

The background of the cover is a collage of Pongal festival elements. At the top is a large, colorful rangoli depicting a sun with a blue cross, green palm trees, and a multi-layered bowl. Below this is a purple rounded rectangle containing the title. The bottom left shows a coconut pot with white foam overflowing, and the bottom right features a traditional oil lamp. The entire scene is set against a backdrop of white spiral rangoli patterns on a light-colored floor.

PONGAL STUDY PAPER

Compiled by the Pongal Study Group

Edited by Charles K. Samuel

*Provincial Liturgical Commission,
Province of Southeast Asia*

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Kindly note that the views expressed in this book are exclusively
the opinion(s) of the group and need not necessarily reflect the
official view(s) of the Provincial dioceses.

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FOREWORD

Bishop Steven Abbarow

Greetings in Jesus' name.

This Pongal study paper is a much needed and lauded effort. The Provincial Liturgical Committee, the chairman, and his team working on this paper; are to be applauded for undertaking this task. This marks a positive and strategic contribution for the development of significant Tamil liturgies to widen the connection points with our Indian community for witness.

Any endeavour at contextualising culture to the Gospel message, will have its share of challenges. The following caveats from Scripture is especially noteworthy to consider when using this liturgy in your church;

1. Paul's appeal to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 8:9-13) to exercise wisdom for the sake of a weaker believer, and
2. in Romans 14, the appeal to change our conduct and not to revise the conduct of others for the sake of the well being of the body of Christ.

We advise Clergy first ensure that the POC/MDC, and even the AGM, has approved for the liturgy to be used. The Pongal Study Paper should be carefully presented to the local community with enough time for discussions and listening to one another before even bringing up at the decision-making bodies. This must be supported with much prayer.

It is my prayer that this Pongal Study Paper, will become an important tool to multiply our connectivity with the Indian community for witness. I wholeheartedly bless this endeavour.

The Lord be with you.

Nisi Dominus Frustra,

The Rt. Rev. Dr. D. Steven Abbarow
Bishop of West Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Bishop Charles K. Samuel

Chairperson of the Provincial Liturgical Committee (PLC)

Diocese of West Malaysia Liturgical Formation and Footprints of God. (LFFoG)

This study paper aims to clarify the celebration of the Harvest Festival (Pongal) among Christians worldwide. It is a cultural tradition of Tamils that brings God's people together to express gratitude for a year of bountiful harvest. It is an occasion to appreciate the beauty of God's creation and to give thanks for the abundance of the season and the hard work of humans. The Pongal festival is not a new concept, but it is not widely observed in churches and is sometimes misunderstood as a religious practice of a different faith. Many Christians struggle to distinguish between religious and cultural practices, and this study paper intends to offer a way forward for Indian Christians to reclaim their cultural heritage as Christians.

We are a Malaysian Anglican Church in the Province of Southeast Asia. We aim to incorporate elements that are significant to the Indian Community into our worship services. In October, the Tamil Churches in Malaysia celebrate the harvest Thanksgiving festival, similar to the Western harvest festival. However, we recognise that the European barley or wheat harvesting tradition is irrelevant to the Asian community. The hymn says it all – “We plough the fields and scatter; the good seed on the land; but it is fed and watered; by God's almighty hand; God sends the snow in winter; the; warmth to swell the grain; the breezes, and the sunshine; and soft refreshing rain. Refrain: All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; We thank you, God, we thank you, God, for all your love”.

The celebration of Thanksgiving has become limited to attending church services and receiving cash envelopes. The Church is often decorated with fruits and vegetables from supermarkets. Unfortunately, the original meaning of the holiday - giving thanks to God for the beauty of the earth, all creatures big and small, and the fruits of creation - has been lost in the festivities and the liturgy of the day.

The Church is vital in connecting with the community through preaching and liturgy. As societies evolve, the Church's mission should adapt to bring everyone closer to worshipping God. To fulfil this mission, we must study our communities and understand their values, beliefs, and lifestyles while staying true to our faith. Relating to multicultural situations and reality is essential, but we should never compromise our cultural identity in Christ. While preaching and making discipleship are admirable, we must keep our cultural identity intact.

Since 1980, the Diocese of West Malaysia has been working on adapting the liturgy to fit the Malaysian context. This effort has mainly focused on Tamil churches, and some changes

have been integrated into the liturgy. However, there are questions about why it was not done earlier, if it is biblical, and how much compromise has been made to our faith. On the other hand, some see the changes as a joyous and meaningful celebration of our cultural identity in a society where dominant cultures are prevalent.

The Lambeth Conference resolution has provided a clear path for the Church to maintain its universal mission and liturgical formation while becoming more localised. This resolution has initiated a process of liturgical education and formation.

The younger generation challenges the Church to be more relevant in their beliefs and worship. The Church needs to pay attention to the voices of its people in every era. Religious leaders have challenged societal norms throughout history to create more meaningful liturgies. The Church should not fear change but instead strive to understand and incorporate it into its theological, biblical, sociological, and cultural practices. By utilising all available resources, such as space, symbols, and actions, the Church can bring greater glory to God through its worship. As the saying goes, “Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi” - as we worship, so we believe, and so we live. The Church exists to expand God’s presence in the world by living in His time and purposefully carrying out His mission.

This study paper explores different aspects of Pongal and how it can be incorporated into worship. A study group was formed in the province, and theological lectures and liturgists from various churches shared their views and experiences. Some churches celebrated the Pongal festival, which was well received. A webinar was conducted between the Diocese of Singapore and West Malaysia, and a brochure titled “Introducing Pongal” was printed. The committee recognises that there is still opposition to the idea, and many are waiting for guidance, but efforts are being made to guide the Church in this celebration.

We express gratitude to all those who contributed and hope that the work of this group leads others to a deeper connection with God. May our efforts be blessed by God.

CULTURE AND LITURGY- A FRAMEWORK FOR DIALOGUE

Bishop Charles K. Samuel

This paper explores a pattern of understanding of Culture and Liturgy in the context of Anglican Churches. It assists in the ongoing discussions of understanding the different cultural practices of other races and languages. I refer to Rev. Juan M.C. Oliver's PhD, who wrote a paper on "The Liturgy and Latin American cultures, by the Rev. Dr Juan M.C. Oliver, Keeper of the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer in the hope that it will provide a framework for the Anglican churches in the different regions in Southeast Asia. But, first, here are some pointers by way of introduction.

In the Christian faith, the Incarnation of the Son of God invites us to realize that Jesus came to earth and inhabited sinful human culture to bring redemption, calling women and men to God in a missionary endeavour. This profound act of God has implications for today's church ministry methods. It is relevant to the Incarnation as a model for the Church's involvement in culture. It invites us to enlarge our understanding of Jesus' presence in his Church, embracing all cultures, peoples and languages. It allows us to humanize and give glory to the global village.

Our liturgies are somehow intertwined with who we are and where we come from. Our Christian understanding of culture is linked to the colonial view of the Church, missionaries coming from overseas from within our own culture and from a hierarchical directive. It is essential for us to give back a liturgical voice to the people who celebrate it! How do we do it? It is important to understand the liturgy from its original context of the first century as a starting point so that we can find in our cultures equivalent aspects of carrying out and incorporating them. As a voice of caution, we need to be engaged with the Clergy, theologians, and practitioners.

For example, Cranmer, the architect of the Book of Common Prayer, wrote in the setting of a particular culture of that time. Even the present liturgies we use in the ecumenical circles, in some ways, capture the essence of what we practice and sing. Dr Oliver adds that since there is no Christian liturgy that is not yet enculturated, it must be interculturated where the process occurs through reciprocity, synergy and respect between the values of the Gospel and each culture.

In our different cultures, the Gospel has already penetrated our cultures. The foreign missionary organizations had brought their brand of Gospel and interpretations of culture.

Over time, our communities and the missionary could not understand the local culture and the many different variations that have been taught which has confused, bringing about distrust for culture as if it has many shortcomings and is even deviant, but this is not so; Jesus himself used old cultural schemes (like the ritual baths of Israel, the concept of death honour, parables, the shared meals of Greco-Roman culture and others), giving them a new, humanizing and liberating meaning. Julio Adams shares that while it is true that culture contains the seed of the Gospel, it has “fallen” aspects: individualism, pleasure-seeking, and consumerism. We must give our laity and clergy the resources so that they can differentiate rather than throw the baby in the bathtub. Therefore, it is not an essay approach to enculturate the liturgy- a challenge of what, how and with whom to do it - to be an authentic Church, faithful to Anglican teachings and culture.

Church and Culture:

By Church, we mean not only the institution and its hierarchical apparatus but the whole assembly (ekklesia) of people baptized in the death and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, the Church is never an abstract concept but a community of concrete people incorporated into Christ through baptism. Culture means the whole field of customs, uses, meanings, behaviours, production of materials and knowledge, forms of expression, etc., typical of a community, people, nation, or ethnicity.

In his famous book *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr suggested that the relationship between the Church and culture must be transformative: the Church exists to transform, through the good news of God into Jesus, the culture in which you find yourself. Christians do not have to separate from or identify with a culture since “we are in the world, but we are not of the world”. This transformation occurs through the proclamation in deeds - and words, if necessary - of the good news of the proximity of the Kingdom of God, that is the gospel. To achieve this, we need to be incarnated in the culture because it would be challenging to say: “We have a great message, but to hear it, it is necessary to learn our language first.”

This Incarnation of the Church’s life continues to be necessary even in cultures that are supposedly Christianised, as in the Latin American context. As Aylward Shorter writes:

“Culture ... is always developing and, therefore, there must be an ongoing dialogue between faith and culture. The Incarnation of the Church is also relevant in the countries of Europe and North America, once Christianised and now de-Christianised”.

Such is also true of regions in Asia and East Asia, where culture is everywhere, and society and people are so ingrained in cultural values.

Churches are still unsure of the direction in which she should go for fear that the gospel will be lost or diluted. Yet the task of impacting the community should move us to be more proactive in our ministry to serve the people and to make the Gospel meaningful and purposeful. The Lambeth bishops discussed this at length and concluded a resolution titled Resolution 22 – Christ and Culture. Bishops agreed and ordered dioceses to incorporate the liturgy! It reads this Conference:

- *Recognizes that culture is the context in which people find their identity.*
- *Affirms that God's love extends to people of every culture and that the Gospel judges every culture according to the Gospel's criteria of truth, challenging some aspects of culture while endorsing and transforming others for the benefit of the Church and society.*
- *Urges the Church everywhere to work at expressing the unchanging Gospel of Christ in words, actions, names, customs, and liturgies, which communicate relevantly in each contemporary society.*

In short, the Church's community must not fully separate itself from or identify with cultures. But we must transform them in the light of the Gospel, celebrating and challenging them to leave behind their dehumanizing aspects. Thus, it repeats the Kenosis of Jesus, for the liberation/salvation of the world, emptying itself.

Theology and Culture:

The theological basis of the Incarnation of the Church (and not just of the liturgy) is the Incarnation of the Word. Just as the Word became flesh in Jesus, the Church, his Risen Body, must be incarnated into the local culture. However, Incarnation alone, without anything else, can make us assume that creation has no value without God's intervention. This reinforces the idea that creation suffers from total depravity because of the fall. But the Word ("by whom all things were made") is already present in God's creatures. This intimate presence of the Word in cultures contributes something positive to the gospel; it is not just a passive receiver or a mere means of transmission. Shorter writes,

The Christ who became flesh is the Word in which all things were created. ... He is at the centre of all human culture and is responsible for all the good that is found in them, making them means of salvation.

But the Church is not incarnated into cultures just to celebrate them. Challenging them to be everything God calls them to be leaving behind their dehumanizing aspects is also incarnated. This is our prophetic and rebellious dimension. That's why Shorter points out: The liberation of the poor and oppressed is a fundamental condition for an authentic incarnation of the Church's life. Otherwise, the dialogue is not with the true gospel of Christ.

The summary is that the Church's community must not separate itself from or identify with cultures fully but must transform them in the light of the Gospel, not only celebrating them but also challenging them to leave behind their dehumanizing aspects. Thus, she repeats the Kenosis of Jesus for the liberation/salvation of the world, emptying itself.

7.1 The theological basis of the Incarnation of the Church (and not just the liturgy) is in the Incarnation of the Word. Just as the Word became flesh in Jesus, the Church, his Risen Body, must be incarnated into the local culture. This intimate presence of the Word in cultures contributes something positive to the gospel; it is not just a passive receiver or a mere means of transmission. Shorter writes,

The Christ who became flesh is the Word in which all things were created. ... He is at the centre of all human culture and is responsible for all the good that is found in them, making them means of salvation.

The life of the Church and its liturgy has a name: Inculturation. And I wonder: will the Anglican liturgy be able to enculturate itself in our Malaysian culture? The question is fundamental because if the Anglican liturgy must be Anglo-Saxon everywhere, it is not Catholic in the sense of universal but a national, ethnic and provincial expression of Christianity, suitable only for Anglo-Saxon cultures.

7.2 How can we understand the concept of inculturation of the liturgy? This is one of the many concepts available that in 1978, the Superior of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, wrote in a letter to the whole Society of Jesus on the subject that he called "inculturation", describing it as

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“... the incarnation of the Christian life and message in a specific cultural area in such a way that this experience not only comes to express itself with the elements of the culture in question, ... but becomes the inspiring, normative and life-giving principle that transforms and recreates that culture, thus creating a new creation.”

7.3 Thomas Cranmer and the other 16th-century Anglican reformers tried to do something like this: enculturate the Roman liturgy into English culture. But since then, we Anglicans had conscientiously avoided doing such a thing - until thirty-two years ago, when in 1988, the Lambeth Conference of Bishops declared:

“This conference calls on the Church everywhere to work to express the unchanging gospel of Christ in the words, actions, names, customs and liturgies that they genuinely communicate in each society.” And it adds: “... each province must be free, subject to the Anglican norms of the liturgy, to seek the appropriate liturgical expression for the Christian people in their cultural context.”

7.4 The following year, the Anglican International Liturgical Consultation concluded that

“In every province and diocese, Anglicans must examine their ... attachment to forms of worship that are not required either by the gospel or by local culture, but perhaps by ... a supposed general “Anglicanism”, since culture affects the entire expression of the gospel and what is known as “general Anglicanism” - if it can be identified - has grown up in a specific Western culture.”

Considering these Anglican pronouncements, I believe that we are not only allowed but also have a mandate to enculturate the liturgy in the Province of Southeast Asia.

We have seen that the Church, which separates itself from cultures or identifies entirely with them, must transform them in the light of the Gospel, celebrating them and challenging them to leave behind their dehumanizing aspects. Therefore, the Kenosis of Jesus is repeated, emptying itself for the liberation/salvation of the world. The system of signs that is the Church's liturgy shapes us with a worldview and ethos, participating in a rehearsal of the Kingdom. This rehearsal, to have meaning - and to carry out the grace of God must be elaborated with and following the elements of culture and their meaning of life. Furthermore, pretending to be Anglo-Saxon to live with God builds up internalized colonialism that shapes us despite ourselves and our cultures with an almost infallible Western background.

The Set of Visual Acts:

The liturgy is a set or system of Visual acts and signs: In the liturgy, our worship is an example of various acts, symbols, and movements. Anthologists have much to teach us about human customs of creating and celebrating rituals. What, then, is our liturgy? The liturgy is a significant action in a specific place and time, repeated and structured, with norms that identify us as members of the Church and citizens of the Kingdom. Take our liturgies: baptism, confirmation, ordinations, and funeral all have their own set of signs and visual acts. Indeed, the liturgy itself - through baptism - constitutes us as members of the Church.

The catechism teaches that the sacraments are “external and visible signs of an inner and spiritual grace”. These signs are not just objects - they are people and actions that give meaning to the things in use, realising that the liturgy is not only a means or container for communicating theology.

Our liturgical services are all a rehearsal of the Kingdom life, which means it has to be incarnated in the cultures, not just using languages but all expressions of culture: their music, architecture, moves, gestures, sense of celebration, of the sacred, of worship, of humour, of mourning, of despair, of lamentation, of hope. In short, it is a vision of life in the Kingdom.

In short, the liturgy as a set of visual acts or signs shapes us with a worldview and ethos, participating all laity and clergy in rehearsing the kingdom.

The inculturation of the liturgy.

A Superior of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, wrote in a letter to the whole Society of Jesus on the subject that he called “inculturation”, describing it as

“... the incarnation of the Christian life and message in a specific cultural area in such a way that this experience not only comes to express itself with the elements of the culture in question, ... but becomes the inspiring, normative and life-giving principle that transforms and recreates that culture, thus creating a new creation.”

A research seminar in Yogyakarta described inculturation as,

“Inculturation is the process by which an ecclesial community lives its Christian faith and experience within a given cultural context in

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such a way that these not only find their expression in the element of the local culture but also become a force that animates, reshapes and profoundly renews that culture so as to create new patterns of communion and communication within that culture and beyond it”.

Indigenization means a process by which a faith from outside gradually becomes local and Indigenous. Inculturation and indigenization today occur through indigenous forms of liturgy, hymns and worship, ways of life and witness and thought forms and theologies.

Thomas Cranmer and 16th-century reformers tried to enculturate the Roman liturgy into English culture. But since then, we Anglicans have conscientiously avoided doing such a thing - until thirty-two years ago, with the 1988 resolution.

The following year, the Anglican International Liturgical Consultation concluded that,

“In every province and diocese, Anglicans must examine their ... attachment to forms of worship that are not required either by the gospel or by local culture, but perhaps by ... a supposed general “Anglicanism”, since culture affects the entire expression of the gospel and what is known as “general Anglicanism” - if it can be identified - has grown up in a specific Western culture.

In light of these decisions in the Anglican communion, I believe we are not only allowed but also mandated to enculturate the liturgy.

INCULTURATION OF THE LITURGY IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Bishop Charles K. Samuel

How, then, can we inculturate liturgy in a Malaysian culture? What tools do we have to carry it out? Which processes have criteria to evaluate? What obstacles do we encounter when trying to do this?

After the Lambeth Conference in 1988, Bishop Savarimuthu encouraged Churches to understand the different cultures and find ways in which the Church could discover and offer possibilities for inculturation. However, the obstacles to engaging seem to arise out of the attitude of priests, who seemingly cannot overcome their clericalism and co-dependency of passive people who used to obey without thinking and celebrating out of habit and routine. At the same time, some converts identify Christianity with Western culture and practice. Leaving their former faith and confessing to Christianity is to leave their past, their cultural heritage, language, and ideology and adopt a way of life that makes them different. They find it challenging to assimilate their culture with the new religion. The task ahead needs a lot of education and understanding of who we are, where we come from and how we are to make our faith meaningful in our context.

When we are serious about inculturation, we are put face to face with the reality of those who presented the dynamics of the liturgy. Today, we are challenged by young people about our liturgy and worship. The young people are increasingly questioning the relevance of the liturgical practices in churches. We understand that the Eucharist, from a historical point of view, is a shared meal and the ushering of the Kingdom of God. Still, we do the liturgical actions and decoration with critical understanding. This is evident in the responses from the young people. It is projected as clergy-centred, but the liturgical task belongs to everyone, those formed from birth and baptism in the culture.

As a guiding principle, the scripture and practice should have two sides of the coin. Gospel and Liturgy are the two sides that propel faith expression in worship. When the Gospel and the liturgy are to be incarnated (“inculturated”) in each cultural context in which they find themselves, they must also challenge the cultures in which they are inculturated. Dr Orlando Espín states that both what is understood and how it is interpreted by “Gospel” and “liturgy”, as well as what is understood, interpreted and comprehended by “inculturation” and as “needing challenge”, are understandings and interpretations made possible by the

fact that human beings and all our communities are cultural and cannot help being so.” *Everything we understand and understand is a cultural creation.* There is no escape from this.

The liturgy that we have now has gone through the processes of Inculturation. The intercultural thinking process is already present in our theology. Could we say that no faith, life or liturgy is no longer inculturated? Evangelisation can only occur in the culture of the one who evangelises and who is evangelised.

When the gospel is preached, the preacher reflects it from the context, experiences he comes from and the cultural setting in which he is most accustomed. Neither can one allude that there is not one celebration that is not already (previously) inculturated. Therefore, what “is already inculturated” cannot be assumed to be “generic”, “innocent”, etc.

Let us explore the process, the tools and the challenges that propel us forward while trying to get parishes and congregations to inculturate the Anglican liturgy in our churches. We look at the Eucharistic Prayer and the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) to see what the prayer book requires and what it allows as an option. As a way forward, we will review some general criteria about Anglican Liturgy, which informs the work of inculturation.

The liturgy is not a book but an event composed of signs - objects, actions, and people that function as signs or symbols. 2. The liturgy is always the work of God through the whole Church gathered. 3. Therefore, the Church celebrates the liturgy, and everyone participates. There are no spectators; there is not a single leader, but several, according to their different gifts, and not just ordained people. 4. The liturgy is not ready. We received only the text. You must design it.

The actions of the Eucharist. Each liturgy has a “skeleton” - a series of actions that have meanings. The service has two parts: the Word of God; we meet; we hear the Word; we share its purpose and pray for the Church and the world. In the second part, Holy Communion, we bring offerings, give thanks to God, have a meal together and, finally, are sent to the world on a mission. However, within each of these actions, we use even more important means of expression than the text, as 90% of communication between human beings is non-verbal. These means of expression are the place, its layout and decoration. Our bodies, their movements, postures, and gestures (not only of ministers, but also of the people); the *objects we use; clothing; music; other sounds and silences*; and, finally, the texts - from the Bible, BCP and our songs. The BCP says almost nothing about these means of expression - it just provides the text - since the BCP needs to *serve from the most Protestant evangelical Anglican churches to the most Anglo-Catholic ones.*

The actions. The actions of the Eucharist were originally Hebrew and Greek as part of the prevailing cultures to i) pray to God and ii) have a community meal *like Hebrews and Hellenics*. We are not Greek or Hebrew. To inculturate those actions, observing how they take place *in the local culture and the people's daily lives is essential*, especially on special occasions.

In Christian Worship, liturgy and culture are intricately entwined: the culture of a given group of people greatly influences the forms, symbols, language, time and place of their worship. Anglican Churches have already begun to put in practices in some of the local celebrations. In terms of the objects we use in worship, i.e. dulang, Indian vessels, motives in Church, taking off of shoes, etc...

Liturgical spaces. What about our liturgical spaces? Many are not very creative adaptations of old buildings against the proposals of the Liturgical Movement. Before it, the altars were at the eastern end, and everyone prayed, looking in the same direction. At least there was some kind of consistency. Now, most of us agree that it is possible to celebrate mass closer to the people, with altars, *versus "populum"* community. Altars were moved, and now the priest faces the congregation.

There is no Word of God outside of culture. There is no disincarnated gospel. The liturgy, therefore, is always the result of a process of inculturation, as the Catholic monk Marcelo Barros would say.

It is common to speak of inculturating the Revelation of God or inculturating the Eucharist, as if the revelation existed externally, and then, in a second act, it was inculturated. But this is unreal. The Revelation of our God has already been produced as a human Word made in a specific culture and conditioned to that time and place.

Christian liturgy has always resulted from a dynamic process of inculturation of Jewish traditions and the surrounding cultures. There is no such thing as a "pure", "biblical" and non-cultural culture. For example, John's baptism derives from the Essene purification rites. The Eucharist is from the sacrifice rites of the people neighbouring Israel, from the practices of Jewish and domestic meals. So, the incarnational principle Dr Juan Olive mentioned earlier in the first part of this presentation is relevant and timely: "The incarnational principle of the Gospel must be taken into account in the processes of liturgical inculturation".

Which culture to inculturate?

Now, the question that everyone is asking is which culture to inculturate? The starting point is from the scriptures and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As a criterion, every culture and everything in culture can be inculturated. Occasionally, there is a tendency to choose exotic and certain folk traditions and customs without looking at the contemporary trends, urban culture, youth cultures and even the media. As Dr. Oliver says, culture is constantly evolving, which means reflecting on the inculturation of the liturgy means reading carefully and understanding the culture itself. The main objective is not the culture but the communication of the Gospel. The goal of inculturation should be to celebrate worship with a local face which is free from structures of social, gender, academic, cultural, and economic domination.

So in this, we ought to note what Juan Oliver says, “the Church is not incarnated in cultures just to celebrate them. It is also incarnated to challenge them to be everything that God calls them to be”. This concerns many people who have come out of another faith and want to know where their new religion would lead them in understanding the community.

In Conclusion

In early 1980, the Diocese of West Malaysia began to find ways and means to inculturate the Liturgy in Malaysia. The Lambeth conference resolution was a clear sign for the Church to be more localized without losing its universality in her mission and liturgical formation.

The young people are constantly challenging the Church to be relevant in her creeds and worship, and in every generation, the Church should be alert to the cries of her people. Our prominent clergy in our diocese had guided and challenged the norms of the day so that the Church may come up with more meaningful liturgies. The Church should not stop or be afraid of things around but be able to understand in the correct theological, biblical, sociological and cultural settings. With all the resources of space, buildings, symbols and actions, let us bring greater glory to God in our creed and worship. *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi*. As we Worship, so we Believe, so we Live. The Church lives in His presence - and its reason for being and existing is to expand His presence in the world.”

A THEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT

Reverend Issac Pandianadan

Introduction

In mid-January, every year, Tamils in India and in other Asian countries celebrate Pongal, their traditional harvest festival. *Across the lengths of the Indian continent, this festival is celebrated in various ways. While some call it Makar Sankranti, and some name it Lohri.* Though these celebrations are done across India in different names, different legends are associated with it: two things are quite common which are the end of a season and the harvest festivals. Pongal also marks the solar movement from the ninth sign of the zodiac to the tenth which the Indians mark as the month of *Thai* (January–February in the Gregorian calendar). *Thai* is considered to be the luckiest month of the year for Hindus. This is the season when crops like sugarcane and turmeric are harvested. This month is also considered to be auspicious for marriages, engagements, and any temple activities. On these days, the sun begins its rise northwards; it is akin to the winter solstice of the Gregorian calendar.

1. The Significance of Pongal Celebration

The Tamil population of the world celebrates the harvest festival to give thanks to the farmers for the production of food. '*Thai Pongal*' is known as thanksgiving ceremony in which the farmers celebrate the event to thank their gods and goddesses for providing a successful paddy harvest. Pongal is basically a celebration to say thanks to god (Sun) and nature, including the cow. It marks a new beginning and the hope that life will be bountiful like the overflowing Pongal. Pongal, named after an Indian sweet glutton rice dish (*sakkarai pongga sor*); the word Pongal translates to "boil" or "overflow", signifying the giving of thanks to Mother Earth. In this festival, it is important to cook the Pongal using rice mixed with moong dal (mung beans), ghee, cashew nuts, raisins, sugar, and milk. Pongal is celebrated for four days with each day having its own significance and practices. The first day is *Bhogi*, dedicated to Lord Indra, the lord of the seasons for providing the rain for the cultivation of paddy field. The second day, *Surya Pongal*, is when the Sun God, *Surya Baghavan* is honored for providing sun and heat for cultivation of food crops. The third day is *Maattu Pongal*, a day dedicated to cattle for ploughing the land and the last day is *Kaani Pongal*, when family and friends gather and the maiden (virgin) in the family will make Pongal for a successful marriage.

- **Bhogi**

The Bhogi Festival is the first day of Pongal and it is very significant especially in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Maharashtra. It celebrates the god of clouds and rain, *Indra*, or *Indran*. On the first day, celebrants thoroughly clean their houses and discard old, unused items. They light bonfires in the evening using agricultural waste and burn the items people wish to get rid off, signifying a fresh start as the year begins again. People, especially women, may sing and dance around the bonfire. Songs typically are those intended to welcome the coming spring season.

- **Surya Pongal**

In preparation for the celebration, Indians decorate their house entrances with colourful traditional *kolam* (patterns made out of rice flour) and tie sugarcane and mango leaves at the front door. They also tie a turmeric root around a clay pot and adorn it with *vibhuti* (holy ash) and *kumkumam* (vermilion). The second day is the day when rice from the first harvest of the season is cooked. It is also called *Surya Pongal* as devotees worship the deity *Surya Baghavan*, symbolised by the Sun, on this day and blow the white conch as to welcome the auspicious day. The element of earth, air and water is a must and symbolically represented in the items used in the celebration such as clay pot, fire, conch and leaves/sugarcane. Once the overflow of milk comes out of earthen pot, each family member will shout “*PONGALO PONGAL, PONGALO PONGAL*”, in one chorus over many times and the cooked Pongal is offered to the Sun God. These particular acts signifying plenty and prosperity for the year ahead. The Pongal is then placed on a banana leaf along with other traditional delicacies such as vadai, payasam, sugarcane, coconuts, and bananas for puja (prayers) before being served to family and friends.

- **Maattu Pongal**

The cow is revered because it is essential to the farmer and is a vital source of milk and milk-based products. In worshipping the cow, the farmer and the people at large are reminded to see divinity in all life forms starting from the cow, without which their food supply will be affected. People bathe a cattle in the 3rd morning and then decorate the cattle with flowers, beads, bells, and other colourful things. The celebrants perform a specific Hindu ritual called *aarti* for the cattle, asking for protection for the cattle in the coming year. Indians in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in India also celebrates the *Jallikattu* festival on this day. Known as “*Eru Thazhuvuthal*” (bull embracing), a small pouch of coins is tied onto a bull’s horns and it is then released into a crowd of people. People then attempt to remove the pouch from

the bull's horns by holding onto its hump and capturing it before the finish line.

- **Kaani Pongal**

Kanni means “virgin females” and the day is to celebrate fertility. Unmarried women in rural areas are treated like royalty and presented with clothes and jewelry. It is also a day to create opportunities for families to search for potential brides for eligible menfolk.

- **A Christian Theological Response to celebrating Pongal**

2.1. Harvest Festival

The Tamil festival of *Thai Pongal* is a thanksgiving ceremony in which the farmers celebrate the event to thank their gods for providing a successful harvest. The Tamil population of the world celebrates the harvest festival to give thanks to the farmers for the production of food. But the act of giving thanksgiving is not limited to Hindus alone but it has wider scope especially in Tamil Nadu whereby Christians and Muslim Tamils also celebrate the same harvest but in different perspectives and rituals. The Agrarian themes in the Bible is not something new for us Christians, and giving thanks for the bounty is important aspect in our acts of worship. Christians are not known to celebrate Biblical festivals as per Jewish requirements, but Bible did mention about at least three harvest festivals: the Feast of Weeks (Lev. 23:15-22, Num. 28:26-31, Deut. 16:9-12) which celebrates the early harvest and the final harvest called the Feast of Booths, Shelters, or Tabernacles; (Lev. 23:33-44, Num. 29:12-39, Deut. 16:13-16).

The harvest, or first fruits, festival is not new to the Bible. Coming from the Hebrews' first fruits festival, it later became the feast of Pentecost, the day of outpouring of the Holy Spirit on humanity. Leviticus 23. 9-10 says, (see also Exod. 23:18 and 34:26), *“And the LORD said to Moses, Speak to the Israelites and say, When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you are to bring to the priest a sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest.”* The gift of the Spirit is the overflowing bounty of God's grace on the human family. Pongal reminds Christians of this outpouring of the Spirit in, promised by the prophet Joel (Joel 3:1) and fulfilled at Pentecost. As a result of the outpouring of the Spirit, the human heart wells up and starts overflowing with love, expressed in actions of sharing and the gift of self. Pongal celebration climaxes in a sharing and fellowship meal reminding us of the “agape,” the love meal of the early Church.

The Tamil Churches in Malaysia celebrate Thanksgiving Harvest Festival as per our lectionary in first week of October remembering the barley or wheat harvesting in Europe which have nothing in common or relevant with Asian community. The celebration is limited to church services and accepting cash envelopes. The church will be typically decorated with fruits and vegetables brought from supermarkets. Today the Thanksgiving Harvest Festival is merely known as Thanksgiving Day. The agrarian nature of the celebration is missing and replaced by personal thanksgiving for the blessing upon family and community. When I was small, my grandmother used to bring me to Tamil Methodist Church, Buntong, a semi-urban township in Ipoh for worship. One of the highlights of their celebration was their yearly Harvest Festival which involved auctions of livestock's, first fruits or vegetables, cakes and cloths. The same culture continued when I was serving in St. Barnabas Church, Klang whereby in every Harvest, the whole congregation will gather and cook their lunch after the service and sat together for a community meal. I believe that the festival of Pongal promotes an attitude of gratitude to God and a spirit of sharing, which has deep Christian values.

2.2. Inculturation versus Syncretism

Harvest Thanksgiving is a relatively modern addition to the Christian Church calendar and feast especially in the Anglican Church. Its origins are usually traced to the adaptation in 1843 of Lammas Day by the Revd. R.S. Hawker, a parish priest in Cornwall. He chose the first Sunday in October as a Christian response to coincide with the traditional but largely secular 'harvest home' celebration, an annual church celebration of the harvest certainly established itself rapidly with great popularity and was first recognized officially in the Church of England in 1862. Since then, many local traditions for the celebration have developed and the tradition of bringing to church gifts of fresh produce and other foodstuffs, as well as thanksgiving for all of God's wonderful gifts to us. We understand that the Hindu's celebration of Pongal involves worshipping Surya, cattle and the nature. All the rituals are also religious Hindu traditions. For us Christians, celebrating Pongal, a Hindu festival is polytheism and appropriating it as heresy. But for us Tamil Christians, historically we have been adapting the religious Hindu lifestyle to Christian lifestyle since the conversion of our forefathers by the missionary. Many aspects of the life been successfully adapted even though it was religious in nature prior to the conversion. For Hindus, the whole life of men is determined by the deities; as such every aspect of human being is guarded by their intervention such as language, food, dress, ritual etc.

2.3. Is Pongal for Hindus only?

In Malaysia, it is more towards the thanksgiving festival for our forefathers and ancestors who toil the land. According to a famous Lawyer K. Kulasegaran, Pongal should be a day to

remember our ancestors who came to Malaysia after a dangerous journey in which many died along the way. They left their homes in India to come to Malaysia to give their children a better life. They cleared the virgin jungles and worked under the sun tapping rubber trees and contributing to the Malaysian economy. The nation would not be where it is today if not for the sacrifices of the Indian community. When the Education Departments Declared Pongal as a religious festival, there were much discussions among the community which eventually said it is more towards cultural celebration of good harvest in the same manner as USA Thanksgiving and other nations.

In 2007, the Karunanidhi government changed the Tamil New Year from the month of Chithirai to Thai through an ordinance. In the same year at the same time, the DMK government inaugurated a government sponsored festival by name “Sangamam” conceived by a Christian NGO by name *Tamil Maiyam* founded by Father Jegath Gaspar Raj and Karunanidhi’s daughter Kanimozhi. This festival would start with Christmas and end with Pongal. The government roped in all the folk arts and folk music into the Sangamam festival notwithstanding the inclusion of classical music and dance. A new concept called “Samathuva Pongal” (Egalitarian Pongal) was introduced in which, Pongal was celebrated within the church premises, wherein people from all religions were made to participate. Though a few Muslims participated in such festivities, they never yielded to the idea of making Pongal inside the mosques. Even the Christian clergy allowed the celebration only within their premises and not inside the church.

Conclusion

The church should be relevant to the community that we are serving. As communities are changing, the ministerial focus of a church especially her mission should change as well. To be a relevant and God’s mission church, we should study the communities as we study the Bible. We need to plan our programs around the lifestyles, values, tastes and beliefs of the people but not to the extent of compromising our faith or believe. Christian mission and community cannot or not be able to function without relating to multi-cultural and multi-religious situation and reality. Throughout the history of missions, I have seen that the aim of every mission society or missionary is to preach and make discipleship; it was done with showing the western culture as the dominant aspects. Thus, every convert is required to follow the rigid western ideas of worship and etc. They failed to embrace and look the beauty of other cultural or religious practices that can coexist together with our faith. Whenever I go for evangelism or mission, when I approach any Indian community, they will say, “we are Tamilians, we don’t want western God!” They see me as a westerner rather than a Tamilian. The church has failed to see the biblical vision of the authors of the scripture and their *modus operandi*.

For years, the Church in India especially the Roman Catholics and non-CSI denominational churches uses the process of Inculturation with an aim to adopt the well-established Hindu cultural practices not to confuse, corrupt and change the minds of the gullible masses but rather use it for the local churches to remain indigenous without western influence. While being a church, the indigenous church has some unique characteristics that some churches do not have; it is a church that is very sensitive and adaptive to the particular culture of the people surrounding it. We need discernment in this and many other areas when deciding on matters of faith. Participating in a purely cultural festival is fine, but attending a religious festival gives the impression of tacit approval. Determining one's level of participation in a cultural festival with religious roots requires wisdom; for the sake of one's own conscience and the integrity of one's witness, such decisions should only be made after prayer, a study of the culture, and the solicitation of godly advice. Whatever we do, we need to do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Thanksgiving Celebration

Bible verses related to Celebration from the King James Version (KJV) by Relevance

- **Psalms 150:1 - 127:6** - Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.
- **1 Corinthians 10:31** - Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.
- **Luke 15:23-24** - And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill [it]; and let us eat, and be merry:
- **Ecclesiastes 3:4** - A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.
- **1 Corinthians 5:8** - Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened [bread] of sincerity and truth.
- **Ecclesiastes 3:13** - And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it [is] the gift of God.
- **Romans 14:5-6** - One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day [alike]. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.
- **Matthew 2:11** - And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.
- **Psalms 149:5** - Let the saints be joyful in glory: let them sing aloud upon their beds.
- **John 15:11** - These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and [that] your joy might be full.
- **Romans 14:1-23** - Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, [but] not to doubtful disputations.
- **2 Chronicles 7:1-10** - Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the house.

PONGAL CELEBRATION

Reverend Anthony Jude Arullappan

Pongal is a harvest festival celebrated by the Tamil community. It is a celebration to thank God for His providence, the Sun for its light, Mother Nature, and the various farm animals that help to contribute to a bountiful harvest. Celebrated over four days, Pongal also marks the beginning of the Tamil month called “thai,” which is considered an auspicious month. It usually falls on the 14th or 15th of January each year. Pongal is also the name of the dish made and eaten during this festival. It is a mixture of boiled sweet rice. It is derived from the Tamil word “pongu,” which means “to boil over”. The main day of Pongal is celebrated as Surya Pongal. On this day, the Sun is honoured as a source provider for the process of photosynthesis. Colourful decorative floor patterns called “kolam” are drawn at the entrance of one’s home, and each household cooks a pot of fresh rice with cow’s milk at auspicious times. As the milk boils freely over the pot, family members shout out happily “Pongalo Pongal”! After the Pongal is offered to God, they would feast on several Pongal dishes that are prepared especially for the day. Usually, a vegetarian meal with other famous Indian delights is also served. Pongal is observed as a thanksgiving celebration among the Indian community. It is more of a cultural and traditional celebration and not a religious festival. The simple understanding is farmers and all those who give thanks come from a vast ethnicity and not just one. However, what is the significance of Pongal to be celebrated by Christians? Christians can celebrate Pongal as a harvest celebration to give thanks to God the Father. Jesus Christ. In today’s context, the harvest thanksgiving celebration is celebrated in the church as though the Asian churches are planted in western countries. Pongal can be celebrated to offer and give thanks to God who is our Jehovah Jireh, the Great Provider. Deuteronomy 16: 10, says “celebrate the Harvest Festival, to honour the LORD your God, by bringing him a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing he has given you”. This proves that Christians are ought to bring free-will offering that God has given.

- To make Pongal, we may need rice.
- a. Rice is a source of food and in Asian culture, it is highly looked upon. In the bible, there are many types of grains such as wheat and barley mentioned. The land of Israel along with these significant grain crops was especially promised to the Israelites as a covenant promise of God (Genesis 12 & Deuteronomy 8).
1. Furthermore, along with rice, fresh milk is used as well to make Pongal. Milk is very highly mentioned in both Old Testament and New Testament. Milk is figuratively used as a sign of abundance as it was mentioned in Joel 3: 18, “And it shall come to pass in that day,

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that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth of the house of the LORD, and shall water the valley of Shittim". Besides, in Exodus 3:8, God promises to take the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to a "good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey". This helps to understand that using milk to make Pongal offer thanksgiving serves as a reminder of the promise that God has made to the Israelites to bring to a land flowing with milk and honey which we can interpret as we give thanks to God who has given us Jesus, the Way to heaven, our promised land flowing with milk and honey.

The ingredients used to make Pongal do not seem to be offensive for Christians because 1 Chronicles 24: 19 says, "Everything comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your hand." This shows that the blessings of fruit of the land such as rice and milk are from God for the nourishment of the human body, thus we use them and give thanks to God who blessed us with such blessings. Besides, Christians are not offering thanks to the Sun but to the Maker of all the things in heaven and on earth, the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) through whom and for whom all things were created (Colossians 1: 16-17).

CASE STUDY 1

- CELEBRATING PONGAL WITH URBAN B40, PREDOMINANTLY HINDU COMMUNITY

Mrs. Jasmine Adaickalam, St. James Church, Kuala Lumpur

Preamble

Celebration of Pongal in St James Church is not all about the members getting together, fully cognizance of their beautiful culture and its beautiful traditions enthusiastically wanting to celebrate this cultural festival called 'Pongal'. In fact, we had to clear, clarify, and correct many cultural misconceptions in the minds of Christians. There were many questions and much suspicion if Pongal was a Hindu festival and not purely a Tamil cultural festival.

This primary hurdle had to be overcome, before we could celebrate Pongal within the compound of St James. However, after seeing and understanding the meaningful celebration of Pongal, some of the congregation members took part in this celebration. It is a progress, in process.

However, it is taking an opportunity to introduce the divine truth to them following the example of St Paul in Acts of the Apostles 17 where He introduces Jesus and his faith to people of Athens, who were idol worshippers. He made use of the context and surrounding to introduce Christ. We read this in Acts 17:22-29. With this understanding of contextualizing the gospel, we have celebrated Pongal more than four times.



The Context

St James Social Concerns Ministry team has been working with the surrounding B40 community, mostly women led households for more than 10 years. These are mostly dwellers from the surrounding PPR (Program Perumahan Rakyat) flats. Most of them live in poverty, and some households in abject poverty as a fragmented community. Low or no education, low skills and hence without much job opportunities. To compound matters further, they suffer from lack of social support and social control system. There were fights and quarrels, and other such social ills. There was so much of animosity that people couldn't trust one another and could not see eye to eye. To compound this further even the minority Malaysian Indian community could not accept one another. There were other such structural issues that divided the community further.

The plight of the Malaysian Indian community dwelling in these flats reminded us of Proverbs 29:18, which says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Hence, the St James Social Concerns team started working with this community with the blessings of St James PCC.



Culturally Bonded, Faith Wise Diverse

What started off as a little seedling has now grown to a full-fledged social program. But then the cultural bonding was missing. We speak the same language, eat the same kind of food, but we are worshipping different gods. Then are we of a different ethnic group? That was the question in the minds of the community. Also, there was an unexpressed worry, if the Christians are solely interested in converting them from Hinduism. To break this barrier and to create a cultural identity, and bring them out of worshipping sun, which is a creation of our great almighty God and to gently introduce them to the thought sun is a creation and not the Creator, celebrating Pongal came to our aid.

This was very much like the experience of St Paul at Athens, Acts 17:16-23. Our community too is worshipping "an unknown God," which needs to be corrected. This is where we

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thought celebrating Pongal with the community becomes an entry point to introduce God Almighty, who alone IS the Creator of all, none else. By celebrating Pongal alongside with the community, we have had tremendous opportunities to bring meaning into their celebration.

Bhogi – Is This Celebration Too Meaningful?

Traditionally the day before Pongal, Bhogi is celebrated. It is in preparation for Pongal, Bhogi is celebrated. Though we did not celebrate Bhogi, when the community women gathered to prepare for Pongal, and to decorate the place we had chosen to casually interact with them on the celebration of Bhogi. They were not aware of the meaning of celebrating Bhogi. They were just continuing the traditions. Hence, we had the opportunity to explain to them the scientific reasons behind celebrating Bhogi. Also, we could gently explain to them, how these celebrations have become ceremonial practices rather than anything meaningful. Slowly, we introduced the spiritual meaning of discarding the old man and habits and meaningless practices to become a new creation. This was well accepted by the community.

Celebrating Pongal, the St James' way

Traditionally Pongal is celebrated on the first day of the Tamil month 'Thai', which is the 10th month in the Tamil Calendar, which usually falls on 14th or 15th of January. However, we, at St James chose to celebrate with the church and wider surrounding community, one or two Sundays after the actual Pongal day. This is to give the community the opportunity to celebrate the family and community-oriented Pongal with their family members and close relatives. We have celebrated Pongal around four times.

Initially, it was just a celebration of cooking and serving Sarkkarai (sweet) Pongal and a full set of vegetarian meal, as cooked in the cultural tradition of Tamil Nadu. Initially, except for the St James' Social Concerns Team members, Tabitha Community families and the resident priest participated at this celebration, but not many church members. Slowly this has improved and changed, and last year 2022, around 50 members of St James attended the celebration and the Pongal Service.



Pongal, Way of Communion and Communication

Pongal is a common cultural festival for all Tamils, irrespective of their religious considerations. Moreover, it is celebrated as a total Tamil community. We used this as an opportunity to ward off the religious, educational, economical, and other such societal differences to create an affinity with the community around. This worked very well, as the community started seeing us as one of them and not as aliens or Westerners. This cleared them of their doubts and reservations about the Tamil Christian community and created a wonderful bonding. At the same time St James congregation members who are mostly from the Tamil Christian origin and whose roots are from Tamil Nadu started understanding and appreciating the God given gift of culture to reach out to Non-Christian Tamil community. This created a deeper communion within the communities of the same culture, who differed in their religious belief system. If culture can provide us an avenue to reach out to the non-Christian Tamil community, why not use that as a vehicle to reach out to them?

In Acts 17: 16-25 we read that Apostle Paul was greatly distressed seeing Athens was full of idols. However, he didn't leave the place with sanctimonious anger. He saw the idols, and found an idol with the caption, "To the unknown God." With great wisdom, he used it to introduce Jesus to the crowd. We need to follow his example and pluck opportunities and not to aggravate the Hindu community, but to introduce God Almighty, the Creator!

Also in the same chapter, Acts 17:26-28, he talks about the way God had created each human being in the geographical location and indirectly the culture they belong to. However, wherever we are put, we need to seek Him whole heartedly but not totally abandon the culture we are created in. As one of the Lausanne Conference concurred rightly, Gospel can judge culture, but culture cannot judge the Gospel. We need to understand this truth and conduct our cultural practices in God honoring manner. This is the fundamental principle in which we operate and celebrate Pongal. This is the basis why we started celebrating Pongal with the community.

However, there were some communications and understanding barriers between the two communities as they differed totally and fundamentally in their belief system and faith practices. To address this effectively but with utmost sensitivity, we called them to come on the previous day to Pongal to decorate the place with cultural items such as thoranams, kolams, sugar canes and banana trees. While doing this, we started the small conversation on Bhogi Pandikai. It started an excitement among them, though they were celebrating Bhogi without any meaning.

This provided us the opportunity to explain why the ancient Tamil community celebrated Bhogi, the scientific reasons behind and we ended with a casual probing question, why should we continue this practice of celebrating Bhogi, which is irrelevant and that there

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is no real reason to celebrate Bhogi. This made them think and to apply the principles of celebrating Bhogi to the contemporary human life and interactions that are marred by human flaws. They took some pledges to address the human characteristics that have been affecting their family and communal life adversely.

In the course of this serious conversation, they also started probing the meaning of celebrating Pongal and why Pongal is celebrated in this manner. This provided us with the golden opportunity to communicate our belief that Sun is not a Creator but God Almighty is alone the Creator and all honor and glory is due to Him and no one else. Now when we celebrate Pongal, they do not raise their hands to the sun to worship. It is a joy to know that we have communicated our Christian belief and faith through these little opportunities we get. This reminds me of the verse, 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." This is where celebrating Pongal, the cultural festival with the community has provided us with tremendous opportunity to communicate our Christian values, beliefs and faith.

Celebrating Pongal – Our Model

The last Pongal celebration with the community was done on 30 January 2022, Sunday. Though the real Pongal celebration falls either on 14th/15th January, we have it a point not to celebrate Pongal on that exact Pongal Day. The reason being, as a church we want to encourage them to celebrate Pongal on that day as a family, household or as local community to enhance and build their family and community bonding. We do not want to deprive them of their family and community togetherness. Also, we celebrate Pongal on a Sunday evening, so that there isn't any need for them to take leave from work and the children from schools. The critical point is, we wanted to show them our way of celebrating Pongal by worshipping the Creator and not the creation.

The preparation is done on the preceding Saturday evening. The community women make the cultural decorations such as Coconut tree palm thoranam to decorate the area in which Pongal was to be celebrated next day. Also, they helped to prepare lentils, chickpeas and



other such items for the Pongal meal. Sarkkarai Pongal, Sundal, Lentil Vadai (Masal Vadai), Masala Tea and Bananas were the items on the menu.

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While they helped us to prepare, there was a casual conversation in which we reiterated the truth, the God Almighty is the Creator, and we will be gratefully thanking Him for creations such as sun, moon, the clouds, rain, and the produce. This made a lot of sense to them! Since then, they do not raise their hands to the sun while the milk boils over. All glory be to our Lord God Almighty alone!



We conversationally broached the subject of celebrating Bhogi. They were excited to share with us the way they discarded the old pots, pans, and clothes to set fire in order to celebrate Bhogi! That provided us with the opportunity to explain the scientific reason as to why and how our ancestors celebrated Bhogi. This brought in great understanding and conviction in them.

Then they were slowly taught why new rice was used to make Pongal rice, why cow's milk, ghee, cane or palm sugar and cashew nuts are used to make sweet Pongal, and why only vegetables and tubers were cooked on that day. We also had the

golden opportunity to explain to them the real meaning of the word, 'Pongal,' which means in pure Tamil, 'overflowing', which is symbolically interpreted as overflowing with divine blessings and joy untold.

They were also briefed as to why and how the Kolam designs were drawn in the front yard of every Tamil house, which is to welcome everyone and what kolam designs are acceptable and what are not and why they are not acceptable. Also, we briefed them as to why and how cow dung was used to be sprinkled in the front yard of every traditional household. Since then, our Tabitha community women have learnt to ask questions before doing anything ritually, and doing things meaningfully, with full understanding and conviction. This way we could strip them off the old wives' tales.

On 30 January 2022, the day of St James' Pongal Celebration, the community links turned in full force in joy and excitement. It was a meaningful community Pongal gathering. After the preparation and cooking of the sweet pongal we adjourned to our main sanctuary, where we had a Thanksgiving service worshipping the



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Creator. A little more than 100 community women participated at the service. One of them read the Bible Passage Psalm 23 in English and another read in Tamil. We were excited, as it was fulfilment of the verse, Psalm 8:2, "Through the praise of children and infants, you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger." The meaningful lyrics and songs were sung by those in full gusto! It was a sheer joy to behold.



After the blessings and the end of the service, all adjourned to take part in the community Pongal meal downstairs at the covered parking area, which had been decorated culturally with thoranam, banana trees, sugar canes and kolams. In a typical Tamil cultural style, the meal was served in a banana leaf. The Social Concerns team members and the community links served the meal adorned in their Tamil cultural attire. It was in every sense a community meal as the community links had not only contributed through their physical labour, but also had brought in different ingredients to make sarkkarai pongal and the rest. Praise God that everything ended joyfully with great satisfaction! Some photos are attached herewith for your viewing pleasure! Also, they stand as a testimony to the whole celebration, as pictures can tell more in-depth and meaningful stories!



CASE STUDY 2:

PONGAL IN THE CHURCH OF GOOD SHEPHERD, PENANG

Ms. Kathireen Kalaivani Rajamanickam

Being the Tamil church tracing its history thru catechist Mr. Royappan Balavendrum from Tamil Nadu to work among the Indians in Penang in 1871 in George's Church at Farquhar Street, thru a meeting an idea mooted to incorporate Indian traditional services in this church by the Suffogen Bishop Charles Samuel in 2017.

As Tamil New Year was celebrated with full ethnic wear in April 2018. The brainchild of Pongal was by Rev. Anthony Jude as the priest in charge in 2019. The Tamil festival of Pongal is a thanksgiving ceremony in which the farmers celebrate the event to thank God for providing a successful harvest. The Tamil population of the world celebrates the harvest festival to give thanks to the farmers for the production of food. In 2020, the first Pongal was materialised in the church with the nod by the Committee and church members. A brief study and referral were done to the Church by Rev. Anthony. As a priest in charge, he explains in detail the cultural and religion difference of celebrating Pongal. A Harvest Thanksgiving liturgy was used. The theme "... the first fruits of your harvest," (Lev 23: 10) was emphasised.

As Covid-19 hit the earth, we paused all celebration in 2021 and resumed in 2022 stronger and more tradition added. Kolam (is a floor drawing made from coloured flour, and is used for ornamental or ceremonial design during traditional Indian festivities), sugarcane, Uriyadi Game and authentic Tamilian foods were part of the celebration in 2022. Everyone participated in decorating the church, preparing the Ponggal and food via pot bless. I noticed the bloomers, are very content as the can relate to this Ponggal Festival. United through culture

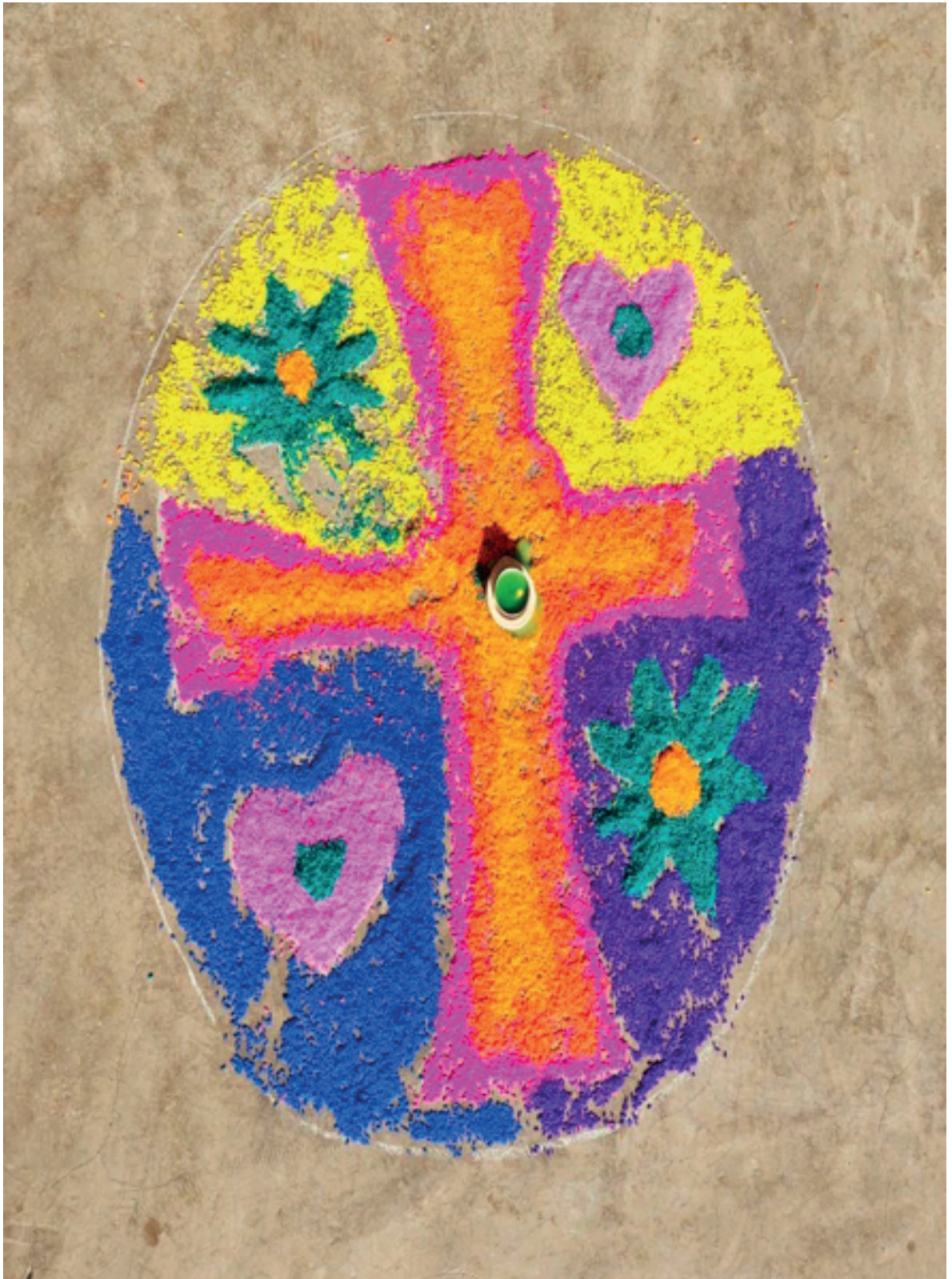


and religion. As they are the second generation in Malaysia, they recalled the memories of their parents. Being the urban generation, this was something new and to look forward. I felt more related to Pongal as Harvest Thanksgiving rather than the Thanksgiving in October.



CASE STUDY 2:
PONGAL IN THE CHURCH OF GOOD SHEPHERD, PENANG



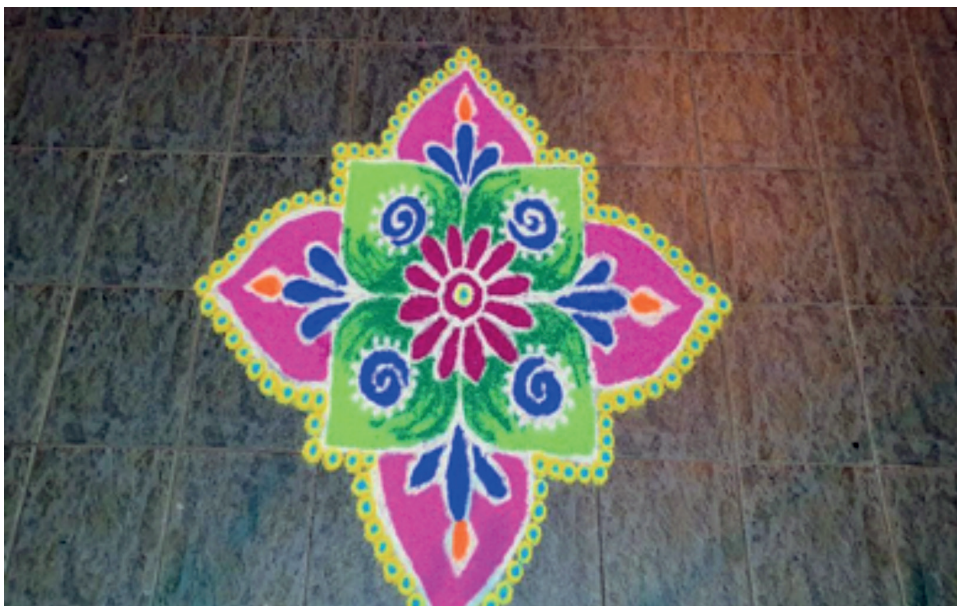


CASE STUDY 3:
ST. THOMAS CHURCH, BANTING
Reverend Eisu Das

Parish of St Thomas, Banting is a Tamil congregation with Tamil Service. The parishioners are traditional Christians and Charismatic believers. As for me and as for church, that was the first time we celebrated Pongal in the setting of Tamil Cultural Day. Here we are going to see the preparation for the celebration of Pongal in a Tamil Church and things we do and don't before, during and after the celebration. It took 2 years to explain Pongal and its meanings to the congregation, church council and various levels of leadership of the church. The majority understood and agreed to celebrated. But a few were dissatisfied with the decision to celebrate and they held their peace on that day.

Before the Celebration

Few days before the event, we prepared the necessary elements for the Pongal. We bought the new pot (Puthu Paanai) from the Indian Shop. One day before the celebration, we set the area to do the Ponggal and decorated the place with thoranam and Kolam. I encouraged the members to wear traditional attire for the celebration.





CASE STUDY 3:
ST. THOMAS CHURCH, BANTING



During the Celebration of Pongal

We celebrated Pongal during Sunday Service. We sang Tamil Lyrics (Keerthanai) related to Pongal/harvest and I preached on the Creator God who preserve the creation and our part in the creation as the good steward. During the announcement, 2 people recited poems on Tamil Culture and Pongal. After the service, we boiled the rice and celebrated Pongal with the fellow Parishioners. Many came and helped, some took photos for the memories and shared in their social medias. I sensed the fellowship and joy around the meal and during the celebration. Even, the few who were dissatisfied with Pongal, joined our meal fellowship and ate two servings of Pongal.



We were indeed joyful and had a good fellowship in the celebration of Pongal. We very much felt that we were still Tamil people and proud of our Tamil Culture. During our preparation and during our celebration, we were never included any Hindu religious elements and its practices. The congregation noticed that and appreciated it.

LITURGY FOR PONGAL

Reverend Eisu Das

¶ Preparation

Rubric

Careful devotional preparation before the service is recommended for every communicant/parishioner.

- *Christian themed Kolam may be placed at the entrance of the church.*
- *Thoranam (made by coconut tree shoots) may be hung at the entrance of the church*
- *People may be wearing Traditional Indian dress – Dhoti, Saree and relevant dress.*

¶ Ministries

Holy Communion is celebrated by the whole people of God gathered for worship.

A Form of Preparation

Rubric

This form may be used in Churches. If there are other forms available, it will be good to first verify the content.

Structure of the service

The people and the priest

- ¶ greet each other in the Lord's name
- ¶ keep silence and pray a Collect
- ¶ proclaim and respond to the word of God
- ¶ pray for the Church and the world
- ¶ confess their sins and are assured of God's forgiveness exchange the Peace
- ¶ prepare the table
- ¶ pray the Eucharistic Prayer
- ¶ break the bread
- ¶ receive communion
- ¶ depart with God's blessing

The Order for the Pongal Service in the setting of Holy Communion.

Processional Hymn

Introductory Sentence

May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you. The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us. May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear him. (Psalm 67. 5-7)

The Greeting

The president greets the people

The Lord be with you
All and also with you.

Prayer of Preparation

All Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Gloria in Excelsis

All Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

The Collect

Heavenly Father, we rejoice in this harvest festival of overflowing, and we give thanks to your Majesty for the fruits of the earth which you have bestowed upon us. May our hearts too produce an abundant harvest; that we be numbered among your elect in the final gathering of your Kingdom. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

¶ The Liturgy of the Word

Readings

Rubric

These readings may replace the readings for the celebration so that the service may be more meaningful.

Old Testament: Joel 2: 21-22, 24, 26-27 or Deuteronomy 8: 7-18

Psalms: Psalm 67: 1-2, 4, 6-7 or Psalm 126: 2b-3, 4-5, 6

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 3: 6-10 or 2 Corinthians 9: 6-10

This is the word of the Lord.

All Thanks be to God.

Silence is kept.

The psalm or canticle follows the first reading; other hymns and songs may be used between the readings.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 6: 25-26, 31-33 or Luke 12: 15-21

An acclamation may herald the Gospel reading.

When the Gospel is announced the reader says

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to N.

All Glory to you, O Lord.

At the end

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

All Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon

Silence is kept.

The Nicene Creed

**All We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.**

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.**

**For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.**

**For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.**

**On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven**

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

**He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.**

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

**We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.**

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Rubrics

Use appropriate prayers for harvest and thanksgiving. These may be include in your regular prayers.

These responses may be used.

Lord, in your mercy

All hear our prayer.

And at the end

Merciful Father,

All accept these prayers

for the sake of your Son,

our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.

¶ The Liturgy of the Sacrament

Confession

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, to be our advocate in heaven, and to bring us to eternal life. Let us therefore confess our sins, In penitence and faith, firmly resolved to keep God's commandments and to live in love and peace with all men.

All:

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father

We have sinned against you

and against our fellow men,

In thought and word and deed,

in the evil we have done and the good we have not done,

Through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault

We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins,

For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,

who died for us,

forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may serve you in newness of life.

To the glory of your Name. Amen.

Absolution

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Peace

The president may introduce the Peace with a suitable sentence and then says

The peace of the Lord be always with you

All and also with you.

These words may be added

Let us offer one another a sign of peace.

All may exchange a sign of peace.

Preparation of the Table

Taking of the Bread and Wine

A hymn may be sung.

The gifts of the people may be gathered and presented.

The table is prepared and bread and wine are placed upon it.

One or more of the prayers at the preparation of the table may be said.

The president takes the bread and wine.

Offertory Prayer

Lord of the Harvest, receive as an acceptable offering, these fruits of our beloved land together with the thanks we render you. Bless our mother earth, all farmers and everyone involved in producing and providing our daily food. May we love you more and serve you as you rightly deserve. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen

The Eucharistic Prayer

The president says

The Lord be with you

All and also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

All We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All It is right to give thanks and praise.

It is indeed right,
it is our duty and our joy,
at all times and in all places
to give you thanks and praise,
holy Father, heavenly King,
almighty and eternal God,
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

For he is your living Word;
through him you have created all things from the beginning,
and formed us in your own image.

Through him you have freed us from the slavery of sin,
giving him to be born of a woman and to die upon the cross;
you raised him from the dead
and exalted him to your right hand on high.

Through him you have sent upon us
your holy and life-giving Spirit,
and made us a people for your own possession.

Therefore with angels and archangels,
and with all the company of heaven,
we proclaim your great and glorious name,
for ever praising you and saying:

LITURGY FOR PONGAL

**All Holy, holy, holy Lord,
 God of power and might,
 heaven and earth are full of your glory.
 Hosanna in the highest.
 [Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
 Hosanna in the highest.]**

Accept our praises, heavenly Father,
through your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ,
and as we follow his example and obey his command,
grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit
these gifts of bread and wine
may be to us his body and his blood;

who, in the same night that he was betrayed,
took bread and gave you thanks;
he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying:
Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you;
do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way, after supper
he took the cup and gave you thanks;
he gave it to them, saying:
Drink this, all of you;
this is my blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it,
in remembrance of me.

Therefore, heavenly Father,
we remember his offering of himself
made once for all upon the cross;
we proclaim his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension;
we look for the coming of your kingdom,
and with this bread and this cup
we make the memorial of Christ your Son our Lord.

**All Christ has died:
 Christ is risen:
 Christ will come again.**

Accept through him, our great high priest,
this our sacrifice of thanks and praise,
and as we eat and drink these holy gifts
in the presence of your divine majesty,
renew us by your Spirit,
inspire us with your love
and unite us in the body of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through him, and with him, and in him,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
with all who stand before you in earth and heaven,
we worship you, Father almighty,
in songs of everlasting praise:

**All Blessing and honour and glory and power
 be yours for ever and ever.**

Amen.

Silence is kept.

The Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

**All Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

The president breaks the consecrated bread.

We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

**All Though we are many, we are one body,
because we all share in one bread.**

The Agnus Dei may be used as the bread is broken

**All Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us.
Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us.
Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
grant us peace.**

Giving of Communion

The president says one of these invitations to communion

Draw near with faith.
Receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ
which he gave for you,
and his blood which he shed for you.
Eat and drink
in remembrance that he died for you,
and feed on him in your hearts
by faith with thanksgiving.

Humble Access

All We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ
and to drink his blood,
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,
and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.
Amen.

Prayer after Communion

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12. 24.

Silence is kept.

The Post Communion prayer.

Almighty God, refreshed by the fruits of your redemption, we pray to You, O Lord of abundant Harvest that those whom you have appointed as stewards of your creation may render an account of a life full of grace, love and truth. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

¶ The Dismissal

Blessing

The peace of God,
which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

All Amen.

A minister says

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All In the name of Christ. Amen.

A hymn may be sung.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Reverend Israel Selvam

1. How much of the festival Pongal can Christians celebrate? How do we draw clear lines as to which is cultural against that which is religious?

- Most committed Christians will be able to clearly distinguish that which is religious from that which is cultural. The papers presented will give Christians a good grasp and help make informed decisions, glorifying Christ.
- The clear teaching of Scriptures, a conscience guidance by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the sound counsel and advice of matured disciples of Christ can safeguard us from the thin lines that sometimes hang in this complex issue.

2. How should Christians understand the prayers made to the sun god and offerings to the sacred cow? How can Christians pray during Pongal?

- Christians pray to the God who made the sun and the cow. The sun and the cow are created by God, for His glory and for our wellbeing. They are created entities and beings. God is superior and sovereign and so we worship and pray to Him alone.
- Christians can learn from the passionate ways prayers are offered during Pongal but are to refrain from praying to created entities and beings.

3. In what ways can Pongal be a bridge-building missional evangelistic tool for Christians without compromising the Gospel of Christ?

- The case studies presented in the study paper gives testimony to the many possibilities Christians and the church can embark in, in a measured way, depending on the church's overall sensitivity and maturity of faith of the members.
- Churches can consider small steps of faith and action using the elements of food, clothing, songs, games, and the likes in order to reach the non-Christians who celebrate Pongal.

4. What are the risk factors involved in assimilating Pongal as a festival Tamil Christians can observe and celebrate? How would it affect the unity of the church given the sensitivities and complexities?

- These are real challenges on the ground in church leadership and faith and order. No one answer may fit all. To advance the gospel and in trying to stretch culture in alignment with the gospel of Christ, the risks will inevitably be there. Faith and not fear should drive us forward. We learn along the way and better hear the gospel call and voice of our Saviour for the nations.
- With a broad spectrum of believers who are for, against or neutral or even ignorant, the sensitivities and complexities may continue to evolve and linger around. What is important is to guard the unity of the spirit by the bond of peace. We should not in the end be fighting against each other for the sake of Pongal. Rather we should learn to give and take and be gracious and accommodating to each other without compromising on the core tenets of the Gospel of Christ.

5. If Pongal can be organised and celebrated by Christians, can Christians then join in the Pongal festivities organized by the other faiths and participate in them? What Theological problems will we foresee?

- The tensions we face will continue. Through this study paper, we hope to clearly define some parameters that would help Christians make informed decisions when their non-Christian friends invite them over for festivities they celebrate.
- Christians can now know their faith stronger and better as they deal with festivities such as Pongal. What is underlying and core is a strong faith embedded with sound Theological foundations. The Holy Spirit will always bring to light the Truth we know and learnt and give wisdom to those who seek Him diligently.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

APPENDIX 1

PONGAL CELEBRATION AT SEMINARY THEOLOGY MALAYSIA (STM)

Emmanuel Nickson George

Cultural Night: *Pongal* Celebration at STM

The STM community is made up of a varied group of people with a wealth of culture and heritage. The Chinese New Year celebration and the *Gawai* festival held by the Chinese and Bornean Community will be the most well-known cultural events over time. Over the years, STM has not observed any of the associated Indian festivals due to the minority community of Indians.

By the grace of God, many Indian students from various denominations made up the bulk of the student community at STM in the year 2022. As an Indian community, we wanted to celebrate our culture and heritage alongside that of other races and cultures. Thus, for the first time in the history of the STM Community, we celebrated the *Pongal* festival.

Everyone in the STM community took part in this activity, including the employees and professors. The event was officiated by senior lectures by lighting up “*Kuthuvillaku*” (oil lamp). Everyone was joyfully gathering together to witness the “boil Over” (*Pongal*), which is a mixture of boiling sweet rice used as the major ingredient featured in the harvest festival in the Indian culture, and it was very lovely to watch because everyone was dressed in traditional Indian clothes. It was an amazing sight to see. The Indian community also did an outstanding job of decorating the canteen area with sugar canes and *Kollam*, a floor pattern produced with colored rice flour. The Indian community has made every effort to explain the Indian harvest festival tradition to the larger STM community.

Even though *Pongal* is a harvest festival to be cherished, the STM’s acceptance of Hindu rituals is the biggest issue we as the Indian minority face. Today, a lot of people erroneously assert that *Pongal* is a Hindu ritualistic celebration. With the aid of our lecture Rev. Dr. Joseph Komar, a mission studies expert, explained the significance and origin of the festival to the community. This was done theologically. Similar celebrations are noted in the Bible during the harvest, assembling, Thanksgiving, and festival. In a good year, the festive season was a time for celebration (Isaiah 9:3; Psalm 126:5). It would have been a successful agricultural

PONGAL STUDY PAPER

year if one gathering activity did not stop before another one began (Amos 9:13). The highlight of the Pongal celebration is a sharing and fellowship meal that is comparable to the “agape,” or “love feast,” of the early Church if we see the festival through a New Testament lens.

Thus, *Pongal* is a celebration of thanksgiving. The Tamil culture places a lot of emphasis on Thanksgiving. Instead, then celebrating Thanksgiving the way people do in the west, churches today should adopt the Asian tradition of celebrating harvest. The STM community’s initiative today demonstrates the genuine significance of Indian customs and culture to other races who mistakenly believe that celebrations like these are associated with Hinduism.



APPENDIX







CONCLUSION

Bishop Charles K. Samuel

I hope this study has clarified the celebration of Pongal among Indian Christians in our region. It has shed light on the challenges faced by Indian Christians in differentiating between religious and cultural practices and has suggested a way forward for reclaiming cultural heritage as Indian Christians.

Contextualising the Gospel is not without its challenges, but as stewards of the Gospel, we are called to make it relevant and draw people to acknowledge that all good things come from God. We should present the findings of this study to our church councils and worship leaders to facilitate an interactive response that can help us make a meaningful addition to our liturgy.

After exploring different aspects of Pongal, we have developed a liturgy that can incorporate it into worship. We propose adding an annual Pongal festival to our liturgical response to honour God and show gratitude to Mother Earth.

We recommend that all churches and the Province of South East Asia adopt this work as a catalyst for a more vibrant, meaningful, and contemporary way of expressing our love and thanksgiving for all good things that come from God and that we receive from Mother Earth.