

LEYAMMA (1911-1943)

*The pioneer of Agathimandirams
(Destitute Homes) in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*



SAINT OF MUNDAKAPPADAM AGATHIMANDIRAM

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(M.E. 9 Thulam 1087 - 2 Karkadakam 1118)

Life story of
Miss. Leyamma Cherian (Pennamma)
Puthuparmpil
Mundakappadam Agathimandiram
Manganam-Kottayam

*The pioneer of Agathimandirams
(Destitute Homes) in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*

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Leyamma (Pennamma) Mundakapadam Agathimandiram,
1911-1943
(M.E. 9 Thulam, 1087 – 2 Karkadakam, 1118)

“I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.” Matthew 25: 35-36

“As the result of the reformation movement many church members came forward for the service of the poor, sick and destitute. But Church as a whole did not realize such an obligation towards the marginalized people of the society. It was the sacrificial lives of Leyamma and her brother P.C. George of the Mundakapadam Agathimandiram that opened the eyes of the Syrian churches. As a result many Agathimandiram were opened for the service of the poor people” ~ Dr. Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan

This is the story of an ordinary Marthomite woman who lost her parents when she was very young, and shouldered the responsibility of a home from the tender age of 7. She, along with her brother, established the Mundakappadam Agathimandiram. She lived 31 years. Her sacrificial life remains a challenge, and by reading her life story many are coming forward for the service of the poor.

Mundakapadam village

Mundakapadam is a small village near the Kottayam Town (7 km away on the western side). Many foreign Christian missionaries, including evangelists David and Wordsworth (They were the speakers of the first Maramon Convention in 1895) and Rev. Thomas Walker (also a Maramon Convention speaker) used to visit this village during their mission trips in and around Kottayam. Many people, including Leyamma’s parents were saved through their messages.

Kottayam in early 1900s

In the early years of 20th century, Kottayam was a small town with a small population. Bullock cart was the main means of transport. It was a common sight to see bullock carts in groups going with goods from Kottayam to Mundakayam and Perimed towns. The British had tea/rubber plantations in Perimed and Mundakayam. Thousands of labourers were working in these plantations. Diseases like malaria, cholera, typhoid, etc. were common due to lack of sanitation and medical facilities. There were no welfare projects or health insurance for them either. The plantation owners used to dump the sick workers on the roads (Perimed –Kottayam road). Many died while walking to Kottayam

town, Kind hearted bullock cart owners used to give them a lift up to Kottayam town. For hundreds of sick and old labourers, the streets of Kottayam were their refuge. No one bothered to listen to their woes.

As wild animals attacked bulls of the bullock cart, on their way to Perimed, cart owners always traveled in group. Puthuparmpil Cherian (Leyamma's father) was one such cart owner who used to carry goods regularly to Perimed. Other cart owners treated him with respect because of his trustworthy reputation. Cherian used to conduct prayers for the cart owners in the Public road before beginning each trip so that they would have a safe journey.

Birth and education

Leyamma was born on 25 October, 1911, in Puthuparampil house of Mundakappadam, to Cherian and Kuttியamma. She had three elder brothers. Her pet name was Pennamma. Her parents used to take their children to attend Gospel meetings conducted in and around Kottayam and Puthupally. They were members of the Bethel Mar Thoma Parish, Chemmarappally. Her father, Cherian, was a very kind hearted man and used to help the poor plantation labourers. He used to care for the sick labourers at home and treated them like a family member.

Leyamma was a student of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Primary School in Machukadu. In those days, Biblical stories/lessons were taught in mission schools by teachers. The moral lessons and stories she learned from them influenced her a great deal and was the foundation of her future. Right from childhood, Leyamma had great concern for the poor and the sick; and she even cared for the animals. As Rebecca drew water for Eliezer's camels, Leyamma used to water the cattle that came in their compound for grass.

After passing Std 4 from CMS School in Machukadu, she joined V.M. School in Puthupally. When she was 7 years old, her mother died at the age of 32. Then Kuttியamma's father, Mr. Varghese took care of the children. Being the only girl in the house, Leyamma had to look after the house. She wasn't getting time to study, but her teachers were very considerate. She found it difficult to be on time to school. She failed three times in Std 7. After a few years, her father too passed away. Her elder brother took care of her then on. In May, 1932, at the age of 21, she joined the Vanitha Mandiram in Tiruvalla for a two year training course.

Layamma at Vanitha Mandiram - Tiruvalla

Mrs. Kandamma Varghese was one of the main people behind the establishment of the Vanitha Mandiram at Tiruvalla in 1925. At the Vanitha Mandiram, women

were given training in Mission work, home science and home management, kitchen gardening, etc. in addition to Biblical studies. An Australian missionary, Miss Kellaway, was the principal of this institution for 20 years. During the early years, many women were trained for Missionary work and sent to various places outside Kerala. Sister Chechamma (Mathilunkal, Kuttapuzha, Tiruvalla), Miss K. J. Aleyamma, Miss P. O. Sosamma, Miss Mariamma John, Miss P. G. Aleyamma (Sihora Ashram) and Mrs. Mariamma Joseph (Manon, Maramon –co-founder of the Hoskote Mission) were students of the Mandiram. The main mottos of the Institution are Prayer, Worship, Study, Witnessing, and Discipline.

During her stay in Vanitha Mandiram, Leyamma could visit and stay at various mission fields of the Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association; in Palghat, North Travancore, Central Travancore and the sea coast. Through the mission trips, she got first hand information in gospel work and it helped her get a broader outlook of other religions. No one knew that God was preparing her for a greater mission in her own village, to work among the poor.

Leyamma's brother, Rev. P. C. Cherian (1907-1978)

Rev. P. C. Cherian (b.18 Jan.1907) was Leyamma's elder brother. After passing his B.A. and L.T examinations, he became a teacher at St. Thomas School, Keezhillam. Mr. C.T. Mathew (later Rt. Rev. Dr. Mathews Mar Athanasius Episcopa, 1900-1973) was the headmaster of the Keezhillam School. As they were friends, before becoming a bishop, Mathews Thirumeni, used to stay in Leyamma's house many times. For Leyamma, Thirumeni was a big uncle.

Leyamma's brother, Mr. P. C. George

Leyamma's brother, P.C. George, became a Malayalam teacher in Puthupally. He had great concern for the spiritual upliftment of the society in and around his village, Mundakapadam. He used to conduct meetings for the youth in his house and together they participated in all social activities of the village. Part of his salary was spent for social work. Whenever meetings were conducted at home, Leyamma was the hostess and she happily prepared and provided them food.

Beginning of the Agathimandiram (Poor Home / Home for Destitutes)

Leyamma's brother, P.C. George, and his friends were greatly concerned about the poor, sick and destitute people living in the streets of Kottayam. They prayed for a solution and finally the idea of setting up an Agathimandiram came to their minds. George was willing to provide any sort of help to set up an Agathimandiram in his compound. On hearing the plans, Leyamma willingly agreed to become the Sevika (Caretaker) of the Agathimandiram. She was aware

of the difficult situations she might have to face in the Agathimandiram. Like her brother George, she was also aware of the need of the society. When God calls people to task that seem too difficult, he does not ask them to do it alone, but offers them his resources and strengthens them. God counts on our availability, not on our ability.

In 1934, the youths of Mundakapadam, constructed a shed in Leyamma's property for the Agathimandiram. The first inmate was a very old sick man, brought from the streets of Kottayam. His name was Ayyappan. He was very weak and unable to speak and Leyamma took care of him like a brother and in due course, he became well.

Mandiram in full swing

Ayyappan was the first inmate. After him hundreds of sick, old and destitute people were brought to the Mandiram. Some of them came on their own and others were brought by various voluntary organizations. Many of them were bed ridden. Leyamma willingly washed their clothes and cooked for them. During the initial years, she took care of the inmates on her own. Even the local washer men weren't willing to wash the inmates' clothes. Like an angel, Leyamma toiled for them from early morning to late night.

Leyamma and her brother used to collect food items and clothes from the neighboring houses for the inmates. The news about the Agathimandiram spread fast in the surrounding villagers and people started visiting the Mandiram with food items and cash. The Sevika Sanghom, Sunday school children, Youth groups, etc. from various parishes started visiting the Mandiram. Few women volunteered to help Leyamma with the running of the Mandiram. And during harvest time, people brought paddy and other agricultural produce.

The inmates of the mandiram

After Ayyappan, the second inmate was a 62 year old man, covered in boils and sores, and was put out by his family. The next inmate was an elderly Pulaya lady with incontinence. A cast away inmate with eight children took refuge in the Mandiram. Others included those with malaria, cancer, lame, and the dumb, blind, all found shelter at the Mandiram. All orphans, beggars, widows, widowers and destitute were welcomed.

These inmates were to be fed, bathed, their wounds were to be washed, their clothes were to be washed, and it was all done happily by Leyamma for years without complaint and without another to relieve her.

A woman of prayer

Prayer was an integral part of Leyamma's life. Even during her busy schedule she found time for solitary prayer. Every day, at a certain time, she would sit in one place and pray for her relatives, friends and supporters of the Mandiram, those requiring intercessory prayers, etc. She would pray for all the bishops, priests, mission workers, etc. Her prayer list was a lengthy one.

Mission work in the mandiram

In the Agathimandiram, Leyamma taught the inmates songs and Bible stories. She always encouraged the able bodied inmates to attend church service on Sundays. Through her living example she won many souls for the Lord. Even though she was a young lady, the inmates treated her like a Mother. She never made her assistants do any menial work.

Life in the Mandiram was not very easy. There was no water supply and they had to fetch water a place far away. Many of the inmates were elderly, having their own lifestyles, and many a times there were quarrels between them. Leyamma was always there to mediate, comfort and console them.

The parish Priest, Chemmarappallil Yohannan Kassessa (16 Feb 1874- 19 Aug 1960), was a great moral support for Leyamma. He treated her as his own daughter and gave her opportunities to conduct meetings in the parish. Leyamma would conduct meetings and Bible Classes for women in various parishes in and around Kottayam and Thattakad. She would visit houses and pray for the sick and needy. Even non-Christians invited Leyamma for their ladies meeting.

Private life

Leyamma had lost her parents when she was very young. From the age of 7 she had to bear the burden of a home. She was taken care of by her elder brother P.C. George. They were both founders of the Mandiram. Both of them remained celibate all their lives. Leyamma was the Sevika of the Mandiram and George was the Secretary, taking care of the administrative work of the Mandiram. During the initial years, Leyamma looked after the inmates on her own, so the burden was heavy. But the Lord sustained her with good health all throughout her life.

She always considered herself a stewardess in managing properties of the Agathimandiram. She did not allow anybody to waste even a grain of rice while cooking.

She never took any salary or any remuneration from the Mandiram except the food she ate. She had very few worldly possessions. She didn't have any ornaments or an umbrella of her own. She always wore simple clothes.

She regularly attended Church services and ladies meetings in her Parish. She would visit houses for collecting clothes and food items for the inmates

Leyamma would write lengthy letters to her friends encouraging them to lead Christian lives for Jesus. She updated her friends about the work of the Mandiram through her letters.

Mandiram visitors

Priests and Bishops from various denominations and Political leaders like K.P. S. Menon and C.P. Rama Swami Iyer visited the Mandiram and appreciated the work going on.

Mandiram & Second World War (1 Sep. 1939 - 2 Sep. 1945)

During the Second World War, India became an important supply centre for the Allied forces. Japan conquered Burma in 1942 and as Burma was the main supplier of rice, scarcity of rice became a reality. All over India rice control was introduced and the Travancore government began to procure complete harvests directly from framers. This rice procurement restricted the farmers from donating a portion of their paddy harvest to the Mandiram. This resulted in a shortage of rice at the Mandiram, but there was an abundant supply of tapioca.

Mandiram Dispensary

More and more people staying around the Mandiram started showing interest in the day to day work of the Mandiram. One anonymous person donated Rs.2500/- (a large sum in those days) for the construction of a building for accommodation. Another Rs.1000/- was received for the construction of a chapel. As many of the inmates were sick, they made a dispensary with the money received as donations. The inauguration of the dispensary and Agathimandiram buildings was held on 4 June, 1942. A large crowd comprising of Sunday School children, youths and members of the nearby Christian churches and other communities, attended the meeting. Leyamma was the person incharge of the reception. Rtd. High Court Judge Hon. K.K. Lukose was the chief guest.

The chief guest was impressed with the work of the Mandiram; and called all the Mandiram workers, including Leyamma, on stage to congratulate them in front

of the huge crowd. Even though Leyamma did not like flattery, it was great day of recognition for their work.

Faithful work

Soon the number of inmates increased to about 50-60. During the next 10 years, Leyamma took care of hundreds of sick, old, bed ridden, and paralyzed people. She washed their clothes and cooked for them, day and night without rest. She would pick up many poor people on the verge of death from streets and hold them, where death is dignified and with eternal hope, lying in her arms rather than on the streets.

Cholera Epidemic in Travancore

During the years 1942-1943, cholera broke out in many parts of Travancore. Big Wall Posters read in bold red “Dangers of Cholera”. Many died as a result of the outbreak of cholera. The public sector tried to cover the area with cholera vaccine. Volunteers from the Mandiram took active part in this venture. Few old inmates who were admitted to the Mandiram had already contracted the disease but they were unaware of the symptoms.

No Award or Medal

Leyamma’s life was a self sacrificial life. She never made public speeches or wrote articles about her work in news papers. She did not receive any medal or award from any social service organization during her lifetime. She led a very silent life.

Final days

Leyamma was faithful to her Master till the end. On 17 July, 1943, there was a special meeting of the Sevika Sanghom in her home parish. Rt. Rev. Mathews Mar Athanasius was the chief guest. Earlier that day, the bishop visited the Agathimandiram and was very pleased with the work going on. On Sunday, 18 July, 1943, Leyamma became sick with cholera. In the early hours of Monday (2:45 am) 19 July, 1943, she passed away to be with the Lord.

Funeral service

Her body was kept in the Main hall of the Agathimandiram for the Public to pay their final tributes. The Parish priest, Chemmarappallil Yohannan Kassessa, cried aloud on seeing her body. He could not control his great sorrow. From early morning, people from all over came to see her. Many compared her life with that

of Father Damien (1840-1889) who gave his life to the care of lepers in a colony at Molokai, Hawaii Islands.

At 10am, the funeral procession started from the Mandiram to the Bethel Mar Thoma Church. Mundakappadam had never seen such a crowd before. Rt.Rev. Dr. Mathews Mar Athanasius conducted the funeral service. Leyamma was known to him from childhood as her bother Rev. P.C. Cherian was a teacher in Keezhillam with the Thirumeni.

Condolence meeting

Leyamma's untimely death was a real shock for all her co-workers. Abraham Mar Thoma Suffragan Metropolitan visited the Agathimandiram to console the workers. It took days for them to get back to the regular routine. The inmates of the Mandiram wept for days. But the challenge of Leyamma's life opened the eyes of many youths who dedicated their life for the Lord's work in various fields.

A condolence meeting was held on 29 August, 1943, in the Manganam School. The meeting was presided by Rt. Rev. Dr. Abraham Mar Thoma Suffragan Metropolitan. In his message, His Grace pointed out the good virtues shown in Leyamma's life. Irrespective of cast and creed a large crowd attended the meeting. To commemorate the memory of Leyamma, an Endowment fund for the welfare of the Agathimandiram workers, was established.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal." John 12: 24-25

Her tomb stone at the Chemmarappallil Bethel Mar Thoma Church Cemetery reads as follows:-

In Memory of Leyamma
Born on 9th Thulam, 1087
Died on 2nd Karkadakam, 1118
Serving at the Poor Home
Mundakapadam

Dates: Malayalam Year 9th Thulam, 1087 is 25 October, 1911
Malayalam Year 2nd Karkadakam, 1118 is 18 October, 1943

Main events connected to Leyamma's life

1895		Beginning of Maramon convention
1911	Oct 25	Birth of Leyamma
1914	Jun 28	First World War begins
1918		Leyamma's mother, Kuttamma, passes away at the age of 32
1919	Feb 14	Formation of Mar Thoma Sevika Sanghom
1919	Jun 28	First World War ends
1923		Establishment of Salem Children's home, Tiruvalla
1924		Formation of Voluntary Evangelistic Association
1925	Feb 25	Inauguration of Vanitha Mandiram-Tiruvalla.
1929		Wall Street crash- The beginning of the Great Depression.
1932	May	Leyamma joins Vanitha Mandiram- Tiruvalla
1933		Beginning of the Agathimandiram
1939	Sep	Second World War begins
1941		Beginning of Ravi Varma Agathimandiram, Trichur on land donated by the Raja of Cochin Ravi Varma.
1942	Jun 4	Inauguration of the Agathimandiram Dispensary
1943	Jul 18	Death of Leyamma.
1943	Jul 19	Leyamma's funeral.
1943	Aug 29	Condolence meeting at Manganam School.
1949		Beginning of Dharmagiri Agathimandiram, Kumbanad
1953		Beginning of Carmel Agathimandiram, Ayroor
1966		Beginning of J.M.M. Mandiram, Edathua

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The End

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All For His Glory

