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'A Changing Church in an Age of Migration'

The Mar Thoma Syrian Church in Germany

A Presentation by the Rev Thomas Joseph, Pastor of the Mar Thoma congregations in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany and other lands.
This has written by Canon Dick Lewis, Secretary of the Society, working from his notes, and he apologises for any inaccuracies there might be and is more than willing to be corrected.

Introduction

In talking about a Changing Church in an Age of Migration I shall be concentrating on my own Church, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and global expansion from the Indian homeland. Migration has transformed the Mar Thoma Church from a comparatively small community concentrated in the southern part of Kerala State in India into a world-wide communion. This has enlarged the Church's mission and also its ecumenical relationships. But this movement also has the effect of an ageing and weakening many homeland parishes in Kerala. The task is not to assist migration but to become one Church across several homes.

The pattern of this lecture begins with the establishment of the Church in India, and especially in Kerala, its reformation and its transformation into a missionary movement, starting in the northern and eastern parts of my home state, then moving to other Indian cities, to Singapore and Malaysia as people migrated, then on to Africa, the Gulf and North America, the United Kingdom, Australia and, nowadays, in continental Europe. It is education that has made the Mar Thoma people mobile. Hence, there have been gains abroad and losses back home. Emigration by young families is producing ageing congregations, with fewer children and a loss of local leadership. Parishes also suffer financial instability. Older people have moved south while the younger people move to the metropolitan areas or abroad.

When people move abroad language, religious affiliation and traditions can be loosened. So, there is need to develop a trans-national Church, with trained leadership, strong lay networks, and a sense of solidarity between flourishing and weaker parishes.

Christianity in India

Christianity in India is ancient, but has diverse traditions and is also a minority presence. The 2011 census in India recorded approximately 27.8 million Christians, which is just 2.3% of the population. They are mainly found in North-East India and in the south in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but they can't be reduced to a single region. There are Syrian, Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical traditions alongside Independent and Pentecostal communities.

Kerala's Christians tell a very important story. They are a product of the Apostolic mission of St Thomas in cAD52. There is no doubt about the ancient establishment of Christianity along the Malabar coast, and the Christians there were connected with Persian and Syriac Christians through trade across the Indian Ocean. Before European rule these ancient communities were Indian in social life and Syriac in worship.

The Portuguese arrival at the end of the 15th century, and the Synod of Diamper in 1599, sought to bring the Christians under a more Latin discipline and liturgical control. This was resisted in 1653

with the Coonan Cross Oath (the 'Bent' Cross Oath) as the local Christians struggled for autonomy, insisting that they did not belong to the Pope in Rome. However, as a result of the involvement of the Portuguese there are now many different Christian traditions, Catholic, Orthodox as well as Mar Thoma Syriac. The later Western Missions led to many other groups and factions. Interestingly, after 1653 several Church families shared the memory of St Thomas despite belonging to different Communions. India's Christians face challenges that vary region by region

Today, Kerala Christianity faces new kinds of vulnerability. As a minority they suffer polarisation and legal and political debates about conversion which sometimes lead to violence. There are social issues surrounding caste, social exclusion within and beyond the church and the credibility of Christian witness which needs to be authentic without appearing 'foreign'.

Kerla also suffers other challenges: there is a low fertility rate compared with other states, ageing and the migration of young people affects the churches, as does cultural distance between inherited Malayalam (the local language) church life and the life of the globally formed generations.

Reformation and Mission

We call ourselves in the Mar Thoma Church a Reformed Church with Eastern roots. The Church emerged from nineteenth century reform movement associated especially with Abraham Malpan and his colleagues who sought the renewal of an inherited Syriac Church. He was a teacher in a seminary established in Kerala, the Church Missionary Society contributed Biblical study, printing, the translation of the scriptures into the vernacular and so on. But this was not simply the transplantation of an English Church into Kerala, it was an internal call to renew an inherited Syriac Church through scripture, preaching, revision of its liturgical practice and the removal of practices judged inconsistent with the Gospel.

After prolonged ecclesial and legal conflict, a judgement in 1889 confirmed a new beginning, not the end of the continuity so valued by the Church, but reform. What continued was Episcopal order and the Syriac Liturgy of St James in a reformed form. The role of the laity in the Church was strengthened and it became a reformed Church with eastern roots. However, it is not an Eastern Church for which the Reformation simply passed by! What the reform sharpened was an emphasis on the authority of scripture, preaching in an intelligible language (Malayalam), a focus on personal and communal renewal and a commitment to mission beyond the inherited boundaries of the Church and state.

'Lighted to Lighten' describes a missionary Church. The Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association was founded in 1888 and provided schools, colleges, hospital and homes for people in communities outside Kerala. So, the reform movement became directed outward and scripture was translated into new languages and faith carried into new settings, the Syriac liturgy was performed in the local vernacular. This expansion continued and now the Mar Thoma Church is a member of the World Council of Churches. It participates in the National Conferences of Asia and India, is in full communion with the Anglican Communion, The Episcopal Church in the USA, the Old Catholic Churches Union of Utrecht and the Churches of South and North India.

Education and Movement

Switching our attention back to Kerala, initially the Mar Thoma Church was only in the central part of Kerala. Migration cannot be understood without education. Royal initiatives, social reform movements and churches provided greater access to schooling throughout India. Charities were also important contributors in providing schools, teacher training and colleges, but educational achievements must not be

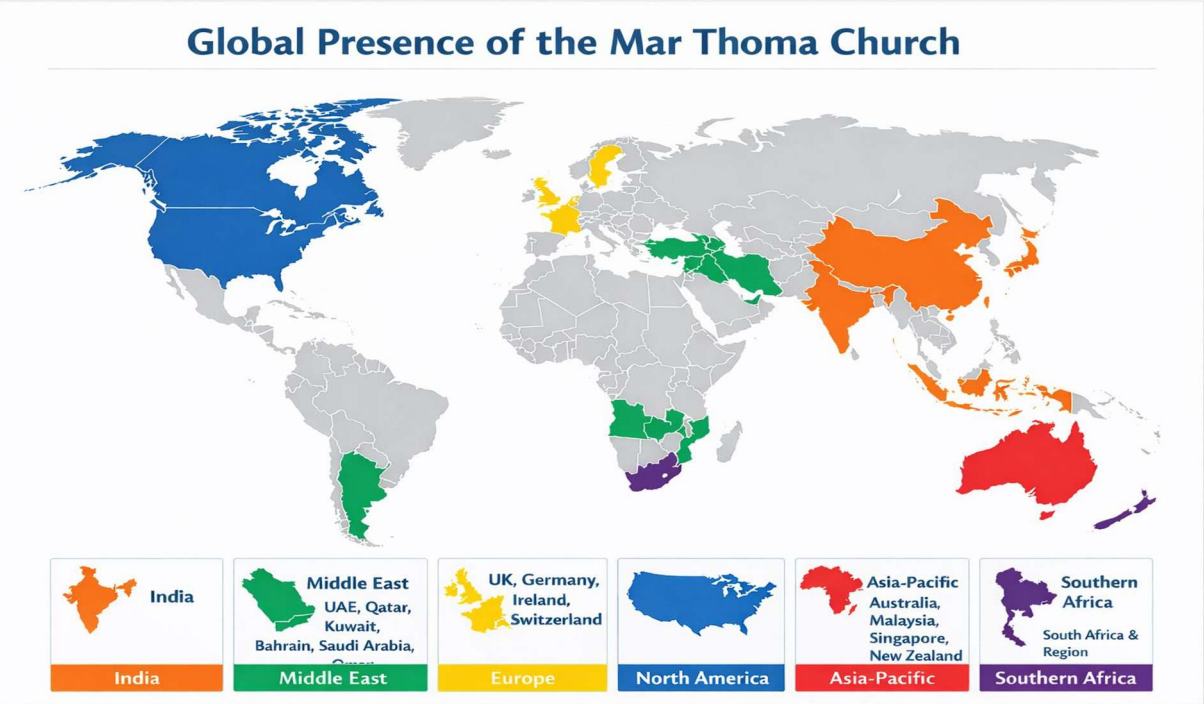
attributed to churches alone. The contribution of the secular authorities was equally important. However, in Kerala the churches started the schools.

Education produces literacy and by 1990 Kerala had 100% literacy compared with other parts of India where today it is only 70% or so. When the local economy could not absorb all the trained nurses, teachers, engineers and other professionals they were obliged to seek employment elsewhere. But there were positive sides to the impact of education: prayer groups in churches became new congregations, and new congregations became new parishes. So, education served as an unintended missionary initiative. The relationship was circular: church, schools, health create mobility. Mobile people establish churches. The diaspora supported more education and so on.

Student emigration from Kerala has nearly doubled in recent years. Figures in 2023 showed that 250,000 students formed 11.3% of the total of 2.2 million emigrants that year. Such emigration often involves whole families who go to places where permanent settlement is possible.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Mar Thoma Church was concentrated around Travancore. After the Second World War people started moving northward in search of jobs and food. The war had affected rice imports and food had become scarce. These people, who were seeking cultivatable land, took their church and their Sunday Schools with them. Gradually the Mar Thoma Church was carried across India to Chennai and Bengaluru where there were openings in education, governmental and other professional work. In Mumbai and Delhi people found work in commerce administration and public services, whilst in Kolkata and smaller places they could work on the railways, in education, nursing and mission. These new congregations in turn supported the mission fields and local institutions.

In the post-war period people moved into South-East Asia in the 1940-50s and to the United Kingdom. There was also migration to the USA and Canada from the 1960s onwards. Others moved into southern and eastern Africa, to Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa . Since then, immigrants have settled in the Gulf States, Northern Europe and Australia and New Zealand. This map shows how the Nar Thoma Church has emerged through overlapping migrations:



The Church has now divided itself into 13 dioceses: 7 in Kerala, 3 elsewhere in India and 3 outside India.

Germany illustrates the newest form of diaspora ministry
Prayer Groups were formed in Germany in the 1950s, was designated a congregation in 1998 and became a parish in 2025. There are now worship centres in Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, Hamburg, Cologne and Stuttgart. Often they receive hospitality from local Evangelische, Roman Catholic, Old Catholic and other congregations who allow them to meet in their buildings. This is in many ways a gift: migration makes ecumenism local.

The Migration Paradox
A stronger global presence means a thinning of the local presence in Kerala. For the migrants Kerala and India are not their only home. They become indigenised – they speak the local languages, often more naturally than their own. But, on the other hand, remittances from abroad support families, parishes and institutions not only back home but where the migrants find themselves. They renovate churches and parsonages, support schools and colleges, create homes for the elderly and for children, and provide services for people with disabilities. In USA they have a Native American Mission in collaboration with other Churches Formal agreements with local congregations of other denominations become partnerships, and all this helps migrants to create their sense of belonging. Through 'Light to Life' the north American diocese supports the work back home in India.

Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Old Catholic communities offer companionship and local knowledge. Ecumenical relationships become 'localised' when Christians share altars, clergy hospitality and mission. Migration has allowed Mar Thoma Church to function as a bridge-Church between India and the world, so ecumenism is in action. When I was in Gothenburg a few months ago the service was organised in the Anglican church. Unfortunately, they don't have a priest there so they asked me to do the Anglican service. It was my first time leading an Anglican service but I was able to manage with the help of the people there. They said, 'You did good!'

In unfamiliar societies the parishes provide care, help with language, support in bereavement, welcome newcomers and provide a setting in which children encounter their heritage. In the Gulf in particular large congregations have been built with extensive children's work under conditions of temporary residence. In countries that offer permanent residence, like Canada and USA, and the UK, we have purchased churches, more than 50 in the United States.

What does migration take from the homeland?
There are many advantages to migration, but it leaves something missing in the homeland. There are declining congregations but also a demographic imbalance. In Kerala large parishes may retain adult and ageing members but relatively few children. This is true not only of the Mar Thoma Church but also of other Churches in Kerala. Children are not the only people lost: there is also a loss of leadership. As married couples with children leave the area the parish loses teachers, office bearers, carers and potential theological students.

The expectations of the migrants also impact the homeland. Whereas migrants in places that only offer temporary residence plan to return home after retirement, keep and maintain their property and provide regular support for their parish in Kerala, those who settle in places that offer permanent residence see their children' future shifting to the new country, their sense of long-term belonging shifts abroad and there is no intention to return to their 'home' parish.

For the homeland parish the pattern is clear. Young adults leave and there are fewer resident couples. Fewer births mean smaller Sunday Schools. A smaller volunteer base generally means fewer leaders and vocations; an ageing population demands greater pastoral care and contracting income means that it is harder to support clergy and buildings. Many parishes in Kerala have large buildings and the cost of maintaining them is enormous. A missing generation today becomes a narrower parish tomorrow.

Small congregations in North India face double trouble: some members return to Kerala while others move to other cities. Because of this, some congregations have been merged, closed down and

disposed of their property. The church building may still be there but the new neighbours live nearby but make no meaningful contact. This leads to a question: is the parish a memorial to those who have left? Or is it a mission towards those who now share its locality?

The financial situation can change dramatically within one generation. In the 1990s foreign income augmented local family giving. Churches and parsonages were rebuilt; mission and social institutions expanded. But today there are fewer remittances from migrants overseas, there are fewer residents to carry the maintenance costs, and older communities need more pastoral care. Impressive buildings can coexist with vulnerable parish finances.

What are the issues for the settled migrants?

Belonging to the church is a voluntary business. With reduced social pressure some members stop attending. Younger people may find the liturgy difficult to follow, and the use of the Malayalam language alone, whilst being a comfort to the first generation of migrants, can exclude the second and third generations and local spouses. The Mar Thoma Church needs to maintain its traditions but make them accessible in the local language. It is a challenge to make the worship accessible to people unfamiliar with the rite or the language. Liturgy and music, for example, are gifts, and should not become an excuse for social exclusivity. Pastoral distance is another issue. One priest may have to serve several cities or indeed several countries. It is hard to maintain Holy Communion even once a month, and baptisms and marriages, as well as the care of the sick and dying, can become problematic and require more than occasional travel. Young people tend to negotiate a new identity in a new society and culture, and a congregation can become a migrant shelter rather than a local missionary church. There are also issues of race, mixed marriage, social expectations, sexuality that inherited programmes may not address.

One Church across several homes

Large American congregations like the one meeting in this Carmel Mar Thoma Centre in Atlanta, Georgia, or the Gulf communities, can sustain a wide range of worship and organisations, whilst small communities in Europe, for example, may not be able to aspire to that kind of model. A global Church therefore needs different structures; regional pastoral teams, trained lay leaders, digital formation, proper safeguarding systems and partnerships with other local churches.

There are seven priorities for a trans-national Mar Thoma Church

First, local congregations must genuinely assess their membership: how many are there? How many are permanent? How many temporary settlers? How many are migrants? How many are connected to the parish and how many transfer elsewhere? What is the age demography? How accessible is pastoral care? 'Sentiment cannot replace data'.

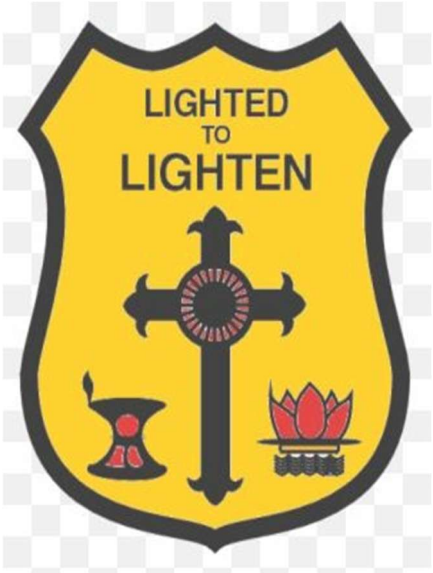
Next, share authority across centres. Kerala is the mother-Church and the diaspora is not merely an extension; it is a constituted part of that Church. Organisation and theological education should reflect this reality, and diaspora congregations should accept their responsibility for supporting the Church in India.

Third, congregations should build covenanted financial solidarity. Finances should be transparent, need based and mission oriented. A diaspora diocese could enter a partnership with a Kerala diocese, mission field or social institution.

Fourth, churches should create a multilingual and intergenerational ministry where liturgical rites can be celebrated in Malayalam, English, German or whatever local language. Study material for adults and children should equally be accessible and deal with ethical questions that children face in their actual societies.

Fifth, the Church should train and authorise lay pastoral teams within its constitution and these should be used is a missional rather than a simple supportive way in the local community.

Sixth, practise ecumenism as a shared mission. Full communion and other partnerships can support sacramental hospitality, care of buildings, chaplaincy, theological education, safeguarding and local service. In Europe especially, the Mar Thoma Church brings living Christian confidence, family networks and liturgical depth. Anglican and Lutheran partners bring local language, institutional knowledge and public presence.



Seventh, turn homeland contraction into missionary service. Each Kerala parish should not measure faith only by restoring its former numbers. It can become a centre for care of the elderly, friendship, ecological action, tutoring support and prayer. The issue is not how to preserve an inherited institution unchanged but how to remain 'Lighted to Lighten' which is the motto of our Church.

Conclusion

The Mar Thoma Church is a changing Church because it has always been a Church in movement. As we heard in our sermon this morning, Christianity is a people on the move. From Apostolic foundation, from Reformation to Mission, for Kerala to Indian cities, from India to the world. Migration has not carried a completed Church elsewhere, it has altered the Church's geography, its ecumenical relationships and its understanding of belonging.

The gains are substantial – global presence, economic resources and institutions, new missions and ecumenical friendships.

The losses are equally real – ageing parishes, fewer children, weakened local leadership, financial strain, pastoral distance and members who suffer tension between the old home and the new.

The future cannot be secured by nostalgia for a densely populated Kerala, nor by grasping diaspora status without counting its cost. Mar Thoma Church must become deliberately trans-national, one Church across several homes, sharing people and resources in both places, translating its worship without sullying its inheritance and treating every place of settlements as afield of pastoral care and mission. In that task, Anglican and Lutheran partners are not merely proprietors of buildings but companions with whom we can learn how migration reaches us, the Body of Christ, and how a changing Church may still bear one light.