

The History of Christ Church, Galle Face

(Formerly called the Colombo Mission Church of C.M.S)

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On Friday, April 12th 1799, sixteen Anglican clergymen and nine laymen met at Castle-Falcon Hotel, Aldersgate Street, England, and founded the world's largest missionary society called "The Church Missionary Society" or "The C.M.S.", with the objective of sending missionaries around the world. On the request of Sir Alexander Johnston, the Chief Justice of Ceylon, the Church Missionary Society in England sent four missionaries to Ceylon to start schools and to work among the natives.

There were no CMS missionaries stationed in Colombo until Rev. George Pettit arrived in 1850. But small scattered congregations met irregularly in Colombo, ministered to by Tamil and Sinhalese native catechists, supervised by Rev. Cornelius Jayasinghe from Cotta Mission Station (Kotte).

Rev. George Pettitt, born at Birmingham, arrived on 20.03.1850 as Finance Secretary to the Mission. He was very fluent in Tamil since he worked for fourteen years in CMS' Tinnevely and Madras mission, in South India, and started working with the assistance of catechists on his arrival in Colombo. Rev.Pettitt's first priority was to build a church in Colombo for the C.M.S. The request to obtain a grant of land was rejected by the government and he bought three plots of land for 225 Sterling pounds and towards the cost of building work a gift of 700 Sterling pounds was received from local friends. The government granted 1500 pounds and the Mudaliars spent 2000 pounds of their own money. The parent committee in London sent 860 pounds. There were also contribution received from the Tamil Coolie Mission (TCM) missionaries in the Up-country, catechist and parishioners in Tinnevely district, Paneiveilai Tamil Christians and the Tinnevely Auxiliary Missionary Society.

The foundation stone of the mission church was laid on 21st January 1853 by the Bishop of Colombo, the Rt. Rev. Chapman. And the Church was opened with a dedicatory service on Thursday, October 13th, 1853 at 4 o' clock by the Bishop of Colombo, the Rt. Rev. Chapman, in the presence of a large congregation representing all three nationalities, including the governor, many chief government and military officers, and Europeans. The main object of its erection was "**The Union of races in the Church of Christ**". The Bishop preached on Malachi I verse 11.

The first Sunday services were held on 16th October 1853 in all three languages. There were 14 communicants in the English service. The collection was 1 pound and 3 shillings. "The collection from the Tamil service was 4.5 pence.

Rev.Pettitt ministered to the English and Tamil congregations and the Sinhalese clergyman Rev. C. Jayasinghe was appointed to the Sinhalese congregation who was in Colombo from 1850 mentioned above. The first baptisms of English, Tamil and Sinhalese congregations were administered by Rev. Pettitt, respectively, to Nancy Maria, daughter of John Bates, born 24.09.1850 on 23.10.1853, to a four-year child Seevanantham, son of Samuel of

Tanjore on 31.10.1853, to John Lewis, son of Basnayaka Mudiyanalage Appuhamy Mohottala, born in 1837 on 29.10.1854. It was decided in the beginning to have the services in the following order, Tamil at 8 o' clock in the morning, English at 11.30 in the morning, Sinhalese at 2.15 in the afternoon and another English service at 5.15 in the evening.

According to Rev. Pettitt, there were two girls' schools at Colombo, under the supervision of the Ladies' committee for female education of the church, comprising 80 to 100 pupils. The work of evangelism was carried on by tract distribution, by preaching and by conversation in the streets, with the help of the native catechists, and the work was flourished. However, Rev. Pettitt was compelled to move to England on 09.01.1855 due to bad health and was replaced by Rev. William Knight and subsequently by the Rev. C.C. Fenn, until Rev. Henry Whitley took permanent charge of the church.

Rev. Henry Whitley, a graduate of Queens' College, Cambridge, arrived on 20.01.1855. He was assisted by Rev. C. Jayasinghe in the Sinhalese ministry, and in working among the people numbering between six and seven thousand living in and around Slave Island, including Malays, the soldiers of Ceylon Rifles brought into the Island by the Dutch. Four services were held every Sunday—two in English, one in Sinhalese, and one in Tamil and the average attendance of the English was 50 and Tamil was 34. There were two schools, boys' and girls' school under his supervision connected to the church, one in Slave Island and other one in St. Sebastian. In 1858 there were six schools, three Tamil and three Sinhalese, comprising 227 children, including 46 boarders.

Rev. Whitley built the first Mission house of Christ Church in 1860, which was demolished in 1981. For this purpose he bought three plots of adjoining land in 1857 for 450 Sterling pounds, with contributions received from friends, and the mission house was completed in October, 1860.

In 1857, when Rev. C. Jayasinghe was pulled out to Cotta, the sole responsibility of all three congregations fell on Rev. Henry Whitley's shoulders. While he was untiringly ministering in all three languages he suddenly met with a tragic death, by an old school wall falling on him on Saturday evening the 10th November 1860. Rev. C.C. Fenn was on the scene and he describes the event,

"Mrs. Fenn and myself were conversing with Mrs. Whitley in the new mission house, dear Whitley himself having left us only a minute or two before, when we heard a loud scream in the compound. We went out and saw five or six natives calling out in Sinhalese "The Master, The Master" and pulling with their utmost strength at a heap of rubbish, the ruins of the wall of an old schoolroom that had just fallen down. The terrible truth then flashed on our mind that our beloved friend Whitley himself was beneath the mass of stones, beams, and earth that lay confusedly on the ground. In about two minutes his body was extracted: he gasped twice or three times. A little brandy was poured down his throat, and then I believe his spirit fled. His death was caused by a beam falling on the ribs, and forcing them into the lungs, and bringing on internal hemorrhage".

He was buried in the Galle Face cemetery and when Galle Face green project started his tomb stone was shifted along with other tomb stones to Kanatte cemetery. It is now can be seen at Kanatte cemetery's Galle Face section. In his memory there were two tablets erected in the Church, one at the site of his death and the other on the outside wall of the vestry. After Rev. Whitley's death the parent committee appointed Rev.C.C.Fenn, and until his arrival Rev. George Parsons took charge of the church for three months.

Rev. C.C.Fenn was born in Cottayam, Trivancore, South India, graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, and ministered to the English congregation from 1861-1863. After Rev.Whitley's sudden death there was an urgent need of a person to minister to the Tamil congregation and to supervise the growing ministry in Colombo. Therefore, during Rev.Fenn's period Rev.William Edward Rowlands arrived from England, and in later days he was called "the father of Tamil Christians in Colombo" or otherwise "the Padre Rowlands". Also Rev. Josiah Herbert Clowes was brought from Mauritius to minister the Sinhalese congregation. He was inducted as a deacon by the Bishop of Mauritius in 1861, and ordained by the Bishop of Colombo in 1863, having arrived in the Island on 20.03.1861. In 1863, when Rev.Fenn left the country, the English services were divided between Rowlands and J.H.Clowes, until Rev.E.T.Higgins arrived from England in 1870. In other words there was no permanent minister to the English congregation for eight years, between Fenn and Higgins.

Rev.Rowlands was born in Worcester in October 1837, and he was 24 years of age when he arrived at Galle on 07.12.1861. He reached Colombo on 09.12.1861 and stayed with Rev.Fenn. After one year's service he was transferred to "Tamil Coolie Mission" in Kandy in 1862, and in 1864 he returned to his former station and worked until 1878.

There were nine large coffee stores in Slave Island regularly visited by Rowlands and the Tamil catechists. They preached in streets such as in Colpetty, the Slave Island Lanes, Police Court at Wolvendhal, and Kayman's Gate at Pettah. The Tamil people were very receptive to the gospel and the ministry of the gospel was fruitful. There were five Tamil congregations in connection with this church, namely Borlla, Grandpass, Mattakkuliya, Maradana, and Mutwal. Also Mr. and Mrs. Rowlands visited the surrounding houses and prescribed medicine for simple cases they were equipped for, where there was a sickness or need. Mr. and Mrs. Rowlands' untiring labour for the Lord was bearing fruit, as evidenced in the church baptism register where most of the pages have been filled by him, still preserved in the church office of the English congregation.

Rev.J.C.Mill assisted Rev.Rowlands in the Colombo Tamil ministry from 1867 to 1869. Rev.Julius Caesar Mill, born in Lodi, Italy, "Giulio Caesarc Mola" a Roman Catholic missionary in Jaffna, was converted and Anglicised from Romanism. He left his church and joined the C.M.S in 1866, was licensed and appointed to teach Latin and classics in Cotta (Kotte) Institute, assisted Rev.Rowlands in his Tamil ministry, and left to Tinnevely mission in 1869. The reason he gave for his departure from Romanism, the will can make sacrifices, but the mind cannot deny what is true once it has understood it. The truth in the Protestantism was the cause he explained.

In 1871, Rowland left the country on leave due to his bad health, and Rev.D.Wood became minister to the Tamil Congregation. During this period, Rev.W.E.Rowlands says "The Sinhalese branch of the Colombo Mission is not so encouraging as the Tamil, the congregations are small and the attendance irregular. Therefore, Rev.H.Gunasekara was sent to this station and the Sinhalese ministry flourished.

E.T.Higgins . (Edward Thomas Higgins), born in Kent, sent to cotta station (Kotte) in 1851, spent nearly 15 years; two periods (1870 to 1876 and 1883 to 1892) in Christ Church. He became the mission secretary in 1886, and ministered to both Sinhalese and English congregation was between 150 and 175, the Sinhalese between 35 and 50, and the Tamil congregation between 125 and 150.

The congregations were steady and the two Church Sunday schools contained 150 children both Burghers and English speaking natives. There was a well-attended Bible study regularly held for youngsters from 9.30-10.30 a.m. There were three Sinhalese catechists supervised by Mrs.Higgins and daughter. They distributed tracts and sold larger books on the street, and the catechists performed street preaching, and regularly visited the prisons. There were three Sinhalese girls' schools and one Sinhalese boy's school, containing 165 girls and 25 boys connected to the church.

A Sunday school was held in Kew Police Barracks with 150 children. The income of the church was satisfactory and funds from the church were sent to support the C.M.S., Bible Women, Mission Schools , Catechists of Cotta Station, Western Province Tamil and Sinhalese ministries and also the Kandyan mission.

A poor Portuguese community was living around Slave Island, and there was a Bible study held for them in the church, and a Bible Women was appointed to read the Bible in their houses.

In 1881, Rev.S.S.Samuel arrived from Tinnevely to assist Rev.Wood in the Tamil work and in 1888, Rev.D.Wood left for England and Rev.J.Ilsey was in charge of the Tamil work. Higgins with his wife and two daughters sailed to England due to his bad health, by a ship "City of Bombay" on 20.05.1893.

In between the two periods of Higgins, from 1877 to 1882 Rev.Henry Newton ministered for five years and on 19.12. 1892 he left for England.

Arthur Edwin Dibben, arrived on 1890.04.03, and served two periods, from 1893 to 1909 and 1921 to 1923, and he was a member of the Sinhalese Bible and Prayer Book revision committee. In his period the roof with slate was replaced by Calicut tiles at a cost of Rs.3000/=.

In 1897, on a Tuesday evening at 7.30 p.m. the West wall of the church fell with a loud noise and heard by the people living in the neighbourhood. A few weeks earlier it was noticed that there was a long crack on the wall, and due to the heavy monsoon showers the Kabook walls were soaked and caused the damage.

The engineers examined the site and recommended to pull down the whole church and to rebuild, and the building committee too decided to do so, in accordance with its old design with bricks. A part of the old materials was also used to reduce the cost. The architectural work was offered by William Alfred Tunstall without charge. The successful tenderer was Bastian Arachilage Don Elias Perera of Bambalapitiya, who quoted 34,150/-. The church had only 8,000/= in its possession and the balance was raised with a pamphlet and within six months Rs.13, 500/= was raised.

The foundation stone of the church was laid on Tuesday 14th June 1898 by the Bishop of Colombo, R.S.Copleston. Rev.A.E.Dibben chanted Ps.84. and the Bible lesson was read by Rev.E.T.Higgins from Hebrew – 10:19-26, the Bishop used an ornamental silver trowel for laying the foundation with the following inscription, “Used on the occasion of laying the foundation stone of Christ Church, Galle Face on 14th June 1898, “and he prayed the following after singing the hymn by the congregation “Christ is our cornerstone”,

“In the faith of Jesus Christ, we place this foundation stone in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and the God the Holy Ghost. Here, let true faith, the fear of God, and brotherly love, always abide: may this place remain ever consecrated to prayer and to the praise of the most Holy name of the same our Lord Jesus Christ, whoever liveth, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God world without end.”

In 1898, March 18th at 5’ o clock the church was reopened by Bishop R.S.Copleston. Evening prayer was said by the Incumbent - Rev.A.E.Dibben, and the lessons were read by Rev.F.H. De Winton and Rev.E.T.Higgins. The Anthem was “Send out Thy Light” and the Bishop preached a sermon from Jn. 12:32 - “The attractive power of the Lord Jesus Christ”. At the end “Te Deum” was sung. The offertory was Rs.547.00. The service was well attended with 500 people. During the construction period the Sunday services of the church were held in the adjoining school for nearly nine months.

The good work carried out by Rev.E.T.Higgins was continued by Rev.Dibben. There was a school for Sinhalese students in Kolonnawa which had 75 children, but the attendance diminished to 20 when the Buddhist monks opened a rival school. Three Bible Women worked among Muslim women in the Slave Island area. They visited houses and taught them to read with the help of the Bible. When they reached the third standard they were presented a New Testament.

The Sinhala Bible Women constantly met opposition, and the people showed their dissatisfaction in various ways. In one incident a basin of water was thrown on them in a Slave Island lane. In 1894, the average attendance of the English congregation was 100, Tamil 200 and Sinhala 35. Easter Sunday attendance was 326 Tamil and 80 Sinhalese.

Rev.D.Joseph Perera, who was inducted as a deacon on 31.05.1896 and ordained in 25.09.1904, was appointed to minister to the Sinhalese congregation from 1896. The pastorate of St.Luke’s Borella and Christ Church was separated and Rev.D.J.Perera was in charge of the Christ Church congregation.

On 01.12.19 14 the committee decided to dispose of the gas lamps and to replace them by electric lamps and the contract was given to Boustead Brothers. Within a few months Christ church had electricity for the first time, the mission house having received its electricity before this.

In 1916, the attendance of the Sunday school was an average 80, and it was held at 8.30 a.m. The Indian Sunday School Union's International series of studies was followed. There were 70 books in the library, and there were 7 classes for boys and 8 classes for girls and there was a Kindergarten for infants too. Monthly teachers met for preparation classes. In 1916 Mr.I.A.P.Augustine died suddenly aged 42 after being in the Sunday school for many years as a scholar and a teacher.

A Portuguese congregation of 50 accustomed members regularly met in the Church Hall and were ministered to by Mr.G.E.Nathanielz. Holy Communion was administered monthly. Most them were very poor and received assistance from the Alms Fund of a couple of rupees. Their children received free education from the mission school and free breakfast was provided on school days, and Miss.Koch was in-charge of the school. A sewing class was conducted for the girls by Mrs.F.E.Jockiffe. Money was raised to help them through Jumble Sales, etc, added to the Alms Fund.

In 1917, a night school was opened in Wekande in a rented house and Mr.D.E.Wijesinghe was the manager and an assistant of the school. There were fifty boys and free tuition was offered. There was a library, indoor games, football and tuck shop to buy snacks and drinks. Two well attended Bible classes were held, and a gospel meeting held in English at 7 pm on Thursdays was well attended.

The building of the belfry began in 1918 and it was dedicated on Monday the 30th June 1919. The bell weighing one ton was donated by Mrs.Mitchell in memory of her late husband Kt.C.M.G.William Wilson Mitchell, the name being inscribed on it.

A Bullock cart was hired to bring Sunday school children for Rupees 3/25 a week for 52 weeks. The paddling organ was bought and the playing the pipe organ was discontinued.

It was decided to place a cross on the communion table in 1941 presented by an anonymous person. After lengthy discussions lasting several months it was accepted on the grounds that there was no crucifixion on it. In 1954, the cross on the top of the church was placed, presented by an anonymous person too. Since Christ Church was a C.M.S church and thoroughly Evangelical for more than a century, the church was plain, as Ven. A.J. Kendall Baker, The Archdeacon of Colombo and Bishop's Commissary mentioned in 1953 in its centenary souvenir, "it is Evangelical in its worship, and musical in its setting".

In 1961, the church lost the adjoining school, in 1978 a plot of 34 perches was lost to the Duplication Road expansion project, and in 1981 a plot of 40 perches land was sold to Hatton National Bank. In 1989, the Bishop of Colombo handed over the Glennie Street Mission house used by the Tamil Minister, to the Anglican Inland Missionary Society (AIMS) for their use in training missionaries.