

**MINISTRY IS A VOCATION OF DISCERNING APPROPRIATE
PRACTICES/TEACHING IN A GIVEN PLACE AND TIME**

(Through teaching, preaching, engaging individually and with the community on transformative actions as per the directive of the gospel of Jesus Christ)

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Graduation is a ceremony to mark the transition from being learners to practitioners, from recipients to providers. **Congratulations** to all of you. On this momentous occasion, I would like to share some of the challenges you and all of us must address as ministerial practitioners today.

Christian communities, the world over, are simultaneously faith and social communities. The historically emerged Christian doctrines, rites, rituals and ecclesiologies, and related institutional structures were shaped by the prevalent social ethos to provide Christians meaning for their existence and purpose for life in general. Therefore, Christian theologies and practices are periodically reviewed, reformulated, and reinterpreted to meet ministerial challenges in a given time and context. Throughout the past 2000-plus years of the history of Christianity, there were periodic attempts to reform in situations of significant social changes. While several of those reforms were often effective, regrettably, in numerous circumstances, they led to descension and divisions within Christian communities. So, as of 2021, it was estimated that there are 45,000 Christian churches, denominations, and communities, all claiming to be true adherents of Christianity. On the other hand, without the needed periodic reform and renewal, the Christian witness gets diluted and may even end up as a counter to its core visions of transforming communities for the fullness of life for all (John 10:10). So, in each historical and social context, the practice of ministry has to give careful thought to the challenges for wholeness of life for all humans, and in the recent years it has been extended to the well-being of the whole of creation. The relation between humans and the rest of creation, often metaphorically referred to as ‘mother earth’ has been increasingly accepted among people of all religious traditions and secular movements.

This evening I would like to briefly touch on six contemporary challenges and refer to three historic ones for discerning the appropriate ministerial practices per the directives of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I will not offer you any ready-made solutions but provide some broad insights from my ministerial experiences. Even though we can learn from one others’ experiences, in dealing with concrete challenges for ministry in a given place, appropriate discerning has to be done by the whole community taking into consideration various factors that govern the life of the people in their context.

I

1. Discernment of appropriate ministerial practices in the contemporary challenge of the ecological crisis. Global warming and its consequences are well-documented, shared, and debated. Ecological mindfulness among Christians necessitates reassessing the interpretations of creation stories in Genesis. The earth and its bounties are not just there for the exclusive consumption of humans without accountability. Rather humans have a responsibility as caretakers or stewards to preserve the bounty that nature offers to multiple lives on planet earth and for the generation that follows till the end of time. Such care and concern for the earth has to

reflect in religious education resources, sermons, bible studies, worship and liturgies, festivities, and the use of congregational properties and resources, which is already being done in many congregations, dioceses, synods and Christian institutions.

2. Discernment of appropriate ministerial practices in the upsurge of Artificial Intelligence and the euphoria it has created about the dawn of the transhuman and posthuman era and humans evolving as cyborgs, which is predominantly seen only in movies. With the help of AI gadgets, humans have overcome many physical and cognitive limitations previously accepted as the inevitable fate of being a human. Among the AI gadgets, robots are becoming coworkers in factories and have begun to help us at home, complementing and, in many circumstances replacing humans. The biblical writers and theologians of the past had no means of imagining these technological developments. So, the various aspects of our inherited religious worldviews need to be reassessed, including the traditional views of anthropology and anthropomorphized images of the divine.

I am assuming that many of the graduates had the opportunity to read Yuval Noah Harari's book *Homo Deus. A brief history of tomorrow* (2015). Harari points us that humans, with their accomplishments in science and technology, have ventured into some areas that were thought to be exclusive dominion of god and gods in biblical times. Today, advancements in bioengineering are providing a better quality of physical life for scores of people. Harari notes that the "techno-religions and Silicon Prophets" are already projecting the possibility of overcoming death and working towards some form of earthly immortality. They consider death as a bio-technical problem, and it can be resolved over the course of time.

AI-facilitated communication electronic platforms immensely helped us during the Covid19 shutdown to maintain social relations through online schooling, working from home, enabling virtual Christian worship, and meetings through zoom and other media. Our iPads and iPhones connect us to people far and near. The information we gather from them is so vast that one cannot exhaust them. With the collection of data and processing them, algorithms have already proven that they can get the work done faster than any humans can do. It is common to witness Christians using the digital Bible, hymn books, liturgies etc. In some countries, church contributions are made through credit or debit cards.

Today, most of humanity has become connected with AI machines more than ever before and increasing daily. It is estimated that there are more communication gadgets like iPhone and laptops than humans and that 70% of communications rely on AI. So, Elon Musk has noted that humans being integrated with our iPhone, laptops, computers, and other gadgets have already become cyborgs. These realities call for new theological explorations to provide people with updated views on religious anthropologies, the future of humans, the meaning of life etc. From an ethical point of view, there is a great need to challenge and prevent further discriminations that AI amenities have created. The industrial and economically affluent nations and multinational corporations are benefitting from AI revolution at the expense of others and further marginalizing them to a new form of "digital poverty".

3. Discernment of appropriate ministerial practices in the face of insights from neuroscience, especially the study of the brain and its role in human behavior and cognitive functions, has

metaphorically shifted spirituality-faith from the heart (emotion) to the brain (reasoning). As recent graduates, you may be familiar with books on Neurotheology like Andrew Newberg, *Neurotheology: How science can enlighten us about spirituality* (Columbia UP, 2018), which states, “brain is what helps us to have all our thoughts, feelings and experiences including that are religious and spiritual”. Dean Hamer, *The God Gene. How faith is hardwired into our genes*, (Anchor, 2005). “Spirituality has a biological mechanism akin to birdsong, albeit a far more complex and nuanced”.

The recent neurological lab experiment showed that when Franciscan nuns prayed and were in deep contemplation, their brains were more active in certain segments than others. That led the neuroscientists to conclude that would be the case with people of any faith in a deep contemplative mode. That further led them to a hypothesis that there is a “God gene” or humans, regardless of their religions and beliefs, are all hard-wired to god or the transcendent; however, they define them. So, relationships with people of other faith and ideologies have taken a new shift of accepting everyone as children of god (created in the image of God) and relating to them in that spirit.

4. Quest for expanding human habitat, possible colonizing and settlement on the moon and eventually on planet Mars. Traditionally Christianity subscribed to a three-tiered universe— heaven above, earth, and hell below. Only the human soul/spirit can leave earth after death. But modern science and technology are opening up the possibility of humans settling on the moon, and eventually, other planets may be in the form of cyborgs. That, in turn, calls for discerning the possible teaching of the three-tiered universe. Reinterpreting the perception of heaven and hell as some churches like the Church of England have done. Hell is not somewhere below the planet earth with constantly burning fire but a status of permanent disconnect from the divine. Of course, it is for each one of you to assess the situation of your congregation and community, and if the traditional teaching on heaven and hell metaphorically provides solace to people in grieving the loss of their dear ones, it has to be retained.

5. Religious worldviews of younger generations. In many Christian communities, sometimes labeled as conservatives, when people, especially youth, raise questions on traditional teachings to make sense of them for the contemporary situation, they are marginalized and tend to leave the community. The recent editions of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* note that Christianity is shrinking especially among the Roman Catholic and historic Protestant churches in Western Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand even Asian countries like South Korea. When asked about the number of Christians worldwide, we are usually told that there are 2.6 billion Christians around the globe. But how many are practicing Christians, which means regularly participating in church activities? That number drops drastically. Sociologists have pointed out that as societies move from agrarian to industrial societies and have more economic security, they tend to give up the traditions in which they were brought up or look for new religious ways. This is true of the younger generation, who are much more exposed to different religions and cultures and see value in many of them. So, it is said young adults in western countries prefer to be spiritual but not religious. It may be true also in the urban settings of India. But a sociological study may give us a realistic picture.

In North America, the result of a survey of hundreds of teenagers in 2002-2003, on their ways of understanding God or the transcendent dimension has led to the publication of the book: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, 2005). The teenagers in North America have a new spiritual perspective beyond being religious. The authors of the book, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, have articulated the theological perspectives of the teenagers they surveyed as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD). According to them, MTD can be summarized by five core beliefs: 1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. 4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when needed to resolve a problem. 5. Good people go to heaven when they die.”

Younger people may get these insights from friends of different faith traditions and cultures, social media, movies, and literature from their teachers and counselors, growing up in inter-race and inter-ethnic families. It may be possible that younger people are sensitive to the fact that religions generally tend to divide people. In contrast, spirituality motivates people towards the common search for meaning and preservation of life in its multiplicities. The important ministerial challenges are not to neglect the spiritual grappling of the young adults but build on what they have figured out, what the shortcoming within them and to be transformative agents for change as per the gospel perspectives and the Christian tradition.

These young people and even many adults who seriously wrestle with their faith often do not doubt the teaching and ministry of Jesus and its relevance even today as they perceive them. But their concern is that the teachings and vision of Jesus often are not that apparent in practice among Christians. So, their struggle to present the Christian faith in a meaningful way to the secularized people in urban areas is a challenge even in India and Asia and not just in the economically developed communities of the world.

6. Discerning the creative ministerial approach to dealing with people of other faiths and cultures when a section of them is hostile to Christian communities. Historically western Christianity had made mistakes in relating to people of other faiths and cultures due to a sense of superiority of its faith often mixed with a sense of superiority to its culture. In Asia and other colonized countries in the global south, Christians and people of other living faiths and political movements have shown a great sense of comradeship during the struggle for freedom from European and other colonial occupiers in the 19th century. However, with the achievement of national independence in almost all the countries in Asia, the euphoria of all citizens living in unity as one extended national family has eroded due to identity politics. A few leaders belonging to majority religions and cultures began to make exclusive privileges to those belonging to them for political gain. As a result, in a number of countries, minority communities, religious and cultural, including where Christians are a minority, have suffered marginalization.

To counter this marginalization, minority groups have resorted to a physical confrontation in a few circumstances. But in the long-term, a better solution is continued dialogue and finding an amicable resolution beginning with those within the majority communities committed to the common good of all and the common humanity that all share. Affirming identity can take the

path of an inclusive or exclusive approach. Unfortunately, asserting exclusive identity often comes in the way of upholding human fraternity. History has ample examples to show that human resilience has overcome worse atrocities as long as the spirit of hope and solidarity is kept alive. Even a severely damaging winter, when the time is ripe, will not be able to stop the blossoming of spring with all its beauty, bounty, and a new beginning.

The ministerial practices, therefore, call for preparing the community to be sensitive to the feeling of other religious and cultural communities, have a proper insight into their past discriminations and atrocities, and work with people within those communities who have a greater sense of common good of all and a secure future for the generation that to follow. Fragmented communities tend to waste precious human resources, perpetuate a sense of insecurity, and as a result, sometimes get ostracized by the international community. History has taught us that amicable, peaceful co-existence is foundational for the progress of any given community. Christianity was born as a marginalized and despised community under the political domination of the Roman Empire and the religious power of Judaism. Therefore, it can draw lessons from the past.

II

I will briefly touch on a few historic ministerial practices and the need to pursue them further with new insights, energy, and greater participation of the members of the Christian communities. From the inception of Christianity, the community has been engaged in dealing with the poor and marginalized and attempting to facilitate women's full participation in all aspects of the ministry. Yet, despite many positive accomplishments, there is still a need for a concerted effort to dismantle prevailing barriers.

7. Discernment of ministerial practices to continue to be in solidarity with the poor, hungry and marginalized in a world of enormous material and intellectual resources. Christianity and world religions have a good record of ministering to the poor, needy, and marginalized communities. However, within Christianity, there is tension between the charity and justice approaches. It has been well articulated by Archbishop Oscar Romero (1917-1980) of El Salvador. "When I give bread to the poor, they call me a Saint. When I ask why the poor have no bread, they call me a Communist".

With centuries of the ministries of the church, people of other faiths, NGOs, and the various programs of the government of India, in the recent report of United Nations and a few other global research organizations, in the global index India is still in much lower rank as far as uplifting the poor. For example, India's rank in child malnutrition is not that impressive. Dealing with poverty, hunger and disease is not just a local concern but also a global concern. Covid19 showed us how economically rich nations and rich people everywhere had an advantage over the poor in getting the needed vaccine, hospitalization and health care. At the same time, we have witnessed great sacrificial services rendered by health and social workers and solidarity among the poor and the marginalized in caring for each other all over the globe. However, addressing the need of the poor and marginalized has to be a continued priority in various ministerial teachings and practices.

8. Overcoming sociological bearers of caste, class, race, and ethnicity due to stereotyping and fear of the other. Christian communities, in many circumstances, tend to follow discriminatory practices against certain castes, classes, tribes, indigenous people, races, and ethnicities. Social changes need a concerted effort, as it is well known that privileged people will resist change due to the fear of losing their advantages. However, the gospel vision of an egalitarian society will not happen unless people repent for their past, work out whatever is the possible reparation, and start a new beginning.

9. Discerning ministerial practices to promote gender justice within the Christian communities and society at large. Full participation of women in all aspects of religious and secular life is still a work in progress. In some Christian communities' theological arguments were made for not including women in all aspects of Christian communities and society. Whereas in some others, male domination is steadily dismantled. There is a need to be more proactive in teaching, preaching and institutional management, so that accomplishments are not slow. In woman's leadership, we have a lot to celebrate. Electing a female Registrar Dr. Limatula Longkumer in the 100 years of the Senate and 200 years of Serampore College is a landmark. We need to see this momentum being repeated in all the areas of ministry and theological communities.

III

Incarnation to epiphany: Do not overlook Jesus the prophet

There is a need to build bridges between theological premises of incarnation and epiphany to discern appropriate ministerial and teaching practices in a given time and space. By epiphany, I mean God's continued presence and stirrings towards the redemption of the whole of creation (Rom 8:22) and abundance of life for all (John 10:10). After incarnation, God has not ceased to engage in God's creation. The challenge is how Christians perceive it. It is explicated by theologians in two scenarios 'theology from above' and 'theology from below. Dogmatic versus liberation theologies. Theology from above is metaphysical speculation of God's existence and presence with humans as stated in John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, ... and the Word was god", a cognitive understanding of God. Whereas theology from below is experiencing God's continued presence here and now. Like the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman and her enquiring with Jesus. You seem to be a prophet, so tell me where one can offer proper worship to God, in our mountain or Jerusalem (v.19). The answer of Jesus is crucial in experiencing the presence of God in every situation. In John 4: 26-28, it is recorded, "Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be Messiah? They came out of the town and made their way toward him." An outcast becomes an evangelist experiencing the presence of the divine. We encounter epiphany in the prophetic ministerial engagement with the spirit of Jesus.

The ministry of the church draws on the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the gospels and interpreted since then by theologians and Christian communities in the past 2000 years. The question that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am" (Matt 16:15) is a recurring question for every community. Among the various images and titles for Jesus, the titles Lord/King, Priest and prophets play a significant role in the liturgies, hymns, preaching, and teaching. While churches are doing well in projecting Jesus as Lord/King and Priest, often the

appropriation of Jesus also as a prophet often gets sidelined. The liberation theology from Latin America and the many other theologies inspired by it, including a number of Asian expressions of them points to the continued oppression of economically poor, socially outcaste, and ethnically minorities etc. The prophetic ministry of Jesus has to be balanced along with his Lordship and priestly components as Christians understand them for Christianity to continue as a dynamic movement. In the modern idiom, we can understand prophetic as Jesus being a social activist (liberator) motivating his followers in a nonviolent way and engaging with the people to open their minds to justice for all, especially for those denied it.

Human nature and basic human needs remain the same as in the time of Jesus. But today, we have a greater insight into humans than in the time of Jesus. Sociology, psychology, biology and evolution theories provide alternatives to the Bible's creation stories and other religious traditions. Historical research has given us insights into how Judaism and Christianity have borrowed insights from other religious traditions of antiquity and appropriated them in their respective religious worldviews. Such appropriation goes on. Soon we will be celebrating Christmas. The various celebrative aspects of Christmas are a post-biblical adaptation, sometimes even labeled as 'pagan' practices of pre-Christian Europe. Christmas tree, Santa Claus, Christmas cards, and Christmas cake. Therefore, theologies and ministerial practices are work in progress with imagination, courageous application and adaptations.

Conclusion: Time to give to enrich the education system of the Senate of Serampore College.

In my opening remark, I mentioned that having graduated, you will be putting into practice what you have learned from your teachers and mentors. However, as lay leaders, ministers and theological teachers, you have a crucial role in transforming theological education at the Senate of Serampore College. In your practice of ministry and teaching, you may discover aspects of theological education that need to be updated to meet the contemporary challenges of ministry. Do not hesitate to share those insights through proper channels. Some of you are already theological teachers. Besides concentrating on your specialized areas, also reflect on ministerial training as a whole. It is said that in curriculum, it is equally important to discern what is left out as it exposes hidden biases in ministerial training and formation. Theological education, by narrowly focusing on traditions, confessions, and institutional histories, neglects equally important contemporary concerns for ministry and vice versa.

As ministry is a vocation of discerning the appropriate practices in a given time and place, theological education is also a vocation in discerning appropriate pedagogy relevant to the ministry in a given time and place. As graduates, you have received much, and now it is time to give/contribute to the renewal of the ministry and theological education.