

Evangelist P. V. Varghese

(Kochukunju Upadeshi) Umayattukara

1899 – 1986



Life story of a Voluntary Evangelist

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Varghese Upadeshi & Wife

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“Even lions go hungry for lack of food, but those who obey the Lord lack nothing good.”
~ Psalms 34:10

This is the story of an ordinary Central Travancore farmer cum evangelist who lived an ordinary life and contributed significantly to the mission of the Mar Thoma Church. This evangelist had no more than an elementary education or access to any ideological books of great thinkers. He read only the Bible and connected books. According to worldly standards he was never rich. Till the end of his life he lived as a voluntary evangelist. He brought up his sons in the light he received through the reading of the Bible and listening to the messages of great men like Dr. Stanley Jones. But what then, is his great contribution? He is a true example of how ordinary people can transform their lives and others when they surrender themselves to God.

Christianity was brought to India by St. Thomas an Apostle of Jesus Christ. St. Thomas landed in the Malabar Coast in 52 A.D. and converted many high caste Hindus and established 7 Churches. We do not know much about the history of the Christian Church in the first few centuries. Many visitors had recorded in their travel records the existence of a very active church in Malabar. Records are available about the visits of many church leaders from Asia Minor, Palestine and Persia during this period of time. The Malabar Church always welcomed foreign Church leaders without much enquiry about their faith and practices. The Church in Malabar remained almost an isolated church.

The Malankara Church was an Independent Church even though it had a relationship with the Syrian Churches. It was not under the supremacy of any foreign Bishops or Churches. Portuguese sailor, Vasco de Gamma arrived in Malabar in 1498. He was a member of the Roman Catholic Church which owed its allegiance to the Pope in Rome. The Portuguese people under the leadership of an Archbishop named Alexis de Menezes convened the meeting of all church leaders in a place called Diamper (Udayamperoor) near Ernakulam in 1599. He succeeded by force in bringing the Malankara Church under the domination of the Pope.

This state of affairs continued for 54 years. But the people objected this movement – they were concerned about the independence of the Church. They assembled in a Church compound in Mattancherry (Cochin) in 1653 and took the

oath severing (cutting off) all connections with the Roman Church. This oath ceremony is known as "Oath of the Coonen Cross". Thus once again Church became independent, but a portion of it remained with the Roman Catholic Church.

After the Oath of the Coonen Cross, the Malankara Church continued its relationship with the Patriarch of Antioch. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, missionaries of the Church Missionary Society came to Kerala. With the help of these foreign missionaries, the Bible was translated into Malayalam. The New Testament was published in 1829 and the Old Testament in 1835 and the complete Bible in 1841. Reading of the Scriptures in their own language (vernacular) enlightened the common man. These Missionaries even started a Theological College (Old Seminary) in Kottayam to train the persons becoming priests. Abraham Malpan was a teacher in this seminary.

Abraham Malpan was born in the Palakunnathu family of Maramon in 1796. Abraham Malpan and Kaithayil Geevarghese Malpan were teachers in the Old Seminary Kottayam. Both of them tried to restore the church to its original purity, by casting away the prevailing wrong teachings and evil practices which had crept in by its association with other churches and religions in the course of time.

Abraham Malpan gave able leadership for the reformation movement in the Syrian Church. He sent his nephew Deacon Mathew to the Patriarch in Syria, who was consecrated as the Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan. Many were attracted to the reformation movement led by Abraham Malpan.

Revival movement

Revivalism is a special approach to religion or one's faith that gives importance to individual religious experience rather than the main doctrines. It is always associated with fervent emotional singing, preaching, confessing, dancing etc. We had experienced many revival movements in Syrian Church. Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu was the birth place of revival movements in South India. It was started in 1860, by CMS Missionaries and came to Travancore through an unknown preacher called Mathai Upadeshi and carried on by Vidhuwan Kutty Achen (Rev. Justus Joseph). In 1864, Mathews Mar Athanasius Metropolitan allowed Ammal, the daughter of a famous Tamil convert, Vedanayaka Sastri, to visit the churches and inspire the people through her Christian songs.

In 1873, Vidhuwan Kutty Achen became the leader of this movement. In 1894, Tamil preachers David and Wordsworth took over the leadership of revivalism. The Maramon convention was started in 1895. Later the spirit of revivalism was

continued by the blessed leaders like CMS missionary Rev. Thomas Walker from Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, Punchamannil Mammen Upadeshi and Muthampackal Kochoonju Upadeshi.

According to Alexander Mar Thoma *“The revival movement in Kerala owed much to the evangelistic zeal of laymen. In the early days of the Maramon Convention, two friends from Tamil Nadu, David and Wordsworth helped with forceful gospel messages. Sadhu Kochoonju Upadeshi and Punchamannil Mammen kept the fire burning for many decades, helping thousands to continue in spiritual joy and sacrificial living.”*

Umayattukara Mar Thoma Parish and Thekkattil Ninan Abraham Kathanar

Thekkattil Abraham Kathanar was born on 1846 in Umayattukara (a place near Chengannur) as the son of Mathunny and Sosamma. He was ordained as a priest in 1868 by His Holiness Euyakim Mar Coorilos. Till 1893, he was the vicar of the Umayattukara Jacobite Orthodox Church. He was attracted to the reformation movement started by Abraham Malpan, and along with 18 families he joined the Mar Thoma Parish in Umayattukara and continued as their vicar. He also served as the vicar of the Othera and Pandanad Mar Thoma parishes. Achen passed away in 1917.

Birth of Varghese Upadeshi - Plammoottil family in Thymaravumkara.

Varghese Upadeshi was born in 1899, as the son of Plammoottil Geevarghese and Kochumariamamma in Thymaravumkara. He was also known as Kochkunju. They were members of the Ummayattukara Parish. Thymaravumkara is a small village near Tiruvalla. Thymaravumkara Mar Thoma Parish was established in 1951. He was known for his faithfulness and loyalty and so the Church property was bought in the name of Varghese Upadeshi which he later transferred to the Church.

Members of the Plammoottil family including Mr. P.V.Varghese were active members of the Orthodox Jacobite Parish, Ummayattukara. He was the Sunday School Headmaster of this Parish. He was interested in evangelical work which was not encouraged by the church authorities.

Attracted by the reformation ideas, he and his family joined the Mar Thoma Syrian Church around 1924 when he was only 25 years old. From childhood Varghese was very active in the activities of the Church. After his basic education he became a voluntary evangelist. He was an active member of the Mar Thoma Voluntary Evangelists Association.

Varghese Upadeshi a Village Teacher

To the villagers, Varghese Upadeshi was a respected elder to all. He was an “*Ashan*” (teacher who taught young children basics before enrolling them in school). He was also an agriculturist who grew sugar cane, paddy and other crops.

Formation of Voluntary Evangelists Association

Consecration of Rev. M. N. Abraham as a bishop (Abraham Mar Thoma Metropolitan) was a great event in the Mar Thoma Church. He infused new spirit and vigour into the evangelistic work of the Church. He travelled throughout India and was a known figure in all the missionary circles as a great evangelist. He believed that every Marthomite is an evangelist. His vision and far sightedness led to the formation of the Mar Thoma Suvishesha Sevika Sanghom in 1919 and the Voluntary Evangelists Association in 1924.

Greatness of Abraham Mar Thoma Metropolitan

Bishop Abraham strongly believed that evangelism was the responsibility of every member of the Church and not of the clergy alone. He emphasized that every man and woman was called to be the witness of Jesus Christ, irrespective of his secular occupation. It was this conviction that led him to organize groups of men and give them specialized training in personal evangelism. Thus the Voluntary Evangelists Association was established as a voluntary lay movement of the Church.

The women of the Church also were encouraged to take their part in fulfilling the mission of the Church. He encouraged the formation of the Mar Thoma Suvishesha Sevika Sanghom, which is the women’s auxiliary of the evangelistic work in the Church. Every parish of the Church was encouraged to form branches of Voluntary Evangelists Association in their respective areas.

Travelling Secretary of Chengannur Centre of the Voluntary Evangelists Association

Varghese Upadeshi was very sincere in his voluntary evangelistic work. As recognition of his tireless work he was selected as the travelling secretary of the Mar Thoma Voluntary Evangelists Association - Chengannur Centre. For many years he faithfully continued in that position forming new branches of the Voluntary Evangelists Association. He gave leadership for fellowship meetings,

women's meetings (Sevika Sanghom) and the convention meetings in the parishes.

Upadeshi was a distinct and very strong person. He had a saintly look with his starch white juba, *white mundu* and a *randam mundu* (shoulder piece) and a Bible in one hand. He was a straightforward man who was known for his appropriate answers and outspokenness. He commanded great respect from all those who knew him.

Upadeshi, a Man of Prayer

Upadeshi followed a strict disciplined life. He was punctual in his prayers and woke up at four in the morning along with the crows of the cock and his evening prayers were at sharp sunset. He used to make sure all his family members joined in these prayers. After his morning prayers, he went to the nearby hill (high place) and then used to recite aloud scripture verses and verses related to the wrath of God.

Secunderabad Mission

Varghese Upadeshi went to stay with his third son P. V. Zachariah who was the evangelist in the Neeradimedu Mission field (in Secunderabad) of the Mar Thoma Church. He assisted his son in this mission field for a few years.

Close friend of Bishop Mathews Mar Athanasius Episcopa (1900 - 1973)

Mathews Mar Athanasius Episcopa was consecrated was in 1937 with Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan. He was noted for his deep personal dedication to Jesus Christ and his zeal for the spread of the Gospel, continuing in the evangelical tradition of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. He was the first missionary bishop of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church.

He took special interest in the welfare of the evangelistic workers working under him. He was well aware of the Spiritual and physical needs of his co workers. He used to encourage the evangelists in time of their special needs and used to help them financially to overcome difficult situations in their life.

Varghese Upadeshi was a close friend of Mathews Thirumeni. He used to regularly visit the *Aramana* (Bishop's House) in Maramon. During the Maramon convention, Thirumeni used to entertain the evangelists in his *Aramana* in Maramon (Retreat Centre in Maramon) by giving them food and accommodation.

Varghese Upadeshi being a close friend of the Thirumeni, had special privileges in the Aramana, used to take his children for the Convention meetings. Their friendship continued till the passing away of Mathews Thirumeni in 1973.

Authorization by the Bishops

Taking account of Varghese Upadeshi's dedicated service, he was given special authorization letters to visit and preach in every Mar Thoma Parish by the Bishops Mathews Mar Athanasius and Juhanon Mar Thoma Metropolitan.

Marriage of Varghese Upadeshi

Varghese Upadeshi married at the young age of sixteen to Annamma (daughter of Geevarghese, Malayil - Vennikulam) who was only twelve years old. She was educated till fifth grade in the Girl's School, Kumbanad. She was from a well known Marthomite family. Annamma was well read in the Bible and knew it by heart and organized Bible classes for her neighbours irrespective of their religion or caste.

She was known by all for her relentless prayer life. She was a dedicated lady who supported her husband in his mission. She was a keen reader and read every literary material she could lay her hands on. God blessed them with four sons. She served her husband's ministry till his death and passed away on a Saturday, 5 July, 1997.

Upadeshi's Children

1. Evangelist Varghese Baby (wife Mrs. Kunjamma)

After his school education their eldest son joined the Abraham Mar Thoma Memorial Bible Institute in Kompady, Tiruvalla and after that he worked as an evangelist with Mar Thoma Evangelists Association mission stations in Thamarakudy, Pattazhi, Amallur, Naraganam, Vaiyavattom, Ayathil, Vallamkulam, Othara, Kattode, Kompadi, Nellimala and Puthenkavumala. He helped in the construction of many churches in the mission stations.

Evangelist Varghese Baby passed away on 20 December, 2004, at Plammoottil House, Thekkathery Post, Pattazhy, Kottarakkara. He served as an evangelist for more than 42 years. His son Varghese P. Joy is an evangelist of the Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association since 1976.

2. P. V. George (wife Mrs. Kunjamma George)

Their second son P. V. George was a skilled leather worker at Kallisserry. He then joined the Central Railways as the Catering Services Inspector. He retired and is currently residing with his family at the Wardha Mission Field, Maharashtra.

3. Evangelist Zachariah P. Varghese (wife Mrs. Kunjunjamma)

Their third son was Evangelist Zachariah P. Varghese. He was dedicated by his mother Annamma while he was very young for the Church Ministry. He served with Mathews Mar Athanasius Episcopa in Secundrabad, Malabar, and Gudalloor. He passed away on 28 July, 2002.

4. Thomas P.V. (wife -Mrs. Marykutty Thomas)

Upadeshi had great concern for Thomas, he being the youngest son, used to go for house visits and meetings during his school holidays with his father and to the Maramon Convention very regularly. During his Maramon convention trips with his father, Thomas met Dr. Stanley Jones, one of the famous speakers of the Maramon Convention. Dr. Stanley Jones was a close friend and supporter of the Mar Thoma Church. For many years he was the main speaker of the convention.

Thomas was greatly impressed and inspired by Dr. Stanley Jones and he always idealized him. He decided that if he ever gets a son, in God's providence, he would name him after this great evangelist. Thomas P.V was an active church member. He served the Bombay Parish (Byculla Mar Thoma Church) in distributing tracts, gospels and endured hardships for the Lord. He wanted to be involved in full time ministry which led to the opening of the mission work in Maharashtra (Wardha Mission). Thomas P. V. is a voluntary gospel worker.

Grandson Rev. Stanley Thomas

Rev. Stanley Thomas is the son of Thomas P.V and Marykutty Thomas. He was born on 14 March 1979 in Dubai, U.A.E. His mother is from the Komathu Tharayil family belonging to Mar Thoma Church, Kattanam. She is the eldest of eight children of K. M. George and Sossamma George.

Stanley Thomas was ordained to the order of *Shamash* (Deacon) of the Mar Thoma Church by the Metropolitan, His Grace Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Mar Thoma in the service solemnized by Dr. Abraham Mar Paulose Episcopa on 27 June 2006 in Trinity Mar Thoma Church, Thittamel, Chengannur. Deacon Stanley Thomas was ordained to the order of *Kassessa* (Priest) on 12 August 2005

in Dubai Mar Thoma Parish, Jebel Ali, in the service solemnized by His Grace Rt. Rev. Thomas Mar Timotheos Episcopa.

Rev. Stanley was the first person born and raised in the Middle East to be ordained in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. His ordination was the first to be held in the Middle East.

Final days of Varghese Upadeshi

“But those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak.”

Isaiah 40:31.

Varghese Upadeshi was very active till the final days of his life. He was well aware of the time of his end. Rev. V. S. John was the Parish priest at the time of his death. Rev. V. S. John took a keen interest in visiting the parish members and visited Upadeshi often. Upadeshi was in good health and was the Vice President of the Umayattukara Parish. One day, he requested Achen to give him the final Holy Communion at his residence immediately. On Upadeshi's request, the final Holy Communion was arranged in his house even though Achen was reluctant as Upadeshi looked perfectly alright. Few family friends along with Upadeshi took part in the final communion service. While Achen was changing the vestments after the sacrament, Upadeshi passed away peacefully in the early afternoon of 18 March 1986.

Immediately, a strong wind storm along with rain hit the area uprooting several trees and creating panic among the local people. With this display of nature's fury, people gathered at this home only to find their beloved Upadeshi had passed away.

The burial was arranged the next day with prayers offered by Rt. Rev. Easow Mar Timotheos Episcopa. A large crowd of people from the area and surrounding areas attended the service to pay their final tributes to the dearly loved Upadeshi. His tomb stands as a witness at Ummayattukara Mar Thoma Parish Cemetery.



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Notes

Maramon Convention - A mammoth religious convention of Christians, (started in 1895 by The Mar Thoma Church but attended by people belonging to all communities), is held at Maramon, every year on the vast beds of River Pumba. The convention takes place in February / March in an atmosphere of devotion and lasts for a period of eight days. Addressed by speakers of international repute and attended by innumerable devotees, this is the largest Christian convention in the world.

Reformation - Reformation is a process of reforming for the better. It can also be an improvement. Reformation in the Syrian Church was started by a priest called Abraham Malpan, (1796-1845) of Maramon.

Ashan - The Malayalam word for School Teacher (Schoolmaster). A person who teaches a child the basics before joining proper school. He is known to establish the foundation of a child's learning by starting with the alphabets and basic maths.

Upadeshi - Upadeshi in Malayalam means a person who gives advice. But in Christian literature Upadeshi means a gospel preacher or an evangelist.

Malabar, Malankara - Olden days the Western part of South India was known as Malabar. The word Malabar was used to refer the present (Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar) Kerala state.

Diamper - Udayamperoor - is a small town near Ernakulam where the Synod was held in 1599. The old Church is still preserved as a historical monument.

Coonen Cross - Coonen in Malayalam means- bent. It is a stone cross- which still stands in the Mattancherry Church Compound with a little slant to one side. When the oath was taken people tied ropes to the cross and due to the pull of the crowd it was slightly slanted to one side.



Varghese Upadeshi and family



The End

Note From Author

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All For His Glory

