CHAPTER 7

Transnational Practice of Faith: Mission of the Church

Migrant religious communities practice their faith in local contexts. Emphasizing the transnational nature of this practice of faith focuses our attention on the ties to and connections with the homeland. The various ecclesial networks and ecclesial agents, however, enable the church to practice the faith in the diaspora. Migrant religious communities, while rooted in a particular geographic context, engage therefore in a global transnational phenomenon that links multiple nation-states. Thus far, we have examined the organization and structures of transnational religion; we now analyze the practice of transnational religion in the Kerala diaspora context.

How do transnational religious communities practice their faith in the diaspora? To answer this question, we begin by outlining a methodology for examining religion in context. This methodology employs the lived-religion approach, which gives attention to how religion is practiced by migrants. To maintain our institutional focus, I examine the migrants’ practice of faith through their respective ecclesial frameworks and corporate worship services. To capture the broad scope of the life of the church, I employ a threefold analytical framework concerning the mission of the church, namely, the gathering of the church in worship, the ministry to the church through the weekly program, and missional action in both the local context and the homeland.

A Methodological Approach to the Study of the Practice of Faith

The remarkable growth of the church in the Majority World altered the overall ethnic and cultural demography of Christianity, and we can trace distinguishing features of this new reality (see, for example, Tennent 2010, 18). Foremost are the nearly simultaneous emergence of multiple centers of vitality and the growth of churches in regions with little or no previous witness of the gospel. In this context, mission histories of the church cannot be restricted to solely the history of the expansion of the church; rather, they must capture the entire life of the church.
The classic approach to mission history focused solely on the expansion of Christianity. With the coming of world Christianity, however, the history of the church in the Global South is coterminous with the expansion of Christianity. Historiography that focuses solely on the missionary or cross-cultural action of the church obscures the rich history that the church itself embodies in its geographic context. World Christian historiography takes seriously the very birth, growth, and expansion of the church in its various particular locales. Thus, we cannot bifurcate between the history of the church and the expansion of the church. A consideration of only the missional activities of the church fails to appreciate the rich narrative of God’s redemptive action embodied in world Christianity.

An institutional examination of the practice of faith necessitates a framework faithful to the life and mission of the church. After defining the term “mission,” I detail a threefold mission theology of the church that provides the analytical theological framework for the remainder of the chapter.

Mission refers to the missio Dei, that is, the mission of God. This term captures the mission of the Father, sending his Son to redeem the world, and the Father and the Son sending the Holy Spirit upon the church (Tennent 2010, 45–61).

The mission of the church then, is the church’s participation in the mission of God. God is the originator and owner of mission. Wright elaborates, “Our mission means our committed participation as God’s people, at God's invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation” (2006, 25). The church engages in missional action as a response to God’s divine initiative.

The tendency, however, is to restrict the use of “missions” to refer to the cross-cultural initiatives of the church. Wright argues for an expansion of the mission motif: “Clearly, not everything is cross-cultural evangelistic mission, but everything a Christian and a Christian church is, says and does should be missional in its conscious participation in the mission of God in God’s world” (2010, 26). Thus, the mission of the church refers to all of the ways in which the church fulfills God’s call and purpose in the world. In other words, the mission of the church encompasses the entire life of the church.

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1 In the context of this quote, Wright speaks of the mission of Christians, without explicitly stating that it is synonymous with mission of the church (2006, 22–23). The mission of Christians is not separable from the mission of the church.