

1. Title

Towards A Contextually Relevant Christian Education Model For Kuki Community Churches In North East India With Special Reference To Kukis Of Assam From The Perspective Of Faith Community Approach

2. Introduction

Despite the hundred-year existence, educational ministry in Kuki¹ Churches in Assam increasingly find itself ineffective in responding to the contemporary challenges in the society. For this reason, there is an urgent need to critically analyse Christian educational programmes in the church, including their theological bases and models with a view to develop what can be considered as relevant for the people, using a faith community approach to Christian education.

3. Historical Analysis of the Problem

Christianity came to the Kuki people in Assam during the early 19th century. The Welsh mission was the first group to enter the land to spread the message of Christ.² It is difficult to ascertain the exact date and place when Christian education was started and developed due to lack of sources. A simple form of Christian education Sunday school seems to have begun at the time the Churches were founded. It was observed that even before the church was well organised under one synod administration, the works of Sunday school were in many of the existing local churches.

Though there were Christian educational ministry, which was as old as the church itself in the regime, the missionaries found the need of education as one of the top priorities in the church. Thus, the mission introduced education by establishing Primary mission schools in Kuki villages with the purpose of teaching the English alphabet, how to read and write the word of God, and a new way of life was taught. In those schools, the new Kuki converts who became preachers were used as evangelist-cum-teachers. The language they used was *Lushai* language. Teaching was simply, to learn how to read and write. Schools were not only the learning centres but also one of the best evangelistic centres. Laird M.A observe “The first and foremost objective of the Missionaries was to convert people to Christianity and the early Missionaries

¹ The Kukis are one of the major tribes in the state of Assam, India. According to Indian constitution

² Thangkim Haolai, *Kuki Culture in N. C. Hills before and After the Advent of Christianity* (Gawahati: Bohniman Printer, 2006), 177.

used educational enterprise because they saw it as one among the many of the possible means of evangelism.”³

Though the missionaries themselves were involved in teaching-learning process among the Kuki Christians of Assam, the impact of their work was not satisfactory due to the following reason: Firstly, their failure to understand the culture and communication methods of Kuki led to their weak preaching and teaching, which could not reach the people effectively. Besides, their top-down approach to Christian education could not yield them much desirable result. Thus, even in the present church educational ministry, among the church leaders, colonialism mind set of teaching and learning continue to exist.

Secondly, due to linguistic problems, the missionaries were not able to give good teachings on the word of God. In that case, lay Kuki evangelists played the most important role in Christian education, who were neither well-versed in the scripture nor good orators. They were also new converts, and having a simple faith and basic limited knowledge. So, they also were not able to give sound Christian teaching in the Churches.

Thirdly, one of the methods of evangelism among the Kuki Christians in Assam, which was also the main driving force for every aspect of the Church life, was revival. This was characterised by an emotional and ecstatic spiritual joy, zeal for constant prayer, vision, singing, dancing, and speaking in unknown tongues. Since this system was primarily emotional, it did not last long. Also, due to its emotional and ecstatic nature, and discipline in the Church became extremely difficult. The Church service usually lasted not less than 3 hours. Naturally, some began to feel sleepy, and there were some going out and coming in. Many of the people gave more importance to singing, dancing, and speaking in unknown tongue rather than getting to know the deep meaning of God’s word. Some misunderstanding took place between the leaders and the people. The revival leaders were almost all lay people. There was no structured order of worship service it depended on how the revival led them. In most places, the Sunday school services were often replaced by revival worship service.

³Laird, M.A. *Missionaries and Education in Bengal (1793-1837)*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, U.K., 1972), 55.

4. Contemporary Assessment of the Problem

In this process, there emerged several issues we shall briefly mention them in the following:

A. Church membership is on the decline with a significant decrease in church attendance. From the time of its inception in the early 19th century until the early part of the 1990, the Kuki Churches in Assam was highly attended. It can be said that during those period, Kuki Christian in Assam reached the highest church attendance rate. Following that time, the attendance rate has significantly declined. Currently, it is estimated that less than 35 percent of the Kuki Church membership in Assam attends Church service on a regular basis.⁴ The factors driving people from the church might be a boring nature of church services and programs. In fact, the patterns of worship services are outdated, and majority of the churches still follow the 1960's practice of worship service. There is a quest for spirituality. The church is no longer spiritual enough for the people whose spiritual needs are increasing. Members who are leaving the Church see Church as largely irrelevant in an increasingly secular age. The Church leaders are worried about the church membership of the next generation if the declining of church attendance continues like the current attendance of today. There is an urgent need to investigate the way that churches worship, their lack of authentic spirituality and inability to handle the language, attitudes and tastes of the young people.

B. Neglect of Sunday school ministry. It gives the impression that Sunday school is conducted just for the sake of conducting. Sunday school teaching is more on content-oriented, rote learning of the Bible verses and examination oriented. Sunday school teaching does not relate to the daily living of the people. It also does not integrate contextual needs and aspirations of the people. So, this became the place to learn only general knowledge of the Bible. It is also true that in some contemporary Kuki churches, the Christian educational programmes do not go beyond the Sunday school ministry of the church. Irrespective of how important and effective this Sunday school ministry becomes, it is unable to accomplish everything in the limited time that it meets. There is no proper Sunday school syllabus structure; some churches don't use curriculum material as they say "we just teach the Bible". Often this means there is no

⁴Siehjalamboungel, "Evolving a Holistic Sunday School Ministry among the *Kuki* Christians in DimaHasao (N.C. Hills) Assam" (M.Th Thesis, Senate of Serampore College, 2013).

approach that they follow in the church education. In the same breath, Iris V. Cully contends that local church Sunday schools are beset with many goals. Parents have one goal in mind; Sunday school teachers have another, while the minister and the board each cherish their own goals as well. There is accordingly, no connected effort at a unified purpose. She went further to say that due to lack of care for Sunday school by other people, some have tried the most drastic solution: dropping the Sunday school.⁵ There is also a sharp difference between the church building and the Christian education classroom displays the subordination of the teaching ministry glaringly. The church building is usually well structured and infra-structured while the classroom is ignored. In some cases, there is no special classroom at all. The importance of Christian education has always been recognised by the church. But an improper understanding of the goals and methods of teaching and its limited scope of imparting of completely factual information has severely affected the Kuki Christians.

C. No proper teaching ministry. Stanley Glen spoke of the subordination of the teaching ministry. Accordingly, teaching in churches is emphasized outwardly, but in practice, it remains subordinate. He continues, the subordination is not a surface phenomenon due only to limitations at the administrative level, but a spiritual phenomenon due to a deeper, underlying condition, which robs the teaching ministry of its power and obstructs it in relation to the constitutive source of faith.⁶ Similarly, though there are some forms of teaching that do go on in Kuki churches, it is not consistent, not properly planned and administered. The concern about inadequate teaching in Kuki churches has been expressed by church members themselves as they grappled with issues from their encounter with life's day to day challenges such as the impacts of social media, false teaching and feeling incompleteness in their life. They feel that in some pulpits, sermons do not bring up explanations of times, contexts, and vocabulary; some are void of teaching content. The feeling has always been that the church leaders have not done enough to equip members for these challenges. The teaching of the churches was and is mostly the importance of the spiritual aspect of a community and preparation for life after death. Due to this perception, life here on earth becomes secondary. Struggle, problems and needs of a person are considered as

⁵Iris V. Cully, *New Life for your Sunday School*, (New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., W. Clement Stone Publishers, 1976) 4.

⁶Glen, J. S. *The Recovery of the Teaching Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 9-26.

temporary. Very little teaching on how to relate the practical problems of life are given. This is a very inadequate teaching. There is a gap between the teaching of the church and the actual problem of the believers. Therefore, the researcher believes that the goal of Christian educational teaching among the Kukis of Assam seems to be missing.

D. Decline of Christian community bond. The rise of individualism and modern education system is threatening the traditional communitarian lives of the people. The traditional communitarian lives are eroding away at alarming speed today. There are many forces which contribute to diminishing the communitarian life. The modern education system even though it has brought tremendous positive impacts on our people, the education system paves the way toward eroding away the communitarian life because education is a powerful tool either to alienate or bring together the people. The present education system has no room for our historical, socio-cultural values to learn. The type of text books and syllabi that students read in the schools and colleges have no room to integrate cultural and traditional values. As a result, children learn histories of other cultures and values. The modern education process alienates the people from cultural and contextual realities of the people. The centrality of community is decreasing. An individualistic orientation has dampened close interpersonal relationships among the community. It has destroyed the sense of tradition, undermined the institution of the family. There is no individual cultivation or harvest, no individual house building or feast of neither merit nor any human togetherness, belonging to each other, living for each other are values that lead to wellbeing of the community as a whole. With respect for elders, they pay attention to parent's teachings, and the concern for ecological balance though there were no written forms of instruction. But through instinct, and the community learning and teachings in *som-inn*,⁷ the way of addressing in affable, polite manner, chirpy in society and elsewhere, have been replaced too. But now, this communitarian feeling

⁷The term Sawm is a Kuki word which means bachelor's dormitory. It was a training institute for young men and boys to learn the arts of wrestling, singing, dancing, handicraft and technique of wars, for instruction about sex, manners, traditions, customs and etiquette and for learning religions and all the essential things for their lives in their own context. It was a social institution which provided different kinds of training necessary for the villagers to live in the society and to be self-sufficient. The Sawn education aims at all-round development. But the processes of learning are not like we do in the schools. There is no particular teacher, as such neither systematic pattern of teaching, nor routine and written form, but learning takes place by memory, practice and activities. K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the making* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 134.

and intrinsic moral values have been replaced into an individualistic, competition and self-centredness and profit making attitude. Today, community life suffers a shift to individualism. Respect for elders, hard work, sharing, sanctity of marriage, community and social ethic is no longer prevailing in the society. Rather, cheating, immorality, individual competitions, self-centered attitude, and consumptive lifestyles of drinking, substance abuse and loss of life are increasing in the society. There is an ever-present danger of eternally losing the traditional communitarian life if this awful trend continues.

E. Challenges to the Ideals of Christian home. The Christian education seems to be unaware of the importance of the Christian home, the family, which was a nucleus of both individual and corporate existence has been broken. Family solidarity has been weakened to a great extent. Families are smaller and children often lack any significant direct interaction with their parents, grandparents, and relatives. Their children are more interested to migrate from their home to the city, and enjoy their individual life without paying attention to their parents at home. Because of this brokenness and lack of relationships with the family, and church and God, inter-faith marriages are common. The authority and respect, which parents enjoyed under the communitarian society are being challenged by the younger people, and in many homes, there is rebellion from children against their parents. Moreover, children learn more from their books in school, and this type of learning does not adequately equip them to play their roles in the faith community life. Between husband and wife, the sanctity of marriage among the Kukis Christian community is deteriorating in spite of claiming themselves as a Christian community. Therefore, among the Christian community, marriages are no longer as stable as they used to be, and divorce is becoming almost commonplace. Marriage is in all societies a recognized and regulated human institution. Christian teaching on this topic begins with the joyful affirmation that marriage is God's idea, not ours. Yet, in spite of knowing the true natures of Christian marriage, divorces continue to be high among the Kukis Christians of Assam. There are numbers of single parents living with their children. According to John Stott, the greatest single reason for increasing of the divorce among the Christian community is undoubtedly is the decline of Christian faith together with the loss of commitment to a Christian understanding of the sanctity and

permanence of marriage, and the growing non-Christian assault on traditional concepts of sex, marriage, and family.⁸

F. The problem of inequality in the Churches and society. Churches in north east India are a rigidly hierarchical church. Only the male or elders are allowed to make decisions regarding the church. Children, youth, and women are excluded in ministry of Church. This means that the word “Church” as *Ekklesia* is not practiced. Due to the dominant ideology of patriarchy, Women are always neglected in the Church ministry. This is clearly reflected in the structure of the Church in which women are given low position. The structure of the Church hinders equal participation of men and women in the ministry. It is in the Church circles that leadership of women is not fully accepted. Though women contribute a lion’s share for the betterment of the Church, they are debarred and marginalised in ecclesial employment. Fully qualified and trained women are often denied their ordination, leadership, administration, policy-making position. Women are expected to play assisting roles only. Similarly, People who are differently abled also face discrimination every day in terms of negative attitudes; they are excluded from the society. The church often excludes and dismisses those with mental and physical disabilities. In the church, they are treated as the weak to be served, rather than as fully committed, integral members of the Body of Christ. So, the church as a community of God’s people as well as a called out people fail to bring the true nature of Church, when disabled people are excluded from Church activities.

G Ethnic violence among the Christian. According to Samson Prabhakar, today we are living in a society where violence and injustice are in abundance. Thus, we should commit to this task to educate the present as well as future generation in fresh understanding and sentiments of non-violence as our primary responsibility.⁹ Ethnic violence among the tribal Christians in the north east is common, but the church barely pays any attention to these problems, apart from prayer. The increasing violent activities are felt in every area of life in the states of the Northeast. Various groups of Christian leaders and community leaders have resorted to violent means of protest and airing their discontentment. There are always ethnic-tribal tensions in north east India. Though the majority of the tribal claimed as Christian, there are numerous community

⁸John Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (Mumbai: GLS Publishing, 2003), 321.

⁹Samson Prabhakar, *Essay on Christian Education and Liturgy* (Bangalore: SATHRI, 2003), 123.

clashes between one tribe to another community to another. The Church educational ministry is failing in addressing these issues. The common teaching on violence in the church is that it is a tribal nature and the government is responsible to bring peace and harmony.

In the light of the above discussion, what is implied here, is that, though Christian educational ministry took place and improved over the years, much still needs to be done to bring a more effective culturally sensitive to Christian educational ministry within the church .

5. Hypothesis

The hypothesis is that a critical analysis of the existing Christian educational ministry of the Kuki churches in Assam, using the faith community approach of Christian education will provide the most relevant and contextually effective approach for improving educational ministry of the Kuki community churches for the 21st century.

6. Importance Of The Study

The research will help us to look closer into and understand the situation of the Kuki Christians of Assam. The research will put us in a better position to explore and suggest what can be considered relevant way of doing Christian education. It will prepare the ground for the emergence of relevant Christian education. This study will encourage them to face positively the challenges they encounter in their contemporary world. It will also serve as basic foundation in the study of Christian education for the Kuki Christians in Assam. This study will contribute to create awareness about the need of Christian education for everyone. This study can help them to have a critical understanding of the reality of the society and participate in bringing justice.

The strategies set out at the end of the research will serve as an eye opener to those who knew they had a problem but did not know how to go about resolving it. Affected churches will be able to build on these strategies as they go about setting their Christian education programmes in order. It is hoped that this research will facilitate further discussion and ongoing debates on the issues of Christian education and modern developments. This research hopefully will contribute to the process of identifying crucial issues enhancing clarity in thinking and shaping of critical responses.

7. Faith Community Approach:

It is one of the approaches in Christian educational study. The approach is also known as socialisation or enculturation. It was developed by American religious educators, such as John Westerhoff III, Charles R. Foster and C.E. Nelson. Their common belief is that community is the context, content, and method for Christian education theory and practice. There are four natures and characteristics of a faith community. *Common story*: Common story is essential in a faith community that they share a common sacred story to explain the meaning and purpose of life and that they transmit it to the next generation.¹⁰ Westerhoff stand that without a story there cannot be a community, without a story life makes no sense. The story is the foundation of our life that provides us both a memory of meaningfully with the past and a vision calling us to a purposeful future.¹¹ *Common vision*: It is not to share not only a common story of the past, but also a desired and anticipated future, that they need visions, and wherever a vision is shared, the gift of community is made possible.¹² *Rituals*: The nature of ritual concludes that ritual is always the heart of Christian education.¹³ It encourages full participation of all the people. This also implies the inclusion of women to ordain in the priestly ministry and children to worship together with the adults.¹⁴ *Experience*: In Christian education person learns first inactively through their experience. Religious education and formation arise from the lived experiences and interaction of peoples' communities of Christian faith. A community of faith is concerned about the character and nature of the experiences of personal share in community.¹⁵ *Action*: For Westerhoff God is at work in the world on behalf of peace, justice, and love. So, if we say we know God than it is to join in his history-making, to explore the nature and character of our individual and corporate action in the world, to make that action a significant part of our educational ministry.¹⁶ The nature and character of a faith community, educate the way people see the world, value it, and live in relationship with others. It is to relate and reflect on the daily experiences of the people, converting and transforming the whole community. In faith community all persons regardless of

¹⁰ John Westerhoff, *Living The Faith Community* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2004), 26.

¹¹John Westerhoff, *A People Pilgrim: Learning Through the Church Year* (Minneapolis: The Seabury Press, 1984), 3.

¹² Westerhoff, *Living The Faith Community*, 27.

¹³ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 60

¹⁴ Westerhoff, *Living The Faith Community*, 62 .

¹⁵ Westerhoff, *Will Our children Have Faith*, 62-64.

¹⁶ Westerhoff, *Will Our children Have Faith*, 64-65.

age, sex, social, racial, economic, or other cultural distinctions are learned. Therefore, in a way to study the faith community approach to Christian education is to give how faith community learning should take place and it is the practical guide lines for any faith community learning in the church world.

Biography:



Rev. Siehjalam Dounjel is currently a doctoral candidate of SATHRI a research department of Senate of Serampore West Bengal, placed in Union Biblical Seminary Pune, India. He is a pastor from Assam, North East India. With his wife Kikim and their daughter Abigail.

He has a passion to help the Christian communities in NEI a region that is poorly connected to the Indian mainland by a small corridor and surrounded by many countries such as Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China. There are eight states and more than 200 ethnic groups with distinct language, tradition and culture. In this land, ethnic conflicts, insurgency problem, corruption, and human right issues are one of the highest rate in the country. Unfortunately, Christian, in general, has contributed to these growing tensions. Dounjel will continue to works with his Church after completing his research.

Thank you