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ARTICLE

Dohnavur Fellowship 125 Years: A Vision with a Mission

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Abstract: This article reflects on the 125 year legacy of Amy Carmichael's, The Dohnavur Fellowship. It argues that the sign of a good mission is not merely its survival for said many years, but it's ability to carry on its vocation by broadening, reflecting and reimagining its mission for every generation. It explores how Christian mission, in order to continue serving meaningfully, should go beyond the work of their founders to the creation of relevant and meaningful communities shaped by worship, belonging and service. The article also considers Dohnavur's significance particularly in their relationship between the gospel and social care, the importance of indigenous Christian agency, and the changing dynamics of mission between the West and the Global South. Finally, it offers a challenge to the Church in the West to build faith communities where people belong.

Keywords: Dohnavur Fellowship, Amy Carmichael, Mimosa biography, Incarnational Christian mission, Global South Christianity, Holistic community development

A week after the celebrations marking 125 years of the Dohnavur Fellowship (DF), I found myself sitting among the DF community in Dohnavur, Tamil Nadu for its Harvest Festival. I had come after the anniversary celebrations, expecting perhaps to encounter a place shaped principally by Amy Carmichael and its remarkable history. Instead, I encountered something much more interesting: an active living Christian community.

My association with DF goes back to my great-grandmother, Mimosa, who after one encounter with Amy, as a child, heard that there is a God who loves her. The idea that there is a God who loves her transformed her life forever. Her fascination with this new God who loves her, had consequences, she was met with severe persecution for years

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and yet her faith survived with little or no contact from Christians. Coming from a family that was caste conscious she was discouraged, by her father first and then later her husband, from moving into DF. Deeply moved by her experiences Amy wrote a biography titled, Mimosa. Some years later my grandfather and his brothers moved into DF. They set aside caste, donated their lands and properties to DF and took on the disciplines of community life. In time they were entrusted with leadership roles within DF. My father was born there, and a note still survives from Amy in which she had suggested a name for him to my grandparents.

Sitting there fully aware of my own history intertwined to this place got me thinking about DF's past and where it appeared to be at present. Along with representatives from various denominations, I had been asked to participate in the liturgy, and as the service unfolded, the significance of the place began to take on character. DF is not simply a historic missionary outpost to be reminisced. It is a community, beyond narrow denominational lines, still worshipping, still singing, still giving thanks, still working, and still seeking ways to live out its Christian vocation.

The Harvest Festival seemed an especially appropriate way to encounter DF. One, because Amy drew extensively from nature for spiritual succour. And two, celebration of harvest keeps us grounded in the history of the produce of that land. What the harvest festival taught me was that an anniversary service should never simply be about what has happened in the past. It is about receiving what has grown now, giving thanks for it, and preparing for another season of harvest. That is how I see DF today; it looks back at the past, but rooted and ready to take on the needs of today.

A Mission that Stays

125 years is a significant milestone for any Christian mission. Often Christin missions begin with a lot of energy and genuine vision but run out of steam and disappear within a generation. Some others survive as monuments to their founders, detached from the current realities that they find themselves in.

What began as a home for vulnerable and rescued children in 1901 by Amy Carmichael gradually developed into a full-fledged Christian community - The Dohnavur Fellowship of South India. DF continues to be an encompassing community with education, healthcare, farming, animal husbandry, care for women, children and elderly as its core mission. Today DF describes itself as an independently run Indian Christian organisation run by successive generations of individuals who grew up within the community, choosing to continue serving in its mission.

This, I think is the most important accomplishment of the 125 year history of the DF. It is simply not a story of a mission that Amy Carmichael founded which has managed to survive despite its own share of internal issues. Rather this is an active community of Indian Christians addressing the immediate needs of its own and of those around.

A Mission that Sees

Amy Carmichael's story is an extraordinarily story of a 27 year old courageous young lady who arrived in a remote part of Tamil Nadu in 1895 and spent the remainder of her life there. She became increasingly concerned about children whom, she believed, were being placed in situations of serious exploitation and abuse. Her encounter with a young girl, named Preena, became particularly significant in the development of her ministry. Amy could not be satisfied with merely proclaiming the gospel if it ignored the concrete circumstances in which vulnerable people lived.

This is an important challenge for the Church today. Mission, in part, means learning to see the immediate needs of those in our congregation – emotional and practical needs, our wider community – teen pregnancies, drug and alcohol addiction, and the needs of those beyond our borders – communities that don’t have the support of the state to support them.

Christian mission can become abstract and therefore remarkably easy especially when we talk about evangelism, discipleship, justice, compassion, transformation and the Kingdom of God. While speaking about these ideas are extremely important to us as Christians, we also need to explore ways practical ways to put take these ideas and give it a human face. DF reminds us that Christian theology, like Christ, eventually must take on a human face.

A Mission that Incarnates

A child. A woman. A family. A village. A forest. These are particular places where suffering occurs and in which the love of Christ must be incarnated. The question therefore is not simply whether the Church has a theology of mission, but whether it has learned to see the world and its people whom God has placed in its vicinity.

From its beginning, the Fellowship understood Christian witness through a holistic pattern of life. The original work of caring for children over the years developed into education – creating an affordable boarding school for Indian Christian workers children; healthcare – a hospital with an active dental department (addressing a particular need of that area); child development – rehabilitation programmes for abused girls; continuing education and empowerment of women – a nursing

programme for young women; elderly care – an ever-growing number within DF and in India; ecological conservation – through its work in DF and Narriakadu in the Western Ghats; and community development.

This is not merely a matter of having many programmes. The deeper question to ask is, is the outworking of the Gospel attempting to recreate a community in the image of God? Because the Christian response to vulnerability is not merely to provide a range of services to someone who remains essentially an outsider. At its best, Christian mission should create safe spaces where the people can belong.

This has been one of the extraordinary features of the DF mission and hopefully will continue to be a community where people feel that they can belong.

A Mission that Moves On

For much of the history of modern evangelical Christianity, mission was imagined in terms of movement from the West to the rest of the world. Missionaries travelled from Britain, Ireland, Europe and North America to Africa, Asia and elsewhere taking their many denominational differences along with them. But Christianity today no longer fits that description. The demographic and spiritual centre of Christianity has shifted dramatically towards the Global South. The future of Christian mission cannot simply be about the West doing mission elsewhere. It increasingly involves Christians in the West receiving, learning and being challenged by Christians in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

DF today gives us a small, but important picture of that transition. We should not blindly romanticise the missionary culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of them operated within the limitations of their upbringing and narrow cultural contexts; especially seen in their disparaging descriptions of Indian religious systems and its distinct cultures. At the same time, we cannot dismiss missionaries just because some of them were entangled with colonialism. We cannot ignore their acts of courage, sacrifice and service, as witnessed in the case of Amy and many others like her. There needs to be a middle ground. And the DF model comes close to that.

The story of DF would be an easy story to tell if Amy Carmichael were a permanent immovable fixture and DF merely remain confined to continuing the work that Amy left. While that partially might be the case too, the opposite is perhaps closer to the truth. I had the privilege of briefly glancing at some of Amy's unpublished entries. Looking at them, it appeared that Amy's outlook of mission was not to make herself indispensable. She was a complex person with a vision much broader than her times.

Her hope was that this community that she had created would outlive her, remain committed to Christ, and respond sensitively to local realities.

Amy died at DF in 1951. The work, however, did not end with her death. It subsequently passed into the hands of others and developed quite uniquely within the Indian context. The present Fellowship's emphasis on indigenous solutions is particularly significant in this respect.

What Can We Learn?

As I reflected on my experience in DF, I wondered, what could the church in the UK learn from a mission like DF in India? The church in England and other main line churches today wrestle with identity, scandal, and decline. Despite these issues, the positive thing, is that congregations are still asking, how can we reach younger generations, meaningfully engage diverse communities, and recover confidence in the Christian faith?

The DF experience challenges us to ask; are our churches spaces where people can genuinely belong?

In DF people lovingly called Amy – Amma – mother. A parent is not someone who merely organises a list of activities and events to keep their children entertained. They are primary carers. They embody a space where their children are seen and belong.

Can a stranger who wanders into our church feel welcome? Can an encounter with us make the love of Christ feel sincere? Can a lonely elderly person find a family? Can a vulnerable child find safety? Can a young woman find dignity? Can a young man find stability and structure? Can the community see the Church step up to issues that matter?

Perhaps what the church really needs is not a list of events, better strategies and institutional structure – while those are indeed important – what is required really is for people to know that the church and Christian mission is here to stay so people can belong, to see people in spite of their weaknesses and differences, to incarnate Christ in the community and keep moving on despite the struggle.

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