

a journey back to the beginning

VERY REV. K. MATHAI COR EPISCOPA



ST. THOMAS ORTHODOX CHURCH OF INDIA



A JOURNEY BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Very Rev. K. Mathai Cor Episcopa



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PREFACE

Elcy Yohannan Sankarathil

I feel gratified to have read the Very Rev. Mathai Cor-Episcopa's studied and well-written account of the origins of Christianity in India. History shows that the faith was brought to Kerala by Saint Thomas, one of Jesus' original disciples. He arrived on the Malabar coast in 52 AD, converted many and established congregations and was martyred in Madras in 72 AD. That story is in itself a saga, God's will be unfolding through suspense and miracles.

King Gundaphur of Mazdai commissioned Thomas to build him a splendid palace and gave him whatever money he asked for. But Thomas spent all that money to alleviate the misery of the poor, and no palace was built. The king was justifiably angry and had Thomas thrown in prison. But things happened and Gundaphur grew convinced that the will of God was being played out through Thomas. He released Thomas from prison and demanded to know who he was. Thomas revealed his true identity and his mission. And he talked about Jesus Christ, His miracles, His death by crucifixion and resurrection on the third day. The king was convinced that Jesus was truly the son of God, became a Christian, and allowed Thomas to preach and spread Christianity in his kingdom.

That was the beginning of St. Thomas's ministry in south India. He went around, on foot, to preach the Word; he performed many miracles and Brahmins too were converted. And Thomas baptized those who believed in Jesus Christ. And many literally followed him. And he went south. He ordained priests from the eminent families of Pakalomattom, Sankarapuri, Gokamangalam, Kalli and Kaliankal, and he established seven churches in Malankara. We know that; but the Very Rev. Mathai Cor-Episcopa tells much more, and all in a most simple but engaging way. Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Dr. Radhakrishnan and many other great Indians have attested that Christianity in India dates back to St. Thomas. It could be argued that they were quoting from history books. But surely the testimony of the Church Fathers like St. Jerome should be authentic.

The administration of the churches established by St. Thomas was carried out by Archadeyokons (Arch-Deacons). But then came the colonial powers. The white man came with the Bible, but also with the sword and his swagger and wiles. Then came the Catholic Church and the Goan Inquisition and the Coonan Cross Revolt... Oh what a story we have, as Mathai achen tells it! A topic of special interests for me is the formation of the Orthodox churches in Philadelphia. In that context, I like to add the following. My beloved husband (late) the Very Dr. Yohannan Sankarathil Cor-Episcopa arrived in New York in 1970 on an Ecumenical Scholarship from the Union Theological Seminary, Manhattan; and after his graduation there, the Catholicose H.H. Baselius Augen I gave him a Kalpana on August 2, 1971, appointing him to

organize Orthodox churches in the US. He traveled to New York, Detroit, Washington D.C., etc. and started many churches, all later organized as St. Thomas Churches. I remember, in 1971 Sankarathil Achen conducted the Passion Week services in Philadelphia; as invited by Rev. Dr. Paul Varki; we stayed at his house the whole week. Later on, Sankarathil Achen celebrated the Holy Qurbana in Philadelphia many times. We stayed at Mr. Cheriyan's house. After Mathai Achen arrived in New York and moved to Philadelphia in 1976, the parish was registered as St. Thomas Orthodox Church, Philadelphia.

Those were hard times for Mathai Achen: two little babies, no job, no remuneration from the congregations, constant moving to different locations to conduct services... Then when finally, a church was running smoothly, it split into two! So heartbreaking!! At that time our folks were few and had very little income, and had to support their families back home in Kerala; they were constantly worrying about a place to live in, and for a good source of income. To top it all, as a community of the Orthodox faithful, each Malayalee segment of laity and priest had to build its own place of worship. **'A Journey Back To the Beginning'** is an eye-opening narrative of the initial hardships to find a place to worship and then to build a church, facing the opposition from the local communities. There is much lesson here for the faithful, who are attending our services worry-free. We should never forget those who prepared the path for us. I hope, future generations will not forget the steps made by Achens like the article's author, who walked before us and paved the way for us.

'A Journey Back To the Beginning' is designed for the edification of our younger generation. I should thank God for Mathai Achen's dedication and perseverance in visiting parishes and parishioners far and near, to raise funds for the building of the beautiful church at Bensalem. The St. Gregorios Orthodox Church in Philadelphia is a living testament to Achen's Christian fervor. I should also acknowledge the beautiful lady behind this good and true man of the cloth--Mariamma Kochamma-- who had her own share of trials and sweat, and tears along with Mathai Achen.

Good luck, dear Cor Episcopa Achen, to have a wide range of readers to appreciate this beautiful, educative article. Prayers,

Elcy Yohannan Sankarathil

New York. June 30, 2022.

(Mrs. Elcy Yohannan Sankarathil, wife of the late Very Rev. Dr. Yohannan Sankarathil Cor-Episcopa, is a well-known poetess and writer, has published 12 authentic Poetry books including the translation of 'Gitanjali', the Nobel prize winning poetry of the world-famous poet Rabindra Nadha Tagore, from English to 500 plus rhythmic Malayalam poems. She has won over twenty well recognized awards; has been with the thick and thin of the American Church history of the Malankara Orthodox churches since 1970. She was an Engineer of the DPW Nassau Country, retired after 35 years of meritorious service, is quite involved with the Church life, and is a member of the St. Thomas Orthodox Church, Levittown, Long Island, New York.)

Editor's Note:

The Very Rev. K. Mathai Cor episcopos, the author of this history of our Church is not a stranger to any Malayalee Christian who migrated to the Philadelphia Metropolitan Region in this land of opportunity, during the 1970s, '80s and beyond. From the time we first met in Philadelphia in 1976, my association with Mathai Achen has been a cornerstone of my commitment to religious activities in the United States.

Our continued friendship grew over the years, and I was humbled to be his confidant during both good times and challenging occasions during his service as the vicar of the first Orthodox parish in Philadelphia. As an active member of Philadelphia Indian Orthodox community for over four decades, I can attest to the authenticity and trustworthiness of the facts contained in Mathai Achen's words, regarding the establishment of the first Orthodox parish in Philadelphia in 1976.

My first association with Mathai Achen was during the Holy Week services of 1976, held in a Center City church. The congregation represented all Kerala Christian denominations who had settled in the greater Philadelphia region. My impression of Achen was that he was a strict Orthodox priest with an unwavering faith in God, the Church, and its traditions. He has continued to embrace these traditions to this day. I am honored to have had the opportunity to edit Mathai Achen's manuscript. I was assisted by Mathai Achen's daughter, Sheena Jacob.

Mathai Achen's manuscript includes a history of our Church, starting with the arrival of Saint Thomas to the Kerala coast and highlighting the effects of the colonial era on the Malankara Church. Achen takes an honest but critical view of the early colonial powers who tried to destroy the faith and traditions of the Malankara Church, while highlighting the good deeds of the British towards the Church. In this book, he has also chronicled the events leading to the establishment of an Orthodox parish in Philadelphia. Mathai Achen's leadership in the formation of the first Orthodox parish in Philadelphia is indisputable and I am grateful to Mathai Achen for documenting our history in a way that can be passed down to our children and generations to come.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Achen for his mentorship. I served under him at the altar for many years and followed his advice which helped me in solidifying my commitment to serve the Church in any way possible. Thank you, Achen, for giving me the opportunity to serve in the parish administration for over three decades.

Korah T. Mani

My Father as a Priest

I am Sheena Jacob, one of Mathai Achen's twin daughters. As a high school English teacher, I am proud and privileged to have assisted in editing my father's book because it is a testament to his years of service as a priest in the Philadelphia area. He has always been a firm believer and follower of the Orthodox faith and traditions, exemplified by his account of the origin and plight of St. Thomas Christians and his dedication to establishing the first parish in Philadelphia in this manuscript.

In the years growing up with my father, I saw him and my mother tirelessly serve the Church family while tending to our family. Witnessing my father's dedication to the Church entrusted to him by God, our entire family became part of the mission of serving in the liturgy, various group activities, and community service, starting from the Church we rented on Market Street to the Church we bought on Torresdale Avenue. Through the prudent leadership of my father, who was aware that the youth were foundational to the prosperity of the future Church, he especially nurtured youth activities, enabling the younger generation to take the lead of the present-day Church as it continues to flourish.

Over the years, our family experienced immense struggles to bring my father's dream to life; however, with our Church family's hard work, perseverance, and divine providence, a beautiful Church designed like the ones in Kerala was finally built in Bensalem. Witnessing the tremendous effort of my father, we, his three children, have adopted his missionary spirit and faithfully serve in our respective parishes. Our children have also gained their grandfather's spiritual zeal, exemplified in my son, Seth Jacob, who designed this book's front and back cover as a tribute to his grandfather.

I hope this book will help younger generations admire the plight of the early Indian Orthodox immigrant pioneers in establishing the first parish of the Malankara Orthodox Church in Philadelphia and also help them increase their commitment to continue working zealously for spreading the Word of God among our Orthodox Christians beyond the boundaries of Philadelphia.

Sheena Jacob



The Northeast American Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

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By the Grace of God,
Zachariah Mar Nicholovos,
Diocesan Metropolitan

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Blessings to our Very Reverend K. Mathai Chor Episcopos!

We are pleased to know that you are publishing a book which offers insight and reflections on the history of our Church in the Philadelphia area. Our Achen has served as one of the pioneer priests in the Church in North America, and tirelessly catered to the spiritual needs of the flock of Christ. The Church cannot forget your dedicated labors, which is an reflection of your commitment to Christ and His Church.

We pray that this book will help our younger faithful remember the tears, prayers and struggle of our clergy and parents to ensure the horns of the Church are exalted in North America.

May the blessings and mercies of God Almighty be showered upon us.

Yours in our Lord,

Zachariah Mar Nicholovos, Metropolitan

Appreciation:

It is with great pleasure and deep appreciation that we introduce this remarkable book, a meticulously researched and enlightening account of the Origin and Development of the Malankara Orthodox Churches in India and its extension in Philadelphia. This work, authored by Very Rev. K. Mathai Corepiscopus, the vicar emeritus of the St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church in Bensalem, who holds the esteemed title of being the first official vicar of the Malankara Orthodox Church in Philadelphia, is a testament to the rich history and spiritual journey of community in this vibrant city.

As we delve into the history of the Malankara Orthodox Church in Philadelphia, we must recognize the tireless efforts of our forefathers, spiritual leaders, and the congregation who have labored diligently to establish a spiritual sanctuary in this city. The story that Mathai Achen aims to tell is one of the sacrifice, unity, and unshakable commitment to upholding the faith handed down through generations. Throughout the pages of this book, we will discover the humble beginnings to the establishment of vibrant parishes intertwined with the cultural fabric of both Kerala and the United States. It is our aspiration that this book will kindle a desire for unity and continued growth in our parishes, strengthening the bonds that have held us together through ages.

Mathai Achen's devotion to the Malankara Orthodox community and his commitment to preserving its history and heritage is commendable. I extend heartfelt appreciation for his tireless efforts in chronicling the journey of the Malankara Orthodox Churches in Philadelphia. Through his work, we gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, triumphs, and the unwavering faith that has fueled the growth of this church community.

I am confident that this book will serve as an invaluable resource for future generations to understand the origins, challenges, and growth of this faith community in the city. We express our deepest appreciation for his work and hope that it inspires others to continue documenting and celebrating the rich heritage of the Malankara Orthodox Church in Philadelphia. Let us embark on this journey together, celebrating the faith, hope and love that Jesus Christ instilled in us through the Apostolic ministry of St. Thomas and his successors.

On a personal note, I would like to express my appreciation to Mathai Achen, for establishing the current Orthodox church in Bensalem. I was blessed and privileged to take charge as the vicar of this truly blessed parish after Mathai Achen left for Kerala.

May all glory and honor to the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, one Triune God for ever and ever.

Rev. Fr. Shibu Venad Mathai, Vicar
St. Gregorios Orthodox Church, Bensalem, PA.

A JOURNEY BACK TO THE BEGINNING

GRATITUDE

For many years, I have hoped to document and illuminate the events leading to the establishment in 1976 of a parish in the City of Philadelphia under the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. As a humble servant of the Church, I thank God Almighty for giving me the opportunity to shepherd the Orthodox Church members who settled in and around Philadelphia in the 1970s and for the chance to tell our story here. It is my honor and privilege to present this short and simple account of the activities leading to the establishment of the first Orthodox parish in Philadelphia.

I would like to express my utmost respect and gratitude to our Diocesan metropolitan, His Grace Zachariah Mar Nicholovos for issuing the Kalpana with episcopal blessing for this book. I am especially thankful for Thirumeni's prayer that this book will help our younger faithful remember the tears, prayers and struggles involved, to ensure the horns of the Church are exalted in North America.

I am indebted to the first metropolitan of the American Diocese, H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios, and also to H.G. Mathews Mar Barnabas for their support and encouragement of the growth of our parish. I must also thank the vicars of the area parishes that were organized in the subsequent decades, for their partnership and recognition of this part of our church history. I am most grateful to the Orthodox Church believers who worked to start the first Philadelphia parish in 1976.

I am also grateful to my dear friend of more than 40 years, Mr. Korah Mani, who invested a lot of time and efforts in editing this short history. He has always been a trusted support during my decades of service to the parish, including some very difficult and trying situations. My deepest thanks to Elcy kochamma (wife of Late the Very Rev. Sankarathil Cor episcopa) for writing the PREFACE to this book which in fact is a summary of the book itself.

It is difficult to put into words my gratitude to my family for standing with me through the unique challenges of establishing our church and for their commitment to helping it flourish. Finally, I owe particular thanks to my dear daughter Sheena Jacob for lending her talent and guidance to putting my memories into words so that the history of our parish can be shared with generations to come.

1. CHRISTIANITY

(a) Origin of Christianity

The history of the Christian religion and the Christian Church began with Jesus Christ and His apostles. Christianity is the religion that is based on the birth, life, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus. Christianity began in the 1st century AD after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the beginning, Christianity was primarily an Asian-African religion. Only by the 4th century, did the Roman Empire become increasingly Christian. Starting as a small group of Jewish people in Judea, it spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire, and despite early persecution of Christians, it later became the state religion.

Christianity kept many practices of the Jewish tradition, and considered the Jewish scriptures to be sacred, and used mostly the Septuagint translation of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Christianity also considered and accepted the writings of the Jewish Prophets, which were referenced throughout the New Testament books. Christianity continued many Judaic practices, liturgical worship, use of incense, an altar, a set of scriptural readings adapted from synagogue practice, use of sacred music in hymns and prayer, and a religious calendar. They also followed the practice of an exclusively male priesthood and ascetic practices.

(b) Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Church is one of the earliest Christian Churches in the world. The Orthodox Church of India is the true and faithful successor of all the Apostolic Churches. The Roman Catholic Church as a group broke off from the true tradition of the Christian Church in the 6th century. The Protestant Churches broke off from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century.

The Indian Orthodox Church is also known as the Orthodox Church of the East, Orthodox Syrian Church of the East, and Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. It is among the newest members of the 'Oriental Orthodox Churches'. Other members of the Oriental Orthodox Churches are the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Collectively, these Churches consider themselves to be the one, holy, and apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ in His Great Commission. The bishops of these Churches are the successors of Christ's Apostles.

(c) Oriental Orthodox Churches

The Oriental Orthodox Churches are a group of Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches, with a total worldwide population of approximately 60 million members. They played a prominent role in the history and culture of Armenia, Egypt, Eritria, Ethiopia, Sudan, and some parts of Western Asia and India.

(1) The Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church was started during the mission of the Apostle Bartholomew together with Thaddaus of Edessa, in the first century, AD.

(2) The Coptic Orthodox Church was founded by the Apostle St. Mark in 50 AD.

(3) Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Church was founded by St. Thomas the Apostle of Christ in 52 AD.

(4) The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was evangelized by St. Matthew and St. Bartholomew in the first century AD. The first Ethiopian convert was the eunuch in Jerusalem, as mentioned in Acts of the Apostles 8: 27-40.

(5) The Syrian Orthodox Church in Antioch was started by Apostle St. Peter, in the first century AD.

(6) Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church is the latest addition into the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches. The name Eritrea is related to the Red Sea, which was then called the Eritrean Sea from the Greek word for 'Red'. After World War II, Eritrea was annexed to Ethiopia. In 1991 Eritrea became independent, and the Church was separated from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The Oriental Orthodox Churches are distinguished by their recognition of only the first three ecumenical councils held during the time Christianity became the State religion of the Roman Empire. These Great Councils are: the First Council of Nicea in AD 325, the Second Council of Constantinople in AD 381, and the Council of Ephesus in AD 431.

The Ecclesiology, according to the Oriental Orthodox Churches, contains four attributes of the Church that are One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, as we recite in the third paragraph of the Nicene Creed.

The Christological doctrine upheld by the Oriental Orthodox Churches is Miaphysitism, believing that the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ are united. His divinity did not separate from His humanity, and He who is God eternal and invisible,

became visible in the flesh and took upon Himself the form of a servant. In Him are preserved all the properties of humanity together in a real, perfect, indivisible and inseparable union, (as pointed out in the common declaration by the Pope of Alexandria, Pope Shenouda III).

A doctrinal agreement on Christology was signed on June 3, 1990 by Basileos Marthoma Mathew 1, Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and Pope John Paul II of the Roman Catholic Church in which they explicitly spoke of natures of Jesus in plural, "Our Lord Jesus is one, perfect in His Divinity and perfect in His humanity, consubstantial with His Father in His Divinity, and consubstantial with us in His humanity. His humanity is one with His divinity -without change, without co-mingling, without division and without separation. "It is the common faith and continuous loyalty to Apostolic tradition that should be the basis for our unity and communion."

The above explanations support the Christological faith and apostolic traditions of Oriental Orthodox Churches, and the Malankara Orthodox (Indian) Church also is a part of this group of Churches.

2. CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

(a) Visit of Saint Thomas to Malankara

There are different opinions about the origin of Christianity in India. One of them is that foreign missionaries from other countries such as Holland, Portugal and Great Britain who came to India for their business purposes had started Christianity in India. Upon careful study and research, it is believed that Christianity in India started with St. Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, who came to India in AD 52. Valid references of the church fathers of 3rd and 4th centuries, and the statements of the political leaders of India, and available records and statements will prove the connection of St. Thomas to the origin of Christianity in the Indian subcontinent.

There is a strong and unquestionable tradition that Christianity was founded in India in A.D. 52 by Saint Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ. St. Thomas was the Apostle who had touched with his hands on the wounds on the body of the Resurrected Christ, and declared his faith in Christ by saying, "My Lord and my God" (St. John 20:28).

St. Thomas obeyed the commandments of his Lord and God, Jesus Christ, who appointed the Apostles, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in Heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name

of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; I am with you always, even to the end of the age, Amen.” (St. Matthew 28:19).

Traditions say that at the time of the dispersal of the Apostles to various nations for mission after the feast of Pentecost, St. Thomas was given the choice for the mission works among the Parthians, Medes, Persians, and finally in India. It is said that ‘while St. Peter started the Christian Church in Antioch, St. Thomas established the Christian Church in India in almost the same time period.’

Some people may ask whether there is any evidence to support that St. Thomas the Apostle of Christ, founded Christianity in India. Did anyone other than St. Thomas come to India with the Good News of Salvation through Jesus Christ? Surely, there are plenty of documentaries and statements of famous ecclesiastical and political leaders which relate St. Thomas the Apostle of Christ, to the founding of Christianity in India in the first century.

The history of the founding of Christianity in India can be briefly narrated from the following references:

- Acts of Thomas, also called Acta Thoma
- The evidences that support that St. Thomas started Christianity in India
- Statements of Church Fathers of 3rd and 4th century
- Statements of prominent Indian statesmen
- Records that prove the St. Thomas tradition
- Further references about St. Thomas Christians

(b) The Acts of St. Thomas

It is the book that provided the earliest record that sheds some light on the faith and tradition of our Church, which says that St. Thomas founded Christianity in India. It is the apocryphal book of the Acts of Judas Thomas (St. Thomas), written in Syriac, in Edessa (called Urfa) in eastern Turkey. The book provides sufficient believable explanations about the circumstances that led St. Thomas to come to India, such as the following:

There was a king named Gundaphur, a ruler in Mazdai in South India. He wanted to build a new palace for himself; he appointed his minister Habban to find an efficient architect to carry out the building project. Habban was very worried about how and where to find an efficient architect, and if he could not find one, he had to face severe consequences from the king. In such a situation, one day, the Lord Jesus

appeared to Habban in a dream and asked him to go to the Middle-East where he could find the expert architect he was searching for.

In those days, Malabar Coast, which is the modern-day Kerala, had active trade- relations with Middle Eastern countries. The merchants from these countries visited the Malabar Coast frequently, for purchasing merchandise such as spices, pepper etc. With the help of the merchants, Habban traveled and reached the Middle East. During the search for an architect, one day Habban had a dream again in which Christ said to him that he would meet a man, whose name was Thomas and that, he could be the architect whom he was searching for. Habban found out a man whose name was Thomas whom he saw in his dream. During a conversation with Thomas, Habban was convinced that he was a capable architect. Habban returned to Malabar (Kerala), with the architect Thomas; they landed first in a place called “Maliankara”, a city on the Malabar Coast of India, in Kerala, in AD 52.

Habban hurried to the palace to see the king Gundaphur, and introduced Thomas to the king as the most competent architect he could find, as a result of his search in the Middle East. The king discussed with Thomas, the details of the structure and beauty of the building to be constructed. Thomas agreed that he would build a beautiful palace to the king’s pleasure. The king hired Thomas as the architect to build his palace and entrusted him with enough money for completing the work. The king showed Thomas the site where to build the palace.

Thomas started the palace construction in his own way. He found out that there were many people in the community around the site of the palace who were poor, and that they were suffering from hunger, sickness, and homelessness. Thomas spent the entire amount of money he received from the king for the construction of the palace to help in meeting the surrounding community’s needs. Thomas had to report to the king about the progress of the construction, and finally, he informed the king that a beautiful palace had been built in the king’s name.

The king was eager to see his new palace, and went with Thomas to the site, but the king could not find any palace there, as Thomas said. Then the king asked Thomas, “Where is the palace, show me?” Then, Thomas answered, “Oh, honorable Majesty, I have built a beautiful palace in Heaven in your name with the money you entrusted me with, but you cannot see it here now. You will see it when you get there. Here, I spent all the money you gave me to help the people suffering from poverty, homelessness and various illnesses. Your Majesty, they also are your people.” The king became very angry and ordered his servants to cast Thomas in to prison.

soul of the departed Gad went to Heaven, the angel showed him a beautiful palace with the name of his brother written on it. Immediately, Gad's soul appeared to his brother, Gundaphur in a dream and told him, "When I went to Heaven, I saw a beautiful palace there with your name on it." The king was surprised at this happy news and believed it. He regretted for punishing Thomas, and finally released him from prison.

Then, king Gundaphur asked Thomas, "who are you? Tell me, why are all things happening this way?" Then Thomas introduced himself to the king that he was one of the twelve disciples of a great man named, Jesus Christ and that Jesus was really the God-Incarnate, and He was both God and man. He was sent by God, his Father from Heaven to earth to save all mankind in this world and to take them to Heaven. He was born from a virgin woman named Mary of Nazareth without relation with a man, and that was the way of His coming to this world. He lived in this world as fully human, and fully God, for 33 years. During his last three years he performed several miracles. He healed many sick people with incurable diseases like leprosy, paralysis, and affliction of evil spirits. He had fed more than five thousand hungry people with five loaves of bread and two pieces of fish in a desert place. He preached the message of salvation to millions and promised the Kingdom of Heaven to those who believed in Him and were baptized in His name.

St. Thomas continued his message to the king, saying that Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross and shed His blood for the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of all mankind. His dead body was buried in a tomb. On the third day, He was resurrected and appeared to His disciples including St. Thomas, and to many other people. He stayed on the earth for forty days after resurrection. Before His ascension to Heaven, He empowered His eleven disciples including St. Thomas, to proclaim the message of salvation worldwide. Apostle Thomas said, "I came here and am standing before you by the help and guidance of the resurrected Jesus Christ, our master."

Finally, the king Gundaphur and his family believed in Jesus Christ and accepted Him as their Savior and got baptized by St. Thomas, in Jesus' name, and thus they became Christians. The king then allowed St. Thomas to continue his mission and preach the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, to all people in his kingdom, and to baptize those who believe in the name of Jesus Christ.

(c) Mission of St. Thomas in Malabar Coast (Kerala)

With the permission of king Gondaphur, St. Thomas continued his mission in Malabar Coast. One day, when he was passing through a community pool, he saw a few

men who were Hindu Poojaries (Hindu Brahmin priests), standing in the pool and throwing water upwards as part of their morning worship ritual. After watching the ritual for some time, St. Thomas asked the Poojaries whether they could keep the thrown-up water stay there without falling down. He also said to them, "If you can do it in your god's name, then I will worship your god. If you can't, and 'if I can do it in the name of my God, can you worship my God named Jesus Christ?"

Agreeing to the challenge of St. Thomas, the Brahmins tried several times to throw the water up and stop it up in the air, but they failed. Then, St. Thomas got into the pool and threw the water up, and it stayed up in the air without falling down. He did the same ritual three times in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, successfully. The Brahmins were surprised and accepted their inability to meet the challenge of St. Thomas. Then, they believed in Jesus Christ as their God and savior and were baptized in His name by St. Thomas. They became Christians and faithful followers of St. Thomas.

3. FORMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN INDIA

(a) Establishing of Prayer Homes

After these miraculous events, St. Thomas continued his mission among the people who were mainly Hindus. As a result of his earnest faith and mission work, many Hindus believed in Jesus Christ as their savior. Those who believed were baptized by St. Thomas. He built small houses in several places for the believers to pray and worship together. These places of worship became the earliest churches of Kerala. These seven churches are the following:

Palayoor (Chavakad),
Maliankara (Cranganore),
Parur (Kottackav/Koovakayal),
Gokamangalam ((South Pallipuram),
Niranam,
Chayal (Nilackel), and
Quilon.

It is also believed that the Apostle had erected a cross at Thiruvithamcode, which is the southern tip of the current state of Kerala.

Since St. Thomas landed first in a place called Maliankara in Kerala, the Indian Orthodox Church assumed the name 'Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India. Thus,

the history of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church goes back to the first churches or places of worship established by St. Thomas, and the priesthood inherited from the first priests ordained by St. Thomas. Thus, the Malankara Orthodox Church is the one established by St. Thomas; the members of this Church are known as St. Thomas Christians.

Priests were required to lead the converted Christians. St. Thomas ordained and appointed priests for leading and guiding them in Christian faith. He selected certain candidates from the baptized Brahmin families, and ordained them as priests. These first priests were from the eminent families of Pakalomattom, Sankarapuri, Kalli, and Kaliyankal.

(b) Statements of Church Fathers of 3rd and 4th centuries

There are several valid evidences to support that St. Thomas was the founder of Christianity in India. Important among them are the honest statements made by the famous church fathers who lived and worked for the church in third and fourth centuries. Their statements were about the mission of St. Thomas, the Apostle of India, and that he started Christianity there. Some of the testimonies about St. Thomas, are the following:

(1) Clement of Alexandria in 3rd Century.

Clement of Alexandria has made some passing reference about the apostolate of St. Thomas in Parthian and Indian churches. This is in agreement with the testimony that Eusebios recorded about Pantaenus' visit to India.

(2) Doctrine of the 3rd Century Apostles

"After the death of the Apostle (Thomas), there were guides and rulers in the Churches. They also have committed and delivered to their disciples after them, everything which they had received from Thomas Apostle...and also what Judas Thomas had written from India." It is also said that "India and all its own countries, and bordering on it, even to the farther seas, received the Apostle's hand of priesthood (from Thomas), who was a Guide and Ruler in the Church which he built and ministered there". (Didymus Judas Thomas is the full name of St. Thomas, the Apostle).

(3) St. Ephrem of 4th Century

St. Ephrem, one of the 4th century church fathers has written many devotional hymns. In his writings he said, 'There the devil speaks of "St. Thomas as the Apostle

I slew in India, also the merchant brought the bones to Edessa.” Again St. Ephrem speaks of the mission of Thomas Apostle, “A land of people in dark fell to thy lot, a tainted land Thomas has purified, India’s darkness was flooded with light by (Saint) Thomas”.

(4) St. Jerome (AD 342-420).

St. Jerome said “He (Christ) dwelt in all places, with Thomas in India, Peter at Rome, and Paul in Illyricum” which is a region on the shore of Adriatic.

(5) Gregory of Nazianzus of Alexandrian Church, (4th Century)

This honorable church father said, “Peter may have belonged to Judea, but what had Paul in common with the gentiles, Luke with Achaia, Andrew with Epirus, John with Ephesus, Thomas with India, Mark with Italy.”

Also, according to tradition, Bishop Thomas of Cana (Knai Thomman) was a prominent Knanaya merchant who came to Malabar Coast in AD 345, with 72 families and settled in Kerala, India. It proves the fact that there were Christians during the 4th Century in India.

The above noted historical references made by the church fathers in 3rd and 4th centuries, give us enough confirmation for St. Thomas apostle’s role in establishing Christianity first in India. Also, it proves that there was Christian community in the Malabar Coast of Kerala, India, many centuries before the foreign missionaries landed in India. They had fresh knowledge about the countries where all the apostles went and carried out their mission works entrusted to them by their Master, Jesus Christ.

(6). Pope John Paul II, the 20th century Roman Catholic Church father made an inspiring statement when he visited St. Thomas Shrine in Madras, India, on February 5, 1986. The Pope said, “It is an honor and special grace for me to come to the Cathedral Basilica of St. Thomas the Apostle, here in Madras. It calls to my mind, not only St. Thomas and his martyrdom, but also all the others after him, who have dedicated their lives to the preaching of the Gospel.”

Besides these statements, there are many other church and political leaders, who have declared that Apostle St. Thomas is the founder of the Christian Church in India. Thus, Indian Christians are known as St. Thomas Christians.

(c) Statements of prominent Indian statesmen

Not only the church fathers, but the famous Indian political leaders also have made statements regarding St. Thomas Apostle's arrival in India and starting Christianity first in India in AD 52. Some of those statements are the following:

(1) Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India (1947 – 1964)

In his book "Glimpses of World History", Jawaharlal Nehru wrote, "Remember, St. Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe had not yet become Christian, and those Indians trace their Christianity to him (St. Thomas) and have a longer history and a higher ancestry than that of the Christians of many of European countries. And it is really a matter of pride that it so happened."

(2) Dr. S. Rajendra Prasad, President of India (1952-1962)

In a speech at the occasion of St. Thomas Day celebrations in New Delhi on December 18, 1955, the president of India, Dr. S. Rajendra Prasad said "Christianity has flourished in India from the beginning of the Christian era. The Syrian Christians of Malabar believe that their form of Christianity is Apostolic, delivered directly from Apostle Thomas..."

(3) Dr. Radhakrishnan, President of India, (1962 – 1967).

In his book, "East and West in Religion", Dr. Radhakrishnan said, "Christianity in India dates back to the days of St. Thomas, one of the original disciples of the Lord Jesus."

The above statements stand unique because they were made by non-Christian political heads of a country whose vast majority of population is composed of non-Christian citizens. The political heads were honest in their statements recognizing the St. Thomas apostolate of Christianity in India, and thus the Indian Christians are referred to as St. Thomas Christians.

(d) Vital records as proof of the St. Thomas tradition in India

Most importantly, in December 2, 1964, Indian Post and Telegraphs department issued a 15-paise Indian stamp with a message on it, "St. Thomas Commemoration Stamp" in honor of St. Thomas, the Apostle of India. It is really a proof of the recognition that Indian government had given to St. Thomas Christians in this great Indian sub-continent.

(e) Other references about St. Thomas Christians

The sources of the oral tradition in Kerala including written and unwritten songs and stories regarding St. Thomas and his mission, are still a living history. The most famous of these are ceremonial songs used at marriage and feast-day celebrations:

(1). **The Thomas Ramban Pattu** is claimed to have been originally composed by the first disciple of Apostle St. Thomas in Malabar (Kerala). In its present version, it is possibly a 16th century re-interpreted version by Thomas Ramban Mallikal, who was a link in the 48th ancestry line of the priests ordained by St. Thomas. Recently these songs are known as the *Mar Thoma Geetham*.

According to these songs St. Thomas came to Kodungallur in AD 52, and founded seven churches in Kerala. There is a very clear listing of the many miracles that St. Thomas had performed in Malabar coast (Kerala).

(2). There is another song which describes the visit of St. Thomas in Kerala and it is known as the **Margam Kalli Pattu**, which means the *Song of the Way*. It describes the introduction of the *Marga* or the Christian way, or the way of worship in Kerala. Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India continues to keep many of the St. Thomas traditions handed over through generations.

(3). **Malankara Marthoma Nazranis**. The earlier St. Thomas Christians in Kerala are known as 'Nazranis' or 'Nazrani Mappilla'. Nazrani means 'Christian' and it appears to be derived from the name of the place Nazareth. People from Nazareth including Jesus Christ were known as Nazarenes. The word Mappilla is a title of honor applied to the members of non-Hindu religions, for example Muslims. Some of the Christians of the former kingdom of Travancore still continue to use this honorable title of Mapilla with their names.

(4). St. Thomas Christians are often called **Syrian Christians** because of their ancient connection to the Church of the East and the use of Syriac as their liturgical language.

Syriac, a derivative of Aramaic, was the language of Christ. The Syriac language is divided between East Syriac and West Syriac. An example of this difference is in their pronunciation of a familiar term used before names of bishops – **mAr (Mar) in East**, and **mOr (Mor) in West**, whose literal meaning is 'my Lord'. Another term for the Christians in Kerala is Malabar or Malankara Marthoma Nazranis since Kerala was known as Malabar then.

The Indian Orthodox Church assumed its name as '*Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church*' in honor of its origin and continuity of the Church established by St. Thomas who landed first in a place called '*Maliankara*'. Historically speaking, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is the only Christian Church in India that keeps the unbroken lineage from the first churches that St. Thomas Apostle has established in AD 52, although several other Churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, and the protestant Churches have tried to establish their supremacy over the Malankara St. Thomas Christians.

(5). The Visit of Pantaenus. Another evidence that points to the origin of Christianity in India in the first century AD, is the travel reports of the world traveler Pantaenus. In AD 190, Pantaenus from Alexandria visited the Christians in Kerala and he found them using the Gospel of St. Matthew in Hebrew language. Eusebius of Caesarea says that Pantaenus mentioned in his travel report about the Gospel of St. Matthew that had been brought to them (Indians) by Apostle Bartholomew.

Some historians are suspicious of whether St. Thomas was the founder of Christianity in India. They say that there is not enough evidence to prove it. However, the presence of St. Thomas Nazranis, and St. Thomas Mount in Mylapore, the statements of famous political heads, and testimonies of AD 3rd, 4th and 20th centuries' church fathers are proof for supporting that Apostle St. Thomas came to India and established Christianity there in AD 52.

4. HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF MALANKARA ORTHODOX CHURCH

(a) Martyrdom of Apostle Thomas

After the Church was established by St. Thomas in Malankara, the Apostle went to Malaysia and China and established churches there. He returned to India in A.D 72. It is believed that four soldiers of King Mazdai (Vasudeva) of the Kushan dynasty in the South, speared St. Thomas in Madras. He was martyred at a nearby place which is currently known as St. Thomas Mount, and his martyrdom is remembered by the Church during December 18 to 21. The bodily remains of the apostle were transferred to Edessa in Persia in A.D 165. Writers of the 4th century, St. Ephraim and St. Chrysostom have mentioned about the relics of St. Thomas resting at that time in Edessa, having been brought there from India by West Asian merchants. Some of the relics of St. Thomas were returned to India in A D 1965 by the then Catholicos of the Church, H.H. Ougen Mar Baselius Catholicos and placed at the Catholicate Cathedral at Devalokam, Kerala.

(b) Church Administration During the first 15 Centuries

The historical evidence and the influence of local traditions point out that the Church in the early centuries sustained basic autonomy by the simple expression of its own faith and culture. For a long period, the Church had been without a bishop, and was led by an Archdeacon. The Church leaders had requested other Churches to help restore the episcopate in India. At the request of Thomas Christians, the 'Jacobite' bishop, Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem came to India in AD 1664 and confirmed the episcopal consecration of Mar Thoma I as the head of the Orthodox Church of India. In AD 1685 Catholicos Yeldo Mar Baselius of the Antiochian Church arrived in Kothamangalam at the request of Mar Thoma II of Malankara Orthodox Church. Due to the treacherous journey to India, in a couple of days after his arrival, the Catholicos departed from his earthly abode.

The Synod of Jerusalem of the Eastern Orthodox Church held in AD 1672 approved the Catholicate of the East established in Persia. The headquarters of the Church was first at Uraha, then Seleucia, Tigris, and Musal. Due to religious persecutions, the Church in Persia became weak. In 1912, with the help of the Antiochian Patriarch Abdel Meshiho, the Catholicate See of Persia was revived and moved to Kerala, India, thus establishing the Catholicate there. The Church Headquarters is the Catholicate Palace, Devalokam, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

(c) St. Thomas Christians Under Foreign Powers

(1) The administration before foreign interference

The administration of the Church established by St. Thomas before the arrival of foreign powers, was carried out by an ecclesiastical head known as Arkadiyakan (Arch-Deacon) who had spiritual and temporal powers. Arkadiyakan presided over the assembly (Synod) and was responsible for overseeing the welfare of the Church. The Arkadiyakan's fidelity to the Law of Thomas (Thomayude Margam) was the touchstone of his authenticity and Orthodoxy.

However, later, Indian Orthodox Church had to suffer from the interference in its internal matters by several foreign Church authorities. Most of the stress and strain suffered by the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (St. Thomas Christian Church) was from the Portuguese Roman Catholics. In their combined zeal to colonize and proselytize, they did not readily grasp the way of life of the St. Thomas Christians accommodating varied Eastern Christian thought and influence, while preserving the core of their original faith. The Portuguese tried to bring the St. Thomas Christians under Roman-Syrian prelates.

When the British Protestant missionaries came to India, they encouraged reformation within the Orthodox Church partly through Anglican domination of the Theological Seminary in Kottayam. They encouraged the Orthodox Church members to join the Anglican congregations since AD 1836. However, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church leadership fought to maintain their faith and traditions carried over from the time St. Thomas established the Church in India.

(2) Malankara St. Thomas Church under Catholic Supremacy

After the Dutch administration in India, the Portuguese were the foreign sovereign rulers over India. Under the command of Alvares Cabral, the Portuguese arrived at Calicut on 13th September, 1500. In January 1501 Alvares Cabral and his team met the well-established communities of Malabari Jews and St. Thomas Christians at Kodungallur Kingdom, for the first time. The Portuguese were surprised to see the presence of St. Thomas Christians in Malankara (Malabar). They (Portuguese) were annoyed by the fact that the native Indian Christians were not under Rome and that they never heard of the Pope. The Franciscan priests who came with Alvares Cabral then started their Latin/Roman Catholic rite in India at this period. As local Kingdoms permitted people of India to have trading with Portuguese, the traders among Malankara Nazranis also began trading with them as other communities did. In AD 1505 the Portuguese king appointed his Viceroy in India and it was considered as the beginning of colonial period in India.

(3) The visit of the archbishop Menezes in Kerala

The Portuguese archbishop Menezes arrived in Kochi in February 1599 with a mission of stopping the use of Syriac language for liturgy, and changing the religious rites of the St. Thomas Christians in India to that of Latin Rite. A letter written by Archbishop Menezes to the Patriarch of Jerusalem who lived in Rome, in 1597, says that he intended to hold a Synod of priests to bring Syrian Christians (St. Thomas Christians) under the control of Rome, and persuade them to accept the sovereign authority of the bishop appointed by the Pope, and also to persuade them to give up Syriac.

The Archdeacon, the head of St. Thomas Christians opposed the intervention of Menezes, the bishop of Goa, in the internal affairs of the Malankara St. Thomas Christian Church. But the Archdeacon did not oppose the bishop of Goa's visit to St. Thomas churches, treating him like any other foreign Bishop, as was the culture of Malankara Nazranis. A pact was made with bishop Menezes, specifying that he (bishop) should not exercise his powers during his visits. One of the conditions was

that the archbishop should be escorted by the Archdeacon. Both agreed to summon a Synod known as the Udayamperoor Synod immediately.

(4) Udayamperoor Synod

The Archdeacon preferred to conduct the Synod at Angamaly. However, Archbishop Menezes did not agree to it, because he thought there was little support for him at Angamaly. Therefore, he selected Udayamperoor, a town near Ernakulam, expecting more support from the local ruler of Kochi, where the Portuguese soldiers had camped at.

Archbishop Menezes issued a circular from Chendamangalam in May 1599 about holding a Synod. In the circular the following conditions were stated:

(a). The Synod was being organized per the powers delegated to him by Pope Clement VIII and also in his (Bishop Menezes) capacity as the primate of the East.

(b). The Archdeacon, the priests and four laymen elected by the general body from each church, should attend the Synod.

(c). Those who fail to attend the Synod without giving valid reasons would face (Maharon) punishment.

(d). There was no head of the Church or ecclesiastical council to govern the Malabar diocese; now the administration was taken over by the Archbishop of Goa. In this context, the circular was being issued by Menezes as the Primate of the East and the Archbishop of all the churches in the country. The circular also indicated that it should be read in all the churches and posted on the church doors for the laymen's information.

After the issuance of the circular to the attendees of the Synod, a meeting was called. On the second day of the Synod, the Archbishop Menezes demanded that all the participants should make a public declaration of the faith that is read to them. The Archdeacon was the first to deliver the public declaration kneeling before the archbishop, then the priests were to follow it. A priest from Palluruthy read the declaration in Malayalam from the pulpit and others repeated it. It was decided that priests who were absent should do the same, and otherwise they would face (Maharon) punishment.

All the things related to faith and rites including sacraments such as baptism, Holy

Rite), and use of 'Thaksa' (book of liturgy) were discussed at the Synod. The Synod also discussed transfer of property, social system of untouchability, right of inheritance, ordination, marriage, traditions, style of dress, celebration of Onam and other Hindu festivals, and communal distinctions, thus passing 24 decrees dealing with social life. When the Synod was over, Archbishop Menezes signed the documents in English, while the Archdeacon signed them in Malayalam.

Menezes informed the gathering that they should conserve a copy of the signed document at the seminary in Vipin Fort and another at the Bishop's House in Angamaly. The English translation of the canons of the Udayamperoor (Diamper) Synod was published as "The Act and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper."

(5) The history after Udayamperoor Synod

The imposition of the Udayamperoor Synod's decrees negatively impacted upon St. Thomas Christians. They were forced to give up the faith and teachings of St. Thomas, which they had been following since the origin of Christianity in India. The system of appointing priests in churches began after the Synod. The high priests used to stay in their homes and performed religious rites. Marriage for priests was banned by the Synod. It also banned Christians from observing Hindu customs and celebrating Hindu festivals like Onam.

Bishop Menezes visited parishes of St. Thomas Christians and lured them to join Roman Catholic Church. Appointing priests he ordained, as vicars at various parishes against the approval of Arkadiyakan (Archdeacon). In 1597 Menezes started to pressure Arkadiyakan Geevarghese to accept Roman supremacy, thus forcing Roman Catholic supremacy upon the Church of St. Thomas Christians in India.

The bishop played five well-planned maneuvers to force the St. Thomas Christians to obey Rome, as shown below:

- (1). Bring the Church of St. Thomas under the control of the administration of Portuguese authority.
- (2). Subject the Church to a Latinization process by establishing two clergy-training institutes.
- (3). Force the Kerala Church to terminate all contacts with the East Syrian Church.
- (4). Force the whole Church of St. Thomas to go through a representative assembly, subjected to Rome.

(5). Impose direct rule of the Roman Catholic administration, and destroy the precious indigenous heritage of the St. Thomas Church.

Along with the Portuguese authorities, the Augustinian, Franciscan, Jesuits, and Carmelites missionaries had reached Kerala, India for missionary activities. Many St. Thomas Christians were brought under the Latin Church. The Synod of Diamper (Udayamperoor) was an attempt to bring them all under the Pope. After the Synod, the Church matters were reorganized in the Latin style and the services in churches were changed to the Latin liturgical system. The traditional education system of Malpanate, a learning system under individual Malpan (teacher) was changed. Instead, seminaries were set up where Latin was included in the curriculum. When the Portuguese bishop García was governing the Archdiocese in Kerala, the Orthodox Syrian Rite was changed to Latin Rite.

(6) The Coonan Cross Oath (Koonan Kurishu Sathyam)

The famous Coonan Cross Oath is an important mile-stone in the history of the St. Thomas Christian Church in Kerala, India. A courageous pledge was taken by the faithful of Malankara Syrian Church. They declared that they would never give up their faith and tradition, and never yield to the Portuguese Roman Catholic supremacy as previously explained.

The St. Thomas Christians had protested vehemently against the domination of the Portuguese, and they took an oath tying and holding a long rope on a standing cross on the northern side of the Mattancherry Church, on Friday, January 3, 1653, and saying, ***“as long as this trial exists, we will not submit to the priests of Samballoor.”*** (Samballor is a place in Thrissur district, Kerala, where the Roman Catholic churches were located). This action is known as the famous ***Koonan Kurishu Sathyam***, and it was a turning point in the history of St. Thomas Christians, who held Angamaly as their headquarters. It was considered as a reaction against the Synod of Diamper, and their love and devotion towards St. Thomas who taught the Christian faith and tradition, and founded the first seven churches in Kerala. At a meeting held at Alangad on May 22, 1653, a faction of St. Thomas Christians swore that they would not accept Francis Garcia Metropolitan, while the other group stayed with the Metropolitan Garcia.

Thus, St. Thomas Christians split into two groups. Twelve priests under the leadership of Anjili Moottil Itty Thomman Kathanar, ordained Archdeacon as Metropolitan Mar Thoma I. His followers were known as Puthen koottukar, and other group members were known as Pazhaya koottukar, who stayed on with Rome. The metropolitan Mar Thoma I, had started communicating with the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch

and a Jacobite church was established at Angamaly as its headquarters.

(7). Arrival of British East India Company

Another foreign power which intervened in the internal affairs of St. Thomas Church was the British East India Company. As a matter of fact, the tolerance policy of political powers of India at the time was favorable for foreigners to come to India for trade. Akbar the Great (1542-1605) became the emperor in 1555 at the age of 13, and ruled India for 50 years. He had a policy of tolerance towards all faiths. His son Jahangir succeeded him as the fourth Mughal Emperor.

In the 1600's, the Royal Charter of Britain, formed the East India Company which set in motion a process that ultimately resulted in the subjugation of India under British control. In 1613-14 British East India company established a trading post at Surat. During the period of 1615-18, Mughal emperors granted Britain the right to trade and establish factories in India in exchange for English Navy's protection over the Mughal Empire which faced Portuguese sea power.

The first significant contact with northeast India was made by the Serampore mission of the British Baptist Missionary Society. The initiative for starting missionary enterprise came from the government officials. It may be right to say that "the flag representing the colonial administration, and the Bible representing the Christian mission went almost together into the northeast." The Royal Charter of 1813 permitted missionaries to propagate their faith in British India. The officials, therefore, expected that "what could not be achieved by military power, could be gained by the power of the Bible." The officials in Assam felt that Assam and its hills inhabited by various tribes, who were not in the least influenced by Hinduism or Islam, had offered the most promising field for the spread of Christianity.

There was widespread support for missionary activities from the government officials, particularly during the first 35 years of British rule in India. It is equally clear that the missionaries of any denomination had received that support. It is interesting to note that most of the missionaries dealing with the people in northeast India were Americans and Welshmen among the Protestants, and Germans, Spaniards, and Italians among the Catholics.

The missionaries on the other hand, did not consider themselves to be the agents of the colonial power; their primary purpose was the propagation of the gospel. Thus, it can be assumed that Christian missions and government were in northeast India for their own objectives; each found the other, valuable and functional. The Government found the missions helpful in appeasing the hill tribes and providing

education at a minimal cost to the people. On the other hand, the missions found the government helpful in endorsing in many cases their educational work, and in providing security for both themselves, and their converts. Therefore, the relationship between the missions and the government can be best described as cooperation in certain limited areas of mutual interests.

There was often conflict between the two entities, the missions, and the government. For instance, the missionaries disagreed with the government about: (a) displacement of Assamese with Bengalis in the courts and schools of Assam, (b) opposition to the state opium monopoly and its implied encouragement of the use of that drug, and (c) opposition to the slavery in Mizoram which led to the expulsion of a Welsh missionary in 1892.

In 1823, the British Parliament in India allowed Christian missionaries to work without a license. Yet the officials were indifferent and unreceptive to mission activities. This situation led to an ambivalent attitude in their treatment of Indian Christians, who were excluded from military services, debarred from appointment in Government offices, and lost the right to inherit their parents' property on account of their conversion to Christianity. Some British officials, which included Lord Wellesley were accommodative to promote mission work, who became the patron of the translation project of William Carey in Bengal. Lord William Bentinck stood firmly for the rights of Indian Christians, Lord Dalhousie worked for the betterment of the people, Colonel Munroe and Colonel Macaulay brought the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Mission to help the Syrian Christians.

Many Christian missionaries enjoyed the protection and support from the British Government. Duncan B. Forrester in his book, *'Exploration in Practical Theology'* stated that the missionaries generally understood the British Rule as a providential sign of God's care for India, rather than simply an opportunity for the making of individual converts.' Thus, Christian missionaries provided a religious justification for European Colonialism in India.

The nature of the British East India Company's colonial power was different from that of the Portuguese and other European Colonists. They did not support the spread of Christianity in their Empire.

Modern India has reaped some benefits from some of the measures taken by the British, during their occupation of the subcontinent. However, most of these measures were geared to the economic and political control of the country during the British occupation. Some of the measures taken by the British are the following:

(i). Various aspects of infrastructure development

The roads in pre-colonial India were not fit for modern transport and was a major hurdle for colonial administration. Various British officials called for the development of roads to facilitate mobilization of the British army, and also to ease the movement of raw materials from the countryside to the nearest railway station, to a port, and ultimately to Britain. Although they built the roads for their own interest, those infrastructure developments became a blessing for modern India.

(ii). Introduction of Railway System.

Indian railway system started taking shape during British administration. The colonial government built all the railway tracks, and entered the process of direct investment. This development helped break the geographical and cultural barriers in India, while making it easy for the people to undertake long-distance travel. It helped to develop commercialization of agriculture. However, the Indians did not receive any profits resulting in the exploitation of Indian resources. Consequently, the negative impacts outweighed the social benefits that Indian people gained from the introduction of railways.

(iii). During the British administration of India, inland waterways and sea lanes were introduced. But most of the canals became uneconomical and eventually were not operational.

(iv). The British introduced telegraph and improved postal services, but they used telegraph facilities exclusively to maintain law and order.

(v). The postal service was an essential facility for the general public. However, it remained inadequate due to the lack of development.

A question may be raised, why the British colonial government financially invested so much for the development of infrastructure, railways and waterways, telegraph, and postal services, in India. Those developments were essential to ensure the fulfilment of their selfish motivation, such as, mobilization of the army, transportation of agricultural products to the seaports and from there to Britain, and facilitate communication, etc. Although the benefits out of those investments did not reach the Indian people in those days, they have turned out to be of great blessings in disguise for the modern India after Indian independence.

(8) Effect of British Colonization of India on St. Thomas Christian Church

The British missionaries introduced Protestantism against Portuguese Catholicism, and started the Church of South India (CSI) in India. Because of their mission work, many people from Catholic Church and St. Thomas Christian Church joined the protestant Church.

(d) Formation of New Congregations of St. Thomas Orthodox Christians

The Church established by St. Thomas experienced varying influences during the twenty centuries of the Church. The following is a list of the various formations of Christian groups:

(1) The Church of the East (of Trichur): Followers of Nestorius who preached that St. Mary was not the mother of God. This heresy was condemned at the Ephesus Council in AD 431. The one-nature theory regarding the personality of Jesus Christ was the topic of discussion at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. Their headquarters is in Iraq, and their stronghold in India has been in Trichur since 1874.

(2) Thozhiyoor Church or Malabar Independent Church: Founded in 1770 with the assistance of a Syrian bishop, have a few institutions such as a high school, a hospital, and an orphanage.

(3) Church of South India (CSI): A protestant group under the influence of Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Anglican Church, organized in 1836 after the Mavelikara Synod (Padiyola). It became CSI in 1947.

(4) The Travancore-Cochin Anglican Church: Mostly separated from the CSI., consists of converts from the “Untouchables” of Indian Caste system.

(5) Mar Thoma Church: Influenced by the Anglican Church, the reformation attempts of this group started in 1843 and ended in 1889 with a court decision, leading to the formation of the Mar Thoma Church. It follows Orthodox Church’s form of worship services and priestly traditions, but rejects prayers for the departed, intercession through the Saints, and a few other important doctrinal aspects of the Orthodox Church. In 1961, the St. Thomas Evangelical Church separated from the Mar Thoma Church.

(6) The Malankara Rite: Also known as the Syro Malabar Rites is a group that was developed as a result of the interference in the Malankara Orthodox Church affairs by the Portuguese Archbishop Menezes of the Roman Catholic Church. A few bish-

ops led by Archbishop Mar Ivanios and their followers left the mother Church and formed this new congregation in 1930. They joined the Catholic Church, accepting the Pope as the Supreme Head, while retaining the clerical vestments, liturgies, languages etc. of the Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church was also threatened by the various forms of Protestantism developed early in the twentieth century in the Western countries, primarily in U.S.A. They included the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witness, and Pentecostalism. However, the Church continued to flourish, retaining its true faith and traditions carried through the past twenty centuries, and has become a global Church with the faithful, spread all over the world.

(e) Internal Conflict within the Malankara Orthodox Church

In addition to the foreign sovereignties, an internal conflict crept into the St. Thomas Orthodox Church in the early 20th century. Two groups were formed within the Church, one supporting the Catholicos who was the rightful descendant of Apostle St. Thomas, and the other group supporting the Patriarch of Antioch. But the main group under the Catholicos had grown tremendously with several congregations, priests and bishops. The Constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Church was passed in AD 1934 which has turned out to be the cornerstone of the current progress of the Church, both in the democratic set up of the Church administration, and in the selection of bishops and the Catholicos. The Church Constitution also restated the Malankara Church's relationship with the Patriarch of Antioch as the spiritual leader, and as the head of one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

(f) Growth of Indian Orthodox Church under the Catholicos of the East.

With the establishment of congregations all over Kerala and in other parts of India, new dioceses were formed. Families moved to various cities of India, especially after the nation got its independence from the British rule on August 15, 1947. The Orthodox members moved to other countries including those of the Middle East and to European countries, and the United States of America.

5. INDIAN ORTHODOX PARISHES IN USA

As the Church started to spread its wings to distant lands, many professionals came to the United States for higher studies, and a few of them settled in this country as immigrants. During the 1960's and 1970's many medical professionals including doctors and nurses, and those in engineering and scientific fields immigrated to the U.S. Later on, they brought their families and settled in major cities with enterprising

opportunities. Many families moved to the East Coast cities, including Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. During this time, several priests and a few bishops of the Orthodox Church, and of other denominations, came for higher studies in theology in some of the universities in America. They formed ecumenical congregations consisting of members of different denominations. When available, the clergies would conduct liturgical services on Sundays, and provided services for other spiritual needs of the individuals and families.

(a) The Orthodox parishes in New York

There were two Orthodox congregations in New York city in 1960's, one in Manhattan, and the other in Bronx. The name of the Orthodox congregation in Manhattan was St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Congregation which was started and led by Rev. Dr. K. M. Simon Cor-Episcopa, during 1960's. Subsequently, other priests came and joined the congregation in Manhattan. They were Rev. Fr. Yohannan Sankarathil, from Kumbazha, Pathanamthitta, Rev. Fr. Neelankal Cherian from Piravom, Rev. Fr. T. M. Zachariah from Puthencavu, and Rev. Fr. George from Mavelikara. The congregation used to assemble in a rented church in Manhattan, New York. The priests made a decision that one priest should conduct the service on one Sunday as chief celebrant, and the other priests participate as assistants, and on the next Sunday another priest as the chief celebrant and others as assistants, on a rotating basis. The second Orthodox congregation was St. Mary's Orthodox Church in Bronx, where Rev. Fr. A. K. Cherian was the vicar.

On September 5, 1975, Fr. K. Mathai (Achen), the author of this book, landed in New York on an immigrant visa. He was sponsored by his wife Mariamma Mathai (kochamma) who came to New York in 1974; she was a nurse and worked in a nursing home in the city while staying with Rev. Fr. Yohannan Sankarathil.



Dn. Mathai and Mariamma after their Holy Matrimonial Service

On the day of Mathai Achen's arrival in New York, Rev. Fr. Yohannan Sankarathil and Mariamma kochamma picked him up from the airport. Mathai Achen's first



Sacramental Service of the Ordination of Rev. Dn. K. Mathai

dinner in the U.S. was at Yohannan Achen's house prepared by his wife Elcy kochamma. After the dinner,

Mariamamma Kochamma and Mathai Achen went to an apartment in Queens village, New York. Mathai Achen and Kochamma are very grateful and indebted to Sankarathil Achen and Elcy Kochamma for their help and love shown towards them during their stay with them.

On Sundays, Sankarathil Achen or his friend Dr. P. S. John gave Mathai Achen and Kochamma rides to the Church in Manhattan for service. Mathai Achen gratefully remembers and prays for the departed soul of Dr. P. S. John. Also, Mathai Achen and Kochamma remember gratefully Very Rev. K. M. Yohannan Sankarathil Corepiscopus, who has departed from this world to join with his forefathers and the other departed righteous people who are waiting for the second coming of Jesus Christ. The second congregation in New York was St. Mary's Orthodox Church in the city of Bronx, where Rev. Fr. A. K. Cherian was serving as the vicar. At that time, there were only a few Orthodox parishes or congregations in the USA, two in New York, as noted above, one in Washington DC, an ecumenical congregation in Philadelphia, and one in Florida.

(b) The Formation of the First Orthodox Parish in Philadelphia

(1) Ecumenical Congregation

As mentioned earlier, a few individuals or families from Kerala and other parts of India came to Philadelphia for higher studies, or for professional development purposes. They worked and stayed in Philadelphia and its suburbs in the 1960's. Many of them were Christians, and they wished to continue their religious practices in this new land of opportunities. However, there were no Orthodox priests or religious leaders of other denominations who were living in Philadelphia at that time to guide them in this pursuit. Therefore, they used to assemble in people's houses on Sundays, and had prayer fellowship. The members from different denominations, namely, the Orthodox, Jacobite, Catholic, Marthoma, CSI, and Knanaya Churches, attended the prayer fellowship, which, later on, was organized into an ecumenical congregation.

One of the earliest immigrants, late Dr. T. V. Philip said that the first Malayalam service for the very few Kerala Christians in Philadelphia at that time was conducted in his apartment's living room located at 4900 Pine Street, Philadelphia, in July 1962. He also mentioned that the celebrant was Rev. Fr. Dr. K.M. Simon of the Knanaya Church, and that he was the altar boy (acolyte). Since then, several priests and bishops from Orthodox, Knanaya, Marthoma and CSI Churches came to Philadelphia and neighboring states for higher studies. Some of these visiting shepherds who conducted liturgical services for the ecumenical congregation were: Rev. Fr. Dr. A. T. Abraham and Rev. Fr. Dr. K.M. Simon, of Knanaya Church, Rev. Fr. K.C. Abraham of CSI Church; the Orthodox bishop H.G. Mathews Mar Coorilos Metropolitan (lat-

er, HH Baselios Marthoma Mathews II Catholicose), and Rev. Fr. Dr. K.M. Yohannan Sankarathil (Corepiscopus); Rev. Fr. Thomas Varghese and Rev. Oommen Koruthu of Marthoma Church; Rt. Rev. Zacharias Mar Theophilus, Suffragan Metropolitan; and Rev. Fr. Dr. K.C. Thomas (later, His Grace Thomas Mar Makarios, Metropolitan of American Diocese), and Rev. Fr. Cherian Neelankal of Orthodox Church.

In the 1970's, the monthly services were conducted by mostly Orthodox and Marthoma Church priests with a few CSI and Catholic services, in between. The services were conducted in the chapel of Ashbury Church, Philadelphia. As the number of the faithful increased, the worship venue was moved to the chapel of the Episcopal Church of the Savior, at 3723 Chestnut, and 38th Streets, Philadelphia. Even some Hindus attended these Christian services occasionally.

Rev. Dn. Dr. Paul Varki, a deacon of the Orthodox Church, (and later, ordained as a priest) became the coordinator of the Ecumenical congregation, in the latter part of the 1960's. He came to America for higher studies in 1957, and worked as a psychologist in Pennsylvania State Hospital after getting a doctorate in Psychology. If a priest who belonged to any denomination was available in Philadelphia or neighboring states, Varki Schemmachan would invite him to Philadelphia for celebrating the worship for the congregation. The priest who came would be celebrating the liturgy using the Order of Liturgy (Thaksa) of the denomination he belonged to. All the members of the ecumenical congregation would participate whole-heartedly, and later gathered at one of the participants' homes for fellowship lunch.

In the 1970's there were a great number of medical and technological professionals and students, who came to USA. They came from Kerala and from other parts of India on either work or student visas to different cities of USA, including Philadelphia. The medical professionals were mainly nurses and doctors. The other immigrants were engineers and IT professionals. Later on, they sponsored and brought their family members and relatives to the U.S., thus increasing the Malayali population in each city.

(2) Orthodox Christian Population in Philadelphia

A good number of Malayalee immigrants who were in Philadelphia belonged to various Christian denominations. Many of them had participated in the ecumenical prayer fellowship and services, because they had no priest of their own individual denominations to lead them in their liturgical services. As the number of participants had increased, the congregation rented the chapel of the Episcopal Church of Savior located at 3723 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia. The vicar of the Episcopal Church, Rev. Fr. John Hardwick was a very generous and kind priest with special consideration toward the Indian congregation, and allowed a space in their Church

facility for us to conduct these religious and spiritual activities, at a very nominal rent. The ecumenical fellowship had service only on one Sunday in a month.

Rev. Dn. Dr. Paul Varki used to make contacts with available priests in Philadelphia or in the neighboring states, and invited one of them for conducting Sunday worship service for the ecumenical congregation. The invited priest would conduct the service using their book of liturgy, and all the Christian members of ecumenical congregation except the Pentecostal Church members would participate in the spiritual service regardless of denominational differences. If there was no priest for leading the religious worship service, the members would meet in one of the members' residences, and will have prayer fellowship and lunch.

The Philadelphia ecumenical congregation was not registered with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, neither was approved by the authority of any of the participating Church denomination. It was a fellowship where people gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, and had prayer and fellowship.

(3) The first Authorized Orthodox Church in Philadelphia

There was no official Orthodox parish in Philadelphia until 1976. There was no resident priest in Philadelphia from any denomination till 1976. Also, the American Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Church was established only in 1979. The historical facts associated with the formation and activities of the first official Orthodox parish in Philadelphia are briefly narrated in the following paragraphs:

(i) A Phone call to Mathai Achen in New York

In April 1976, Rev. Fr. K. Mathai (Mathai Achen) received an unexpected phone call from Paul Varki Schemmasan, the coordinator of the Ecumenical congregation in Philadelphia. He invited Achen to be the chief celebrant of the Holy Week services of 1976, from Maundy Thursday through Easter Sunday for the Ecumenical congregation in Philadelphia. Two members of the congregation went to Queens Village in New York, where Mathai Achen and Mariamma kochamma were living at that time. They picked up Mathai Achen and brought him to Philadelphia on Wednesday of the Holy Week.

(ii) First Holy Week Service of Mathai Achen

The Passover (Pesaha Perunal) service was conducted on Wednesday evening; it was based on the fact that our Church liturgical day begins at 6:00 p.m., and ends the following day at 6:00 pm. Also, the chapel facility at the Church of Savior was

available only for that Wednesday evening. Many members belonging to different Christian denominations attended the Passover service regardless of their denominational differences. After the service, Mathai Achen stayed at the residence of Varki Schemmasan and Mariamma kochamma. They served Mathai Achen a Lenten dinner which was Achen's first dinner in Philadelphia.

On Good Friday, the service started at 9:00 a. m. and ended by 4 p. m. There was also prayer on Good Friday evening at 6:00 p.m. On Holy Saturday, there was morning prayer and Holy Qurbana and special memorial prayer for the faithfully departed souls. Easter Sunday services started at 8:00 a. m. and were concluded by 12:00 noon. All services were held at the chapel of the Episcopal Church of Savior. There were a great number of faithful, including about 60 Orthodox members who actively participated in the worship services and other spiritual programs like retreat and evening prayers of the Holy Week.

(iii) Request for Regular Orthodox Service

When Mathai Achen was about to return to New York after the Holy Week services, some of the Orthodox members earnestly requested him to move to Philadelphia since they had no priest to conduct Holy liturgy, and to take care of other spiritual needs such as memorial prayers, etc. However, it was not easy for Achen and family to move to Philadelphia soon, because Mariamma kochamma was working in New York, and also, she was pregnant, thus limiting her chance of getting a job in a new place. Therefore, they waited until she delivered their twin babies as her doctor suggested. But Mathai Achen continued to go to Philadelphia on Sundays for conducting the liturgy for them whenever they invited him.

(iv) Welcome News to Mathai Achen's Family

June 25, 1976 was a memorable and blessed day for Achen's family because they were blessed with the birth of two beautiful girls (twins) at the Queens Hospital in New York. The girls were named Sheeba and Sheena and were normal and healthy fraternal twins. Mariamma kochamma had to go back to work one month after the delivery to meet the increased family expenses.

(v) Visit of H.G. Easo Mar Thimothios of Marthoma Church

The Ecumenical congregation was blessed in August 1976, with the visit of H.G. Easo Mar Thimothios of Marthoma Church who celebrated liturgical Holy Qurbana service for the congregation. During Thirumeni's sermon, H.G. noted that progress and identity of any denomination can be achieved only by having its own parish.

Some of the Orthodox Church attendees took this challenge seriously, and started consulting among themselves about forming an Orthodox parish in Philadelphia. In the meantime, Mathai Achen conducted Holy Qurbana service as and when the congregation invited him.

A group of Orthodox Church members of the Ecumenical congregation met privately at the residence of Dr. M.M. Koshy, in Philadelphia. These members were Messrs. V. M. Chacko, P.I. Chacko, V.C. George, Joseph Varghese, Korah Cherian, K.A. Mathai, T. Thomas, and Thomas Varghese, and their families. They held a number of planning meetings and were given moral support by Mr. John Vilanilam.

In the meantime, the Marthoma Church members moved out of the Ecumenical congregation and started regular Marthoma Church service at a church in North Philadelphia in October 1976. The Orthodox members had been urging Mathai Achen and family to move to Philadelphia, for good. Achen and Kochamma were hesitating to permanently move to Philadelphia because of Kochamma's job. However, later they decided to give priority to God's Will and Call, and to move to Philadelphia.

(vi) An Advance Planning Before Moving to Philadelphia

Mariamamma Kochamma went to Philadelphia by herself, and easily got a job there as a nurse. Mathai Achen stayed back in New York taking care of their twin daughters. Kochamma rented a one-bed-room apartment, at 4817 Old York Road in the Logan section of north Philadelphia. In about two and a half months, with help from some close friends, Mathai Achen moved to Philadelphia with their two children, and settled the family in Philadelphia. Many of the Malayalee immigrants resided in the Logan section of Philadelphia, at that time.

Mathai Achen continued to celebrate the Sunday's Holy Qurbana once a month as desired by the congregation. On Sundays when Kochamma was on duty, Achen went to church with the children and celebrated Holy Qurbana after entrusting the twins with someone in the church.

(vii) Orthodox Liturgy Service on all Sundays

On one Sunday, after service, Mathai Achen announced that the Holy liturgy should be on all Sundays of the month, and only then would the congregation progress. Achen said, 'I am going to start services on all Sundays, and also on important moronoyo feast days (moronoyo means the feasts related to the Lord). Some congregants expressed their objection to go to church on all Sundays, to which Mathai Achen responded, "I will do the services on all Sundays; whoever can come, let them come. I won't impose any extra financial burden on you." People agreed to

that idea and cooperated sincerely. Thus, the services were held on all Sundays at the same chapel, and more members started to attend the liturgy service.

Mathai Achen and Kochamma express their heartfelt gratitude to all who came to Achen's residence on Sundays, to give them rides to and from the church until Achen bought a car. Achen and Kochamma are very grateful to all who helped in taking care of their children during the service in the church, especially to Mr. K. T. Ninan and his wife Mrs. Saramma Ninan who took care of the twin babies in church when Kochamma was at work. Achen also remembers the services of Rev. Varki Schemmasan, Mr. K.T. Ninan, and his sons, Thomas Ninan and Mathew Ninan, Mr. V. C. George, and many others including Mr. Korah Mani who were the acolytes helping Achen in the sanctuary for many years from the beginning.

(viii) Formal Meeting for an Orthodox Parish in Philadelphia

As initiated by a number of Orthodox faithful, and in response to Mathai Achen's keen interest in having an Orthodox parish, Achen collected the names, addresses and phone numbers of all Orthodox members living in Philadelphia and its suburbs. An official letter signed by Mathai Achen was sent to all these members inviting them for a general meeting to be held on the 10th of October 1976, at 5:00 p.m. at the residence of Dr. M.M. Koshy, (a cousin of Dr. Poovathoor Koshy, a member of the new parish from its inception) in Philadelphia. This notice was announced in the Church twice by Mathai Achen.

The majority of the invited members assembled at Dr. M. M. Koshy's residence. Mathai Achen presided over the meeting in the presence of Varki Schemmasan, who was the Ecumenical congregation coordinator till then. In the introductory speech, Mathai Achen said, "We are here in this country because of God's blessings. In the Old Testament we read about Abraham who was faithful to God, and wherever he lived, he used to make an altar and offered sacrifice to please God. Similarly, America is our new place of living. Therefore, we need a church to get together and worship the Almighty God who has brought us here, and to keep our faith and traditions and hand them over to the next generation. In the social aspect also, we need a place of fellowship in order to know each other and help each other. A church is the best place for us to meet these goals."

After the introductory message, the president had gone through the meeting agenda for discussion, and decision. The following decisions were made:

1. An Orthodox parish should be established in Philadelphia under the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India.
2. The name of the parish should be St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia.

3. The parish should be registered with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as a non-profit organization.

4. Fr. K. Mathai, who had initiated the process of starting an Orthodox parish in Philadelphia should be officially appointed as the vicar of the new St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia.

5. The minutes of the meeting should be sent to His Grace Thomas Mar Makarios metropolitan for approval. His Grace was the metropolitan of Bombay diocese, at that time, who was also in charge of the parishes and congregations outside India. The minutes were to be sent to His Grace's permanent residence, which at that time was in Buffalo, N.Y.

Then a member in the congregation, Dr. John Vilanilam, suggested, "We are living in USA and, therefore, we should live and act according to the law of this country. Therefore, we need a new constitution for the new parish of St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia." Some members supported his proposal and the meeting president Mathai Achen, with the consent of the attending members, appointed him to draft a new constitution and present it in the next general meeting. Achen explained that Orthodox Church has a constitution to follow for the parish administration. The meeting was concluded with prayer at 6:00 p.m.

In another meeting of the congregation, Dr. Vilanilam presented his draft version of a separate constitution for the newly formed parish. His proposal limited the Vicar's role only to provide spiritual leadership to the parish. At this point, Mathai Achen informed the members that the proposed constitution was not compatible with the 1934 Constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. Achen added that, the new parish in Philadelphia will be under the Malankara Orthodox Church, and hence was required to follow the Constitution of the mother Church. Achen stressed that the role of the vicar of a parish was to perform all the administrative duties of the parish in addition to protect and preserve the faith and tradition of the Church in accordance with the provisions given in the 1934 Constitution of the Church. Hence, the meeting concluded without approving the proposed draft of the constitution prepared by Dr. Vilanilam.

6. ST. THOMAS ORTHODOX CHURCH OF INDIA (STOCI) IN PHILADELPHIA

(a) Events Leading to the Formation of the New Orthodox Parish

The report of the planning meeting of October 10, 1976 was sent to His Grace Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios metropolitan at His Grace's Buffalo, NY address. His Grace was the metropolitan in charge of the parishes and congregations outside India. Mathai Achen and the congregation members were eagerly waiting for about three-

four weeks for Makarios Thirumeni's kalpana, approving the decisions taken at the planning meeting held on October 10, 1976.

Meanwhile, on one Sunday morning while Mathai Achen was preparing for the start of the Holy Qurbana, Rev. Varki Schemmasan handed over a Kalpana to him from His Grace Mathews Mar Athanasios, Metropolitan of the Outside Kerala Diocese, (who later became the Catholicos, His Holiness Baselios Mathews I). It was the kalpana authorizing the new parish, St. Thomas Malankara Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia, under the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India. Mathai Achen read the Kalpana in the church after the liturgy.

(b) Contact with H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios Metropolitan

Mathai Achen contacted Makarios Thirumeni, and explained to His Grace about the planning meeting and the decisions taken at the meeting. Achen also informed Thirumeni about the Kalpana from H.G. Mathews Mar Athanasios Thirumeni authorizing the formation of the new parish in Philadelphia.

As a follow up, Makarios Thirumeni said that Thirumeni would visit the parish, and informed Achen a date for such a visit. Thirumeni came to Philadelphia on a Saturday afternoon, and stayed in a hotel. On Sunday morning, Mathai Achen picked up Thirumeni from the hotel, and brought him to the chapel of the Episcopal Church of Savior at 3723 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA, where His Grace celebrated the Holy Qurbana. After a beautiful service and an excellent sermon, Thirumeni announced in the church that the newly formed St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia, was a parish under the Bombay diocese, which is one of the dioceses of the Malankara Orthodox Church in India. Also, Thirumeni also announced that Rev. Fr. K. Mathai would be appointed as the vicar of the St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia, until further orders. His Grace, after reaching Thirumeni's Buffalo, NY residence, sent a written Kalpana appointing Rev. Fr. K. Mathai as the vicar of the newly approved parish in Philadelphia.

(c) Election of Parish Office Bearers

After Thirumeni's visit and kalpana, the vicar, Rev. Fr. K. Mathai convened a general body meeting after it was announced on two Sundays in the church after the liturgy. In the meeting, the secretary, treasurer and managing committee members, and the members of the Board of Trustees were elected. The list of the newly elected office-bearers was sent to H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios metropolitan, and in return, Thirumeni sent a Kalpana approving the election and the elected officials of the parish, and the Kalpana was read in the church.

(d) Registration of the Church with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

According to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania requirements, each religious organization or business entity in PA has to be registered with the Pennsylvania Department of Registration. An application signed by the five members of the Board of Trustees, and a copy of the 1934 Constitution of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, were submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Registration. Within three months the department issued a declaration, stating that, 'St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia, is a religious corporation in Pennsylvania.' Subsequently, the administrative body of the parish submitted an application along with the Commonwealth's Registration Certificate, and other necessary documents to the Federal Department of Taxes for a non-profit status for St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia. In a couple of months, a certificate, declaring the non-profit corporation status of St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia was issued to the parish.

(e) Establishment of American Diocese in 1979

There was an important development regarding the Indian Orthodox parishes and congregations in the United States of America in 1979. It was the declaration by the Holy Synod of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church on the creation of the American Diocese that included all the parishes and congregations in USA, Canada, England and Middle-East, thus, freeing the American parishes from the administration of the Bombay Diocese. His Grace Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios was appointed as the Metropolitan of the newly declared American Diocese in 1979. Since then, so many developments have taken place in the American Diocese.

(f) Formation of a Second Orthodox Parish in Philadelphia

The first Orthodox parish was increasing in membership under Mathai Achen's leadership. The parish organized a Church Building Committee to raise funds to buy a church in due course, and to look for potential sites or buildings within the city of Philadelphia. Mr. Raju Varghese was the first convenor of this committee followed by Mr. Korah T. Mani. The parish conducted a number of fund-raising programs, raising a good amount of cash as seed money for the church building project.

After a few years of growth, as in any organization, the growing pains created problems among some of the parish members. In 1980, some of these members approached the Diocesan metropolitan to address their concerns. Being a very smart administrator who looked forward to increasing the number of parishes under His Grace's management, Thirumeni asked them to produce a list of contending members, and offered them a second parish in Philadelphia. This offer was without any

proper investigation on the charges nor with any discussion with the vicar and administration of St. Thomas Orthodox parish.

The new parish in Philadelphia was named, St. Mary's Orthodox Church. Thirumeni appointed Very Rev. Dr. Muttaniyil Idiculla Corepiscopos as the vicar of this new parish. Idiculla Achen was the vicar of the St. Thomas Orthodox Church in Rochester, NY at that time, and was working as a university professor. Hence, Achen had to travel a long distance for the Sunday service for St. Mary's parish in Philadelphia. Later, Rev. Fr. C.J. Johnson, who came to USA on a visiting visa, was appointed as the vicar of St. Mary's Orthodox parish. Subsequently, St. Mary's Orthodox Church, Philadelphia, was elevated as a Cathedral by Makarios Thirumeni.

(g) Dissolution of St. Thomas Orthodox Church (STOCI) of Philadelphia

(1) Organization and Development of the Parish Ministry

St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia (STOCI, Phila) under Mathai Achen's leadership was going forward in a progressive manner with its various ministries. The Christian ministry of STOCI, Phila, included the liturgical worship on all Sundays, evening prayer on every Saturday evening, and organizing the Sunday school, though only with a few children. Morth Mariam Samajam members met twice a month after the Holy liturgy. Prayer meetings were held regularly at the homes of members. Mathai Achen participated and provided guidance to all these activities while managing his twin daughters when Kochamma worked in the hospital.

Mathai Achen's family was blessed with the birth of their son in 1981. They named their son, Justin. Life became busier for Achen, thereafter. He was given a tiny remuneration for his services as the vicar of the growing parish. Achen was scouting around to find an appropriate job with his educational background in economics to support the growing family. At last, after taking the required test for a job with the Pennsylvania Department of Revenue, he was hired as a full time Sales and Use Tax Auditor.



Mathai achen and his family

By the grace of God, the family finances got better with Achen's job as an auditor, and Mariamma Kochamma's job as a nurse in Temple University Hospital. Mathai Achen and family tried their best to see that all the church ministries were performed without any default. Achen's priestly ministry 'was guided by the insight that a priest should be faithful to God's call as a priest, and give priority for God's works in His vineyard which is the church itself.'

(2) Growing Pains of the Parish

However, a few parish members were not appreciative of Mathai Achen's commitment and hard work to uphold the vision of his priestly ministry. They did not get along with Achen in a peaceful manner. This dissention was four years after an earlier group had left the church and formed St. Mary's Orthodox Church in Philadelphia. Some members of this new group started conspiring behind the scenes, and raised angry voices during parish meetings. When the internal dissention grew beyond control, Mathai Achen contacted the diocesan metropolitan and explained the situation to His Grace. Thirumeni told Achen that His Grace would visit the parish on a Sunday.

(3) Visit of Diocesan Metropolitan

His Grace Makarios Thirumeni arrived on a Saturday, and stayed in a Holiday Inn for the night. On Sunday morning, Mathai Achen picked up Thirumeni from the hotel and brought His Grace to the church for the liturgical service. After the end of a melodious service and a sound sermon, Thirumeni announced about having a General Body meeting of the parish, after kaimuth. Thirumeni did not mention anything about the meeting to Mathai Achen, prior to the announcement in the church.

(4) Emergency General Body Meeting

Following the service and kaimuth, a General Body meeting was held under the chairmanship of His Grace Makarios Thirumeni. After the prayer, Mathai Achen welcomed Thirumeni to the parish and to the meeting. In the introductory speech, Thirumeni acknowledged that there were some issues among some members of the parish which required to be resolved. Thirumeni urged the General Body to make peace and reconciliation in the Church.

Some of the members surprisingly suggested that the existing St. Thomas Orthodox Church of Church of India, Phila, (STOCI, Phila) should be dissolved, and to allow two separate independent parishes, one for the members in Philadelphia City, and the other for the members in Upper Darby and suburban areas. The members would have the freedom to choose any group which they wanted to join.

Then, the vicar, Mathai Achen requested Thirumeni and the General Body members, not to take any decision to dissolve, and divide the growing parish, in spite of the minor issues among the members.

(5) Dissolution of St. Thomas Orthodox Church, Philadelphia

Makarios Thirumeni accepted the proposal of dissolving and dividing the parish. Thirumeni made an official announcement that STOCI, Phila, should be dissolved and in its place two independent parishes should be established. Then, Thirumeni asked for the names of the new parishes. Mathai Achen was asked to suggest a name for the parish with the majority of members with him as its vicar. With much sadness over losing STOCI, Phila, Achen suggested the name, 'St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church' for the new parish, which Thirumeni accepted. Then, Thirumeni asked the other group to suggest a name for their parish. They suggested, 'St. Baselios Orthodox church', and Thirumeni accepted their proposal. Then, His Grace officially announced the names of the two new parishes in the meeting, with the dissolution of Philadelphia St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, as decided in the meeting.

The next announcement Thirumeni made was to transfer the bank balances in the account of STOCI, Philadelphia to the bank account of His Grace Thomas Mar Makarios. There was more than \$25,000 in the STOCI, Philadelphia bank account at that time. Thirumeni promised in the meeting that the money would be distributed between the two new parishes when they were reorganized.

Also, Thirumeni wanted the books and records of STOCI, Philadelphia, sent to Thirumeni's Buffalo address. After the concluding remarks and prayer, Thirumeni had lunch, and went back to Thirumeni's residence in Buffalo. Thirumeni sent kalpanas to both new parishes approving them as independent parishes of the American Diocese. - St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church (SGMOC), and St. Baselios Orthodox Church.

(6) Execution of the decisions taken at the Emergency General Body Meeting

Sad as it was, the group with Mathai Achen had to go by the decisions made in the official General Body meeting, and the Kalpana of H. G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios Metropolitan. Since Mathai Achen was the vicar of the STOCI, Philadelphia, he and the members of St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church (SGMOC) took the responsibility for executing the decisions taken in the General Body meeting presided over by the Diocesan metropolitan. The following were the actions taken by the Vicar and the Parishners of the newly formed SGMOC:

(i). The dissolution of the existing parish, St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, in Philadelphia was processed and the corporation's registration and non-profit status were canceled.

(ii). Mathai Achen sent all administrative and financial books and records of STOCI, Philadelphia, to the Diocesan Metropolitan in the Buffalo address of Thirumeni.

(iii) Closed the bank account of the dissolved STOCI, Philadelphia, and transferred the balance amount of about \$25,000 to Makarios Thirumeni's account by a bank check. It may be noted that St. Gregorios Church did not get any money out of that bank balance. We are not aware of any other parish or person who got a share of that bank balance.

In short, all decisions taken at the Emergency General Body meeting were executed, without any hesitation or delay, by Mathai Achen and the new parish administration.

(7) A Court Case Against H. G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios Metropolitan

A certain member of the original STOCI, Philadelphia filed a court case against H G Dr. Makarios Thirumeni for dissolving a legal entity, St. Thomas Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia, and taking custody of its money, books and records. The complainant said that a bishop should not have dissolved the church which was a registered nonprofit Pennsylvania Corporation, or transferred its money and office records in the bishop's custody. St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church (SGMOC) was not involved in the case. But SGMOC still doesn't know where the books and records are, what did the Thirumeni do with the STOCI money transferred to Thirumeni's bank account, or whether Thirumeni shared the money with St. Baselios Orthodox Church, or any other entity.

By God's Grace, the final verdict of the court case was in favor of Makarios Thirumeni as well as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The verdict established the provisions of the 1934 Constitution of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, giving the Diocesan Metropolitan authority to make decisions in establishing parishes of the diocese, and dissolving any disputed parish to form new parishes.

(h) St. Baselios Orthodox Church, Upper Darby

The members of St. Baselios Orthodox Church used the same chapel of the Episcopal Church where the services were conducted before the dissolution. They used the facility for over a year, and then moved to a newly built church in north Philadelphia. They bought a house and converted it into a house of worship, and Rev. Fr. Dr. P.S. Samuel from New York was its vicar. They changed the name of St. Baselios Orthodox church, to St. Thomas Center of Upper Darby. When H. G. Mathews Mar Barnabas Thirumeni took charge as Metropolitan of American Diocese, His Grace

advised the members to change the name, St. Thomas Center of Upper Darby to St. Thomas Malankara Orthodox Church, N. Mascher Street, Philadelphia, PA 19120. Rev. Fr. M.T. Kurian was appointed as the vicar of this parish in 1985. This was how St. Thomas Malankara Orthodox Church (STMOC), Mascher Street, Philadelphia originated.

7. ST. GREGORIOS MALANKARA ORTHODOX CHURCH (SGMOC)

(a) New Name to STOCI

St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church (SGMOC) was established in 1984; but it is the continued entity of St. Thoms Orthodox Church of India, Philadelphia, established in October 10, 1976. The majority of the members of the original St. Thomas Church took this new name, SGMOC, in 1984. Mathai Achen continued to be the vicar of this newly named SGMOC.

(b). Search for a Place of Worship

St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church (SGMOC) faced a problem in finding a place to conduct liturgy and other spiritual activities. There was no permanent place for their ministries to be conducted. The situation was similar to the people of Israel who wandered in the desert for 40 years after their freedom from bondage in Egypt until they reached their promised land.

Following are the steps taken by SGMOC for conducting Holy Qurbana and spiritual activities after they had to leave the chapel of the Church of Savior in Philadelphia in the wake of the division.

(1). For a few months, SGMOC used a rented church in Upper Darby for conducting the liturgy and other spiritual activities.

(2). Subsequently, the parish moved to a rented church in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania and stayed there for only a short time.

(3). From Lansdowne, SGMOC moved to a rented Catholic Church just opposite of the Episcopal Church chapel at 3723 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia.

(4). From there SGMOC moved to a rented space in a Methodist Church in Center City, Philadelphia.

48 (5). After sometime, SGMOC came back to the same place, at the Episcopal Church

of Savior, which was used before the dissolution of the original St. Thomas Church. The St. Baselios Orthodox Church had moved out to a different location in North Philadelphia. For moving over to all these locations, Mathai Achen had to carry the church supplies and priestly vestments in a box, and set up the altar ready before starting the service in the different rented places. After returning back to the Church of Savior, SGMOC stayed at this place for 17 years conducting all the regular and special liturgical services and associated religious activities there.

(c) SGMOC at Verree Road, Philadelphia

Within the long 17 years of the life of the first Orthodox Church of Philadelphia, the membership of the parish increased, substantially. Besides, the newly appointed priest and the new management of the Episcopal Church of Savior, put more pressure on SGMOC to move out of their church facility. Therefore, in 1990, SGMOC reorganized the Church Building Committee with a few members with the same task as decided in 1980's, to search for a building or facility as the future place of worship for SGMOC.

Without much delay, Mr. George M. Mathew, a member of the church building committee informed the vicar that a house along with 1.5 acres of land on Verree Road, Philadelphia, was for sale. The property was just opposite to a Jewish synagogue. The parish general body decided to purchase the house and property immediately, with the vision to construct a small church building on the land attached to the house.

Some renovation works were done inside and outside of the house. After the works were done, a temporary dedication service was conducted by Mathai Achen, and he started celebrating Holy Qurbana and prayers there. Initially, there was no opposition from the residents of the neighborhood, or members of the Jewish Synagogue. SGMOC planned the church building project on the property behind the house. Dr. Poovathoor Koshy recommended Agri Inc., the Construction Professionals, of Ephrata, PA, based on his prior experience with this firm.

The parish contracted Agri Inc. based on a bid submitted by the firm, and started the preliminary work of the design of the building, and obtained all the required permits from the City of Philadelphia and from other regulatory agencies. The plan included sufficient capacity for the sanctuary and parking lot for the parish members of that time. A team of SGMOC engineers led by Mr. Korah Mani and Mr. Alex Varkey worked with Agri, Inc. manager Mr. Jack Echternack, on the preliminary and final design and construction details. In addition, the parish assigned Mr. Raju M. Varghese to work with the council member of the area, Mr. Brian O'Neill to make sure that the zoning for the property remained the same, which allowed religious buildings.

The construction start date was selected by the parish coinciding with the visit of His Holiness Baselios Mathews II, Bava thirumeni to Philadelphia. In the meantime, the neighbors came to know of the church construction plan from the city records. They joined together and decided to oppose the plan and got the city to change the zoning of the property and its immediate neighborhood to exclude any church construction in that property. They brought a court order banning the construction of a church building on the property.

On the day of the expected start of the construction, there was a large gathering of church members and many well-wishers at the site. Bava Thirumeni led the evening prayer before the planned laying of the building corner stone. Soon, a member of the Synagogue came to the property and delivered a copy of the court order that banned the construction of the proposed church building at this site. The program for the evening was canceled and Bava Thirumeni left the site after blessing the gathered attendees.

The parish did not give up on the quest for building the church at this Verree Road site. In the meantime, SGMOC appealed to the Zoning Hearing Board of the City of Philadelphia with the claim that the City had issued the zoning permit at the time of the building application. Unfortunately, the City could not be faulted for their mistake of canceling the zoning permit. Finally, SGMOC gave up on the proposed church building, at the Verree Road property. It may be noted that the Construction Contractor Agri Inc. returned the deposit money of \$40,000, to SGMOC, while writing off all the labor and material cost incurred by them for getting the permits and for the employee expenses.

The Church continued the use of the building in the Verree Road property for regular prayers and worship services. In the meantime, the Building Committee continued its task of finding another place for the Church.

(d) St. Gregorios Church at Torresdale Avenue, Philadelphia

By the Grace of God, a small church building with its surrounding property at 7721-31Torresdale Avenue, Philadelphia, was available for sale. It was used by a religious group for worship, and the group was about to move to another location. Without much delay, the General Body of SGMOC approved the purchase of this church property in spite of objections and legal actions taken by certain members. The parish's legal matters were successfully handled by Theodore Jobes, Esq. a member of the parish. The property with the church building was purchased in 1995. At the same time, the Verree Road property with the house, was used for religious activities for four years.

(e) The consecration of Torresdale Church

The dream for the long-awaited place of worship for SGMOC parish had become a reality. The parish, under the leadership of the Vicar, Mathai Achen and with whole-hearted support and management of the parish committee with Mr. Thomas Paul, as the secretary, and Mr. Issac George, as the treasurer worked tirelessly for the success of the consecration ceremony of the new church. Agri, Inc., the contractor who worked for the Veree Road church building project, worked with Mr. Korah Mani in doing minor modifications inside the building and to the exterior appearance of the building. A new altar was built and the sanctuary was made ready for the Orthodox worship services.

His Grace Thomas Mar Thimotheos metropolitan, who was then the Catholicos designate, (and who later became HH Didimos Bava) was the chief celebrant for the consecration of the Church. Thirumeni was assisted by His Grace Mathews Mar Barnabas, the Metropolitan of the American Diocese, and His Grace Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios metropolitan, the first metropolitan of American Diocese, and later in-charge of Canada and Europe. A number of priests and deacons of the diocese, invited dignitaries, and a large crowd of the faithful participated in the dedication service.

Since 1995, the membership had grown to over 100 families within a period of 13 years. The church witnessed many memorable events during this period, including the elevation of Mathai Achen as Cor Episcopa, and the 25th year anniversary of Mathai Achen's priestly ordination. Also, in spite of the church's limited facilities, a number of annual events of the American diocese were held in this church. The parish became the focal point of spiritual as well as social activities of other Orthodox parishes of the city of Philadelphia, including the Philadelphia Area OVBS.

At this point, SGMOC felt that there was insufficient space in the sanctuary for all family members to attend the service. There were no rooms for Sunday School classes and other spiritual organizations. There was no parking space within the



Silver Jubilee service



Moments of tranquility
Mathai Achen being elevated to the position of Cor Episcopa



church property, and the street parking was insufficient for all church members. The parish initiated a number of fund-raising projects to have sufficient cash towards the down payment for the purchase of a new church site. By this time, the parish had accumulated approximately four hundred thousand dollars, including the net income from the sale of the Veree Road property. With this background, the parish vicar and members felt the urgency to look for a site to build a larger church building with sufficient parking space.

During this time, there were serious discussions among the two larger Orthodox parishes of Philadelphia, namely, St Gregorios Parish, with Very Rev. K. Mathai Cor Episcopa as its vicar, and St. Thomas Church with its vicar, Rev. Fr. M. K. Kuriakose. The goal was to join these two parishes as one unit, with a project to build a larger Church with all amenities. The management teams of the two parishes met on many occasions, and discussed on the pros and cons of the proposal. The vicars were in full agreement of sharing the responsibilities amicably. However, for some unforeseen issues brought out at the final joint meeting, the project did not materialize.

8. ST. GREGORIOS MALANKARA ORTHODOX CHURCH, BENSALEM

(a) Purchase of the Bensalem Property

There were many sites and buildings considered by the Church building committee as a potential location for a larger church building with all amenities including sufficient parking space. Many of these sites needed modification of the building or were outside the city of Philadelphia, and hence were rejected from further consideration. At last, in 2005, a property with a residential building on Hulmeville Road, Bensalem township in Bucks County came on the market. There were different opinions on the location of our future church. A group of members residing in the Upper Darby area demanded that the new church should be located within the city of Philadelphia as was the prior decision taken by the parish. However, the majority of the membership opted to purchase the property in Bensalem.

The general body meeting of SGMOC was held on June 12, 2005, where a decision was made to build a new church in the newly available Bensalem property within Philadelphia region. As always, the parish experienced God's blessings, and was able to purchase the property of 2.5 acres with a house in Bensalem Township at 4136 Hulmeville Road, PA 19020, on June 30, 2005. However, the land area did not comply with the Township's zoning requirement of a minimum of 4 acres for a church building. Hence the parish purchased the adjoining property of 1.75 acres at

4150 Hulmeville Road, on September 18, 2006. After selling the Torresdale church and property for a good price, the parish had close to eight hundred thousand dollars in its building fund. Since SGMOC had sufficient funds to start with, the parish could buy these properties without any financial difficulties.

(b) Start of the Construction of the Church Building in Bensalem, PA

The construction of a new church on the Bensalem property was planned and the process was started. In the general body meeting, a new building committee was elected for the church building project. Mr. Joseph Abraham and Mr. Thomas Joseph, both engineers by profession, and members of SGMOC, were elected as the coordinators for obtaining necessary permits from the governmental authorities, and to manage the church building construction processes.

Various means of fundraising programs were adopted to meet the finances of the construction, and they are explained in the following paragraphs:

(c) Fund-raising from Parish Members

To start with, majority of SGMOC parish members generously pledged, and donated towards the church building project, including the vicar, Mathai Achen. Members donated according to their financial capabilities. Members felt the need for a better place of worship, and paid generously towards the church building project.

(d) Fund-raising from General Public

The vicar, church building committee, and board of trustee members visited His Grace Mathews Mar Barnabas, the metropolitan of American Diocese to inform Thirumeni about the plan to build a new church, and requested His Grace's permission to visit other parishes in the American Diocese for fund raising. In addition to giving the parish permission to visit other parishes of the diocese, Thirumeni inaugurated the fund-raising program by donating \$5,000.00 towards the church building fund from His Grace's own personal account. It was a strong encouragement to the building committee and it created a benevolent spirit for others to donate according to their ability, and also to build confidence in making the great dream, a reality. Thirumeni blessed the SGMOC visitors and sent them with hope and enthusiasm.

With the blessings and permission of Thirumeni, the vicar, managing committee and board members, and a few other church members, visited the orthodox parishes in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Dallas and Houston, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, Chicago, Virginia and Washington D C, and also the parishes in Canada that were under the American Diocese. Mathai Achen joined the fund-raising team that visited the parishes in the above-mentioned places.

The parish visiting mode followed these steps: (a) get an appointment from the vicar and committee of the parish to be visited, (b) the visiting team would visit these parishes at their own expense. The team included 5 to 8 members of SGMOC, representing the church building committee, managing committee, or members from the board of trustees, or other faithful of the parish. Mathai Achen would conduct the Holy Qurbana at the hosting parish, and at the end of the service, the vicar of the hosting parish would announce the purpose of the team's visit. After the vicar's introduction, Mathai Achen would elaborate on the purpose of the visit, and would request spiritual and financial assistance from the members of the host parish for building a new House of Worship in Bensalem, PA. (c) The members of the fundraising team would individually meet the members of the host-parish and request their help. Majority of the host-parish members offered their donations at the time of the visit, and a few members sent their donations by mail. Through such an organized manner of outside-parish fundraising campaign, SGMOC was able to collect a substantial amount for the church building project.

(e) Bank Loan.

The Board of Trustees of SGMOC approached a number of financial institutions for mortgage for the church building construction project. It was fortunate that banks were happy to lend money for the project at an acceptable interest rate. The mortgage papers were signed by the members of the parish Board of Trustees. The parish has been paying the monthly mortgage amount on time. The mortgage amounts were refinanced twice during the past 15 years, to much lower interest rates, thus reducing the monthly mortgage payments to a very manageable level.

(f) Internal problems within the Church

As mentioned earlier, a group of the church members living in the suburban communities of Upper Darby and Drexel Hill who had objected to the purchase of the property in Bensalem on differing grounds, moved out of SGMOC unconditionally. The diocesan Metropolitan, H. G. Mathews Mar Barnabas Thirumeni accepted their request to have a parish in the south-western suburb of Philadelphia to serve the Orthodox Christians living in that part of Pennsylvania in 2006. This new parish, situated in Drexel Hill, PA, was named St. John's Malankara Orthodox Church of Delaware Valley. The parish started regular service in the chapel of St. John the Baptist Church in Drexel Hill, PA. Later in 2016, the parish bought the entire property with the church building and the adjoining school.

Mathai Achen felt sad that a few members left the parish. However, without losing the momentum to build the planned new church building, he asked the parish members to pray to God, to see their dream of a new church in Bensalem materi-

alizes. “Nothing is impossible for God”, he said. The members trusted in Achen’s leadership and fully supported the project. The whole parish members prayed for blessings from on High, to complete the construction of a beautiful church on the Bensalem property. The parish members also believed in the intercessory prayers of, St. Mary, mother of God, St. Thomas, the Apostle of India and St. Gregorios of Parumala, who is the patron saint of the parish. The vicar, secretary, treasurer, joint treasurer, the members of board of trustees, and the managing committee pledged to work hard to achieve the goal. The entire membership stood behind the building committee, and the core-team with a spirit of commitment. Thus, SGMOC went ahead with the construction project, trusting in God Almighty.

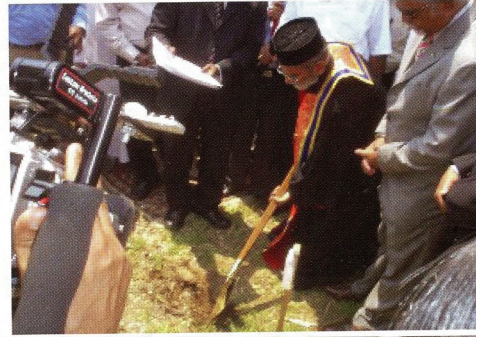
(g) Church Building Construction Process

St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church moved forward with the new church building project. As mentioned before, the church general body elected Mr. Joseph Abraham, and Mr. Thomas Joseph as the engineers responsible for getting the required permits from Bensalem Township and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and other related agencies, and for managing the construction processes.

The ground breaking ceremony on the property was conducted by Mathai Achen in the presence of the members of the Board of Trustees, and Managing Committee, and a number of church faithful, in May, 2007. The engineers and construction managing committee sought for a construction contractor. After a wide search for qualified contractors, the parish selected Worthington Associates, Inc., PO Box 225, Bristol, PA 19007, and signed a contract with them on September 8, 2007.

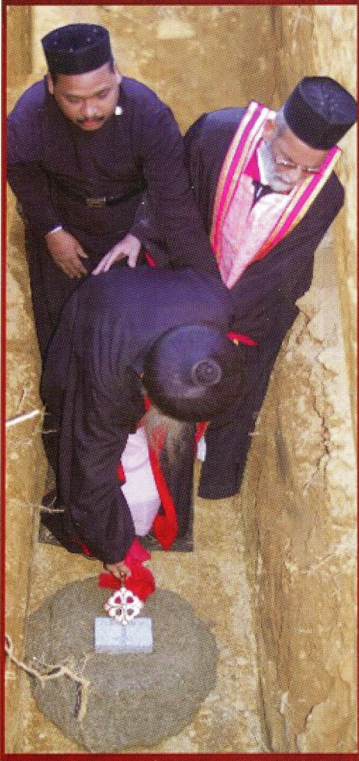
Heavy equipment was moved on to the construction area. Then, H.G. Mathews Mar Barnabas thirumeni was invited and His Grace laid the corner stone, assisted by the vicar of the parish, Mathai Achen, during the first week of April 2008. And thus, the construction started in full swing.

Ground Breaking Ceremony

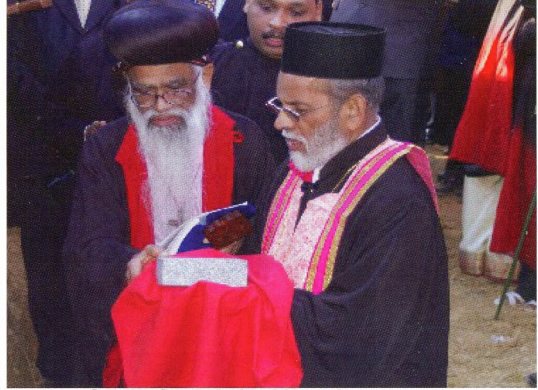


During construction, the roofing collapsed because of the heavy rain and wind. Fortunately, there was no injury to anybody. However, it was 'a blessing in disguise' because the contractor admitted their poor workmanship, and they built a new, stronger, and better roofing set-up, free of charge.

Corner stone laying



H.G. Mar Barnabas laying Corner Stone



Corner Stone being blessed



Corner Stone

(h) Consecration of The New Church

Once the construction of the church building was completed, the parish started with the preparation for the consecration celebration. The Consecration date was decided at the parish general body meeting, and a list of invitees was developed. The church building dedication dates were set for May 22 and 23, 2009.

The following is a short list of honorable spiritual, political, and societal leaders, who were invited for the church dedication and consecration ceremonies:

(1). His Grace Mathews Mar Barnabas, the diocesan metropolitan was the chief celebrant of the consecration services.

(2). His Grace Zachariah Mar Nicolaus, the assistant metropolitan of the American diocese, was present on both days of the dedication services.

58 (3). His Grace Dr. Mathews Mar Severios, the metropolitan of the Kandanad West

diocese., (who was elevated to be the Catholicos and Malankara Metropolitan in 2021 after the demise of HH Baselios Poulouse II, Catholicos). Thirumeni is a friend of Mathai Achen since his time as a student at the Kottayam Theological Seminary.

(4). His Grace Yuhanon Mar Milithius, metropolitan of the Trissur Diocese who was visiting the U.S. at that time.

(5). Honorable Joseph DiGirolamo, mayor of Bensalem township. He is a good friend of all Indian communities, especially our parish that is located within the township. He was gracious in issuing required zoning and other construction related permits.

(6). The other distinguished guests who were invited and present were:

- (a) PA Governor's representative,
- (b) Hon. Prabhu Dayal, the Consul General of Indian Embassy,
- (c) Chitra Sarkar, Executive Director of Air India Airlines,
- (d) Meera Sankar, Indian Ambassador.

(7). Other respected guests who attended were:

- (a) Rev. Fr. Skariah, chairman of the Ecumenical Fellowship of Indian Churches in Philadelphia,
- (b) Rev. Fr. M.K. Kuriakose, Chairman of the Malankara Orthodox Christian Fellowship,
- (c) Roy Ennacheril, trustee of the Diocese of Northeast America,
- (d) Sunny Thomas, the Northeast American Diocesan Council member,
- (e) Paul Karukapallil, President of FOKANA,
- (f) Mr. Yohannan Sankarathil, who was the president of FORMA, and also a member of the Board of Trustees of SGMOC

(8). Also, present were honorable clergymen and seminarians:

- (a) Very Rev. Dr. K. M. Yohannan Sankarathil Corepiscopos,
- (b) Very Rev. C. M. Alexander Corepiscopos, Kuttikandathil,
- (c) Rev. Fr. Cyril Davis, New York,
- (d) Rev. Fr. Thomas Paul,
- (d) Rev. Fr. Alexander Koodarathil, Manager of Parumala Mission Hospital, and a few Seminarians of the American Diocese.

(9). The media representatives who helped with publicity and news casting were the following:

- (1) Mr. Vincent Immanuel – Asianet, and Kerala Express,
- (2) Mr. Jiji Koshy-Kairali,
- (3) Mr. Kochumon - Malayalam Vartha,

(4) Mr. Joby George – Malayalam Pathram, and president of Philadelphia Chapter of Press Club, and

(5) Mr. Raju Sankarathil, a member of the SGMOC parish, who was in charge of Video and Photography for the church.

As the vicar of the parish, and the leader of the consecration celebrations at the time, Mathai Achen expressed his heartfelt gratitude to all who participated and made the dedication celebrations a grand event.

Our Late Rev. Fr. Dr. Paul Varki, the pioneer Orthodox Church member and the coordinator of the Ecumenical Christian Congregation of the 1960's and until Mathai Achen started our own Orthodox parish in 1976, reminiscences about the history of our Church in an article, 'The Beginnings' at the occasion of the Bensalem Church dedication in 2009,



THE BEGINNINGS

By: Rev. Fr. Dr. Paul Varki

In the summer of 1965, some of us who were working and studying in Philadelphia and surrounding areas, got together and planned a worship service of different denominations including Malankara Orthodox Church. Rev. Fr. Dr. K. M. Simon and Rev. Fr. A. T. Abraham were the early celebrants of the Orthodox Holy Qurbana, and I was the deacon who assisted and hosted those priests. In addition, the late H. G. Mar Makarios (the then Fr. K.C. Thomas), the late H. G. Mar Theodosious (the then Fr. P. T. Punnoose who was my dear friend from my Old Seminary days), the late Fr. John Mathews, Very Rev. Fr. Cherian Neelankal, Very Rev. Fr. Yohannan Sankarathil, and other priests visited us.

The Orthodox Qurbana was celebrated once a month at Asbury Methodist Church on 33rd and Chestnut Streets. I had contacted Rev. Jim Hallam of Asbury Church who allowed us to use their Church, rent-free.

In those days, we had Marthoma, Catholic, CSI, and other denominational church members who attended the services, which was open to all. Thus, the vineyard which Saint Thomas, our Church founding apostle of Jesus, started in Odessa, was born in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. After each Sunday service, we got together in the residence of one of the attending members for lunch and fellowship. It went on for eleven years.

In the seventies, some groups separated from the congregation and started their own worship service. I contacted Bishop Ogilby of the Episcopal Church who gave

us the Cathedral church and chapel rent-free for our Holy Qurbana. We also started our own worship service with Rev. Fr. K. Mathai (now, Very Rev. Fr. K. Mathai) as the celebrant. Before Mathai Achen moved to Philadelphia as the Vicar, I sent a request to the Catholicos H. H. Baselius Mar Thoma Mathews I (who was not only my teacher at M.D, Seminary, and my benefactor), to allow us to start a parish in Philadelphia. His Holiness sent me a kalpana authorizing a church in Philadelphia, immediately. It was on the basis of that kalpana that Mathai Achen was appointed as Vicar, by H. G. Mar Makarios which was documented my Makarios thirumeni, and it was read by the Vicar Rev. Fr. K. Mathai in the church.

It should be noted that ours was the first St. Thomas Church in Philadelphia area after H. G. Mar Makarios came and inaugurated the American Diocese. St. Thomas Orthodox Church thus came into being which is now St. Gregorios Church. The beginnings still go through the currents of our souls, the earliest Orthodox church settlers in Philadelphia.

May the patron saint, St. Gregorios, whose memory we cherish, bless this new, elegant church in Bensalem, PA which is the outcome of the dedicated and courageous members of our beloved church, now.

[This manuscript was prepared by Rev. Fr. Dr. Paul Varki at the dedication of St. Gregorios Orthodox Church in 2009]



Our diocesan metropolitan H.G. Zachariah Mar Nicholovos presented Mathai Achen, a plaque at the celebration of Achen's 40th year of Holy Priesthood ordination.



9. THE SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES IN ST. GREGORIOS CHURCH

In addition to the regular liturgical worship services, St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church continued its other essential spiritual activities.

(a). Sunday School

From the very beginning of the church, starting from 1976, importance was given to Sunday School, in spite of limited space in the rented church buildings and having only few children in the parish. Mathai Achen insisted that the children of the parish need to be taught the word of God, for their spiritual growth.



Mathai Achen with Students and Teachers, Rev. Fr. Dr. Paul Varki and Rev. Dn. Markose Mani



Mathai Achen and Mariamma Kochamma with SS competition winners, the Principal and teachers



SS Students and Teachers with Mathai Achen visiting Barnabas Thirumeni and Nicholovos Thirumeni



Mathai Achen with SS Philadelphia Area leaders

Mathai Achen celebrating his birthday with children and Shibu Achen



(b). Youth league

It was organized for the young boys and girls. This helped them to learn the faith of the church, and to get involved in church activities.



Mathai Achen with Youth League members

Telegrams: Devalokam.

Telephone: 8500

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church
CATHOLICATE OF THE EAST

BASELIOS MARTHOMA MATHEWS II
CATHOLICOS OF
THE APOSTOLIC THRONE OF ST. THOMAS
AND
MALANKARA METROPOLITAN



CATHOLICATE PALACE
KOTTAYAM-686 038
KERALA, INDIA

24-4-1993

Blessings to the Vicar and the Youth League members of the St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church Inc., Philadelphia.

Beloved in our Lord,

It gives us immense pleasure to know that under the auspices of the Youth League of the St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church Inc., Philadelphia, the third edition of "Reflection" is to be published very soon.

We do appreciate your efforts in this connection and hope that this publication will not only be able to provide necessary information about the True Faith and the great traditions of our ancient Orthodox Church with an apostolic foundation, but also be able to give necessary guidance and directions to the community to lead a true christian life to be lived in peace and in praise of God.

Today when the whole world is seeking ways of making human personality morally sound and is in search of the truth which is capable of regenerating man, a publication of this type will be of great help to inculcate a sound system of values, develop and maintain stable relationships and usher in a new era of human relations.

May God Almighty shower His blessings on all of you, and lead you to success in your endeavours.

With best wishes, Love and Prayers,

Baslios Marthoma Mathews II.

H.H.Baslios Marthoma Mathews II Bava
on 'Reflection' publication

MALANKARA ORTHODOX SYRIAN CHURCH
AMERICAN DIOCESE, INC.

HIS GRACE MATHEWS MAR BARNABAS
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September 28, 1994

To
The office-bearers and members of the Youth League
St. Gregorios Orthodox Church, Philadelphia.

Beloved brothers and sisters in our Lord,

I am glad to hear that you are releasing the annual publication of the "Reflection" under the auspices of the Youth League of that parish. My best wishes for the same.

May I bring to your attention the unbreakability of the laws of nature. Anyone trying to break the laws of nature, whether in the material field or spiritual field, will break himself/herself against them.

The main law in the spiritual world is the law of love, which is caring for others. When we grow in this self-giving love, we will have all kinds of virtues. That is what we find in the fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22, 23). On the other hand, when we become selfish, we will ruin ourselves and others through all kinds of vices.

How then to grow in self-giving love? Put ourselves in the place of others and make their needs and desires our own. Or, see others as the children of God to whom we owe everything. Then we can care for others without ulterior motives. Should we not try to grow in this love? St. Paul says "Let all you do be done in love" (1 Cor. 16:14).

Will you please make a special effort from to-day onwards, to do everything in love? That means all thinking, talking and doing must be controlled by love, seeking the welfare of others.

With the best blessings for your success in every field.

I remain
Yours affectionately
Mathews Mar Barnabas

H. G. Mathews Mar Barnabas, American Diocese Metropolitan wishing
Youth League for its annual publication of 'Reflection'

(c). Morth Mariam Vanitha Samajam (MMVS).

After participating in the liturgy, the women gathered for an hour and read Bible, sang hymns, and discussed matters related to the Church. If Achen was available, he gave a short sermon based on that day's significance. Sometimes they organized their meetings in member's houses.



Mathai Achen with MMVS members



Members with Mathai Achen on his 80th birthday celebration



Members with Mathai Achen visiting the home of a member



Mathai Achen with MMVS members going to New York to attend a conference

(d). Prayer meetings

Monthly prayer meetings were held on Saturday evenings in those houses who volunteered to host the meeting.

(e). Wednesday and Friday Prayer and Holy Qurbana

In addition to Holy Worship on all Sundays, there were evening prayers on Wednesday and on Friday of every week. After coming to Bensalem, there is regular Friday evening Holy Qurbana service and intercessory prayers.

The spiritual organizations such as Sunday School, Morth Mariam Samajam, prayer meetings in houses, and other spiritual activities were available since the beginning of the first Orthodox parish in Philadelphia in 1976, and were continued in the new Church in Bensalem.

To generate interest and complete participation in our regular Holy Qurbana services for our younger generation and for those who have difficulty in following our regular liturgical services in Malayalam, liturgy in English was started during the 1980's and is continued to date. Now, we have liturgy in English on alternate Sundays and there is an active choir proficient in both English and Malayalam.

Many of the above-mentioned activities were started from the very beginning of our church in 1976, at the Church of the Savior, in Philadelphia. Thus, SGMOC was, and still is a blessed parish in all aspects of spiritual and liturgical setting. There is full participation from almost all the members for the worships and spiritual activities.

In addition, Mathai Achen was very active in the Ecumenical Fellowship of Indian Churches in PA, since its start in 1987. Under his leadership, the parish participated in all activities organized by this Fellowship.

With the leadership of Mathai Achen and Rev. Fr. M. K. Kuriakose of St. Thomas Church, Unruh Avenue, Philadelphia, the area's Orthodox parishes organized under the name Malankara Orthodox Christian Fellowship (MOCF). This organization has a very active agenda for every year. Mathai Achen was chairman of this organization for many years, and he continued to lead MOCF after his return from India in 2015.



Mathai Achen after MOCF sponsored Holy Qurbana with SGMOC Members

10. INSTALLATION OF THE HOLY RELICS OF ST. GREGORIOS OF PARUMALA

Mathai Achen and a few members of SGMOC requested Parumala Seminary manager Achen for holy relics of our parish's patron saint, St. Gregorios, from Parumala Tomb. The Manager Achen gave a holy relic item in a closed vessel. SGMOC brought it in a very celebrative way, and it was installed inside the new church on the right side near the madbaha. Holy Qurbana and mediation/intercessory prayers are conducted specially in the name of Saint Gregorios of Parumala on all Friday evenings, since the installation of the saint's holy relics in the church.

Relics of St. Gregorios of Parumala



Relics being received at Parumala



Church Members at Parumala



Team went to JFK to receive Relics



Vicar and the Team brought Relics to Church



RELICS OF ST. GEEVARGHESE MAR GREGORIOS (PARUMALA THIRUMENI)

At this time of consecration of our church building, we are blessed by the presence of Parumala Thirumeni who continuously intercedes for us. The Holy Relic of our Patron Saint that is kept in the north side altar also blesses us. This Holy Relic was brought to our church from Niranom Church where most of Thirumeni's belongings are kept in reverence to this first indigenous saint of Malankara Orthodox Church. Our Vicar, Very Rev.K. Mathai Corepiscopa, along with our parish secretary and treasurer, and many other members of the parish visited Niranom Church in March 2009 and received the Holy Relic from the Senior (Retired) Metropolitan of Niranom Diocese, H.G. Geevarghese Mar Osthathios who has instructed us to keep this Holy Relic as a symbol of Parumala Thirumeni's life in God's presence so that we mortals can also achieve that purity of heart and spiritual excellency of life by following his footsteps.

We learn from Thirumeni's simple life that, we should impart Christian love towards all of God's creation. He showed us that God created everything for us to love, and to take care of. He taught us that this principle is also applicable regarding the Church, that it is God's creation and hence it is our responsibility to nurture her and protect her from all evil influences. His life was an example of good leadership and humble living and he treated the rich and the poor with the same love and care. He fought against caste system and he baptized many members of the 'low caste' communities in central Travancore. He encouraged education and gave emphasis for English medium schools. Over and above, he taught us to rely on fasting and prayer, thus living in God's presence, listening to God, and following His directions.



Parumala Seminary

Parumala P. O., Thiruvalla, Pathanamthitta District,
Kerala State. Pin: 689626

To Whom It May Concern

Very Rev. K. Mathai Cor-Episcopa, Vicar of St.Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church, 4136 Hulmeville Road, Bensalem, 6A 19020, is carrying a part of Holy Relics of St.Gregorios of Parumala, the Great Saint of Orthodox Church in India. The Holy Relics was donated to the Phila St.Gregorios Parish to install there in the set Shrine for people to pray and meditate. The Vicar received it from the Most Rev. Geevarghese Mar Osthathios Metropolitan on March 15th, 2009 in Parumala Seminary.

Phone: Office: 0479-2312202
Manager: 0479-2312328
Retreat House: 0479-2312226

Date: 15-03-2009

Very Truly

Manager

Fr. M. D. JOHN
Manager



At present there are eight Orthodox parishes in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. After dissolution of the original St. Thomas Malankara Orthodox Church, majority of the parish members joined St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church, with Mathai Achen as its vicar. The other parish, namely, St. Baselius Church never accepted that name. Instead, they called their church as St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church.

(a). St. Mary's Malankara Orthodox Cathedral, Welsh Road, Huntington Valley, PA This is the second Orthodox parish in Philadelphia that was formed in 1980. As mentioned earlier, the founding members of this parish were members of St. Thomas Orthodox Church of Philadelphia. American Diocese Metropolitan, His grace Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios Thirumeni appointed Very Rev. Dr. Muttaniyil Idiculla Corepiscopos as the first vicar of this parish. Later, Rev. Fr. C. J. Johnson was appointed as the vicar. The parish bought a historic church on Orthodox Street, Philadelphia and stayed there for over three decades. Makarios Thirumeni elevated this parish as a Cathedral Church in the 1990's. Later on, the parish moved to a newer church building on Welsh Road in Huntington Valley section of Philadelphia.

(b) St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church, Mascher Street, Philadelphia

The original St. Thomas Orthodox Church in Philadelphia established in 1976 was dissolved in 1984. As reported earlier, the diocesan metropolitan H. G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios approved two parishes namely, St. Gregorios Orthodox Church, and St. Baselius Orthodox Church. The majority of members took the name, St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church for their new parish. However, the remaining members did not follow through the diocesan metropolitan's Kalpana and did not accept the name of their parish, St. Baselius Orthodox Church.

Later on, a group of members bought a house on Mascher Street, Philadelphia and converted it to a church. However, the building was in the names of those individuals, and was known as St. Thomas Christian Center. Very Rev. P.S. Samuel Corepiscopos achen was instrumental in organizing the members to a parish. Also, Rev. Fr. M. T. Kurian became the vicar after the diocesan metropolitan recognized the group as a parish and got the owners of St. Thomas Christian Center to change the name to St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church.

The parish had a number of vicars during the life of the parish including Rev. Fr. M. K. Kuriakose, Rev. Fr. K. K. John, Rev. Fr. Dr. Paul Varki, and Rev. Fr. Babu Varghese (Shebaly Achen) till he joined his creator in January, 2023. The new vicar was Rev. Fr. Dr. Varghese Daniel, the Diocesan Secretary. Mathai Achen served the parish for the past two years during Shebaly achen's illness, and continued to serve the parish as requested by the current vicar. The diocesan Metropolitan recently appointed Rev. Fr. Dr. Tojo Baby as the new vicar of St. Thomas church.

(c) St. Mary's Orthodox Church, Deveraux Ave, Philadelphia

A few members of St. Mary's Orthodox Cathedral Church left that parish and started their services in a rental place. It was organized by Very Rev. P. S. Samuel Corepiscopus, and was established as a parish under the Northeast American Diocese in 1991. He served as the first vicar of the parish. He was followed by Rev. Fr. M. Johnson (Now, H.G. Nicodimos Thirumeni) who served the parish from 1992 to 1993. Rev. Fr. Dr. K. M. Samuel was appointed as its vicar, in 1993 and served till 2000. The present church building was bought in 2000 and Rev. Fr. Dr. M.S. John (Now, Very Rev. Dr. Yuhanon Ramban) became the vicar. He was followed by Rev. Fr. Babu Varghese. In 2005, Samuel Achen returned to the parish and continued to serve as its vicar till 2021. It is with immense sadness that we remember Samuel Achen's passing from his earthly abode on July 31, 2023. Rev. Fr. Shinoj Thomas is the current vicar of this parish.

(d) St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church, Unruh Ave, Philadelphia

Started under the leadership of Rev. Fr. M.K. Kuriakose, in 1996, this parish was formed with the majority of members of the St. Thomas Christian Center of Mascher Street, Philadelphia. The parish conducted regular Holy Qurbana service in the beginning, in the small chapel of Cardinal Dougherty High School, Philadelphia. The parish started its efforts to have its own church building in 1996. While looking around in the city for a suitable building or land, the parish was able to buy a 6-acre plot in Philadelphia. Later, a Jewish Synagogue on Unruh Avenue was available for purchase, and the parish bought this large complex in 2004 with the money from the sale of the 6-acre plot and the cash in the bank. After the construction of the beautiful altar and repairing several parts of the building, this church became the largest Orthodox Church in Philadelphia. Simultaneously, membership of the parish grew from 28 in 1996 to over 250 families. Kuriakose achen continues to be the vicar of this parish, assisted by Rev. Fr. Sujit Thomas.

(e) St. John's Orthodox Church, Drexel Hill, PA

As mentioned earlier, the diocesan Metropolitan, H. G. Mathews Mar Barnabas Thirumeni accepted the request of some of SGMOC members living in Upper Darby and Drexel Hill communities, to have a parish in the south-western suburb of Philadelphia to serve the Orthodox Christians living in this part of Pennsylvania in 2006. This new parish situated in Drexel Hill, PA, was named St. John's Malankara Orthodox Church of Delaware Valley. Thirumeni appointed Rev. Fr. Geevarghese Erakkathu as the first vicar of this parish. He was followed by Rev. Fr. Roy P. George. The parish started regular service in the chapel of St. John the Baptist Church in Drexel Hill, PA. Later in 2016, the parish bought the entire property with the church building and the adjoining school. The current vicar of this parish is Rev. Fr. Kuriakose (Siby) Varghese.

(f) St. George Malankara Orthodox Church, Fairless Hills, PA

In 2013, a group of members of St. Mary's Malankara Orthodox Cathedral left the church, and they purchased a church building with 2.5 acres in Bucks County, at 520 Hood Blvd, Fairless Hills, PA 19030. Initially there were only 34 families, and within one month, the number increased to 50 families. The consecration services of the church building were conducted in 2014, by the diocese metropolitan, His Grace Zachariah Mar Nicholovos as the chief celebrant. Currently, Rev. Fr. Abu Varghese Peter serves the parish as the vicar.

(g) St. Luke Orthodox Mission Church, Bensalem, PA

St. Luke Orthodox Mission church is a parish that focuses on young families and individuals who are unable to understand fully the Orthodox services in Malayalam. The parish members are mostly from Philadelphia area Orthodox parishes. They practice liturgy, preaching and teaching in English. Rev. Fr. Geevarghese John is serving the parish as its vicar. Their liturgy and spiritual activities are conducted at a rental facility of 'Our Lady of Fatima Church', 2933 Street Road, Bensalem, PA 19020.

12. CONCLUSION

After 45 years of dedicated priestly service in Philadelphia, and organizing and leading the activities related to the construction and the dedication services of the new Bensalem Church, Mathai Achen decided to go back to Kerala to serve the needy parishes there. In 2011, the diocesan metropolitan appointed Rev. Fr. Shibu Venad Mathai as the new vicar of SGMOC. The parish continues to flourish under his leadership.

Mathai Achen and Kochamma moved to Kerala in 2011 and settled in Kottayam. Achen took charge of a small parish in Nilakkal Diocese, appointed by the diocesan metropolitan, His Grace Joshua Mar Nicodimos. Due to Kochamma's health issues, Achen decided to return to U.S. in 2015.

Shibu Achen was very happy to have Mathai Achen back to the parish, and often reminds the parish of the long and committed service of Mathai Achen leading to the building of the new and magnificent Bensalem Church. Shibu Achen continues to request Mathai Achen for his liturgical services whenever Achen is available. He continues his priestly services also to other parishes of the Diocese.



IN MEMORIUM



It was Mathai Achen's earnest hope and desire to document the facts regarding the origin of Christianity in India by Saint Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the future generations living in the United States of America. He also wanted to document the events leading to the establishment of the first Orthodox parish in Philadelphia and how God used him as His instrument for this purpose.

Mathai Achen started to write this book 'A Journey Back to the Beginning' a couple of years back, and reached his goal of completing this manuscript after collecting the relevant facts and writing down events from his recollection. In this book, Achen talked about the various challenges he faced and how God's amazing grace guided him through the struggles he faced to achieve his goal to be a trustworthy worker in his Lord's pasture. Mathai Achen's unwavering faith in God and his commitment to do His will is evident in these pages.

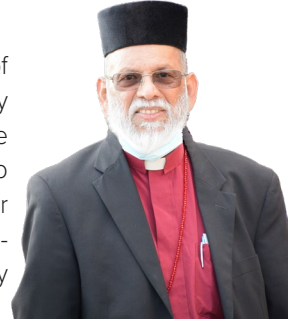
During the final stages of the compilation of this document, Achen's health was failing, thus he was unable to see the book in its final stage, printed for distribution. Achen was called by our Lord to his heavenly abode on October 12, 2023. We, the children of our dear Papa, are honored and privileged to publish this book with his blessings, on November 21, 2023.

As our Papa was involved with a number of charitable organizations during his numerous visits to Kerala, and wanted any contribution from the distribution of these books to go to these charities, we plan on donating this amount to Navakarma Charitable Trust, Vazhoor, Kottayam, Kerala.

Sheeba Paily, Sheena Jacob and Justin Mathai

Very Rev. K. Mathai Cor episcopa

Mathai Achen was born on July 3, 1942 as the second son of Ninan and Rachel Daniel. Achen belonged to the Kollantethu family in Prakkanam, Omalloor, Kerala. The family has its lineage from the Pakalomattom family, one of the first Christian families converted to Christianity by St. Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus Christ. Achen's elder brother Mr. Thomas Daniel passed away in 2021. His younger brother Mr. Samuel P. Daniel and family live in Cheltenham, PA. His only sister Marykutty Daniel passed away at a very young age.



Kochu Mathai, as he was fondly called by his parents, had a life-threatening form of typhoid while he was a sixth-grade student. He was miraculously saved due to the prayers of his parents and friends, and after his recovery, his father made a pledge, vouching him for the service of the Lord who saved him. After his high school days, Kochu Mathai met H.G. Pathros Mar Osthathios metropolitan, the founder of the Servants of the Cross. Thirumeni appointed him as an associate of the mission society in 1961, and thus he became a missionary worker (Sleeba dasan) at Pandappally. He worked for the newly converted Christians in their spiritual and social needs.

Sleeba dasan Mathai joined Bishop Moore College in 1965 to pursue a college education prior to joining theological seminary. He joined Catholicate College, Pathanamthitta in 1967, in pursuit of a B.A. degree in Economics, with Political Science and World History as minors. After completing his college education, in 1970, he was accepted as a student at the Kottayam Theological Seminary. In 1974 Kochu Mathai graduated with a GST diploma from the seminary and a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Serampore University, Calcutta.

H.G. Dr. Mathews Mar Athanasios, the Catholicose-designate ordained Kochu Mathai in 1974 as the fifth-order deacon. Dn. Mathai decided to lead the life of a married priest. Attachakal Mathews Rembachan proposed Mariamma as the girl he should marry. Mariamma, who was already working in U.S. at that time, is the second daughter of Mr. Abraham of Mamootil, Kozhavallor, and Saramma of Kumbukkattu, Vettoor. Dn. Mathai felt that it was a sign from God that brought this proposal. The marriage of Dn. Mathai and Mariamma was solemnized and blessed by H. G. Mathews Mar Athanasios on April 14, 1975. Dn. Mathai was ordained as a priest on April 28, 1975 by Athanasios thirumeni, who was the metropolitan of the diocese Outside Kerala.

Mathai Achen's first Holy Qurbana celebration was at a school building in an Air Force camp at Jankpuri, New Delhi. He filled in for Rev. Fr. T. T. Thomas, the vicar of St. Mary's Orthodox Church, Housekhas, New Delhi for three months. After getting his Visa, Achen came to U.S. in October 1975 and stayed with Mariamma kochamma in an apartment in Queens Village, New York. He joined St. Thomas Church, in Manhattan, NY where Rev. Fr. Yohannan Sankarathil was the vicar. Mathai Achen came to Philadelphia to celebrate Holy Week services in 1976, at a local church. Achen moved with his family to Philadelphia in August 1976. This book highlights the service of Mathai Achen as the vicar of the first Orthodox parish in Philadelphia.





ST. GREGORIOS MALANKARA ORTHODOX CHURCH, BENSALEM, PA