

Diocesans Daring to Dream Different: Evolving Creative Models of Ministry

*V Maria Alphonse, Bishop's House, P B 17,
Nagercoil 629 001, K Kumari Dt.,*

Privilege and challenge

Personal experience shows that life of a diocesan priest today is both a privilege and a challenge. Pastoral ministry is challenging to diocesans who are willing to render their best. Call it a vocation or a profession, contemporary pastoral context in India offers immense opportunities to the diocesan clergy because of their close proximity to people whom they serve.

The vision and mission of a diocesan priest is intertwined as well as shaped by the joys and sorrows of the people. Ultimately, diocesans discover the meaning of their priestly commitment from their daily interaction with their people. Encountering people enlarges their vision.

Close proximity to the pastoral context – not just Christians alone, but people of different faiths and no faith – opens wide ample opportunities to understand and to be part of the daily struggles of ordinary people. Interaction with them shapes the personality and ministry of the diocesan priests.

Innovators respond to the context

Moved by the mounting day-to-day struggles of their flock, the innovative lot among the diocesans sensitively and creatively

respond to their anxieties and aspirations, fears and hopes. Their interventions, though often go unnoticed, are significant.

Taking bold new ventures in accordance with the teachings of the Church, the creative diocesans have made their mark in the different spheres relating to the life and destiny of people. Remarkable indeed are their commitment because resources available to them are very limited. Yet, it is no exaggeration to say that priests of this type and their creative interventions do make the Church vibrant and relevant at the grassroots!

Abounding new models

Of the 13,067 diocesan priests working in 158 dioceses in India, some of them have made inroads into several new areas of exercising their ministry. Adopting innovative methods, they have pioneered novel ventures. But very little of their contribution has so far been assembled, analysed, assessed or assimilated. Working often single-handed with limited resources, these priests and their efforts, hidden to the world outside, have the potential to change the image of priestly life and the mission of the Church.

From a pastoral field research conducted for the last three years, examples of several diocesans who dared to dream different could be cited as models. However, five models are illustrated here for personal assimilation and pastoral application.

Model 1: Integrating indigenous culture

Known throughout the North-East as Kulandai, Kulandaiswamy is a priest from the diocese of Bongaigaon in Assam. While in Barama, he built a church incorporating the

symbols and icons of the Bodos. Probably, Barama is the only church in the whole of North-East that has integrated indigenous cultural expressions. Besides this monumental structure, he has also compiled, with the help of the experts in Bodo language, a dictionary in Bodo. It was first published in the Roman script. Titled "Concise Anglo-Bodo Dictionary", it contained 762 pages with 12,000 main and 3,000 sub-words. Unfortunately, there was stiff opposition to the use of Roman script for the Bodo words from some quarters. Hence, Kulandaiswamy and his team had to work overtime to bring out another edition of the dictionary in Devanâgarî script.

In Bijni, Kulandai started a Bodo medium school, first of its kind in Bodoland. Together with those proficient in Bodo language, he has prepared the syllabus and the text books in the vernacular.

Number of text books on Christian doctrine and relevant material for catechism are also prepared by Kulandai. Last in the list of his publications include 15 booklets on the History of Salvation in Bodo, translated together with the late Mr Obed Basumatary.

A collection on the Bodo songs and dance lessons and home remedies brought out by Renu Boro is pioneering indeed.

Though an outsider to Bodo language and culture, Kulandai has built an expert team to collect field data, compile and publish them. Notable among them are some of his longstanding friends: Mr Moniram Mochari, Ms Renu Boro and late Mr Obed Basumatari. Identifying the local talents and collaborating with them for catechetical and literary purpose is something very original. The group, particularly Mr Moniram Mochari, continues to work on various other collections relating to the Bodo people.

Kulandai is also known as one of the first missionaries to reach Arunachal Pradesh during those years when entry to the

missionaries was forbidden. He was then at Karumathy, bordering area between Tezpur in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Kulandai showed a lot of interest in the education of the children at this far flung area. Helping the parents to get their children admitted in the Catholic boarding schools in Assam unexpectedly marked a new beginning in the history of the Church in Arunachal Pradesh. Kulandai never took the credit to himself. He referred to these students as the first missionaries! It was the children who took the Christian faith to their parents! Quite an innovative idea to form local missionaries!

Model 2: Embedded in social consciousness

Recipient of four awards for journalism; eight awards for literature and eight awards for social work, Francis D'Britto is a priest from the diocese of Vasai in Maharashtra.

Author of eight books in Marathi, and twelve books of translations, D'Britto is the founder of the Green Vasai Movement. Well-known in the Vasai-Virar region of Thane District, Harit Vasai Saurakshan Samiti championed environmental issues. When Vasai experienced terror from the land grabbing Mafia, D'Britto and his movement fearlessly led a crusade against their land grabbing and water draining tactics.¹ He had risked his life and reputation in the hands of the gangs. His initiative had found an honourable space in the National Geographic Magazine,² as it stood up to protect the greenery and livelihood of the people of Vasai.

¹ "Mafia aiding Vasai builders: Fr D'Britto", *Free Press Journal*, Mumbai, August 11, 1990, pp. 1 & 9.

² Referring to D'Britto, the author wrote "So are a lot of people who live downtown. For such a large, muscular city, Bombay has a touchingly tender soul", "Bombay: India's Capital of Hope", *National Geographic*, March 1995, p. 63.

National integration and communal harmony continue to be his special concerns. He had organised several Sarva Dharma Sabhas in Vasai to create an atmosphere of peace. Through his writings and activities he has helped to bring the Christian community of Maharashtra into the national mainstream. The journal he edited SUVARTA served as an instrument of dialogue between different communities and took up social issues. Hence, it was under attack from the politicians, especially the BJP.³

Currently Francis D'Britto is the parish priest of St Thomas Church, Sandor in Vasai. His social consciousness is reflected in the inter-faith candle light procession he organised on November 30, 2008, Sunday, immediately after the Mumbai attacks. He felt an urgent need to instil a sense of hope and faith in his parishioners since his parish had its own share of tragedy. One of the members, Jordan Fernandes, aged 21, was a victim to the terrorist attack at the Oberoi Hotel. His appeal at the prayer meeting, "The need of the hour is to stand united as Indians, as human beings and promote inter-religious dialogue," is pertinent till today.⁴

Model 3: Promoting diocesan spirituality

Jacob Aluckal, born in 1937 and ordained in 1964, is a priest from the Archdiocese of Shillong in Meghalaya. His book, *Pioneering Diocesan Priests in the North-East India* documents

³ Staff Reporter, "BJP burns copies of social magazine", *Times of India*, Bombay, June 15, 1991. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate from the Bombay North-West constituency led a group which made a bonfire of the Marathi periodical Suvarta, giving a communal twist to the fight over using well water between Vasai and the new builders' lobby.

⁴ Shibu Thomas, "Sermons keep faithful going in city", *Times of India*, Mumbai, December 01, 2008, p. 07.

the bold new ventures of the diocesans in the north-east to establish a Church according to the local tribal cultures. The first in the series on the diocesans in the North-East, this volume reflects his concern for the life and ministry, struggle and spirituality of the diocesans in the north-eastern part of India.

One of the architects of the *Northeast Diocesan Fraternity* (NEDF) in 1985, an organisation of the diocesan clergy, Aluckal tried to build unity among the diocesans and articulated the struggles and conflicts the diocesans particularly faced from the religious bishops in the north-east. He is also instrumental in bringing out the journal *The Diocesan Priest*, now published from Oriens Seminary, Shillong on behalf of NEDF.

A person of varied interests, Aluckal focussed his attention on vital issues affecting the Church in the north-eastern region. His publications reveal his concerns, interests and expertise.

No	Publications	Year
1	Announcing the Good News in the Context of N-E India	1982
2	Diocesan Priests in North-East India	1985
3	Pioneer Diocesan Priests in Northeast India	2005
4	Catholic Church in Northeast India	2006
5	Cathedral and Laitumkhrah Parish	2006
6	Pilgrims in Faith Walking with the Lord	2006
7	Celebrating the Sacraments	2006
8	The Privileged Apatanis (of Arunachal Pradesh)	2007
9	The Church of Christ	2007
10	The Christian Prayer	2007
11	Christ's Faithful United as One Body	2007

12	Ecology & Environment – A Christian Perspective	2008
13	The Catholic Directory of North East India	2001

Besides the above list of publications and a number of unpublished materials on women in North-East India and on changes in Tribal identity and names, Aluckal is also editing the following two journals:

1. *Echoes from the Northeast*, Bi-monthly of the Church in the North-East.
2. *News and Views*, Quarterly Newsletter of the Archdiocese of Shillong.

How Aluckal was able to keep up his creative activities in spite of a fatal accident is worth listening to. He acknowledged that he was inventive because of the opportunities that came on his way. Instead of lamenting, his spirit for adventure and creativity seemed to have doubled after the accident. No misfortune could destabilise him. Instead, he turned every adversity into an opportunity. Undeterred, Aluckal emerged fortified! Even while convalescing, he compiled the Catholic Directory of the Northeast.

Aluckal was resourceful not only because of the opportunities that came on his way but also because of the vision that he held for himself. "To do thy will, O Lord, I come", the motto chosen at his ordination is kept alive, to this day.

Time and again Aluckal asserted that all the diocesans would have been creative were they provided similar openings. It was quite revealing to know from him, who had worked in the region for forty four years the diocesans were absolutely bound to their

parishes. They were left alone to sustain themselves and their missions. Even survival itself was a problem to them. Besides, for the diocesan clergy to be creative, dynamic leadership was an essential prerequisite.

Currently, engaged in helping Archbishop Joseph Mittathany, Archbishop Emeritus of Imphal, in compiling his biography, Jacob Aluckal maintains good relationship with the bishops of the region. He is also well known because of his involvements. His stint in Oriens Theological College, Shillong, the regional theologate for the North-east as its first diocesan Rector (1982-1986), as resident and visiting Professor and as the Director of NEDSF (North East Diocesan Social Forum), an institution under the aegis of the regional bishops conference for co-ordinating social and developmental activities, have gained him good reputation. His writings, as Archbishop Dominic Jala SDB of Shillong felt profited people and priests and hence made him popular.

Model 4: Holistic care for alcoholics and addicts

Joseph H. Pereira, affectionately addressed as "Fr Joe", a priest from the Archdiocese of Bombay, is one of the pioneers of rehabilitation of alcoholics and drug addicts in India. He has made a world of difference in the lives of thousands who were once plagued by the scourge of alcoholism and drug addiction.

As a Parish Priest at Mount Carmel Church, Bandra, he came into contact with numerous victims of alcohol. Seeing their pathetic condition, Joe decided to address the problem in a scientific way. With a recovering alcoholic, as a role model, and 3 patients referred to him by Mother Teresa's Home, he set up the first rehabilitation centre in the annexe of his parish house. With its humble beginning in 1981, rehab work today has spread to 48 facilities all over the country.

KRIPA-AIDS FOUNDATION

Touched by the pathetic condition of intravenous drug users (IDUs) suffering from HIV/AIDS, Joe Pereira started KRIPA-AIDS, an initiative working with people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHAs) in 1991. Today most of the KRIPA centres provide care for HIV/ AIDS infected persons.

KRIPA FAMILY

True to his calling as a Catholic priest and as a true Gandhian, Joe has dedicated his life and the services of KRIPA to the people who were considered outcasts of society. To those disowned by their own families, KRIPA is a HOME. To thousands of alcoholics and drug addicts who were once unable to look after their own personal needs, KRIPA stands for their family. Surprisingly, today they have become responsible enough to manage the affairs of KRIPA FAMILY.

KRIPA TREATMENT MODULE

Treatment at KRIPA is meticulously structured:

1. Admission
2. Primary care (De-addiction)
3. Assessment
4. Secondary care (Rehabilitation)
5. Extended care
6. After care

Realizing that ex-patients following the program of recovery would be better equipped to reach out to the individuals in treatment,

Joe encouraged persons in treatment to dedicate their lives to help others like themselves.

Community Based Rehab (CBR) is organised for those who for whatever reasons could not participate in a residential program. Until major social changes occur, the affected and rehabilitated individuals are required to live in their existing circumstances. So the CBR centre provides a support system. A friendly neighbourhood counsellor is available regularly to those who seek help. The CBR staff besides conducting Information, Education and Counselling activities, develops networking and referral systems to community hospitals and other supportive organisations.

Since chemical dependency does not stop at the individual and affects the immediate family, Joe has formulated the Family Systems Therapy Program. Individual and group interactions help participants to identify their disabilities and develop strategies to deal with them. Sustained counselling enables them to re-orient their relationship with others, especially with their families. It also empowers the individual to make appropriate lifestyle changes for better relationship within the family. The treatment also addresses the involvement of children and facilitates them as and when required.

In 2002 Joe founded Vasai Region AIDS Control Society (VRACS) with an unique module known as NICE (Networked Initiative for Community Empowerment) and model SMART (Surveillance, Management and Care, Awareness, Research and Training). After a period of six years more than 1300 patients have registered and are availing treatment at the OPD. VRACS became the first government recognized HIV testing centre in Vasai in 2008.

YOGAINKRIPA

Alcoholism and addiction, as diseases took a toll on both body and mind, apart from the spiritual aspect. Hence, the need for a holistic approach was felt. Being an ardent disciple of Hatha Yoga since August 1968 under Guruji B.K.S. Iyengar, Joe instinctively knew that Yoga would enhance the healing of both mind and body. With the assistance of his Guru and mentor, he structured specific postures in the disciplines of Pranayamam, Dharana and Dhyana. This along with the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions of the Alcoholics Anonymous reinforced the Kripa Module.

AWARDS

Revolutionizing rehabilitation by including yoga in the Kripa module of treatment, high rates of recovery could be seen at KRIPA. Consequently, Joe and KRIPA have received number of prestigious awards, both in India and abroad.

- 1989: Perestroika Sanjeevani Award for Anti-Drug Abuse Work in Bombay
- 1989: Award for work in Anti-Drug Abuse at Reach
- 1990: Priyadarshini National Award for work in Anti-Drug Abuse
- 1993-'94: National Award from the Anti-Narcotics Council of India, Thiruvananthapuram for KRIPA as the best establishment against Narcotics & Drug Abuse in India
- 1995: Sahayog Foundation Award for outstanding work in the field of Drug & Alcohol Abuse

- 1997: Ati Param Visisht Sewa Medal for Social Sciences from the Association of College of Chest Physicians, New Delhi
- 2003: International Yoga Journal Karmayogi Award
- 2005: Appointed as Expert/Specialist Member to the Academic Committee of the National Institute of Social Defence, an autonomous organization of the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India
- 2007: Christian Chamber of Commerce Award for Excellence in the Field of Social Work
- 2008: 3rd International Mother Theresa Award by Harmony Foundation, Mumbai, for Social Work in the Field of Drug-Addiction

FROM TREATMENT TO INTERVENTION

Today the focus of KRIPA-AIDS has shifted from treatment to intervention activities to restrict the spread of the disease. Therefore, centres have come up even in states like Nagaland, Imphal, Mizoram, Assam and in places like Kolkata, Delhi, Rai Bareilly, Goa and Mangalore.

Model 4: Animate, autonomize, accompany and adieu!

“Animate, autonomize, accompany and adieu!” is not just a slogan but an ideological option of Trust for Rural Education and Development (TRED) an initiative of Antonysamy. Known among his friends as “Beedi Samy”, TRED was established in August 1991 as a registered non-profit organisation. It aimed to consolidate and sustain justice, gender equity and participation for enhancing

the quality of lives of vulnerable sections of people in Talavadi Block and Kadambur Hills of Sathiamangalam Taluk in the district of Erode, Tamil Nadu.

Recounting the origin of TRED, Antonysamy, a priest from the diocese of Udhagamandalam (Ooty) in Tamil Nadu, referred to the interest of a group of friends, priests as well as lay persons, wanting to take up socially relevant initiatives. They started with seminars for the youth and students and organising various groups living on the edge. Fighting against untouchability and enabling the youth to contest in Panchayat elections apparently irritated the hierarchy. Hence, priests in the group were bundled off to different places within the diocese. This necessitated the origin of TRED to sustain their solidarity and to continue their work.

Initially confined to Talavadi area and later extended to Kothagiri, TRED targeted Adhivasies, Dalits, differently abled persons (DAP), women, farmers and HIV infected persons. TRED today has the following community based organisations:

- Talavadi Adhivasi (Tribal) Munnetra Sangam (TAMS)
- Talavadi Pengal (Women) Sangam (TPS)
- Talavadi Federation of Differently Abled Persons (TFDAP)
- Talavadi Farmers Association (TFA)
- Talavadi Positive Network (T+N)

From the beginning TRED trustees had the vision of community based organisations and made every organisation independent. Their vision to animate, autonomize, accompany and adieu is gradually realised. The success of TRED and its founder Antonysamy lies in making real this noble ideal. A brief look at the initiatives would vouch for upholding these values.

In 2000 CRUTCH, a welfare association for the differently abled, started in 1983 in Kothagiri was made independent.

TAMS, the organisation for the Adhivasis was made autonomous with basic infrastructure at Hassanur in 2004.

Talavadi Positive Network (T+N) was entrusted to the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM), a religious congregation for women from April 2004, operating independently from Soosaipuram in Talavadi.

Talavadi Pengat (Women) Sangam (TPS), Talavadi Federation of Differently Abled Persons (TFDAP) and Talavadi Farmers Association (TFA) have come under a single banner: Dalit Social, Educational and Development Association (DSA). TRED gifted them with 1.22 acres of land to put up basic infrastructure for their day-to-day functioning. On June 28, 2008, the offices were inaugurated.

The campus designated for TRED at Talavadi, about 6 acres of land and 6000 sq ft of buildings, is handed over to the Guanellians, a religious congregation for men working with the differently abled persons. On April 28, 2009, the bequest function was held and the campus was gifted gratis to the Guanellians.

On May 15, 2009, TRED moved to a rented office in Talavadi concentrating mainly on Tamil Nadu Adhivasi Federation (TAF) and South India Adhivasi Federation (SIAF) and Adhivasi Development Initiative (ADI).

After 24 years of service to the people of Talavadi, TRED wishes now to be on the edge. Definitely it has heightened the consciousness of the local people, organised them into Sangams

and built up their capacity. The Adhivasis and the Dalits are empowered to tackle issues affecting their lives, contest elections and to access Government schemes. They are ready now to animate, autonomize, accompany and adieu!

Impact of the Models

1. Dispelling priestly inertia

Pastoral field is abounding with inspiring new models. Capturing the motivating spirit found among the diocesan clergy who have made them possible for the integral liberation of the people can lift up the forlorn ones. The kind of inertia that has crept in these days among a section of the diocesan clergy could be replaced by these success stories.

Those who feel weary today think that there is nothing new to do. Taking shelter in age-old practices, they restrict their involvement merely to the administration of the sacraments. Their worn out feelings could be rejuvenated by these diocesans who have dared to dream different.

2. Responding to the context

New models presented above are pioneered to meet the changing pastoral context. Accordingly, these creative diocesans probably felt compelled to evolve new models of pastoral involvement. Primarily, these new models responded creatively and concretely to the changing needs of people. Problems of people and their daily struggles have inspired creativity. Situation that looks dismal for an ordinary priest had provided immense opportunities for these creative diocesans. Genuinely creative, they have sought adequate ways and means of eliminating the miseries of the people.

If the contemporary Church sincerely aims to be relevant, she cannot but take note of these new models. When priests with similar training and pastoral placement carried on with normal activities, those who went out of their way to craft new methods and models of involvement need to be acknowledged and their models followed.

Creative interventions originated for socio-political transformation. At the outset, interveners were personally touched by the problems at their pastoral context. Further, addressing the issues theologically, they are led to work for changing them.

Unlike many others, the creative few could not remain indifferent to the happenings around. Their inner self prompted them to make timely responses. Consequently, innovators followed the pedagogy of Yahweh: providing land, food and liberation to people. In practice, they took up issues of justice which resembled evangelisation.

Following the footsteps of Jesus, they oriented their life and activity towards the reign of God. Everything they said and did was founded on the integral liberation of people as visualised by Jesus.

3. Defending the vulnerable

As against the traditional approach that maintains the status quo, the innovative models have taken concerted efforts for the integral liberation of the vulnerable sections of society: Tribals, Dalits, differently abled, farmers, women, alcoholics and drug addicts. In fact, the originality of the involvement is measured in terms of their sensitive structures, policies and language.

4. Commitment to liberative praxis

No one but those committed to liberative praxis alone could have dared to dream high. In all probability, they drew inspiration

from Jesus. Following the footsteps of Jesus, they oriented their life and activity towards the reign of God. Everything they said and did was founded on the integral liberation of people as visualised in the Manifesto of Jesus. Hence, they can set the tone for contemporary priestly life and ministry, which otherwise is gradually becoming dull and monotonous, inert and static.

5. Popular support

If these creative models have stood the test of time, it is because they received popular support. But for the collaboration from people, none of the new programmes could have continued for long. While the innovators tried to resonate with the people and won their confidence, the local hierarchy, at least in the case of Model 5, seemed to have failed to recognise their work and at times even branded them as rebels.

6. Partnership in mission

Continuity of the interventions is impossible without team spirit and team work. In any new endeavour, initial inspiration may originate from an individual or a core group. But unless a responsible team backs up the proposal, it hardly can see the light of the day. Therefore, the above creative pastoral interventions reflect partnership at every stage. Apparently, at every phase they have passed through a communitarian process of understanding and have reached common decisions for collective action. Contemporary Church, which emphasises the need for partnership in mission, cannot afford to ignore the hidden potential in these new endeavours.

7. Networks constructively

Co-ordination with persons of similar involvement and linking or networking with like-minded movements comes quite naturally to creative activity and to persons. Solidarity with other movements

and constructively co-operating with them has hastened the targets to be achieved.

8. Promotes leadership

If leadership is opportunity utilised, creative models bring out the leadership qualities hidden within persons associated with them. It overflows into all levels, socio-political as well as ecclesial. There is no room for subordination or subjugation but freedom is ensured and participation is encouraged. Creative interveners do not look at the growth of others as a threat. On the contrary, they look for collective leadership and common activities. What can be inferred from the new models is that they played the role of animation and when it was time to make them autonomous they made honourable exit. Leaving the responsibility with those working with or trained by them ensures continuity and promotes leadership.

Participatory leadership secures succession and continuity. Building supportive structures and encouraging power sharing saves the initiatives from institutional rigidity. Flexibility is encouraged! Respect for public opinion and power delegation become accepted norms. Decentralisation and democratic process are hallmarks of the new models.

Although institutionalising brings power, provides funds, ensures security and guarantees succession, innovators have tried to democratise their initiatives. Fear of the future is replaced by democratic structures.

9. Beyond established boundaries

Creative interventions defy narrow boundaries. Inclusiveness is quite characteristic to creativity because change in a particular sphere of human activity effects naturally changes also in other spheres.

Usually, any work other than the parish work is considered creative and no work other than parish ministry is considered pastoral. But the illustration of the models showed that even parish work, if done meaningfully, can be creative. Any creative intervention, though done outside the parish limit, is pastoral.

Although creative interventions of diocesan priests are tangible in the pastoral context, their daring leadership looked beyond the existing pastoral boundaries. Innovative spirit of these diocesans, though few in number, knew no bounds! As such, it can be said that their contribution was inter-denominational.

10. Keeping the Church alive

Church has always been intervening in the lives of people. History shows that she never shunned involving in any activity that would usher in wellbeing to her faithful. Just as the Church, new models too are committed to the cause of the people.

The criticism that the institutional Church is concerned more about maintaining her status quo than addressing the actual life issues affecting people is replaced by these diocesans who have tried to make timely interventions even when the official Church seemed either to be silent or distant.

Concretely, those who introduced creative interventions gave the Church credible visibility. The Church is alive in the bold new pastoral ventures! As such, the Church is no more a dead entity! The handful of innovators kept the Church alive. Actually, they are the real builders of the Church!