

Mission in Malaysia: to infinity and beyond

Augustin Muthusami

If there is one thing that the whole Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns (we are on our third lockdown currently!) have taught us, it is that the church's mission is relevant and very much needed at this time of great difficulty and challenge. It has also taught us to beware of falling into fixed notions of thought—whether inherited or otherwise—as to how this mission should be carried out. And finally, it has taught us that our traditional ways of thinking about our intended mission field have to change radically.

The church's mission is still relevant

Mission today is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago, and it is particularly interesting that as we celebrate Pentecost this week, and are reminded not only about the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church, we are also reminded of the mission of the church. In this time of pandemic, Malaysia faces many challenges. We have political uncertainties, economic difficulties, societal fracturing and personal challenges. The numbers of infected people are rising rapidly (now in the third wave), and the numbers of people dying in a day has hit new highs. But it's not just the virus. Stores are closing. People are being laid off. Airlines are collapsing. Casual workers and those in the service industry have no income whatsoever. It is a social disaster. People are struggling to provide for their families. Those who live alone fight loneliness and despair. Schoolchildren who cannot go to school struggle with basic internet access.

The church's mission to bring light into the darkness remains relevant – perhaps more so now when people's normal pillars of security are being shaken. We are charged with bringing hope and faith for the future. We are called to bring assurances of love to those who need it most. Surely now is the time for the church to shine. However, it seems that the church still has a few things to change.

Out of the box

As Lutherans, we have certain ways of doing things—theologically as well as practically. The Lutheran church in Malaysia has always been active in reaching out to the poor, the marginalised, the Indigenous people, and so on. The problem is, much of this has been hands-on outreach—that is to say, we have been going out to these areas/people, and teaching them, preaching to them, supplying them with basic needs and so on. What happens when we cannot do that anymore? The needs are still there, perhaps increasing even, as the lockdown dries up the tourist trade and the indigenous people's income suffers. But the problem is that with the lockdown, we cannot go to those areas anymore. We cannot even leave our own districts/states and go to where they are. How then can we continue to reach out to them? For that matter, how do we maintain contact, strengthen

fellowship, worship together with our own members when we cannot gather physically as a church (off and on for the past year and a half, now)?

We have had to learn. The Lutheran church in Malaysia has had to rethink and reinvent itself both theologically and practically. We have had to re-examine what it means to be 'the Body of Christ' in a virtual sense. We have had to come up with ways to make it a reality. In my congregation, for example, we had to spend a lot of money and time to come up with an infrastructure that could support online broadcasting. All of us, from the pastor and the leadership to the members have had to learn how to use online platforms and access streaming. Which brings us to the third issue.

New audiences

Back in the day (last year), we could have a service and know who was sitting in our pews—our members, mainly, with an occasional visitor. We could also say who we were reaching out to—this group or that group from this place or that place. We knew who they were. Now we do not know who our target group is. Or more specifically, our target group, and who we actually reach, can be very different.

By way of illustration, the worship services in our congregations and my sermons basically reached our members. I knew who they were and what they were about, and so we could have our services 'as usual' and that was that. Now it seems that we are reaching people we do not know. We are reaching audiences across the region, even as far as Germany. My sermons are being viewed by people I do not even know. How does that change the way we do things? Very early on we realised that we cannot have services 'as usual' and stream them online. Online services require something different and so we had to adapt and change.

This is not unique to our congregation or even the Lutheran church in Malaysia, of course. It is happening all over the world. People are accessing worship services from every denomination from across the world. It is a buffet out there. As much as people we do not know are following us, there are our members who are no longer following us.

The beyond

It appears that while mission is still relevant, the parameters have changed. In other words, the content of what we have to say remains the same, but the way of carrying it out has changed. As the church ponders its mission in the post-pandemic world, it needs to realise that things are never really going to be the same again.

Augustin Muthusami has been a pastor and teacher for nearly thirty years. He is currently pastoring Luther House Chapel Congregation in the city of Petaling Jaya and trying to work out what church means in this time of pandemic and lockdown.