

CHENNAI MISSION ASSEMBLY

THE SECOND CHENNAI MISSION ASSEMBLY was held at Loyola College, Chennai from **28th to 30th of December, 2009**. It was a time of coming together and reflecting collectively to evolve a framework that serves as a template to envision and craft a new future for the Chennai Mission. The core objective of the Assembly was “Educate – Empower – Employ: Challenges and Responses”. The Mission over the last few years focused its mission on empowerment. The Mission envisioned a future for itself in the ways and means by which it could evolve strategies to educate the poor, the Dalits and the marginalized leading to empowerment and finally to gainful employment.

DAY ONE - DREAMS OF SCHOLASTICS

The first day started devoting itself exclusively for the scholastics who reside within the Mission area and all the regents participated in the Assembly. Sixty five scholastics attended the Special Meet for Scholastics. It began at 9.30 am with a Prayer service led by Scholastics from Palayamkottai. Welcome address and the dynamics of the day was given by Fr. Joe Arun. He invited the gathering to focus on the challenges of empowering the people and our creative responses to those challenges. He called for a collective responsibility of all the Jesuits and invited the Scholastics to play a vital role in this collective responsibility.

Fr. Rector threw a lot of challenges to the scholastics and invited them to dream for the people, especially for the Dalits and Tribals. Fr. Victor invited all the Scholastics to work tirelessly for the development of the Chennai Mission as they are the hope, heart and breath of the Chennai Mission and to fulfill the dreams of St. Ignatius in our present context. A brief historical background of the Mission was given by Frs. Manu and Yesumarian on the Socio- Cultural Situation of North Tamil Nadu. Fr. Manu opened our eyes by giving us the alarming statistical data that urged all of us to get into quick action. Fr. Yesumarian urged all the scholastics to make this Mission a “Sorkkavalal” to our target people. He also challenged all our institutions to support our Mission.

We had a Panel Discussion on **OUR DREAMS FOR OUR TOMORROW** and three scholastics shared their experiences on various topics. Sch. Rayappan shared on **Persons for Mission**, Sch. Wilson on the **Ministries of Mission** and Sch. John Paul on **the Challenges for Mission**. There was a documentary video on “Mission for a Cause” at 2.15 pm. Then we had a group discussion on **Jesuit Chennai Mission: Areas of Growth & Areas to Grow**. After the group discussion we had a Plenary Session on Future Directions in which Fr. Maria Arul Raja led the group to dream for the people in terms of three domains, namely cognitive, emotive and performative.

DAY TWO - CHALLENGES WE FACE

The second day focused on the challenges we face in furthering the progress of the Chennai Mission. Nearly 200 Jesuits attended the assembly. The key note address was given by Mr. Uma Shankar, IAS and moderated by Fr. Kumar.

The summary

Mr. Uma Shankar said that the mind set of people, officials and politicians is pre-historical and wants to dominate the poor and Dalits in north Tamil Nadu which is slightly different from south. For example, to execute the Integrated Drinking water scheme, we have to make a borehole in a strategic point and pump the water to the needed places. Unfortunately the work is often hampered due to the intervention of caste people as the pipeline has to go through the streets of Dalits. For an oppressor, the support flows from different quarters but for the oppressed communities the support is less and so our rightful and timely intervention can strengthen them. He called the Jesuits to pay special attention to the following.

- Education is the first priority to strengthen the people.
- Land allotment of at least 5 acres to landless poor and Dalits
- English language and Japanese language will empower people in terms of employment. The US and Europeans companies and Japanese companies are looking forward to further investments
- Religious and spiritual back up (people need energies) to be given to poor people as they are in the grip of superstitious beliefs and practices
- The galaxy of committed IAS officers can change and transform the social scenario of the country. So encourage the Dalit students to take up IAS and other civil services training.

We had a **panel discussion** and it focused on the challenges in various fields.

Evolving Institutions: Fr. Casmir Raj spoke about two important things. 1. Recruit right people and 2. Maintain those people. The Chennai mission can be developed depending on the variety and specificity of the areas in the Mission by empowering the skills of the ordinary unskilled workers and developing the people to be competent in IT field and we can train them for the right jobs through ITI & Polytechnic colleges. We can send our men for IAS and IPS.

Caring Pastorally: Fr. Bella said that our action plans do not give enough importance to the pastoral ministry. We need to search together in understanding it. Our ministries have to go beyond institutions and we need to accept the lay leadership in our parishes.

Building Movements: Fr. Yesumarian posed a challenge to all of us saying as Jesuits, how do we view movements? Strategy of Ambedkar & St. Ignatius would put us in the proper understanding of the Movement. What is Our Mission and Vision? Vision –means empowering Dalits and movements play vital role in it. Mission is part of the movement and we are called to build and develop people’s movements.

Orientating School Education: Fr. William Alphonse brought to the attention that an immediate challenge that needs to be addressed is the impact of Alcoholism in our students family. Our students have to cope with this problem – so counseling is the need of the hour. We have created group studies which help our students to forget the family burden by developing healthy friendships. Guiding our students, ESPECIALLY GIRLS is most important. Giving them right motivation is the need of the hour in our schools.

Approaching Higher Education: Fr. Ignacimuthu said that our students have more memory than creativity. We need to restructure the program of study and integrate research oriented teaching. We need to encourage learning by doing and concentrate on developing skills and aptitudes. We need to provide scope for learning with orientation for job, self employment by introducing more job oriented courses in our Colleges.

Forming Jesuits: Fr. Alangaram indicated that we need to expose the formees both to the rural and urban poor and the oppressed. We need to respond to the challenge of the disease of the Alcoholism and develop a folk cultural centre and Jesuit Centres in the tribal belt. We need to train our men in esthetics. Ongoing accompaniment with the young priests and introducing the formees to major problems is the need of the hour.

We had a *plenary session* focusing on the processes of developing Chennai Mission.

Collective Approach in the Development: Fr. John Pragasam invited all of us to become personally *more open* towards the Mission and to have a deep sense of *companionship* with everyone working in the Mission and *collective consciousness*. He also said that some Jesuits feel discriminated and side-lined and they are perceived to be anti-option, anti-Dalit, etc. so the spirit of accommodation and confidence building is the need of the hour by recognizing differences among Jesuits in the manner in which the option is understood and implemented. Challenges to the implementation of Dalit option are not the same everywhere. Prejudices and suspicions will vanish if a spirit of accommodation prevails.

Formative Process: Fr. Sebastian said that we need to enhance the quality of the formation. We need to recruit quality candidates - the candidates who are willing to take the society forward irrespective of caste and intelligence. We need to create more number of apostolic schools. All our formation programmes should adhere towards the individual philosophy of life and enhancement of self confidence and self acceptance. There is a need for good formators, too.

Resource Mobilization: Fr. Francis Xavier shared about the innovative and creative ways of mobilizing the funds and resources for the Mission and the philosophy and the methodology of fund raising.

What has been done so far?

Chennai Mission Office. Loyola Animation Centre, Mettupalayam. Loyola College of Education. Loyola College, Vettavalam. Loyola Teacher Training Institute, Kuppayanallur. Loyola-ICAM College of Engineering and Technology by Aug/Sep 2010. Loyola Academy, Vadampakkam - by June 2011.

Yet to be done

House for Jesuit Candidates. Community College/College in Salem or Dharmapuri District. Hostels for rural boys and girls in strategic places. Nursing/Pharmaceutical School for Girls. Housing for the poor Dalits. Resource Centre for Rural Development. He also shared the challenges and difficulties in the resource mobilization.

Challenges Within: There is no clear understanding of the Mission among the Jesuits. This needs a special attention to all of us. There is a need for conviction and collaboration.

Challenges Outside: Limited funds are available from the foreign donors for higher and technical education since their priority and concentration has shifted to African and Latin American countries.

DAY THREE - RESPONSES WE MAKE

On the third day, we focused and reflected together on what kind of responses we could make to the challenges we face in the Chennai Mission. To kick off the day, the keynote Address was given by Padma Sri Aloysius Fernandez on “Building Poor People’s Institutions”.

The summary

Mr. Al Fernandez said that there is a shift today in power, in role models, in beliefs and in institutions and are we ready to cope with this shift as Jesuits? Climate change is a concern and it is a matter of life style. We need to build democracy from the roots, and focus on the Gram Panchayat. All the problems start with

Gram Panchayat. If at all, we want to bring some changes, we need to focus on the Gram Panchayat. He also talked about three circles and our poor Dalits are at the outer circle. We need committed managers to lead companies. Companies should be transparent with the objective of initiating shift from the third circle to the second and second to the first and our role as Jesuits in this regard is essential and the need of the hour.

We had a **Panel Discussion** on Responding to the Challenges at 11.30 am.

Fr Mark talked about the creative methods in our empowerment through the schools and institutions. He said that the people should own the power and institutions. We need to give awareness to the parents and leadership program for the students. We need an organizer for each diocese who would bring all the Jesuits together and develop a lot of initiatives at the diocesan level.

Fr. Peter Francis spoke about building competencies of the people. *We try to admit the disadvantaged into our institutions, but we need to ensure equality in **ADMISSION**, in **ADVANCEMENT** and more importantly in **ACHIEVEMENT**.* We need to enable them to be different, stand out, get noticed and develop their competencies

Fr. Ignatius Amalraj said that the project of Vettavalam was achieved on target because of the good team work. The college has admitted 195 students in the first academic year. The uniqueness of LCV is every student will go out of the College with Degree and Diploma in his or her related subject. The present staff will be given enough training to handle the life skills and communicative skills in collaboration with Fr. Xavier Alphonse and ICRDCE team. We need to educate the students, empower them with skills and make them employable.

Fr. Maria Joe shared on the theme **Daring to look beyond and Caring to act Differently** and said that the Chennai Mission has adopted a realistic and pragmatic approach due to our limitations.

There is an offer now from one of the NGOs in Cuddalore District. The offer has come now to realize our goal to a certain extent. We have started to respond now by appointing a committee to study the offer and get back to us for further reflection and action in future. A similar offer to start a school came from Germany after reading an article on Chennai Mission in Worldwide Magazine (Weltweit). Loyola Academy, for providing quality education to the rural dalit and poor children in the mission area, would take shape gradually. *In a year, 75% of the income comes from our donors abroad, 20% from the province and the remaining 5% from our investments.*

We have already started to look beyond so as to reach out to

- ✓ Migrants from Northern Districts -In collaboration with Arunodaya
- ✓ Small Farmers and Agricultural Labourers- Study to be done by TN Social Watch
- ✓ Sri Lankan Tamils in Northern Tamil Nadu – JRS Tamil Nadu
- ✓ Micro-finance Project in the surrounding villages Kuppayanallur – Frs. Dominic & Bella
- ✓ Explorative Study to start our initiative in a new diocese/district in 2012.
- ✓ a Task Force for Socio-Economic Development Activities

and would convene a meeting in 2010.

Fr. Joe Arun and Fr. K. Amal summed up the proceedings and picked up the challenges and our response that emerged from the floor.

Challenges: Hesitation and misunderstanding in how we work, and who we work with, incompetence in empowering work, not owning up the Mission, lack of resources to meet the challenges, lack of collective resolve, inability to work with our collaborators, difficulty in comprehending networks of power (politicians and bureaucrats); the strategies of oppressors are overwhelming.

Our Response would be to empower the smaller units, give equal weightage to the three circles: policy makers, working class, the poor, to build institutions that empower the poor, to build competencies of the people who work with the poor and to have creative methods in our approach and to expand the socio pastoral base in the phase I.

Address of the Mission Superior

Fr. Mission Superior brought to the notice of all the Jesuits two important things: The **first** one is the finger of God that is guiding us and the **second** one is the developmental work in the Mission within a short span of time such as Loyola College, Vettavalam, where we have already applied for Mathematics and one more section for English, Teachers training centre at Kuppayanallur for the rural women, a new course, namely welding and renovation of the hostel building in Ooty, construction of the first floor of the hostel at Kuppayanalur and the new Jesuit Residence in Kilepennathur. A few days ago, Loyola Industrial School at Ranipet has established a safe-water-system for the entire institution. We have taken the **three-step formula** of St Ignatius: 1. The poor and the marginalized, namely the rural poor and the Dalits, as our target people; 2. The mandate of working for their empowerment; and 3. In the process we walk humbly with the marginalized in the presence of the Lord who is at work in and through us.

There will be LICET in Loyola Campus, in collaboration with ICAM, a Jesuit-associated group of engineering colleges in France so that we may produce quality engineers with social responsibility and Loyola Academy in Vadampakkam with the help of Fr Albert Diedrich from Germany. Loyola Academy will serve, with the best of facilities, the poor and the Dalits and provide them with quality education. We are working toward Loyola University which would give us the freedom to provide to our students relevant education.

There will be a Social Action Centre to address the needs of the Migrants as well as the internally displaced workers who do the 3-D jobs, namely dirty, difficult, and dangerous jobs. We are aligning ourselves with the JRS for the Sri Lankan war-affected. We need housing for the most neglected in our parishes. He also thanked the Chennai Mission Office, the Chennai Mission Consult, the Task Forces, the Province Administration, Loyola College Community, apostolic teams and institutions for their contribution towards the growth of the Chennai Mission to this level. What we have done, gives us confidence and impulse to march ahead to do greater things in the future.

Fr Provincial's Address

Fr. Provincial, himself impeded from attending the Assembly due to ill health, was following the proceedings closely thanks to modern ICT (Information Communication Technologies) and sent in a PowerPoint presentation and deputed Fr. Socius to present it. In it he called for our collective efforts to empower the people in the Mission area and the ways in which we should respond to the challenges. When we looked on the first day of the Assembly at the development of the Mission from perspectives of movements, institutions, higher education, pastoral field, and formation of Jesuits, **educating the people is the key**. This education should build their competencies. Today our poor rural youth, particularly the Dalit youth, are not able to compete with their wealthier urban counterparts. They need to be made competent to compete. This is our challenge. Our institutions and movements should focus on building the competencies of the people. This is the way we should empower the people.

Our Response to the Challenges

Our response should be positive and collective. -positive in the sense that this is possible. Empowerment of the powerless in the Mission is possible. This is the "Yes-We Can" feeling. We have shown it in the ways by which we have developed the Mission. In a short span of three years, there has been a tremendous growth. This is a positive sign that we can develop further. Secondly, our response should be collective. The Mission will not develop by efforts of some individuals or some projects. Not certainly by the funds we raise. We will develop the Mission only by a collective resolve, unity of purpose and collective action.

EDUCATE

Mr. Uma Shankar said: "Education is the first priority to strengthen...English education to rural people especially SCs needs to be given promptly as a way of empowering." So we are starting LAV (Loyola Academy Vadampakkam). There will be feeder primary sections in Dalit areas. Special arrangements will be made to select the brightest and the best from Dalit areas and start already Standard 6 at LAV next year. Though these kids come from Tamil medium we have 7 years to make up. And when the feeder primary sections start sending children to Standard 6, they will be second to none.

EMPLOY

"Make employable" is what we mean by "Employ." Mr. Uma Shankar said: "The galaxy of committed IAS officers can change and transform the social scenario of country. So encourage the students to take up IAS training." It is not enough to encourage but we need to equip them and make them competitive so they get into IAS, IFS and IPS. How about turning out entrepreneurs, technocrats? In our schools, it is not a question of catering for Leaders OR Cadres. We have to prepare both. We cannot provide substandard or irrelevant education to the future leaders of the rural poor and Dalits.

EMPOWER

Empowering means giving our people "power over" their own future, job security, status, economic well being etc. But, more importantly, it means empowering them to be empowerers themselves. We just don't want to select a few of our target people and give them a ticket to prosperity and thus actually estranging them from their constituency. We must take "EDUCATE" seriously and comprehensively. We are in the business of producing "persons for others" with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes.

After Fr. Provincial's address, the Assembly ended successfully with the Mass celebrated by Fr. Mission Superior. He thanked each and everyone who contributed their mite to make this Assembly a grand success under the able guidance and effective leadership of Fr. Joe Arun whose spirit of service and tremendous efforts with lots of commitment deserved a special mention and appreciation.

Fr. Joe Arun

Convener

Fr. M.S. Jacob

Coordinator - Documentation