

Church for Others:

A Living Model for Local Ministry

Mathew Koshy Punnackadu

Across the world, many churches take pride in their grand buildings, mistaking beauty for faith. Worship has become routine, focused on personal comfort rather than transformation. The Church must move beyond preserving tradition to active service – becoming not a monument but a workshop where faith builds justice, compassion, and renewal.

One small CSI congregation in Punnakkadu, Kerala, India, has embodied this daring vision – a model of ministry rooted in compassion, justice, and community transformation. It lives out what Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared: *“The Church is the Church only when it exists for others.”*

From Theology to Transformation

Contextual theologies have long called the Church to stand with the poor and the oppressed. Yet many such visions remain confined to seminar rooms. The Punnakkadu congregation turned theology into daily practice, choosing to invest in people rather than beautify buildings. Their conviction was radical yet simple: *“The Church is not a monument but a workshop for God’s labourers – a place where faith plans for action.”*

This principle gave birth to a new paradigm of ministry integrating justice, health, ecology, and spirituality.

The Genesis of a Mission

The story began with an old mission hospital that had once offered free eye surgery to the poor, supported by overseas partners. When funding ceased, the hospital closed – a fate shared by many such institutions. But the congregation refused to let the mission die.

In 2011, the church chose to rebuild relationships rather than walls. Volunteers identified cataract patients in nearby villages and arranged free surgeries through local hospitals, covering all expenses. When one elderly man couldn’t attend because his sons were too busy, volunteers took him themselves, and he regained his sight. The moment echoed John 5:1-9 – like the man at the Pool of Bethesda who said, “I have no one to help me,” this man found hope through

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compassionate action. The church became Christ’s healing hands in the community.

Soon, people who had lived in literal and spiritual darkness began to see again. Thus was born a **Community Health Ministry** – where service itself became evangelism.

Healing as Mission

The effort grew into a full-fledged **Community Development Programme** addressing physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. The organisers sought support from the **Mallappuzhassery Grama Panchayat, Mar Thoma Church, Grama Vikasana Samithy, Jana Maitry Police, Nava Darshan Trust, Krishi Vgyan Kendra and Puspagiri Medical College.**

With the Panchayat’s cooperation, the Church held awareness meetings in all thirteen wards. It organised training programmes on poultry farming, jackfruit processing, coconut cultivation, and other livelihoods.

A seven-day **Health Convention** followed, transforming the church campus into a hub of learning and healing. Nursing colleges provided buses to bring villagers by 6 p.m., and about 600 people attended each evening. The sessions began with prayer and featured bishops, civic leaders, short dramas by nursing students, and talks by specialist doctors who also answered questions. On the final day, the Home Minister of Kerala joined as the chief guest.

A turning point came when **Pushpagiri Medical College, Thiruvalla, partnered with the church.** Under Dr. Philip Mathew’s leadership, seventy volunteers from CSI, Mar Thoma, and Kudumbasree groups received training in basic health care – monitoring blood pressure, checking sugar levels, and identifying health risks. The church turned into a mini-medical college for this purpose.

Afterward, these trained volunteers began visiting colonies, discovering high rates



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of hypertension, diabetes, and kidney disease among daily-wage workers. Their compassionate visits, listening ears, and prayers brought both medical help and hope to many homes. Every where they went, people asked for financial help – for dialysis, medicines, or wheelchairs. But rather than offer charity, the church focused on **capacity-building – helping people stand on their own feet.**

A Paradigm Shift

Traditionally, patients go to hospitals seeking doctors. In Punnakkadu, the model reversed: **the doctor went to the people, not to treat disease but to prevent it. The motto became: “Healthy Body, Healthy Mind, Healthy Environment.”** Community health workers regularly visited colonies, educating workers and farmers in open-air sessions and students in schools. A free dental clinic and a school-health programme soon followed.

Monthly **Healing Conventions** replaced the typical miracle crusades.

During Christmas, the Church celebrated at Pannivelichira Colony with people of all faiths. CSI and Mar Thoma choirs sang carols, and civic and religious leaders shared messages. Over 500 people joined for cake and tea.

Expanding the Vision: Science and Faith in Partnership.

Re Act Asia Pacific partnered with the “Antibiotic Smart Communities” initiative to raise awareness on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and promote responsible antibiotic use. The project, piloted in Mallappuzhassery Panchayat, developed an indicator framework to track community-level progress on AMR, which

was later validated across India and Southeast Asia. Research from the project, published in the journal *Antibiotics* (2024), demonstrated the effectiveness of community-based approaches in combating AMR and received wide international recognition.

A community worker once received a note from a girl leaving for Kuwait. Visiting her home, her disabled father revealed they had planned to end their lives in despair until the worker’s earlier visit gave them hope. Moved to tears, he later became a pastor, now leading the Diocesan Counselling Centre.

Core Principles of the Model

1. Accessibility: Bringing healthcare directly to villages and colonies. **2. Prevention over treatment:** Addressing lifestyle diseases before they strike. **3. Participation:** Training local volunteers – especially women – as community health workers. **Volunteers of different faiths became trusted friends in every home. They never preached conversion; their message was compassion.**

A Church Beyond Walls

What made this ministry remarkable was its **network of partnerships** that transcended traditional boundaries: **● Ecumenical collaboration:** Joint action with Mar Thoma and Catholic communities. **● Civic partnership:** Cooperation with local Panchayat, police, Women’s collectives and Non-governmental organisations. **● Faith in action:** Inter-faith prayer gatherings linking spirituality and public health.

This model showed that the **Mission of God is not confined to preaching but is lived out through holistic care, where faith communities become agents of healing and reconciliation.**

Sustaining the Vision

Financial sustainability emerged through shared ownership rather than large foreign grants. In the early phase, diaspora congregations funded surgeries and vehicles, and the

CSI Madhya Kerala Diocese supported it as a pilot project in the Church’s Healing Ministry. The parish dedicates offertory from two Sundays each year to community health. **Since 2011, this ministry has continued despite financial challenges. As the Vicar remarked, “This is not a project; it is our ministry – a unique mission field where the local church bears witness to Christ through compassionate service.”**

A Model for Replication

Now informally known as the **Punnakkadu Model**, this approach offers a replicable framework for churches seeking to reconnect faith with social transformation:

1. Mission over maintenance: Prioritise people over property. **2. Community partnership:** Work with civic and secular institutions. **3. Health and wholeness:** Address both body and spirit. **4. Inclusivity:** Welcome all faiths into shared action. **5. Local empowerment:** Train volunteers instead of relying only on professionals. **6. Sustainability through simplicity:** Build on small, consistent local contributions.

Such churches become **dynamic centres of hope – institutions that heal, educate, and unite.**

Conclusion:

The Church of the Future

The story of Punnakkadu challenges churches everywhere to rediscover their purpose in the twenty-first century. It shifts focus from building maintenance to human flourishing, from charity to empowerment, and from religious exclusivism to compassionate service.

In this vision, **worship and service are inseparable; prayer naturally leads to action, and the Gospel becomes visible in the community’s health and dignity. The Punnakkadu Model demonstrates that local congregations can meaningfully contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals through faith-based action. It exemplifies how contextual theology can become a tool for social transformation and ecological justice. It is, ultimately, a call to embody Bonhoeffer’s prophetic vision: “A Church for Others – a Church that lives not for itself but for the world God loves”.**

