

Malabar Mission Newsletter

April 2016

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Our Mission

The Malabar Mission Society is a group of Christians interested in assisting the Malabar Mission Circle in India as it shares the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ along the Malabar Coast by supporting, with prayers for God's blessings,

- the spread of the Gospel, and
- the Circle's witness



THE WITNESS OF MUSLIM FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Rev. Dr. Roland E. Miller

It has been said that leading Muslims to Christ is the hardest of all mission tasks. There is some truth in that opinion, but fortunately it is not the whole story. Hard, yes. Impossible, no. The major difficulty is related to the suffering of Muslim converts. When they do decide to follow Jesus, the witness of those who stay true becomes one of great bravery. They face loneliness, insecurity, economic deprivation, and in some places violence.

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Malabar Mission Newsletter

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"Jews for Jesus." Have you heard that phrase? It refers to Jewish people who follow Jesus but remain within the Jewish community. They are sometimes called "unbaptized believers." Three decades ago a similar movement called "Muslims for Jesus" also started, becoming strongest in Bangladesh. They were members of the Muslim community who accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but in all other respects they continued to be



Recent Muslim baptisms in Anantapur

members of the Muslim society into which they were born. This movement never developed widely, but what is interesting is what made it start at all. It was the persecution normally experienced by new Christians from Muslim background who follow the traditional path of open discipleship.

What is the reason for that persecution which, from one perspective, may seem surprising? After all, not only do Muslims have great respect for Jesus, to whom the Qur'an gives fifteen noble titles including Messiah and Word of God, but it also gives Christians and Jews a special status. Despite some ambivalence, it regards them as protected people because they have received genuine revelation from God in the law (*tawrat*) and gospel (*injiil*). They are called "people of the book." Why then should converts to the Christian faith be harassed?

The answer comes from later Muslim history. In its first three centuries Muslim religious scholars developed the extensive law of Islam called the sharia ("clear road"). One of its regulations is the law of apostasy ("the act of abandoning"), based on the idea of blasphemy. Anyone who blasphemes against God has in effect abandoned Him and should be punished. The scholars clearly detailed the severe penalties for that action. However, not only did they lack the political power to implement their law, they were also

In Appreciation

The Malabar Mission Society sincerely thanks the following who have so generously given special gifts.

In Memory of:

✠ **John Craven**

Doris Craven

✠ **Constance Charron**

Mark & Monique Dickinson

✠ **Betty Dickinson**

Mark & Monique Dickinson

✠ **Louise Bradley**

Owen and Gail Mitchell

✠ **Oscar Sommerfeld**

Martha Sommerfeld

✠ **Edward Wudrick**

Florence Wudrick

✠ **Rev. Harold Patzer**

Roland & Mary Helen Miller

Memorials and gifts honouring special occasions are welcomed by the Malabar Mission Society, and are used to support the Lutheran Church in India to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with those who do not yet know His love. All donations are receipted for income tax purposes. Special occasion gifts and memorials will be acknowledged in future issues of the Newsletter.

Send your gifts to:

**The Malabar Mission Society,
P.O. Box 32045
Regina, SK S4N 7L2**

Malabar Mission Society

Annual General Meeting

April 30, 2016 at 11:00 a.m.

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

935 McCarthy Blvd North

Regina, Sk

All regular and honorary MMS members are invited to attend.

not so clear on the nature of blasphemy itself. There is a great deal of behavioral variation within religions, including Islam, and blasphemy is very much in the eye of the beholder. A striking modern example comes from the Mappila Muslims of Kerala. There, from the 1950s forward, many Muslims became communists for social and political reasons. Following Marxist ideology, some of them even denied the existence of Allah! What could be more blasphemous! Yet for practical reasons it was impossible for traditionalist Muslims to sanction a major portion of their society. The law of apostasy could only be administered if it was narrowed down by another operational principle, and that is what happened.

With consensus, clergy (*'ulama*) connected the law of apostasy with the idea of sacred community. The community of Islam (*umma*, or "mother") is the parental home of Muslim believers and it must be respected. Its holy boundary cannot be broken. It is sacred because God has guided it to the straight path. To leave it by joining another religious community is an appalling insult to God. Next to idolatry, it is the fundamental blasphemy that needs to be punished. Communism is not a religious community, so you can parade down the streets shouting its slogans. But Christianity and Hinduism are other religious communities. If you become a Christian and break the *umma*-line, you should be punished. The official penalty laid down in the law was death, and from time to time converts have been martyred. In practice the law was frequently mitigated to social ostracism, loss of family relationships and inheritance rights, physical violence, and other sanctions.

The worst situation prevailed in Middle Eastern Islamic states where apostasy was coupled with treason. A Muslim who becomes a Christian has not only blasphemed against God but is also considered to be a *murtadd*, a traitor to the state. It goes without saying that evangelism is forbidden as an invitation to treason. The defining point where blasphemous and treasonable behaviour are publicly confirmed is baptism. Up to that moment almost any opinion can be in play, but at that point the law of apostasy comes into effect. A new follower of Christ must be very brave to take that step and if he or she does so, life is lived on the run. Pakistan has extended to "holy personages" its heavy blasphemy laws. Conditions are less stringent in pluralist Muslim societies in other parts of Asia and Africa, but baptism remains a serious decision. How near this situation is to New Testament times when Jesus, the apostles and their immediate successors faced similar conditions! The Lord Himself was convicted of blasphemy (Matthew 26:65-66). Muslim converts remind us that disciples are not above their master.

Gradually, in the contemporary age, many enlightened Muslims have chosen to ignore this harsh medieval dogma, or to set it aside in favour of mutual toleration. If you would ask Muslims in Canada whether they approve of the traditional approach, they would say no. In their support is the fact that almost none of this legal development is in the Qur'an itself. There, in referring to the question of Muslim believers turning to another path, in two places the scripture in effect says: Leave this matter to God. He will take care of it on the Day of

Judgment (16:106, 109; 2:217). Yet, in many places, among traditionalist Muslims, the old rigorous interpretations are still very much alive; untutored, they follow the lead of conservative clergy.

How then can we account for the fact that so many Muslims have chosen and are choosing to follow Christ's way? The past and present are sprinkled with their heroic stories. Christians in safe havens must pay tribute to their individual courage, which is a major factor. That is one of the reasons why the work of the Lord in Malabar has been so thrilling. The readers of this Newsletter know some of their stories. The Gospel-sharing among the unusually hospitable Mappila Muslims has resulted in the discipleship of a group of dauntless individuals, male and female, who have paved the way for today's outreach.

Seven hundred kilometers away in Anantapur another contemporary marvel is taking place. A Shaikh leader, with his family and companions, has led over a thousand village Muslims into the Christian faith. About forty of them, mostly farmers, have become part-time evangelists to help reap the spiritual harvest. The sheer human courage involved in all these stories is unmistakable and effective. Yet that cannot be, and is not, the full answer. To faith it is clear that more than human valour is involved. Faith holds that the Spirit of God is moving powerfully and often dramatically over the human waters to create a new thing. That is perhaps most remarkably evidenced in Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world, where since the 1960s well over 300,000 Muslims have turned in faith to Jesus the Messiah. It is an unusual and highly moving experience to sit in a congregation made up of more than one thousand new believers from Muslim background, and to worship and thank God together.

In summary, let us work while it is day, and be grateful to God for the Muslim converts who give us the **witness of courage**. "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation...and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:14, 17).

THE WITNESS OF HINDU FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

Rev. Dr. Roland E. Miller

In Malabar about 56% of the people are Hindu. Most of our congregation members are from Hindu background, as are almost all the Gospel workers. Their evangelistic efforts are mainly among Hindus, and the majority of new believers stem from Hindu society. Because of the special difficulties experienced by followers from Muslim background, it is sometimes forgotten that Hindu converts also have their problems. While their situation is not so precarious as that of Muslims, they too must bear the cross. As the Lord Jesus foretold, some form of persecution will be the norm for new believers rather than the exception (Matthew 16:24), and in fact the problems of Hindu converts are now on the rise.

Of all religious societies in the world the Hindu one has been the most spacious in its tolerance of different points of view. It has two principles that express the concept of breadth. One is *ishta-devata*, which means the right of every individual to choose his or her own deity. There are many deities to choose from, although philosophic Hinduism also speaks of the One behind the many. The second principle is *ishta-adhikara*, the privilege of every individual to choose his or her own preferred form of religious practice. Hindus believe that all religious roads (*margs*) eventually lead to truth and salvation, whether it be the way of works (*karma*), or of devotion to a helpful god (*bhakti*), or through spiritual knowledge (*jnana*). Christ is one of the deities a seeker may select, and his road is one of the ways to God, in the Hindu opinion. Hence Hinduism has no objection to individuals following Christ, as long as they do not claim that it is the only way to truth.

This principle of openness helped to enable the successful Christian outreach among Hindus. The view of Indian Christians is that work began with the apostle St. Thomas who is believed to have come to Kerala. There he planted the church on Indian soil. Whether that is true or not, the church in Kerala certainly started very early, its growth led by Eastern Syrian Christians. Lutheran work started with the effort of missionary Ziegenbalg on India's southwestern coast in 1706. It grew quite rapidly in south-central and coastal Andhra in the 1800s, including some mass movements, and in Kerala in 1911. Hindus were open to the message of the Gospel, and converts were generally unmolested, with some exceptions.

However, two other factors arose that negatively affected this open approach. The first was the growing strictness of the caste system, which had developed early in Hindu history. This rigidly stratified custom incorporated more than 3000 distinct groups, ranging from the controlling Brahmins at the top to outcastes and tribal folk at the bottom. It

greatly impedes religious mobility.

Caste means an exclusive social group. You are born into a certain caste, and must remain in it throughout your life, carrying out its duties and carefully observing its restrictions. Caste regulations affect one's occupations and involve food laws, pollution issues, marriage arrangements, and social possibilities. While your caste gives you identity and support it also controls your personal status and many life decisions. Observing its duties creates the possibility of having a higher position in your next reincarnation, while ignoring them may mean being "outcasted" and becoming an Untouchable. Because Christianity holds that fellowship in Christ transcends caste distinctions, most Hindus believe that it is not appropriate to become a Christian. If you choose to do so, it may result in your social exclusion, loss of rights, and economic sanctions, and physical violence is not unknown. New believers from Hindu background have also had to suffer for their faith.

Penkutti, a Hindu woman, had become a helper in our Malappuram household. She was sincerely attracted to Jesus and his love. That fell within her permitted behaviour. However, when marriage was proposed with a Christian named Francis, her family became outraged and treated her badly, including physical beatings. She persisted in her decisions and died in the faith. It is not surprising, in the light of such repercussions, that some Hindu followers of Jesus have chosen to remain in the category of unbaptized believers.

A second significant factor has impacted on Hindu seekers in our current age. That is the development of the idea that Hinduism is the historic and true religion of India, and it should therefore be the only one. In this view, being a Hindu is synonymous with genuine Indian citizenship. Being or becoming a Christian or a Muslim is un-Indian and inappropriate. The efforts of churches and mission societies to carry on evangelism among Hindus should therefore be resisted or outlawed in the interests of "Indianisation." In fact, also Hindus who in the past have become Christians or Muslims should be re-converted if possible, and this policy has become the platform of some Hindu organizations and certain political parties.

A party called the Bharatiyya Janata (BJP), some of whose members hold these views, now governs India through its enterprising leader, Narendra Modi. The potential impact on Christians is reflected in the following article quoted from the New York Times (March 1, 2016, p. A-10):

Adding to Mr. Modi's woes, he has found himself on the defensive as the radical right wing of his party and offshoots have adopted an aggressive agenda that has sometimes spilled over into violence.

An offshoot group began a 'ghar wapsi' or homecoming campaign, holding ceremonies to convert Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. Members of Mr. Modi's party pushed for bans on eating beef, which many Hindus do not eat. Late last year a Hindu mob killed a Muslim man in a village near the capital, saying—mistakenly as it turned out—that he had killed a cow. There was also a series of attacks on Christian schools and churches.

So outraged were some of India's top writers that, starting in September, they protested what they called an attitude of intolerance by returning awards the government had given them. Mr. Modi has made some conciliatory steps, including a speech at a church in Delhi early last year, saying he would not 'accept violence against any religion, on any pretext,' but many have said his efforts fell short.

In my own experience the people of Malabar, including both the Hindu and the Muslim sectors, have been generally tolerant of the various ministries that the Malabar Mission Society supports. Some have even expressed their deep appreciation for them. On the other hand, the realities are such that there are also some things to be prayed for:

- ✠ Pray for the safety of new believers in Malabar and Anantapur;
- ✠ Pray for the spiritual gift of wisdom for Gospel workers who must carry on their work among diverse people in changing conditions;
- ✠ Pray for a spirit of evangelical urgency for ourselves since, as our Lord told us, the time is short (John 9:4).

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Malabar Mission Society and the Malabar community mourn the loss of Mabel Victor, beloved wife of the Rev. Dr. K. M. Victor, who went to her heavenly home on March 21, 2016. A tribute will be included in the next newsletter.