

## PROPHETIC LEADERSHIP OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA: ECHOES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

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**Abstract:** This article examines the prophetic dimensions of Kuriakose Elias Chavara's leadership in 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, drawing parallels between his mission and the role of Old Testament prophets. It highlights how Chavara exemplified prophetic leadership in five key domains: pastoral mission, religious life, social justice, women empowerment, and family life. Similar to the Old Testament prophets who addressed societal injustices and called for a spiritual renewal, Chavara confronted the social and religious issues of his era through pioneering initiatives, which included the establishment of indigenous religious congregations, the founding of educational institutions for the marginalized communities, the promotion of women's rights through the founding of the first religious congregation for women in India, and the guidance of Christian families through his seminal work, *Testament of a Loving Father*. The study demonstrates that Chavara's prophetic vision transcended mere social reform, aiming for a holistic transformation of society through spiritual renewal, educational progress, and the promotion of social justice. By revisiting Chavara's prophetic

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actions and insights, the study invites the readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of his mission in promoting justice, uplifting the marginalized, and nurturing strong, value-based communities. Ultimately, the article positions Chavara not only as a historical figure but also as a timeless guide whose prophetic legacy continues to inspire and challenge the modern society to pursue the comprehensive transformation grounded in faith and justice.

**Keywords:** Old Testament Prophets, Prophetic Leadership, Spiritual Renewal, Educational Advancement, Marginalized Communities, Holistic Transformation, Contemporary Relevance, Transformative Leadership

## 1. Introduction

The notion of prophecy holds a distinct and profound place within the biblical tradition and the wider currents of Christian spirituality. Prophets, particularly in the Old Testament, were uniquely chosen by God to convey the messages imbued with heavenly wisdom to the people of Israel. As noted in the glossary of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a prophet is understood to be one dispatched by God to prepare the people of the Old Covenant with a hopeful anticipation of salvation. This definition emphasizes the unparalleled significance of prophets in moulding the spiritual and ethical core of Israelite society.

A key hallmark of the Old Testament prophets was their deep historical consciousness.<sup>1</sup> To live with such an awareness is to possess a profound sensitivity to the socio-political and moral fabric of one's time, recognizing the pressing concerns, dilemmas, and yearnings of the people, and offering a divinely inspired response to those realities. In times when material prosperity birthed moral decay, inequity, and social imbalance, where a few revelled in excessive luxuries while the masses weakened in hardship, the prophets raised their voices with urgency. Their proclamations were designed to awaken the society from its ethical lethargy, urging a return to moral integrity and spiritual wholeness.

Though the epoch of biblical prophecy has ceased, the messages pronounced by the prophets have endured throughout time. The prophetic voice, which boldly decries oppression, injustice, and spiritual corrosion, has found renewed resonance in various individuals

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<sup>1</sup> The prophet's role as both critics and witnesses of their time; see, Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper & Row, 1962).

throughout history. Christian spirituality, in particular, has been marked by figures who embodied a prophetic ethos. Much like the Old Testament prophets, these figures discerned the divine call and the pressing need for reform within their own historical contexts.

A striking example of such a figure is Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Just as the ancient prophets fearlessly confronted the social and political injustices of their era, Chavara keenly perceived the challenges and inequities that plagued the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala society. Witnessing social disparities, religious stagnation, and moral degeneration, Chavara responded with a wake-up call for renewal and reform. His initiatives to advance education, elevate the underprivileged, and revitalize the Church's spiritual life mirror his prophetic concern for justice, righteousness, and the collective well-being of the community.

While direct comparisons between Chavara and the Old Testament prophets must be approached with caution, given the vast differences in time, geography, and culture, the thematic similarities are undeniable. This article seeks to explore Chavara's life and contributions through the lens of the prophetic tradition, highlighting the traits he shared with biblical prophets. By examining these parallels, we deepen our appreciation of Chavara's role as a prophetic figure and the lasting significance of his message. His life serves as a reminder that the prophetic tradition is not confined to a specific time or place but is a timeless call to justice, compassion, and spiritual transformation. Before delving into Chavara's prophetic legacy, we must first turn our attention to the role of prophecy in the historical narrative of Israel.

## 2. The Impact of Prophetic Voices in Israel's Historical Evolution

The historical evolution of Israel cannot be fully comprehended without acknowledging the significant role of prophetic voices. The designation 'prophet' finds its etymological roots in the Greek term *prophetēs*, linked to the Hebrew *navi* and the Akkadian *naba*, which signify 'to summon,' 'to name,' or 'to declare.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, at its core, the concept of a prophet encapsulates one divinely summoned to serve.<sup>3</sup> Prophets are those called by God for a mission to articulate his will and execute his commands, operating as critical mediators between the divine and the

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<sup>2</sup> J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 1; J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1966), 5.

<sup>3</sup> John L. McKenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 85.

people - a framework that is indispensable for understanding the integral position of prophets in Israelite history. The prophetic proclamations are contextual, challenging, critical and creative.<sup>4</sup>

The evolution of the Israelites from nomadic tribes to settled communities fostered the formation of a tribal and covenantal identity centred on a collective relationship with Yahweh. This identity emphasized moral and ethical obligations within the community. As these tribes transitioned into stable societies, they faced external threats, internal moral decay, and extensive social injustices. During these moments of turbulence, prophets emerged as indispensable voices of guidance and correction. Moses, for instance, defied Pharaoh's oppressive regime and led the Israelites to freedom, while Elijah boldly confronted the 450 prophets of Baal, demonstrating the unwavering commitment of prophets to their divine mission.

Prophets, by their very nature, became advocates for the marginalized, voice of God, relentlessly defending the vulnerable - orphans, widows, foreigners, and the deprived. In essence, they had a sense of the ground level perception of their people. As Pope Francis recognizes they were shepherds also knew the smell of the sheep.<sup>5</sup> Their message consistently urged the society to exercise compassion and equity particularly toward those on the fringes. In the prophetic texts like Isaiah and Jeremiah, a resounding call for societal reform is apparent, prioritizing the equitable treatment of those who lacked the means to advocate for themselves. Prophets such as Amos and Micah directly addressed the deep-rooted corruption and injustice rampant among the ruling elite. These elites mistakenly equated their material success with divine favour, turning a blind eye to the suffering of the impoverished. Their wealth, built upon systemic manipulation and corruption within the judiciary, greatly disadvantaged the underprivileged, who were unable to engage in bribery and thus remained vulnerable.<sup>6</sup> Prophets persistently reminded the people that true worship of Yahweh could not coexist with exploitation and moral

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Vallianippuram, *Jeremiah: A Prophet of the Modern World* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2012), 10.

<sup>5</sup> See, P. A. Chacko, "Prelates, Be Prophets: Role of Shepherds in India Today," *Indian Currents* 35.24 (2023): 12.

<sup>6</sup> See, Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, "Calls to Repentance in the Minor Prophets," *Journal of Sacred Scriptures* 18.1 (2024): 14.

decay.<sup>7</sup> A just society, they insisted, was fundamental to sustaining a meaningful relationship with God. Their bold proclamations served as a wake-up call to the people and their leaders, urging them to realign their actions with divine expectations.

A defining trait of every prophet was their unwavering allegiance to God's commands, often in the face of severe adversity.<sup>8</sup> Old Testament prophets frequently found themselves in direct opposition to influential figures such as kings, priests, and other power brokers. Their remarkable bravery in confronting authority, even at great personal risk, remains one of their most admirable qualities. For instance, the prophet Jeremiah, who, despite being imprisoned and shunned for his prophecies (Jeremiah 37-38), continued to deliver God's message with undeterred conviction.

Prophets not only criticized but also provided guidance to leaders, acting as mentors regarding Yahweh's divine will.<sup>9</sup> Their messages were often twofold: warnings of judgment alongside promises of God's mercy for those who sincerely returned to Him. This blend of admonition and hope was central to the prophetic vocation.<sup>10</sup> Isaiah, in particular, is renowned for his messianic prophecies, foretelling the advent of a Redeemer who would usher in an era of peace and salvation. These hopeful proclamations provided solace to the Israelites during times of despair, assuring them of Yahweh's everlasting covenant and unwavering love.

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<sup>7</sup> Goran Eidevall, "Rejected Sacrifice in the Prophetic Literature: A Rhetorical Perspective," *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 78 (2013): 40; Larry J. Rector, "Israel's Rejected Worship: An Exegesis of Amos 5," *Restoration Quarterly* 21 (1978): 172; Bincy Thomas Thumpanathu, *Communication and the Role of the Lord in Amos: Their Development and Their Implications for the Text-Immanent Reader* (Utrecht: Eburon, 2019), 170-171.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see, Thumpanathu, *Communication and the Role of the Lord in Amos*, 230-231.

<sup>9</sup> Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Nathan not only confronted leaders for their moral failings but also provided direction for following God's covenant and intentions for justice. See, Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 19-22; Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2001), 89-92.

<sup>10</sup> How prophets balanced warnings of impending judgment with assurances of God's mercy for those who repent, see, Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 61.

Through their fearless pronouncements, prophets not only shaped the ethos of their own eras but also left an enduring legacy that continues to influence contemporary dialogues on ethics, justice, and faith.<sup>11</sup> With this foundational understanding of the prophetic role in Israel's societal formation, we explore the parallels between the Old Testament Prophets and the prophetic legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

### **3. Chavara's Prophetic Leadership: Aligned with OT Prophets**

To be a prophetic leader is to embody the spirit of the Old Testament prophets: a figure who courageously champions what is just, often amid resistance, urging others to embrace a higher moral and spiritual calling. As Brueggemann describes, such leadership seeks to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture.<sup>12</sup> Prophetic leadership is not just about foreseeing the future; it is about being deeply rooted in the present, understanding the needs of the time, and calling for a change. This role entails confronting systems of injustice and inspiring a vision of hope anchored in God's promises, inviting communities to undergo transformation through a steadfast commitment to God's covenant. Prophetic leaders, therefore, serve as harbingers of change, guiding others toward a life steeped in divine justice and compassion.

Chavara embodied the concept of prophetic leader.<sup>13</sup> His leadership was not confined to administrative or doctrinal concerns alone; it was basically prophetic in nature.<sup>14</sup> His prophetic leadership is characterized by keen attentiveness to the voice of the Spirit and a corresponding commitment to action. Chavara's birth, life and leadership were profoundly shaped by the Holy Spirit's guidance.<sup>15</sup> His leadership was

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<sup>11</sup> See, Chacko, "Prelates, Be Prophets," 11-13.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> See, Owen Phelps, *The Catholic Vision for Leading Like Jesus* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2009), 13. Jesus exemplified servant leadership. Chavara's mission too marked by servant leadership, stewardship, and pastoral care, and it was through the embodiment of these principles that he achieved success in his ministry.

<sup>14</sup> See Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2008), 426-430; Jennifer Campbell, *The Way of Prophetic Leadership: Retrieving Word and Spirit in Vision Today* (UK: Paternoster, 2015), 160.

<sup>15</sup> See *St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Man of the Spirit* (Kottayam: Congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, 2014), 55.

deeply spiritual, yet practical and is qualified with his farsightedness, clarity of thought, daring, innovative and systematic thinking.<sup>16</sup> He was unafraid to challenge the status quo, push for reforms, and care for the marginalized, making his life a model of prophetic leadership.

The essence of Chavara’s prophetic legacy lies in his ability to recognize the needs of his time and address them with bold, transformative actions. Whether it was promoting education for all, fighting for social justice, or revitalizing religious communities, Chavara’s mission was one of deep conviction and foresight. He saw a future where everyone—regardless of social standing—could grow in faith, knowledge, and dignity.

In the following section, we will explore the various dimensions of Chavara’s prophetic leadership, examining the multifaceted ways he embodied and expressed his divine mission. Like the Old Testament prophets who sought the welfare of the people of Israel, Chavara’s actions were deeply rooted in a commitment to the spiritual and social uplift of his community. Through this exploration, we will uncover the profound depth of his vision and the enduring legacy of his life’s work, which continues to resonate with the timeless call for justice, compassion, and faithfulness.

### **3.1. Prophetic Pastoral Mission**

A central aspect of prophetic leadership is the call for spiritual renewal, and Chavara exemplified this through his pastoral mission. Like the prophets of the Old Testament who urged the Israelites to return to God, Chavara’s message emphasized the need for spiritual revival and renewal within the Church. His focus on spiritual discipline extended beyond individual piety, rooted in his belief that a spiritually strong community would be more effective in serving the society and resisting moral decline.

Realizing the significant role of catechesis in faith-life, Chavara organized the parishes and ensured that each parish had a catechism school attached with it, and he personally monitored the development. He also emphasized the importance of a proper seminary system for the formation of priestly candidates, seeking to cultivate zealous and holy shepherds to guide the faithful.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Mampra, *Dreams of St. Chavara* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2022), 99.

Chavara's dedication to maintaining unity within the Church was particularly evident in his efforts to prevent schisms.<sup>17</sup> A key example of this was his decisive opposition to the Roccas schism, a significant conflict that posed a threat to the unity of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala.<sup>18</sup> Many Syro-Malabar Christians were misled into following Bishop Roccas, mistakenly believing he had been sent by legitimate ecclesiastical authorities. In response, the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly appointed Chavara as the Vicar General with the task of countering the schism and preserving unity within the Church.<sup>19</sup> Chavara's sincere efforts were successful in preserving the Church's integrity and reestablishing ecclesiastical unity.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's prophetic mission was marked by a comprehensive pastoral vision aimed at renewing the Church and nurturing a vibrant Christian community. His lasting pastoral initiatives and his commitment to ecclesiastical unity, underscore his impact on the Catholic Church and its mission in India.

### 3.2. Prophetic Mission of Religious Life

Chavara was a visionary leader whose prophetic insights were instrumental in founding religious communities for both men and women in the Syro-Malabar Church. His dedication to creating these orders reflected his belief that monastic communities were crucial for the Church's spiritual and social renewal at a time when, despite its long-standing history, the Church seemed spiritually barren.<sup>20</sup> Chavara recognized that these communities would become sources of renewal

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<sup>17</sup> In discussing servant leadership as essential for today's context, Jacob Peenikaparambil notes that a true leader encourages collaboration and cooperation among members, fostering a sense of belonging and team spirit. Such leaders view themselves not as masters or owners but as stewards of their community. See, Jacob Peenikaparambil, "Servant Leadership: Need of the Hour" *Indian Currents*, accessed 4 November 2024, [www.indiancurrents.org](http://www.indiancurrents.org).

<sup>18</sup> See Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 180-81.

<sup>19</sup> See, Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly and the St. Thomas Christians in 1867: Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2018), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Thonippara, "Historical Setting of the Syro-Malabar Church and the Unique Position of Chavara," in *Father and Doctor of the Church: A Theological Reading of the Life and Writings of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 14, eds. Benny Thettayil and Naiju Jose Kalambukattu (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2024), 58.



through their prayerful lives and active service to the society. From the establishment of the Mannanam monastery, members engaged directly with parishes, conducting retreats, preaching on Sundays and holy days, teaching foundational Christian doctrines, and addressing the spiritual needs of the faithful. Thus, religious communities became central to Chavara’s mission to revive and reform the Kerala Catholic Church. Chavara was confident that dedicated and principled leaders would naturally bring about a transformation in the social order.<sup>21</sup>

Chavara’s vision for religious life was deeply rooted in his understanding of the purpose and function of monastic communities. He referred to religious communities as *Tapasa Bhavanam* (House of Austerity) and *Punyavanmarude Sanketham* (House of Virtues), emphasizing the spiritual essence of monastic life. According to Chavara, monasteries were not merely places of retreat or isolated contemplation, but rather environments where virtues could flourish. He taught that the true strength of a monastic community did not lie in its physical infrastructure, such as the thickness of its walls, but in the virtuous lives of its members. The cultivation of virtues—love, compassion, humility, obedience, and other Christ-like qualities—was, in his view, the bedrock of religious life and essential for witnessing to Christ in the world.

Chavara also reflected on the causes of decline in some large monastic communities in Western countries.<sup>22</sup> He observed that these communities often collapsed because they lost their focus on virtuous living. When virtues were neglected, the spiritual foundation of the community crumbled, leading not only to the demise of the monastic institution but also to broader social decay. Chavara warned that the weakening of a ‘house of virtues’ would turn the surrounding region into a ‘land of wildlife,’ symbolizing chaos and moral decline. This profound insight highlighted his belief in the interconnectedness between the spiritual health of religious communities and the moral fabric of the society at large.

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<sup>21</sup> Maryann Madhavathu, *Humble Minister of the Living Mystery: Liturgical Vision of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2023), 141.

<sup>22</sup>Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Complete Works of Chavara, Volume IV: Letters*, eds. Lucas Vithuvattickal and K. C. Chacko, trans. Mary Leo (Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, 1990).

In addition to his emphasis on virtuous living, Chavara also introduced a fraternal dimension to monastic life. He referred to the members of the monastic community as *Koodapirappukal* (siblings), a term that reflected his belief in the importance of love and unity within religious life. This familial bond was central to his vision of a harmonious and spiritually vibrant monastic community. For Chavara, the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among religious members was not just a relational ideal, but a necessary condition for the growth and sustainability of monastic life. The love and mutual support within the community, he believed, were essential for its spiritual vitality.

Chavara's prophetic vision also extended to the broader role of monastic life in the service of the society. He inspired the members of his religious communities to live a genuine spiritual life, balanced with a sincere commitment to the well-being of others. For him, the charism of religious life was one that integrated prayer and service in a seamless, interdependent relationship. He proposed a spiritual model in which prayer led to service, and service, in turn, deepened one's prayer life. This approach not only reinforced the spiritual foundation of monastic life but also ensured that religious communities remained actively engaged in addressing the needs of the society around them. Through this vision, Chavara sought to create communities that were both contemplative and socially engaged, contributing to the transformation of society through their spiritual witness and acts of service.

In summary, Chavara's prophetic vision of religious life was characterized by his emphasis on virtue, fraternal love, and the integration of prayer and service. He envisioned monastic communities as houses of spiritual growth and moral integrity, where members would cultivate virtues that would not only strengthen their religious life but also positively influence society.

### **3.3. Championing Social Justice**

Prophetic leaders often serve as advocates for the marginalized, and Chavara was no exception. Like the prophets Amos and Isaiah, who championed justice for the oppressed, Chavara's prophetic mission was deeply rooted in a commitment to social justice and harmony, which he realized through several initiatives. In Chavara, we see a man of great courage, unwavering in his commitment to the truth and capable of effecting significant change in a caste-ridden society in 19<sup>th</sup> century

Kerala.<sup>23</sup> Untouchability, social marginalization of women,<sup>24</sup> economic inequality and illiteracy deeply affected the social and religious life of the Kerala society.<sup>25</sup> It is in this context the social reforms initiated by Chavara stand as insightful and impactful with a prophetic resonance in the society.

One of Chavara's most notable prophetic activity was the establishment of the *Pallikkoodam* system, which integrated educational institutions with local churches. This initiative sought to provide education to all segments of society, breaking the traditional barriers that limited access to education to the privileged classes. Particularly significant was his founding of a *Sanskrit* school at a time when the study of *Sanskrit* was largely reserved for the upper castes. By opening this educational avenue to a broader population, Chavara promoted educational inclusivity and social justice and harmony.<sup>26</sup>

Chavara's concern for social welfare was further reflected in his innovative response to food scarcity. Observing the widespread poverty and malnutrition, he introduced the concept of *Pidiyari*, where small amounts of rice were collected from households and distributed in schools as lunch. This initiative ensured that impoverished children received at least one nutritious meal per day, addressing both hunger and education simultaneously.

In addition to his educational and welfare reforms, Chavara institutionalized his care for the poor, destitute, and elderly with the

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<sup>23</sup> This same courage is essential today as we confront societal injustices. Historical figures like Gandhi, Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated that without courage, there would be no free India, no liberated South Africa, and no progress toward racial equality in America. Courage, therefore, stands as a key quality in the enduring legacies of these leaders. See, Athar Qureshi, "Courage: The Quality Most Needed Today to Fight Corruption," *Fr. Agnel's Call* 59 (2024): 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2014), 99-100; Thomas Kadankavil, *Chavara: A Multidimensional Saint* (Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 2014), 31-32.

<sup>25</sup> K.S. Radhakrishnan, "Founder of Modern Civil Society in Kerala," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. John Mannarathara (Delhi: Viva Books, 2015), 42.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Mumbai: St Paul's, 2014), 250; Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 257.

establishment of the *Upavisala* (House of Charity) in Kainakari in 1869.<sup>27</sup> This institution became a concrete expression of his universal love and compassion, further demonstrating his deep commitment to social justice and support for vulnerable populations.

Chavara's advocacy for fair labor practices is particularly evident in his writings, especially in *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (The Instructions of a Good Father). He stressed the importance of paying just wages, reflecting his broader concern for economic justice and ethical treatment of workers. He emphasized that do not withhold or postpone the fair wages owed to workers, for such an act is a grave sin that cries out to God for justice. Likewise, never demean or mistreat those who are poor, for God will hold you accountable for their suffering and tears. This concern for social justice aligns with the teachings of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where the Pope emphasizes the need for a prophetic voice when human rights and Gospel values are threatened.<sup>28</sup> The dignity of the human person and the common good must be prioritized over the privileges of a few. When these values are endangered, Christians are called to speak out and take action. Chavara's life and actions demonstrate this approach well in advance of the modern Church's call for social engagement.

Chavara's vision also extended to opposing both societal and ecclesiastical divisions. His establishment of the Sanskrit school and his efforts against heresies within the Church were driven by a desire to promote unity and prevent fragmentation. His work sought to bridge divides within society and the Church, advocating for a more cohesive and harmonious community.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's prophetic vision and mission in social justice were marked by innovative approaches to education, welfare, and ethical practices. His commitment to inclusivity, equitable treatment, and community development underscores his lasting legacy as a champion of social justice, unity, and harmony.

### **3.4. Prophetic Mission of Women Empowerment**

Chavara's life and work must be viewed in the context of 19th-century Kerala, a time marked by significant gender inequality and

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<sup>27</sup> John Mannarathara, "The Light That Transcends Time," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 230.

<sup>28</sup>*Evangelii Gaudium*, 218.

discrimination. Women were often marginalized, with limited access to education, social mobility, and independence.<sup>29</sup> In response to these societal challenges, Chavara, driven by a strong sense of social justice, took pioneering steps to empower women.

Chavara's dedication to women's empowerment is exemplified by his founding of the first indigenous religious congregation for women in the Indian Catholic Church.<sup>30</sup> In collaboration with the Italian missionary Leopold Beccaro and with support from the local bishop, he established what would become the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC).<sup>31</sup> This initiative was groundbreaking, offering women not only spiritual growth but also social uplift<sup>32</sup> during a time when they were largely denied basic rights such as education and property.<sup>33</sup> It provided a significant space for women's religious and social leadership within the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church.<sup>34</sup>

Chavara's vision for the congregation extended far beyond spiritual guidance. His letters to the members of the community consistently articulated his strong belief in the necessity of women's empowerment. In these writings, Chavara emphasized the importance of independence, education, and social commitment for women, advocating for a life where women could actively participate in societal transformation. He envisioned the members of the congregation not only as religious figures but as leaders and educators who could influence the wider community.

The legacy of Chavara's vision is evident today in the continued growth and influence of the CMC congregation and it plays a crucial role in the education and uplift of women, particularly through its numerous educational institutions.<sup>35</sup> These institutions, which include schools and colleges offering higher education, have provided countless

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<sup>29</sup> See Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 121-122.

<sup>30</sup> *Chronicles of the Koonammau Convent*, Vol. I, 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Chronicles of the Koonammau Convent*, Vol. I, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 263.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1870), 209; Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 95-103.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Pathrapankal, "An Iconoclast in His Own Right" in *The Life of and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 241.

<sup>35</sup> Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 292; Jossy Veliyan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Founder of the Women TOCD in Kerala* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2015), 353-358.

opportunities for young women to pursue academic excellence and personal development. Through these initiatives, Chavara's mission of promoting the dignity and empowerment of women has been realized, and the congregation continues to be a beacon of hope for the betterment of women in society. By promoting education and leadership among women, Chavara laid the foundation for a more just and equitable society, and his contributions continue to inspire generations of women in Kerala and beyond.

### **3.5. Elevating Sacred Families**

Chavara recognized the valuable role of the family in shaping the moral and spiritual fabric of society. His teachings on the Christian family were not just directives for his time but remain profoundly relevant today. In an era where familial structures face unprecedented challenges, Chavara's insights emerge as both prophetic and practical, offering a roadmap for building strong, faith-centered homes. His vision for Christian families echoes deeply with the modern world, where love, unity, and spiritual integrity are becoming degraded. His prophetic aspiration to uplift families is embodied in his magnum opus, *Chavarul*, or *Testament of a Loving Father*.<sup>36</sup> This foundational work is a testament to his divine mission, providing deep revelations on the essence of family life.

Chavara's prophetic foresight identified the potential dangers that could erode the values and sanctity of Christian families. His belief that a good Christian family mirrors the unity and love of the Holy Trinity is particularly striking in its theological depth. Chavara emphasized that the family is not just a social unit but a divine institution, meant to reflect heavenly virtues. In a world where families are increasingly fragmented by individualism and external pressures, his assertion that love, order, and peace should be the defining features of the family remains profoundly prophetic.

A key element of Chavara's contribution was his concept of value-based parenting. He advocated for a holistic approach to the formation of children, encompassing spiritual education, social justice, and ethical living.<sup>37</sup> His teachings emphasized the formation of a virtuous

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<sup>36</sup> Magna carta of the theology of family life and it lays a solid and sound foundation to the renewal of families and the upbringing of the children.

<sup>37</sup> In *Chavarul*, Chavara discusses the parental duty of raising children to be spiritually strong and mature individuals. Though written 150 years ago, his

environment within the family, steering clear of harmful influences like toxic friendships or the allure of a lavish lifestyle. Chavara's focus on children's education was profound. He recognized education as not solely an intellectual pursuit but a means for the holistic cultivation of a child's moral, spiritual, and mental faculties. His prophetic concern for preserving children's purity and innocence in the face of a morally permissive society resonates acutely today, where the threats posed by secular and relativistic values grow ever more pervasive.

Chavara's call for vigilant parenting finds particular relevance in contemporary concerns over the role of media, technology, and peer pressures in shaping a child's values. His firm belief that parents serve as the primary educators of their children remains a timeless reminder that moral and spiritual nurturing begins within the family unit. His teachings persistently echo through time, urging parents to safeguard their children's spiritual formation amidst an ever-shifting cultural landscape.

His emphasis on forgiveness as a foundational principle for family life mirrors the Gospel's call for unconditional love and mercy. In a world where families often grapple with unresolved tensions and conflicts, Chavara's teachings on forgiveness offer an invaluable lesson: it is not a sign of weakness but rather a profound strength, essential for maintaining familial unity and love. He opposed pride, ostentation, and the pursuit of power, advocating instead for humility and simplicity as core tenets of family life. Rooted in Gospel values, his teachings call families to embrace love, service, and unwavering faith in God over transient material pursuits.

Chavara's teachings on family values, value-based parenting, and the integration of spiritual and daily life are both timeless and prophetic, offering profound insights for modern families. His vision of the family as a domestic church, grounded in love, humility, obedience, and forgiveness, is strikingly accurate in addressing the challenges faced by families today. As the pressures of modern life threaten to undermine the spiritual integrity of the family, Chavara's call to return to the foundational values of faith, piety, and mutual respect is more relevant than ever. His prophetic insights continue to inspire and guide Christian

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keen observation, sharp intellect, and deep love for family have provided us with a testament that remains as relevant and precious today as it was in his own time. See, Mampra, *Dreams of St. Chavara*, 81.

families, encouraging them to live out their vocation with love, humility, and a deep sense of God's presence in their daily lives. Through his teachings, Chavara remains a beacon of wisdom for families striving to embody the values of the Gospel in a complex and ever-changing world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Chavara's writings and actions were not confined to his present reality; they were imbued with profound spiritual foresight, anticipating both the potential and challenges faced by the Church, society, and the family unit. His legacy as a prophetic leader is most evident in his enduring impact on social justice, moral reform, and spiritual renewal. His primary focus was on the spiritual renewal of the Kerala Church, which he achieved practically through the establishment of religious congregations. These communities became central to the Church's renewal and played a crucial role in societal welfare, including the empowerment of women.

Chavara's commitment to maintaining the unity of the Church, particularly in confronting schisms and heresies, underscores his prophetic leadership. His dedication to building a just, educated, and moral society during a time of great social inequality was revolutionary. His advocacy for social justice, harmony, and education marked a significant transformation in Kerala's society. Chavara's deep communion with God empowered him to effectively communicate the Gospel message to a wide audience, including religious leaders, laypeople, and the general public. While his life may appear quiet and contemplative, his actions reveal a profoundly active and revolutionary spirit. The visionary initiatives he began and the teachings he shared continue to influence the Church and society today, solidifying his place as a transformative figure in history.