



The Church 100 years ago

Christ Church, Galle Face, celebrates 156 years of Worship

by Renuka Jeya Raj

Christ Church, Galle Face celebrated 156 years of evangelical worship in Sri Lanka, on 13th October 2009. A special A special Fellowship Thanksgiving Service will be held on Sunday 8 November to commemorate the occasion.

Christ Church was begun by the CMS or Church Missionary Society. Known as the CMS Cathedral in those days, the church is a 'low church.' Evangelical in its outlook and worship and characterised by simplicity in the order of service and ceremony. As Ven. A. J. Kendall Baker, then Archdeacon of Colombo and Bishop's Commissary states in the church Centenary Souvenir in 1953, the church was 'Evangelical in its worship, and musical in its setting.'

The C.M.S. was founded in London in 1799 to send missionaries around the world. In 1818 the CMS sent four missionaries to Ceylon to set up schools and to work among the people. Rev. George Pettitt was the first CMS missionary to arrive in Colombo, in 1850.

It is rather ironic that the origin of a place of worship should be due to a priest who had little to do on Sundays. When Rev. G. Pettitt, was asked to become Secretary of the CMS in Ceylon, "the duties connected with this post were not such as to give him any ministerial

work." It was this that led him to suggest that a Church be built adjoining Slave Island railway station, where he might take regular English services, and thus occupy his Sundays.

W. A. Tunstall, a British architect, did the original design of the church, free of charge. The initial structure was small, built with local materials, mainly of kabook. Over the years the church changed faces many times, although the initial architectural language and internal layout remained unchanged. The main object of the church's construction was "The union of races in the Church of Christ". Its location in Galle Face, in the heart of the city, and its adjoining esplanade just 300 yards ahead at the time, even then a popular meeting point for people of all races and walks of life to 'take in the sea air', made the site an eminently suitable one for this purpose.

Christ Church was constructed with pounds sterling 860 contributed from the CMS London, and generous donations from the local populace. The foundation stone was laid on 21st January 1853, by the Bishop of Colombo the Rt. Rev. Chapman. On 13th October 1853, the church was opened. A large congregation, representing all three races in the country as well as the European community attended the dedicatory service by the Bishop. Rev. Pettitt was ailing in health for some time and returned to England in 1855.

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The Church today

He was replaced by Rev. William Knight and subsequently Rev. C.C. Fenn, until Rev. Henry Whitley took permanent charge of the church. Rev. Whitley worked among about six thousand people living in and around Slave Island, including Malays, the soldiers of Ceylon Rifles brought in by the Dutch, ministering in all three languages. His incumbency of the Church is remembered even today chiefly because of his sudden and tragic death as a result of an old school wall falling on him in November 1860 while he supervised construction.

Two tablets are erected in the Church in his memory. Rev. Whitley's death saw the succession of a long line of CMS representatives who served as the Vicars of Christ Church, too numerous to mention. To mention a few, - the CMS parent committee appointed Rev. Fenn, followed by Rev. William Edward Rowlands known as "the father of Tamil Christians in Colombo" or otherwise "the Padre Rowlands". Rev. Josiah Herbert Clowes was brought

from Mauritius to minister to the Sinhalese congregation.

Rev. (now Rt. Rev.) Peter Vaughan was the last CMS representative to serve as the Vicar of Christ Church and is presently in Sri Lanka to participate in the anniversary celebrations and conduct the mission services. The Church's CMS links are still in evidence, as the Vicar of Christ Church is still chaplain of Ladies' College (formerly CMS Ladies' College) Colombo, while among the enterprises it assists/assisted by way of administration and/or donations is the House of Joy Talawa, the Girls' Friendly Society and the Denipitiya Medical Mission.

In 1897, the West wall fell, due to the deterioration of its kabook from heavy monsoon showers. The church was rebuilt on its old design in brick at a cost of Rs 34,150, with old materials also used to reduce the cost. The foundation stone of the 'new' church was laid on 14th June 1898 by the Bishop of Colombo, the Rt. Rev. R. S. Copleston.

Its construction in Early Gothic style features a pointed arch nave arcade and king post roof bracing into a succession of flying buttresses. The emphatic verticality of both elements and structure soar upwards to heaven and towards God, as if defying the strength of gravity. Stained glass had been used for the windows in the sidewalls of the sanctuary, as well as the intricately set East window and the Rose window with their profusion of colours. Mosaic is placed in the Church floor in a repeating geometrical pattern.

The interior is also refined with the timber carvings on pews and the stands where intricate foliage traceries are engraved.

The church received electricity in 1914. The building of the belfry began in 1918 and was dedicated on 30th June 1919.

The bell, weighing one ton, was donated in memory of Lt. C.M.G. William Wilson Mitchell, by his widow. The cross on the top of the church was placed in 1954. The church lost its adjoining school to the government. In 1961, in 1978, 34 perches was given to the Duplication Road expansion project. In 1981, 40 perches was sold to Hatton National Bank.

Today, Christ Church consists of two parishes - the English under the incumbent Ven. Joseph Sarvananthan and the Tamil under Rev. Norman Jeyachandran. English services are held at 7 am and 6.00 pm. The Tamil service is at 8 am. The Sinhala Eucharist is sung at 9.45 every Sunday. This truly fulfils the church's mission of uniting people of many walks of life, irrespective of caste or creed.

Christ Church has been the chief evangelical centre of worship in Colombo for over a century. Although the surroundings have changed dramatically and the Church is now dwarfed by towering skyscrapers comprising hotels, nightclubs, restaurants and commercial enterprises, Christ Church continues in its perennial task of relating to the contemporary lives of its people as it preaches the message of the Gospel of Peace.



Rhythm World performs at Singapore

On Sunday, 25th October, 2009, students of Rhythm World Dance Studio Competed at the 22nd International Ballroom Dancing Championship held at Suntec City, Singapore, with over 600 competitors from 22 countries participating. These students were accompanied by Shiromi Perera, their trainer and Directress & Instructress of Rhythm World Dance Studio.

It is a matter of sincere pride that the students of Rhythm World Rustom Yusuf & Roshanthi Nanayakkara won a place in all four dances of the "Latin American Section" in their category - they were placed Third Runners-up in three dances and Fourth Runners-up in one dance.

Their achievement was all the more creditable as the competition was indeed of a very high standard - Well done, Rhythm World.



Rotary Club of Kandy donated a artificial limb for a disable person recently. Here Srilal Mendis, President of Lions Club of Senkadagala, handing it to Bandula Wijesinghe. Sugath Rajhapakse, Arlene Kellart, Dr. Asela Bandara, Tissa Jayasinghe, Carl Kellart, Ayesha Weijerathne, Nigel Fernando and Shamil Peris of Rotary and Lions Club of Senkadagala are also in the picture.