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Western Christian missions' influence on the public witness of the Nepali Church

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Abstract: The Nepali Church, with a rich history spanning 70 years, is the fruit of the tireless work of the Nepali Christians who joined the Western Christian missions when they came to Nepal in the 1950s. These partnerships emerged to 'preach the gospel and build the global Church'. However, the missionaries found that they were unable to implement their mission of evangelism and Church planting, and instead, became involved in social development. While they focussed on social works, the Nepali Christians embraced the work of evangelism and built the Nepali Church. The divergence in mission objectives between the Western missionaries and the local Nepali Church led to separate implementation of the integral gospel. This research investigates how the separate modes and objectives of the Western Christian Missions and the local Church influenced the public Christian witness in society, and highlights the need for a meaningful partnership between the missions and the local Church in strengthening the public witness of the latter. It is an inter- and intra-disciplinary study, attending to the fields of history, development, mission studies, and ecumenical relations.

Keywords: Social development, mission, Nepali Church, public witness, Christian missions

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to assess how the Church is enacting the transformative influence of the Christian faith within Nepal's pluralistic society, with the aim of bolstering its public witness. The study also examines the role of the Western Christian Missions (WCMs)[2] in contributing to the transformative development of the Nepali

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[2] These are the Christian mission agencies coming from the Western countries and operating in Nepal as international Non-government Organisations (INGOs). Their goal is 'presenting the Gospel to Nepali people and building the Church' which they seek to achieve through social service. They draw their major human, financial and spiritual resources from the churches outside Nepal, especially in the West.

society and how that image either helped or hindered their relationship with the Nepali Church. Alongside, the discussion runs through these two entities, seeking to understand how their relationship is established and valued in advancing and strengthening the public witness. The research captures the insights and experiences of the leadership of the Nepali Church and the Nepal Christian Society (NCS) in their anticipated role of the WCMs in framing the public witness of the local Church in connection to the latter's focus on social development as mission. Aligned with this objective, the study adopted the concept of 'Christian public witness' as the key theoretical and theological lens. By centring on the local Church as the primary agent of transformative Christian mission, this study investigated the missional and relational dimensions between the WCMs and the Nepali Church. Suggestions are made to bridge the existing gaps in mission, with the goal of cultivating a robust and effective public witness of the Nepali Church.

I.   Public Witness

The concept of 'public witness' is based on the theories of contextual mission. Stephen Bevans (2009:5) argued that 'a theology of mission that is not reflective of our times, our culture and our context concerns is a false theology'. Segura-Guzman (2010:126-127) suggested that 'a good theology must be rooted in the Text, and it must be sustainable and appropriate for the context where it is practised. It should empower and challenge the practitioners. It must be practical for spiritual formation and cultural transformation.' The Church, in its transformational mission as part of public witness, remains attuned to the prevailing realities of the world. It equips its members for mobilisation to transform the community environment for the better. The Church does not stand idly by in the face of injustice and poverty; it refuses merely to observe from a distance. Likewise, it does not remain silent about the spiritual forces that keep people under darkness. Instead, it aims to change the context in which it is placed and works to bring about transformational changes in the lives of the people it serves (Phil 2:7; Col 1:27).

The term 'witness' is frequently employed in a juridical manner. As Berry (2017:216) elucidates, 'to bear witness' means 'to swear, attest or testify'. Similarly, Budiselic (2014:410) echoes this sentiment, noting that 'to bear witness means to be willing to face martyrdom for the sake of faith'. Berry (2017:225) recalled what Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, saying 'you too will be witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning' (Jn 15:27). This statement signifies that to become a witness of Jesus is not only to know him but also to contemplate the incarnate Word that existed since the beginning. The 'logic of becoming witnesses to Christ', as per Berry (2017:226), 'has two tasks involved. The first is that of evangelization, of pure

witness to the faith and the charity of Christ, and secondly, to influence the earthly sphere of humanity'. In this way, 'the Church exists to proclaim and show the saving work of God to all who live, to every tongue, and tribe, and nation. The Church, as the body of Christ, is pointing to the Father, and living sacrificially for the sake of the world—a world that is still in rebellion' (Sunquist 2013:284). With this proclamation, the Church invites the world to believe, to see, and to be saved from its sin of rebelliousness against God. This invitation, or the witnessing of Christ's grace, becomes a force within the Church in mission.

Herting, in Budiselic (2014:412) confessed that the 'Church is faced with the challenge to offer a witness that will be contemporary and adjusted to the current mind-sets of the people, but in the same breath remain orthodox – biblically sound and faithful to the revelation of Jesus Christ'. This positioning of the Church makes the Christian message a public enterprise, a message that is shared and heard in the public. This calls 'the Church to return to the public square, reengage in public issues and rediscover itself as a transforming agent in an ever-changing context' (Ibid.412).

II.   The Public Squares of Witness

Witnessing to Christ is accomplished in public. This involves understanding the people and their public squares. Costas (2002:63) suggests that this public square is the public sphere of society where the witnessing must take place. It is in this public sphere 'where human need is most overtly and nakedly revealed. It is there where women and men are most conscious of their human predicament and vulnerability, and where their solidarity in the face of sin and death is most clearly revealed'. Bosch (1991:10) concurred, asserting that 'the Church-in-mission cannot close its eyes to these realities'. However, Sunquist (2013:286) warned, 'a Church that does not face the need for ongoing conversion or transformation is no longer a signpost of the Kingdom. Such an institution no longer functions as a Church of Jesus Christ'. How should the Church understand the public spheres of Nepal and witness effectively to remain true to its missional call? The section below outlines three social spheres wherein the Church has the mandate to witness.

a. Religious Pluralism

Nepal is a religious kaleidoscope, as is evident by its 2021 census which recorded the adherents of 10 different religions in the country (CBS 2023:8). Among these 10, four world religions have garnered a considerable number of followers. In Nepal, 81.3% of the population are Hindus, while 9% are Buddhists, 4.4% practice Islam, and 1.76% are Christians, out of a total of 29,164,578 individuals (Ibid.8). These facts help one

to conclude that Nepal is in the truest sense a religious pluralist society. The adherents of these religions exchange their life and cultural practices on a daily basis in the public sphere, fostering a spirit of religious pluralism that permeates the society.

Bosch (1991:483) expressed that 'today few Christians anywhere in the world find themselves in a situation where coexistence with other religionists is not part and parcel of their daily life'. These individuals acknowledge the multitude of ways people can have access to God, refuting the notion of only one way, as asserted by Christians. 'This reflects a commonly held view that belief in one path to salvation is narrow-minded and it is arrogant to say that Jesus is the only way of salvation' (Kopan & Litwak 2014:45). How then, must the Church in Nepal be prepared to witness in such a cultural context?

b. Modernity

Modernity is defined as 'the spread of rationalism, liberalism, secularisation, individualism, and capitalism, the cult of progress, expanding literacy rates and social mobility, urbanisation and industrialisation' (Tonning 2014:2). A notable fruit of modernity is the 'weakening of traditional religious cultures; the introduction of the Western mode of life, and the idea of consumerism among the younger generation' (Carney & Rappleye 2011:6). In line with its characteristic nature, modernism has gained prominence among the new generation, leading them to adopt the belief that 'truth is a social construction and that rationalism preceded over religions' (Kopan & Litwak 2014:42). The rationalism promoted by modernity challenges the acceptance of truths that cannot be empirically verified. It elevates the capacity of human reasoning to comprehend truths and acquire knowledge over and above sensory experiences and divine revelation. This principle appears to be in conflict with a Christian understanding of truth.

Nepal initially embraced the idea of modernity in the 1950s when it extended an invitation to the Western world for assistance in its social development. Upon their arrival, the Westerners introduced unfamiliar Western lifestyles, philosophies, and cultural artefacts to the traditional Nepalese context (see Shrestha 1997:53; Carney & Rappleye 2011:1; Dahal 2022:2). While modernity brought the long-awaited Nepali dream of development, it also created conflict with the traditional social make-up.

In Nepal, Christianity is often viewed as the twin brother of Western modernity. But secular modernity denies the Christian claim of salvation through Jesus. In such a modern environment, what modes and methods of mission must be applied for the public witness of the Church?

c. Widespread Poverty

According to the 2021 Multidimensional Poverty Index, approximately 17.4% of Nepali people in 2019 live below the internationally recognised poverty line (United Nations Development Programme – Nepal 2021:12). The same year, the Legatum Prosperity Index ranked Nepal number 114 out of 167 countries in the world in its overall performance in reducing poverty (Legatum Institute 2023). Nepal has been sustaining its food needs through imports on which it spends triple the income generated from its gross exports. The country's economy remains dependent on agriculture, remittance, and tourism. However, the enduring effects of weak governance and the recurrent incidents of disasters and pandemics have pushed all these economic sources to the brink of non-functionality.

Employment opportunities and economic generation have experienced a notable decline. This downward trend is exacerbated by political instability, contributing to a noticeable brain drain over the last decade. In recent years, the young and economically active population has been outbound, leaving behind young children and elderly individuals who are less able to contribute to the national economy. The remittance from individuals working overseas has witnessed growth, but its use has mostly been limited to unproductive endeavours. In summing up the chronic poverty of Nepal, Prasad (2006:6) stated, 'The fundamental reasons behind widespread poverty is inefficient and corrupt administration, sluggish growth rate relative to rapid population growth, and political exclusion'.

The Nepali Church is a socio-religious institution born within this poverty situation. Nepali Christians originate from a community that has endured material scarcity and spiritual deprivation. The Church is called out from this poverty and is offered a life that is distinct from a life in the world (see Eph 4:17-24; Gal 5:22-23). The newness of life drawn from the Bible calls the Church to live by kingdom ethics. In this kingdom, God provides enough for all his creation – both materially (Ps 24:1) and emotionally (Ps 103:1-6). In its public witness, the Church is to emulate this kingdom ethics and embody the biblical truth that the God of this kingdom stands by the poor and the marginalised, rather than abandoning them, working towards their redemption (Lk 4:18-19).

The question we must answer is: how has the Nepali Church engaged in this redeeming mission as a transformational Christian witness in public? What are its missional inspirations and strengths that either enable or disable it in projecting an influence on the public? In order to find whether the Nepali Church has been effective

in pursuing its public witness, we need to review the historical context of the Nepali Church which is connected with and influenced by the presence of the WCMs.

III.   The Nepali Church in Context

Located in the heart of South Asia, Nepal is a landlocked country bordering India and China – the two emerging world powers. The Capuchin missionaries had a short stint in Nepal when their Lhasa mission failed in the early 18th century. Their brief Nepal stay saw the birth of a local Church in Kathmandu (Pandey 2003:20). However, they were chased out of the country in 1769 when the Gorkha King, Prithvi Narayan Shah captured Kathmandu in 1775 (Lindell 1997:16; Khanal 2019:52). It is widely claimed that the new king wanted to establish Nepal as the *asli Hindustan* (the pure land of the Hindus) and opposed the idea of Christians residing in Nepal (see Gurung 2002; BK 2013:8). Subsequently, it took nearly two hundred years for Christianity to return (Rongong 2012:37).

In 1951, a people's movement led to the establishment of democracy. With the dawn of democracy, Nepal wanted to start on a new road of nation building. 'In walking this new road, the people in Nepal threw the windows and doors open, joined the world family of nations, laid development plans, undertook implementing programmes and sought the help of friends in this work' (Lindell 1997:169). The gates of Nepal thus opened to the outside world. In this context of political change, the WCMs came to Nepal 'to preach the gospel and build the global Church'.

However, the WCMs could not implement their mission as expected. They were permitted to work only as development experts and not as Church workers. A few Nepalis converted while the WCMs who waited in India were brought to Nepal (Hale 2012:22). These Nepalis were assigned the tasks of preaching and praying, while the WCMs handled the social services. The WCMs focused more on social emancipation and less on spiritual enlightenment, unlike the original mission effort two centuries earlier. Consequently, the spiritual ministries became the arena of the Nepali Christians and their Church, while the WCMs' focus was diverted to social development.

The efforts of the Nepali Church to foster positive change within the Nepali society are met with challenges from two dominant forces. Firstly, is the strong presence of the WCMs in the social development field. They came to be known as the 'development partners' of the government, and their initiatives were classified as important, legal, and desirable. The missionaries would devise and execute social development plans with the government and would spend little time helping the infant Nepali Church

develop and learn God's transformational mission. Also, the missionaries declared their non-association with the Nepali Church when incidents of proselytisation were reported (Kehrberg 2003:151; Shrestha 2012:80). This reaction rendered the spiritual work of the Nepali Church unimportant, unofficial, and unwanted, compared to the glorious social work the WCMs did. By the same token, the work of the Nepali Church was relegated to secondary importance and the social development became the prime goal of Christian mission. Through this separation of objectives, the 'WCMs put the Nepali Church in a box; neither the Church had the ability to influence the society nor was she invited to partner and learn from the WCMs' (Johnson 2002:10).

Secondly, the Nepali Church was excluded from mainstream social development. Though small and insignificant in comparison to the WCMs, the Nepali Church played some but informal roles in transforming Nepal's traditional social set-up, thereby aiding to change the poverty and underdevelopment of marginalized people groups. Caste barriers and the resultant prohibitions and marginalizations were eradicated inside the church. Personal evangelism, the manifestation of spiritual gifts, and exorcism marked the Nepali Church as a new social phenomenon emerging from within its people. Rongong (2012:79) narrated that 'the people converted to Christianity experienced not only a new religion but received a different outlook to the whole of their life in society'. This way the Church emphasised transforming people's perceptions of religion as a way to freedom from caste and cultural bondages.

However, the Church's contribution to social change is unaccounted for. The development elites, together with the country's leadership, deny any place for the Nepali Church in social change. Instead, resentful complaints are shot at the growth of the Church. These elites are more concerned with maintaining the social and religious status quo, than letting Churches contribute to changing people's lives for the better. The treatment of local Churches by the general public painted two different pictures of the Church: first, the Western rich churches pour resources to help Nepal without requiring them to listen to their religious rant. On the other hand, Nepali Churches would not keep silent.

The results of this separation between the purposes of the WCMs and the local Church in mission coupled with the public perception has been an ongoing challenge to overcome in positioning the Church in the greater schema of social change in Nepal. Due to the distinct orientations of operation between the WCMs and the local Church, the result has been that neither the contributions of the Nepali Church to the endeavours of the WCMs nor the input of the WCMs to the Church were readily embraced. They did not collaborate in designing mission priorities, nor did they jointly initiate transformative activities. This lack of unity has led to the compartmentalisation

of the Christian mission into separate social and spiritual actions, consequently weakening its public witness. Moreover, the promotion of only social development was unable to challenge the religiosity and the growing influence of modernity in Nepal.

IV.   Methodology

As a qualitative inquiry, this research investigated the experiences and assumptions of the people in the Nepali Church regarding the relationship of the WCMs with the Nepali Church in public witness of transformational mission. Hence, this study explored the understanding, experience and the meaning making process of people in the Nepali Church. The NCS and 10 WCMs were selected as case studies due to their role as the main actors in Nepal mission. A critical review of the objectives, the activities, and the contribution of these selected WCMs is conducted in connection to their role in building the Nepali Church and its public witness.

V.   Research Participants

In total, 15 people participated in this research. Among these, twelve represented the Nepali Church through their association with the NCS. They were selected based on their professional engagements. Three participants were chosen from each of the fields of politics, community development, and academia. A further three represented the NCS and its core mission activities. The remaining three participants, who are non-Christian individuals, were selected because of their long-term involvement with one or more WCMs studied in this research. To ensure the anonymity of the research participants, a number was assigned to each of them, and they are referred to by their respective numbers throughout this research.

A level of objectivity has been achieved through the comprehensive interviews conducted with a diverse range of respondents, as highlighted earlier. From the opinions of the respondents in different fields of engagement, the study has attempted to formulate a missional strategy of the Nepali Church in the public sphere that resonates with those seeking to understand the idea of public witness in social change.

VI.   Research Design

This research employed an action research design. Investigating the mission practices of the WCMs and their impact on the Nepali Church's public witness necessitated the use of tools that facilitate the formulation of pertinent questions and the application of analytical methods. A majority of the research respondents come from the heart of the field under investigation and form the present-day key leadership of the Nepali

Church. As Swinton and Mowat (2016:235) stated, '[A]ction research is a method of inquiry and form of practice that encourages controlled and focused change using the knowledge and expertise of those involved in the research setting. And it seeks to build a community and address issues in and through communities'. They further suggested that researching the real-world problems via action research is 'about making a contribution that can lead to real and lasting change and enables the researchers to seek to empower practitioners to improve their practice by recognizing how they can make a contribution to their own learning' (:236).

The social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who developed the action research method in the 1930s, stated that 'people would be more motivated about their work if they were involved in the decision-making about their workplace' (See Greenwood 1999:9; McDonald 2012:37). Therefore, the research model applied here 'offered a radical alternative to knowledge development as a collective, self-reflective inquiry for the purpose of improving a situation where the research participants live and work' (McDonald 2012:46). The diagram below illustrates the theoretical design used in this research.
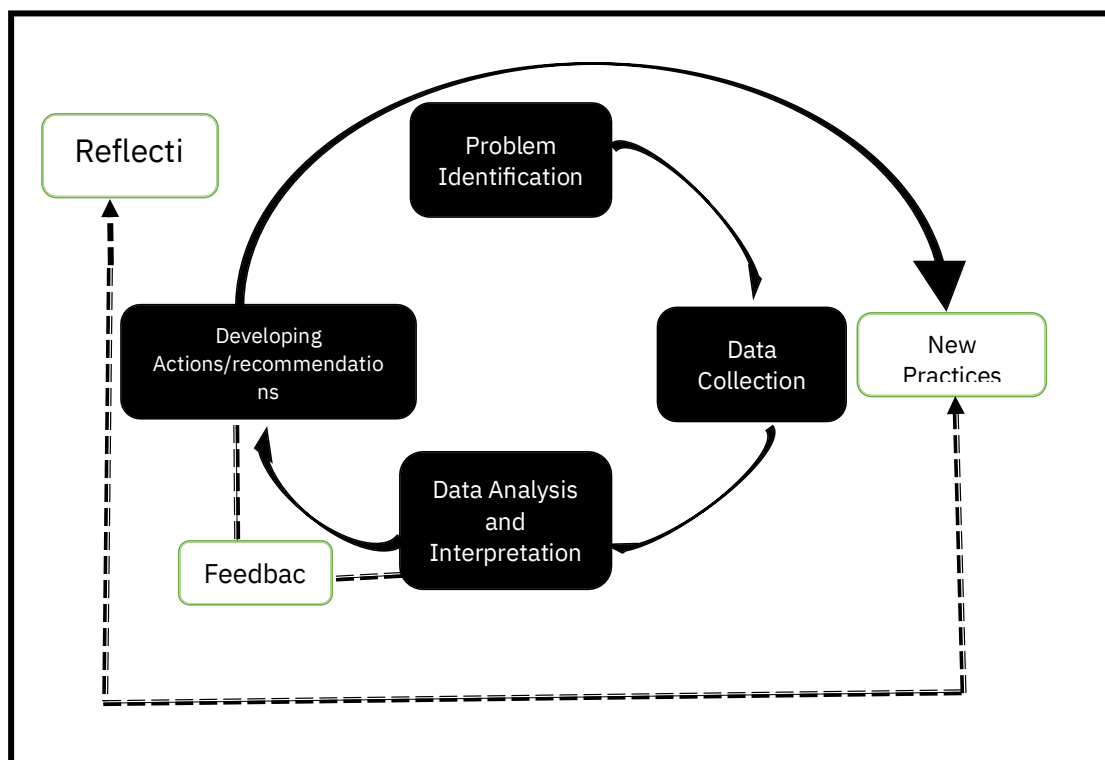
Figure 1. Research Design modified from Mills 'dialectical action research' 2011. (Source: Hanafi 2018)

The paragraphs below justify the use of this research design as the chosen methodological tool for analysing and presenting the data and its findings.

Firstly, the action research design, by its very nature, seeks to engage with an issue in order to empower practitioners to enhance their knowledge and skills, ultimately leading to improved outcomes. Nicodemus and Swabey (2015:1) articulated that 'action research attempts to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing'. This research is focused on generating a new way of evaluating the idea of a missional relationship between the WCMs and the Nepali Church, with the aim of fostering a more robust mission collaboration in Nepal so that the public witness of the Church flourishes.

Secondly, it is concerned that the people involved in the study increase the effectiveness of the work in which they are personally engaged. 'This is achieved by examining the particular dynamics present in a local setting, taking a specified action within that setting, and evaluating the results of that action' (Nicodemus & Swabey 2015:3). This research has engaged the leaders of the Nepali Church who have a give-and-take relationship with many WCMs involved here, and their social development work.

Thirdly, it is applied in researching people who possess direct knowledge and first-hand experience of the issue under investigation. Referred to as practitioners, these individuals bring their lived experiences to assess real-world situations. Therefore, the participants are selected for this research based on their prior experience with the key issue being investigated.

Fourthly, this method proves valuable in scenarios where participants can influence the outcome of the matter at hand, fostering a collaborative knowledge exchange between the researcher and the research participants. This enables the researcher to delve extensively into the insights and concepts of the participants, thereby paving the way for the improvement of the situation in the future.

VII.   The Research Questions

Primary question: With their focus mainly on social change, what influence do the WCMs in Nepal have on the public witness of the Nepali Church?

Secondary questions:
- What is the understanding and attitude of WCMs towards the local Church in relation to social change in Nepal?

- What influenced Nepal's social and demographic changes? Has the Nepali Church obtained a membership in the over-all social change process in Nepal?
- What has been the strategy of The Nepal Chrisian Society - NCS - (a network of the Nepali Churches) in mission to present a public witness for the Nepali Church?
- What can NCS do to help the Nepali Church and WCMs to create a better public witness together?

VIII.   Research objectives

The objective of this study is to document and explore the historical evidence of the relationship between the WCMs and the Nepali Church concerning the creation of a viable public witness in mission.

In summary, the objectives of this research are:
- To explore the understanding and attitude of WCMs towards the public witness of the Nepali Church in relation to social development and change
- To describe the strengths and weaknesses of the WCMs in relation to the Nepali Church regarding strengthening Christian public witness
- To document the understanding of NCS on the public witness of the Nepali Church and its organisational objectives towards it, and
- To identify areas of future mission partnership between the WCMs and the Nepali Church for a better Christian public witness.

IX.   The Importance

This research examines the assumption that the conversion saga does not end with one converting into a new faith. Rather, it is a life-long journey of changes the new faith brings to the convert and his/her circles of society and culture. This Christian faith in individuals and families collectively empowers the Church to set a new identity in the community. It is from this position that the present research aims to study the status of the public witness of the Nepali Church and how it has been influenced by the social change promoted by the WCMs in Nepal. Looking into the understanding, and praxis of the WCMs' mission as social development, it will shed light on how the Nepali Church's mission priorities were defined and what adjustments are to be made now for it to become an able change agent through its mission in the public square.

In this sense, the special contribution of this study can be summarised as:

i)   To help in exploring the dynamics of the relationship between the WCMs and the Nepali Church to understand how the former's mission focus influenced the latter's priorities in mission.

ii)   To propose new and applicable principles of mission partnership between the two that can contribute to promoting contextual mission approaches and build a strong public witness of the Nepali Church.

iii) To encourage meaningful and authentic inclusion of the Nepali Church in Nepal's social change process.

X.   Results

The core aim of this research was to examine the public witness of the Nepali Church in conjunction with the WCMs in Nepal, with their focus mainly on social change. The ensuing responses address the three pivotal questions that were identified:

Q1. What is the understanding and attitude of WCMs towards the local Church in relation to Nepal's social change?

Despite asserting their intention 'to be an example of Christ in mission and work in close collaboration with the local Church'[3], the WCMs maintained a visible distance from the local Church[4]. Right from the beginning of their arrival in Nepal, they emphasised preserving a distinct identity from the local Church and refrained from establishing an official relationship with it. The lack of involvement of the WCMs in the affairs of the Church was primarily upheld at the organisational level, with only willing individual missionaries maintaining contact. The research participants observed, 'The missionaries with technical expertise would count their social service as service to God and limit themselves in their profession. This position meant that the WCMs believed their social development activities were enough for people to see and experience God's kingdom'. In particular, Respondent 10 said,

> '*The philosophy of the WCMs was that since material inadequacy was the major cause of poverty in Nepal, contributing to physical well-being can help Nepalis realise the goodness of God – expressed through the actions of love and mercy – once they are physically whole. The natural*

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[3] Official documents of the WCMs make a claim that they came to Nepal as missionaries to present the gospel to the Nepali people and work in partnership with the local Church to build the global Church.

[4] Owing to the political and cultural environment the WCMs did not want to risk of being chased out of the country due to their visible association with the newly emerging Nepali Church which was seen as a threat to the prevailing Hindu worldview.

> *and physical needs are important but the most important one is the spiritual need. And, seeking only to satisfy the material needs is insufficient to lead people to salvation'.*

The official documents of the WCMs consistently assert their commitment to the mission of the global Church. However, their disassociation from the local Church has remained intact despite the major political changes the country has experienced over the last six decades.

> '*The WCMs did not come as Church workers but as experts in health, education and community development. They were given a definite role and finding suitable candidates to fulfil such roles would limit the WCMs hiring people with skills, passion and ability to engage in Church work. And, those with technical skills behaved as superior to those working in the Church'* (Respondent 6).

Further, respondents 5 and 6 unanimously opined that the WCMs,

> '*Left their passion for evangelism behind because of the opposition they faced early on. They chose an agreement with the government as a means to remain in Nepal over engaging with the Church in spiritual activities. They never challenged the government agreements in favour of being visible with the local Church and its mission activities'*.

On the surface, the WCMs showed the conditions of their agreement with the government as main reasons for their non-attachment to the local Church. However, the pretext of the legal condition actually hides a deep-seated attitude of the WCMs in their perceived understanding of the Nepali Church and its position in social mission.

The research revealed that the WCMs believed that the Nepali Church was too small and without qualities to partner with them. Respondent 4 stated, '*According to them, the Church did not possess the strengths or capabilities that make them a worthy partner'*. This attitude discarded the possibility of a mission partnership with the local Church and limited the scope of advocacy for the Nepali Christians.

Q2. What has been the strategy of Nepali Christians in mission to present a public witness for the Nepali Church?

The distinct identity and divergent mission priorities of the WCMs and the Nepali Church contributed to the diminished public presence of the Church. The divided

implementation of the gospel – the WCMs focusing on the social dimension and the Nepali Church on the spiritual dimension – resulted in public confusion regarding the intended outcomes of these efforts. A stark question arose: Why were the Nepali Christians intent on converting fellow Nepalis into a foreign religion, while the missionaries looked content to undertake social development without teaching their religion? This question, which has persisted prominently and resolutely to the present day, has been a major obstacle for the Nepali Church in its mission endeavours.

In response to this question, the Nepali Church advocates for a radical shift in the mission practice approach of the WCMs. They urge the WCMs to view the Nepali Church as a collaborative partner and invite it to participate actively in its ministry. This collaborative effort can result in overcoming the partial treatment of the government between the WCMs and the Nepali Church, and can help improving collective capacity for public witnessing. The essence of what respondents 3 and 9 said can be summarised as,

> '*For so long, we have waited on them to consider the local Church as legitimate partner in mission. We did not demand, neither did we complain, but in prayer we waited for a hand of invitation. They hesitated. The Nepali Church is now no more in its infancy but by God's grace, it has learnt how to do holistic mission. We would need to lead Nepal mission and not the outsiders. The WCMs must invite the Nepali Church to help them identify the mission priorities and follow its lead. The Church is in the second generation and is aware of its mission context. So, without much exaggeration, we are the people God wants to use to win Nepal for Christ. We accept this as our responsibility rather than a right, and invite the WCMs to join hands in transformational mission rather than continue a one-sided mission*'.

47% of the respondents expressed the belief that a collaborative approach to mission is imperative at this juncture. They emphasised the necessity for establishing a purposeful partnership to advance the local Church's public witness. In this regard, they stated:

> '*Thus far, the WCMs have been leading the social mission. They have somehow failed to justify to Nepali Church of their social engagement in the pursuit of God's mission of transformation as they do not preach Christian salvation. We value a more reciprocal relationship in which the WCMs learn from the Nepali Church. It is not always the WCMs who know better or have the surplus resources. The local Churches are also*

> *endowed with the knowledge, skills and expertise which could be utilized. The WCMs need to consider [the] Nepali Church as an equal partner in mission in seeking to build [the] global Church in Nepal'.*

The research participants acknowledged the WCMs' perspective that evangelism is the responsibility of the local Church rather than theirs. However, they raise a poignant question: 'How can a fledgling Church fulfil this duty without essential assistance from the WCMs, who came to 'do the kingdom business'?' Respondent 5 said:

> *'In theory, the WCMs' decline to engage in evangelism is praiseworthy. Mission to be successful must be led by the local Church. We have seen how the missions led by the outsiders failed in India and other countries. But, shifting responsibility does not mean that you abandon the task to someone who was not ready to accept the call. You cannot expect an immature baby to swallow a solid food. That was what happened when the WCMs completely abandoned the task of evangelism to a growing Church. The best thing the WCMs could have done was to come along the Church, join hands in mission and provide necessary support'.*

The leadership of the Nepali Church acknowledged the gaps in practicing a holistic mission due to the different routes taken by the WCMs and the local Church. They aspire to collaborate with the WCMs in promoting the public witness of the Church.

Q3. What can the Nepal Christian Society do to help the Nepali Church to create a better public witness?

It was found that the NCS holds reservations about the efforts employed by the WCMs in creating a better public witness of the Nepali Church. Collectively, they acknowledge that the WCMs have not provided a clear blueprint for the Churches to follow in establishing a viable public witness. Recognising the gaps created in mission by the WCMs in their drive for social transformation through material development, they also express concerns about how these activities negatively impact the witness of the local Church. In responding to the question why the NCS has not been able to work in this direction, Respondent 3, who was one of the founders of the NCS, said,

> *'We confess that from the beginning NCS did not think in that direction. We were limited by our experience and understanding of doing the Church in better ways. We were pretty occupied in managing inter-Church or inter-denominational interests in our drive to create a united Nepali Church. All our energy was spent in helping ourselves to become an accepted entity*

within the Christian community and we hardly had time to look outside. Also, we were content that the WCMs were doing what a Church was expected to do in terms of serving the needy. We counted them as our partners and didn't bother much on the consequences. We became an inward-looking organisation and did not seek to expand our horizons into the society and politics. We drew away from the national politics, and kept ourselves closed in prayers and never thought of going out as one of the capable responders in times of need. We had an imperfect image of what Christian mission was and kept ourselves busy with reading the scriptures and praying for the welfare of our community. As well, we never got a call from the WCMs to enlarge our mission territories'.

Responding to the query regarding why the NCS has not made substantial strides in this direction, Respondent 10 opined that,

'Our problem was in reading the Scriptures with only spiritual eyes; we would interpret the biblical stories in such a way that our worldview on the society got distorted. We would only do the things that had spiritual significance and relegate what we considered material. We had that luxury initially because the WCMs had taken the social aspect as the mission mandate. We were encouraged to behave in that way, and we thought we were doing the right thing. That was our problem then and it continues to beset us. We need to mend our way of interpreting the scriptural mandate to fulfil the great command through obedience to the Great Commission'.

The observations above confirm that the Nepali Church leadership acknowledges its lack of robust understanding of the WCMs and their missional inputs. They waited for the latter to venture into partnership; but waited for too long and in that pursuit, failed to hold themselves accountable to the society in its missional call. Hence, a clear mismatch of the expectations of the two existed for so long that this led to a weaker presentation of the public witness of the Church in society.

XI.   Recommendations

The social contributions of the WCMs have exerted many positive impacts on the Nepali society. Nevertheless, the contemporary Nepali Church holds the viewpoint that these positive social outcomes instead of aiding the public witness of the local Church, have an underlying negative consequence, potentially leading the WCMs to equate social liberation with spiritual salvation and the local Church to justify its

inability to influence the society. The experience underscores that if these social effects are not carefully examined, they could impede rather than bolster the local Church's public witness. Based on the results presented above, the study proposes certain actionable recommendations for all stakeholders in Nepal's mission landscape, including the WCMs and the NCS. These recommendations are designed to foster an environment of robust and constructive collaboration, ultimately enhancing their capacity for a powerful and affirmative public witness.

a. *Mission is universal, necessitating a global mission partnership*

The scope of Christian mission is global, requiring the involvement of the Church on an international scale. The solitary efforts of an individual Church in a single location fall short of fulfilling this worldwide mission. The WCMs, driven by the objective to 'build the global Church' through Nepal mission, cannot achieve this ambition without the active participation of the local Church in the context. Simultaneously, the Nepali Church cannot build the kingdom by disregarding the WCMs and their place in Nepal mission. Hence, forging a partnership for this global mission is the way forward. The Nepali society needs to see the transforming power of Christian mission conducted in the power of union between the social and spiritual aspects promoted by the WCM and the NCS as one mission endeavour.

b. *Mission is holistic (integral)*

Social and spiritual aspects are integral to mission; they are inseparable components, neither can exist exclusively without the other. The crux of the evangelical movement from the mid-twentieth century has been the assimilation of the physical and spiritual into the core of God's mission. Regrettably, the accommodation of this kind of mission is far from being realised in Nepal, as the WCMs primarily focus on the physical elements while the local Church promotes the spiritual. The WCMs ought to engage actively in learning from the local Church about the spiritual aspects of mission. They should strive to create room for incorporating these elements to enrich their social development. Conversely, the local Churches should exhibit the courage to transcend spiritual boundaries and endeavour to learn the social mission from the WCMs. This collaborative mission approach has the potential to make a profound impact on Nepal's religious pluralism and make its journey towards poverty eradication.

c. *Mission is locally driven*

In the observation of Andrew Kirk (2000:19), the concept of Christian mission being a West-driven agenda has changed significantly with the turn of the 20th century. The

same idea has been echoed by Andrew Walls (1996:9-10). He expressed that, 'Third World theology is now likely to be the representative Christian theology', signifying the emergence of the localness of Christianity and its mission. These statements accept that authentic mission originates and flourishes locally. It is that mission that is well able to address local issues holistically.

In order to penetrate the host society, the local Church must take socially oriented actions, borne out of passion for mission, rather than merely adopting models from the WCMs. Such missionary vision holds the potential to empower the Church to embark on a transformative journey that is tailored to the context and embraced by the community. Allowing outsiders to dictate local mission priorities increases the chances of getting the priorities wrong. In the context of Nepal's mission, a misalignment in the focal point of the WCMs has been recognised. This discrepancy can be avoided by allowing local entities to discern and spearhead mission priorities, with outsiders playing a role as collaborators. This approach would also help prevent potential conflicts of interest between the WCMs and the NCS, as a reciprocal exchange occurs, empowering localness in the mission enterprise.

XII.   Conclusion

This study was undertaken to investigate the state of the public witness of the Nepali Church in relation to the work of the WCMs in Nepal's social development. Utilising an action research framework, the collected and analysed data facilitated the presentation of significant findings and actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing the relationship between the WCMs and the Nepali Church and enhancing Christian public witness. The respondents, most of whom make up the current Nepali Church leadership, expressed a deep concern for the future of mission, as the WCMs show no sign of a workable partnership with the local Church. The separation of mission praxis and the objectives thereof not only create confusion but weaken the public witness of the Church. As a participant in the endeavour to 'build the global Church in partnership with the Nepali Church', the WCMs are urged to re-evaluate their mission practices. They are encouraged to extend a collaborative hand to the Nepali Church, fostering an empowering partnership for transformational mission.

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Disclosure Statements