

Celebrating the 77th Anniversary of the Church of South India: A Time for Introspection and Renewal



September 27, 2024, marks a significant milestone as the Church of South India (CSI) celebrates its 77th anniversary. This momentous occasion, commemorating the union of 4.5 million believers, is an opportunity to reflect on the church's journey and the vision of our forefathers. However, this year's celebration is marked by an unprecedented situation: the CSI currently operates without a moderator, deputy moderator, general secretary, or treasurer at the synod level. As a concerned member of the CSI, I am deeply worried about the future of our synod. Nevertheless, instead of dwelling solely on our present challenges, let us revisit the remarkable journey that has brought us to this point.

A Legacy of Unity and Sacrifice

The vision of our forefathers, beautifully encapsulated in Rajiah D. Paul's 1972 book *Ecumenism in Action*, reminds us of the extraordinary sacrifices and unity that formed the CSI. Established in 1947, the CSI represents a historic union of Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Methodist churches. The bold idea of church union was first proposed in 1919 at a conference in Tranquebar (now Tarangambadi). After 28 years of discussions and prayer, various denominational churches in South India, established by different missionary societies, formed the CSI following India's independence.

The inaugural ceremony of the CSI took place at St. George's Cathedral in Madras (Chennai), presided over by the Rt. Revd. C. K. Jacob of the Anglican Diocese of Travancore and Cochin. In front of a vast congregation from all over the world, Bishop Jacob made a historic declaration:

"Dearly beloved brethren, in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church, who on the night of his passion prayed that his disciples might be one, and by authority of the governing bodies of the uniting churches whose resolutions have been read in your hearing and laid in your prayer before Almighty God; I do hereby declare that these three churches, namely – the Madras, Madura, Malabar, Jaffna, Kannada, Telugu, Travancore Church councils of the South India United Church; the Methodist Church of South India, Trichinopoly, Hyderabad and Mysore districts; the Madras, Travancore and Cochin, Tinnevely and Dornakal dioceses of the Churches of India, Burma and Ceylon; are become one Church of South India, and these bishops, presbyters, deacons, and probationers who have assented to the basis of union and accepted the constitution of the Church of South India, whose names are laid upon this holy table, are bishops, presbyters, and deacons of this church. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen."

Reflecting on Our Vision: Are We Following the Path?

As we celebrate the 78th anniversary of the CSI, we must introspect whether we truly follow our forefathers' vision. The CSI published a book, *CSI After 30 Years*, which offers critical insights into our current challenges. I'd like to know how many leaders within the CSI have taken the time to read it. The problems of our church are detailed within its pages, and we must address them earnestly.

The Struggle for Power

One of the church's constantly reported problems is the power struggle. Every Christian desire to be something significant and many laypeople seek to assert their power in pastorate committees and church councils. They want to be heard, and their egos bolstered, often deriving a thrill from dominating the lives of their pastors and bishops. Pastors, in turn, often fall prey to the evils of power, canvassing for votes, securing committee positions, and striving to become area chairpersons or bishops. The lengths to which some go to achieve these positions can be disheartening.

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Bishops, presidents, and institutional heads are no exceptions. They cling to power as if it were their private investment. Having tasted power, they sometimes become so intoxicated by it that they are unaware of being overcome by the lust for it. They do not want to lay down their office, even after serving long enough. This unyielding grip on power harms the church's mission and vision.

Concentration of Power

The excessive concentration of power, patronage, and prestige in the hands of bishops has been responsible for unseemly, undignified, and unchristian races for bishoprics. This issue was highlighted as far back as 1952, when the General Secretary presented his review before the synod, warning against perpetuating the old Anglican type of bishops who act as spiritual overlords. The CSI is not an Anglican church but a united, uniting church. Bishops who imitate Anglican bishops are in trouble in most dioceses.

A Call for Renewal

As we celebrate this significant milestone, it is time to renew our commitment to our forefathers' vision. The CSI is unique in many respects, and we must strive to uphold the values of unity, service, and humility that were foundational to its formation.

To honour the vision of the CSI's founders and address these issues, several steps could be considered:

1. Promote Servant Leadership: Emphasise servant leadership, in which leaders focus on serving their communities rather than seeking power and prestige.
2. Enhance Transparency and Accountability: Implement more robust measures for transparency and accountability at all levels of church governance to prevent power abuses and ensure fair practices.
3. Encourage Rotation and Term Limits: Introduce or reinforce term limits for leadership positions to prevent long-term concentration of power and encourage fresh perspectives.
4. Foster Inclusive Decision-Making: Create more inclusive decision-making processes that involve a broader range of voices from the congregation, ensuring that leadership is more representative and less hierarchical.
5. Reinforce the Church's Unique Identity: Reaffirm the CSI's identity as a united and uniting church, moving away from hierarchical models that emulate the old Anglican structure.
6. Educate and Inspire: Encourage leaders and members to read foundational texts like Ecumenism in Action, CSI After 30 Years and other relevant literature to understand and align with the church's vision and mission.

By addressing these issues, the CSI can continue to grow and strengthen its mission, staying true to the vision of its founders and serving its community more effectively. Let this 78th birthday be a time of reflection, renewal, and recommitment to the values that make the Church of South India a beacon of unity and hope.

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