC treasury. The IELC will write a monthly pay check to all pastors.

This approach with all good intentions was flawed and became the last straw that broke the camel's back. It insisted that all congregations must remit their income to one central treasury. It meant that all pastors of the IELC will be paid by the general treasurer whether the pastors did their work or played politics. It signified that pastors need to accept a new call or obey an appointment to another congregation regardless of their performance in one congregation. It generated the idea that congregations need not save up anything on their own for posterity. It promoted the notion that pastors are employees of the Church and not so much a part of the congregational life. It implied that pastors and congregations will get to vote in conventions even if they did not pay their synod contribution. It also meant that many congregations and their pastors will never vote because they do not remit to the IELC the amount the IELC assess for them. And the reasons are numerous. Furthermore, the Moon administration could not sell much property nor could it sustain funding that was sufficient to resource a steady central payment system

The central payment system has caused a practical disconnect between several IELC Pastors and the congregations they serve. This system has allowed them less time for ministry and more time for politics. Thus the honor and respect due any office in the church gradually but steadily began to fade and to disappear.

Since 1990 (I believe the kick off event for this was the attempt at selling the property at Kodaikanal) the church has invited the secular judiciary system to involve in the affairs of the IELC. The absence of a stand alone election commission outside of the administration has diminished the chance of conducting routine elections in any orderly fashion. Court cases have since had a domino effect. When the elections are held at the circuit level, the district elections could not be held. When the church reaches a point where all procedures are completed in two districts, a third one will still be disputing their presidential elections. When everyone thought that the church was ready to meet in convention, it would find out that the term of the officers who were elected in one district had expired. Such unnecessary anomalies have been happening in the IELC. The saga has been going on (I am not advocating yet another office for the IELC. I already mentioned that this church has too many offices for its size. As I am writing this I heard in the news that Pakistan's Supreme Court reinstated the chief justice whom the nation's president had fired a few months ago.)

Most of those who get to know the IELC, and have conversations with the plaintiff and the defendant side of the vast majority of the court cases in that Church will have to agree that there is truth on both sides. Personal conversations with the parties on both sides are so convincing to the extent that both sides are approaching the court wishing the best for their beloved church. They seem to acknowledge that the present system within the church as such does not enable the church to go on with its primary mission. Nevertheless, it would be obvious to any outsider that both parties are 'praying' to the courts mainly because one party does not want another party to be in office, again for the sake of the well being of the church. What is not clear is how a church body that continues to struggle financially can afford to pay the court fees and the lawyers' fees for all these suits, and from where the members that draw the church to the courts find their financial support.

Already in 2003(?) the court pretty much took over the administration of the IELC, first by appointing an election commission to hold elections at different levels, and then to counsel the officers who were elected in the church's Convention. The 2006 June Pastors' Conference featured a soul-lifting, momentous event that in all its appearance guaranteed a turn for the better for the entire IELC. In the afternoon of the second day of the conference, the senior members of the IELC clergy under the initiative of Dr. Suvisheshamuthu exhorted the assembly to come to a consensus so that issues of the church may be settled outside the state's judiciary system. The primary focus was again for the church to run its own administration apart from the court-appointed administrators. The brothers were moved by this counsel. Everyone came forward, gathered around the altar and prayed together for the Spirit's guidance. Thanks to human weakness, a few weeks later the flesh quenched the Spirit again. For some people who control this church the court system appeared to be more trustable than a covenant they make among themselves even if it is made in the presence of God.

There is reason beyond doubt for the multiplication of court cases in this church body. Apparently the court of law has become the first and the last refuge of the church's leadership and membership to settle even purely ecclesiastical disputes. Experience has shown that not everyone who holds an office in the IELC can be trusted. Almost everyone in this church has been hurt by another in some way or fashion. Thus the court has become their last refuge, not with the assurance that finally justice will prevail but with the assumption that somehow the opposition will be penalized. Fear and lack of trust of one another dominate this church's culture.

Since the court took over the church few committees and boards of the IELC function with efficiency. Several of them have become practically non-existent, and rarely is a board able to accomplish anything at the service of the church. If committees meet and minutes are written, they are not available for ready reference. The minutes that become available do not necessarily represent the actual resolutions in the meetings. The wording seems to change sometimes on the basis of an afterthought since the meeting. Even call documents and appointment orders are issued employing courtroom language.

No doubt court cases are common in society and in politics. Government officials and democratically elected leadership of the country and the states regularly face this challenge. However, in India at the state and society levels, except for the IELC, a functioning administration is in place even when elections are contested and the policies and decisions of the administration are appealed in court. Rarely has the court taken over administration of a Church in India, and at that for such a long time as the IELC.

In the politics of filing suits against an administration, the officials of any community including the churches in India foresee this and file a caveat ahead of time in order to avoid a stalemate a suit could cause for the administration. The caveat stands as a safety net. It means that if and when a petition is filed for an injunction, the court will not grant it without proper hearing from both parties. Ignoring this privilege causes one to wonder if the administration is not aware of it, or allows it to happen with some intentionality on its part. A court administrator run institution is going to court against an order that the court itself has issued. Under normal circumstances civil suits of this nature do not receive priority over other issues the court may be dealing with. Postponement reoccurs.

The IELC's Specific Relevance. The IELC is already Ablaze! It has been. The IELC has been practicing without formal training almost every outreach method with an innovative spirit churches in America have been identifying in recent years.

Whether the Pentecost season, a mission festival or not, at least one song sung by its congregations on a Sunday morning worship is missional, and the average IELC pastor concludes everyone of his sermons on an evangelistic note. The membership does wear its faith on its sleeve. They sing out loud Christian songs and lyrics during their daily morning and evening family prayers, and they do not hide from their neighbors that they are Christian. When their pastor visits their home they also encourage their non-Christian neighbors to join them for prayer and fellowship.

Mission work began in many villages by establishing schools and other charity institutions. During week days the schools imparted education for children in the community, and during weekends the school auditoriums became worship centers for local congregations.

From the very early years of the IELC history, new congregations have been added through the daughter church planting method. Pioneer missionaries followed by indigenous Lutheran teachers, evangelists and pastors started and served multiple congregations in various sites. Such clusters have over the years become pastorates. A group of three or four or five congregations in different locations used to be served by one pastor, some times Lutheran schoolteachers or voluntary evangelists assisting him during weekends. The vast majority of them have since become independent, each becoming a pastorate. Several IELC congregations, especially in the urban areas, also run day care centers, the economically poor man's version of the Open Arms Outreach.

Congregations have either on their own, or by partnering with neighboring ones have experimented what used to be called "Hindu Sunday Schools." A few of them in the Trivandrum area have since become full-fledged congregations. Families that have connections with non-Christians through marriage have been God's instruments for bringing over the years not a few to faith in Jesus Christ. Youth and children have befriended their friends and classmates and shared with them the love of their Lord. The Second Saturday one-day retreats, laymen's fellowships, and women's fellowships are public testimonies of the faith. Even though Christians are a minority in India, and much of the Church is cognizant of the not-so-friendly context in which it lives, in those areas where the IELC is placed the Gospel is not easily kept under the rug or hidden in a bushel. The people have been ablaze. Under such adverse circumstances even today through the ministry of the IELC individual, group, and mass conversions do take place. The gospel does have free course.

India is no stranger to television evangelists, mega church development or small group ministries. Joyce Meyer and Benny Henn are beamed into the family television screen everyday, speaking the local vernacular. Locally produced and broadcast Christian programs in many of the 15 major Indian languages are readily accessible to the Indian public. Christian music audios, MP3s and DVDs are commonplace in the market place.. Bookstore windows proudly display the Purpose Driven Church, and Mother Theresa on the same pane.

It is not uncommon in India to come across in the newspaper an advertisement for a Christian evangelism program. Regularly, large scale miracle life crusades and "Jesus Calls" gatherings are held in the public arena drawing thousands

of non-Christians in one place. On such occasions even non-Christian government officials and state dignitaries participate in these programs.

In June 2007 in Chennai I had the opportunity to visit an Assembly of God Chapel that claims a 15,000 membership. About 8000 gather every Sunday for corporate worship. The membership networks through cell groups. Indigenous Christian mission societies have mushroomed all over India, supported primarily with resources from within the country in order to reach out to people groups within India where the gospel has not made great strides. Crystal Cathedral, Willow Creek, and Bishop T. D. Jake and the likes of them all have their Indian counterparts, and their small group ministries are mushrooming all over India.

India is a very popular destination for almost every kind of short term volunteer mission team. Many are sponsored and funded on denominational grounds and several are ad hoc volunteer groups that are curious to explore this vast land of various religions, cultures, races and languages. We are aware that independent LCMS pastors and missionary groups are visiting India without connecting with the LCMS or the IELC.

Although chronically drawn to the court, struggling financially, and subjected to oppression and isolation, the IELC and its leadership with one voice celebrate mission and evangelism as the very essence of the Church. The presence under one roof in one place of the Ablaze! conference of representatives of the struggling administration and its vigorous opposition was a welcome sign for all to behold the power of the Gospel that frees and unites. The IELC is not ashamed of the Gospel.

Concordia Seminary Nagercoil is the 'intellectual center' of the IELC and an institution that is centrally located for the whole church. Concordia is also unique as the only protestant seminary within a 200-mile radius where more than one million Christians reside. Upgrading this 85-year-old seminary to the BD level has been in the works for 30 years. Over the years Concordia has met the requirements to achieve BD status stipulated by its accrediting agency, the Senate of Serampore College. More recently the Senate has been encouraging all schools chartered under it to upgrade to BD level. The Christian community surrounding the seminary is anxious to see this institution grow and flourish in the area. The church has not yet seized this opportunity because it is still struggling to resolve issues that are internal to it.

The struggles today's IELC pastors face in terms of their identity and security in the IELC unfortunately continue to be a replay of what their predecessors faced fifty years ago. The cries I had heard in the first pastors' conference I attended in 1971 are still the same, voiced by my generation and the generation of my children. The vast majority of them suffer from a very low self-esteem, searching for their own identity, security, and purpose as pastors in the IELC.

Their average compensation is way below that of a grade school teacher with whose families and children the pastor also needs to raise his family. They receive a pension lower in practical value than what their predecessors received thirty years ago. They have no insurance coverage and health plan. They do not qualify for a mortgage, nor do their families own something they can lean on once they retire.

I understand that in the business world, corporations merge, one business buys out another, and others that cannot make profit close. Indeed the concept of partnership is nuanced with such ideas even when it is used in ecclesiastical circles. However, the IELC is partner with the LCMS as it grew from being a daughter first and then a sister. Daughters and sisters are part of family however weak and constantly showing signs of dependency they might be. In this family one needs to deal with the other with patience and longsuffering.

Under these circumstances I request that the LCMS view this oldest overseas mission in a new light. Do everything that is possible to help the IELC practice the gift of trust and trustability amongst the clergy and the membership. Encourage the IELC clergy grow in their self esteem and assume their responsibilities with faith and confidence as respected individuals in the community, enjoying the privileges and encountering competently the challenges of ecclesiastical leadership.

After the IELC's triennial elections, a representative from the Board For Missions Services call on the elected leadership of the IELC and of the districts to conduct for them a week long seminar on ecclesiastical leadership, administration, and book keeping.

Perhaps a few of the LCMS related, mission minded men and women who might be pursuing graduate degrees in the field of society and culture, ecclesiology or administration could spend a year with the IELC researching this church as a case study as well as teaching related courses at the seminary in India. This will enable our India partner grow in the knowledge and skills of church leadership and administration this church has been found wanting mainly because these remain untapped.

I believe in the spirit of partnership, one sister needs to *help* the other in those areas where it falls short so that the common task of serving the Gospel of Jesus Christ even if it would be by going through many hardships (Acts 14:22) would bear much fruit.

In the spirit of freedom in Christ,

Victor Raj
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To submit a comment on this reflection, email respond@lsfmissiology.org.