

K. K. Kuruvilla

Headmaster & Principal of
M.T. Seminary, Kottayam

The history of the Mar Thoma Church would
not be complete without a reference to its
lay leaders....

13 April 1882 - 12 June 1962

FREE E-BOOK

www.nalloorlibrary.com

K.K. Kuruvilla

Headmaster & Principal of M.T. Seminary, Kottayam

(13 April 1882 -12 June 1962)

By Adv. John Joseph Nalloor, Kuriannoor

advocatenalloor@gmail.com

K. K. Kuruvilla spent most of his life teaching and is considered as one of the greatest educationalists of the former Kingdom of Travancore (now part of Kerala). The Mar Thoma Church wanted Kuruvilla to become a bishop along with Abraham Mar Thoma Thirumeni (1880-1947), but God had other plans for him. God Almighty blessed and used him in the field of education at large and social upliftment of the poor and downtrodden in the society.

K.K. Kuruvilla (Kuruchiethu Kuruvilla Kuruvilla also known as *Kurichiyathu Kunju*) was born on 13 April 1882 to the Kurichiyathu family in Niranam. His grandfather was the Treasurer (*Kaikkaran*) of the Niranam St. Mary's Church. His mother was the granddaughter of Abraham Malpan (1796-1845) and the niece of Thomas Mar Athanasius (1837-1893) and Titus I Metropolitan (1843-1909). The Kurichiyathu family supported the reformation movement happening in the Mar Thoma Church; and because of the close relationship with the Palakunnathu family, Kuruvilla's family became members of the Mar Thoma Church. Pattamukkil Achen (Yakkob Kathanar - 1840-1914) and Kuruvilla's father were close friends and they would pray together in the compound of the present Jerusalem Mar Thoma Church at Niranam.

Kuruvilla learned the alphabets from Ipe Asan's Kalari at Niranam. From there he joined an English medium school at Niranam and passed his Lower Secondary Exam from the Government School at Tiruvalla. Right from his school days, he would help the sick and needy and was kind to the lower caste people. He would assist his friends in their studies. He joined C. M. S. School Kottayam for his high school studies and later joined the newly opened Mar Thoma (M.T.) Seminary School at Kottayam. After matriculation, he passed his F.A. (Faculty of Arts) exam from CMS College Kottayam and joined Madras Christian College (MCC) for a B.A. degree. After graduation, he wanted to become

a lawyer and joined the Government Law College at Trivandrum. But within a year, he realised that the legal profession was not for him and therefore discontinued his legal studies.

At the compulsion of Mr. C.P. Thomas, Kuruvilla's teacher and the Headmaster of M.T. Seminary School, he joined the school as a teacher. And after two years, he went to Karwar (North Karnataka) as a missionary of NMS (National Missionary Society).

The then Mar Thoma Metropolitan (Titus I) made an appeal to the educated youth of the church to come forward to serve the Church. In a meeting held by the Samudaya Alochana Sabha (*Sabha Mandalam*) on 20-21 April, 1910 it was decided to send M. N. Abraham B.A., (later Abraham Mar Thoma) and K.K. Kuruvilla B.A. to America to be trained as the future celibate leaders (bishops) of the church. So M.N. Abraham went to America first in 1912 and returned in 1914. Kuruvilla was sent in 1914; and pursued his M.A. and B.D. degrees from the Hartford Trinity College in the Connecticut state of America.

Unfortunately, due to the First World War (1914-18), Kuruvilla was unable to return to Kerala on completion of his studies as all means of transport were suspended. Also, as there were no means to communicate with Kuruvilla, his return was uncertain; and the *Samudaya Alochana Sabha* meeting held at Arathattu Church in Kunnankulam decided to consecrate Rev. M.N. Abraham as bishop. Accordingly, Abraham was consecrated as Ramban on 24 December 1917 and Episcopa on 27 December 1917.

Kuruvilla somehow managed to sail up to England before the end of First World War. He used his time constructively visiting Cambridge and Oxford Universities, learnt about cooperative societies and its functions from Ireland, and despite being an Indian, went on to become the Secretary of the London YMCA. This was just the beginning of how God used Kuruvilla's efficient work ethos.

He finally got a chance to sail back to India in 1917. He packed all his books and belongings in boxes for the journey home. Although he did not get a berth for himself, he decided to send his luggage. He boarded the next ship headed to India. While he was on the ship, he learnt that the ship carrying his luggage capsized on hitting a sea mine. Although he lost all his possessions, he was truly grateful to God for sparing his precious life by not getting a berth for himself on the earlier ship.

This was the second time God saved his life. In an earlier incident, when Kuruvilla was still a boy at school, Kuruvilla was bitten by a very venomous snake (Russel's Viper – *Rakthamandali*). It was certain that he would die. Despite the lethality, Kuruvilla did not die. It was a miracle! God heard the heart wrenching prayers of his parents and relatives.

Once Kuruvilla returned to India, he became a teacher at the United Theological College in Bangalore and helped form many parishes including that of sister churches. Then on behest of Titus II Metropolitan, Kuruvilla joined the M.T. Seminary School at Kottayam as Headmaster on 14 June 1921. He continued in that post till 1940. He was an able headmaster and a strict disciplinarian. Due to his tireless efforts along with his team of teachers, M.T. Seminary School became the best School in Travancore.

On 15 May 1924, Kuruvilla married Elizabeth, daughter of Rao Bhadur George Zacharia, Maruthottathil, Vennikulam. Their marriage was held at S.C. Seminary and was said to be a beautiful and unique ceremony for its time. Before the marriage ceremony, the Holy Communion was held

and both the groom and bride and their family members participated in it. After the marriage, when they returned to Kottayam, a big feast was arranged. The main guests were the lower caste people in and around the seminary premises including beggars. Elizabeth Zacharia Kuruvilla was born in 1894 at Calicut and was a B.A. Honours (English Language and Literature) graduate from the Madras Presidency College and taught briefly there as well (Alexander, 1999). She was the YWCA student secretary and had visited many parts of India to study the problems of students. She attended the 1922 World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) General Assembly in Beijing, China. In 1922, she became a member of the National Council of the YWCA and in 1924 she was elected as the Vice president of the World Students Christian Federation.

Like everyone else I have two grandmothers. My mother's mother, who died before I was born, was **Elizabeth Kuruvilla**. She was born in 1884 and was active in the Nationalist movement, an ardent follower of Mohandas Gandhi, and the first woman member of the Legislative Assembly in Travancore. As a young woman she had studied in Madras, gained an M.A. in English Literature, and taught briefly at Presidency College. She traveled widely, all over India, to Europe, and to China. The portraits of her in my mother's house, the broad, high forehead and dark eyes, haunted me. I tried to imagine what it might have

Excerpt from The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience by Meena Alexander (1999)

In 1928, she was nominated as one of the first women legislators, after Dr. Mary Poonen Lukose, to the Travancore Legislative Council (1928-1931) by Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi of Travancore. Elizabeth Kuruvilla "would champion a motion to give equal chances to women in government appointments with men by the following year" (Pillali, 2015).

In 1943, she was the Secretary of the Mar Thoma Sevika Sanghom. Elizabeth started the first kindergarten in Travancore that had the Montessori education system, in Kottayam (Mathew, 2015). Their only daughter Mary (Dodo) was born in 1927. She was the first girl student at the M.T. Seminary School in Kottayam. Mary was married to George Alexander, the son of Alexander Vakkil, Kannadikkal, Kozhencherry. George Alexander was an expert with the Meteorological Department of India. Elizabeth died in 1944, "a month short of her fiftieth birthday, three years before Indian independence" (Alexander, Fault Lines - A Memoir, 1993).



Mar Thoma Theological Seminary at Kottayam



*Mar Thoma Seminary Higher Secondary School
Kottayam*

Kuruvilla was actively involved in Inter-Church dialogue meetings held in Kottayam between the Mar Thoma Church and Orthodox churches in 1925. He was a delegate of the Mar Thoma Church at the International World Missionary Conference held from March 24 to April 8, 1928 in Jerusalem (Council, 1928). He was one of the main speakers (representing the Christians in Travancore) at the "All Religions Conference 1924" held in Alwaye under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928).



Mount of Olives, Jerusalem Conference, 1928; Credit International Missionary Council Records

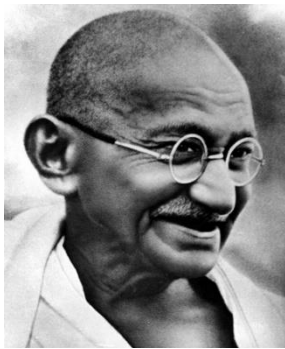
INDIA.—National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon.—
Professor E. Ahmad Shah, B.Litt., M.A., M.L.C. : Professor in Lucknow University.
The Rev. S. K. Chatterji, M.A. : Member of London Mission, Calcutta.
Pandipeddi Chenchiah, Esq., B.A., M.L. : Member of the Executive Council of the South India United Church and of the National Missionary Society.
The Rev. Jashwant R. Chitambar, M.A., D.D. : Principal of the Lucknow Christian College.
Surendra Kumar Datta, Esq., B.A., M.B., Ch.B. : National General Secretary of the Y.M.C.A. of India, Burma and Ceylon.
C. Fridt-Möller, Esq., M.B., Ch.B. : Medical Missionary under the Danish Missionary Society ; Medical Superintendent of the Union Mission Tuberculosis Sanatorium in South India.
The Rev. E. Stanley Jones, D.D. : Missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church.
The Rev. K. R. Karunakar, B.A., B.L., B.D. : Teacher in the United Theological College, Bangalore ; Missionary of the Basel Mission.
K. K. Kuruvilla, Esq., M.A. : Headmaster, Mar Thoma Syrian Seminary ; Principal, Mar Thoma Theological Seminary.
Miss Eleanor McDougall, M.A., Litt.D. : Principal of the Women's Christian College, Madras.
The Rev. John McKenzie, M.A. : Principal of Wilson College, Bombay

List of Members at International World Missionary Conference, Jerusalem 1928.
 Image courtesy - missiology.org.uk

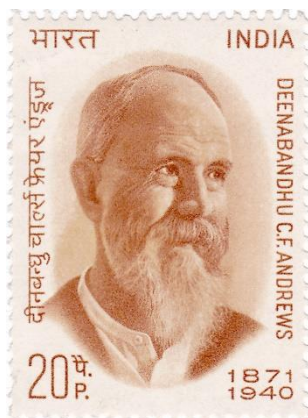
Rev. V.P. Mammen, K.K. Kuruvilla and T.K. Kuruvilla were the three Mar Thoma Church members who worked alongside Anglican Church leaders and established the Malayalam wing of the Christian Literature Society (CLS). It was after many years that the name was changed *Christava Sahitya Samithy* (CSS).

Kuruvilla was an eloquent orator. During his stay in Kottayam, he would conduct Bible classes for the lay leaders twice a week. He would visit nearby parishes and motivate the youth to be more involved in solving social problems of the poor and needy, especially the large number of beggars in Kottayam town. On weekends, he would invite beggars residing in Kottayam town to his home for meals with his family. He was the thriving force and inspiration for the formation of the Beggar Relief Centre in Kottayam and the *Mundakappadam Agathimandiram* (Estd.1933).

He was also a strong supporter of the Co-operative Movement in Travancore. He helped form the Co-operative Banking Union in Kottayam and the Co-operative Society in Manganam. When severe famine broke out in the coastal area of Travancore, Kuruvilla helped the people of Cherthala with food and other necessities collected from Kottayam and taught them how to cultivate tapioca, now a staple food of Kerala.



Kuruvilla was a freedom fighter, social worker and was an active member of the Indian National Congress. He was actively involved in the Indian Freedom Movement and was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi. According to school records, Mahatma Gandhi called on M.T. Seminary School and stayed at the residence of Headmaster K.K. Kuruvilla, on the night of January 16, 1937 (Bose, 2014). Kuruvilla was not just Mahatma Gandhi's friend; he was also a follower of his words and deeds. People would call him 'Kochu Gandhi'. All through his life he wore only Khaddar (khadi) clothes.



India Stamp – 1971 – issued on the birth centenary of Rev. C.F. Andrews

Deenabandhu Rev. C.F. Andrews, (1871–1940) a Church of England priest, was a Christian missionary, educator and social reformer in India. Kuruvilla was his close friend as they both sympathised with the poor and needy. Kuruvilla was fondly called 'Kerala Deenabandhu' by his friends.

During the freedom struggle in Travancore, the Malayala Manorama newspaper was shut down on orders of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the dewan of Travancore who ruled on behalf of the Maharaja, on 1st September 1938. He believed the newspaper was financing the State Congress (Malayala Manorama restarted on 29 November 1947). It was during this time that Kuruvilla founded the "Kerala Bhooshanam" Malayalam Daily in Kottayam and started publishing on 4 September 1944.

He was the printer, publisher and chief editor of the daily. After a few years, he handed over the newspaper to his friend A.V. George in Kottayam.

Chackochayan was different from all of us; he had unusual ways. He would often shout at us and scold us. He would also not hesitate to hit us if we contradicted him. He detested sitting in class to study. During the time he studied in the M.T. School in Kottayam, the efficient K.K. Kuruvilla was the headmaster. Gandhiji stayed with Kuruvilla when he visited Kottayam. Kuruvilla achieved a place in history: without being a priest, he became the principal of a seminary that trained priests for the Mar Thoma Church. He was the founder of the newspaper *Keralabhooshanam*. The well-known poet Meena Alexander is his granddaughter.

Excerpts from The Eighth Ring: An Autobiography by K.M. Mathew (Mathew, 2015)

The *Keralabhooshanam* newspaper was started in 1944 by K.K. Kuruvilla, who was the principal of the M.T. Seminary High School and a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. The first kindergarten school in Kerala, the Baker Memorial, was started in 1930 by Miss M.E. East, an English lady. Kuruvilla's wife Elizabeth started the first kindergarten in Travancore that had the Montessori educational system, in Kottayam.

Excerpts from The Eighth Ring: An Autobiography by K.M. Mathew (Mathew, 2015)

Kuruvilla was later an elected member of the Travancore Legislative Council. He was elected to the Srimulam Popular Assembly (The Sri Mulam Popular Assembly in the erstwhile state of Travancore was the first popularly elected legislature in the history of India) from the Mavelikkara – Pathanamthitta --Thiruvalla constituency (1937-1944). He initiated fruitful efforts on behalf of the Mar Thoma Church in securing a license for the establishment of two colleges (Mar Thoma College, Thiruvalla and St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry) in central Travancore from Sir C.C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the then 'Dewan' (Chief Minister) of Travancore. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer had great respect and appreciation for Kuruvilla from hearing his speeches in the legislative assembly.

As per the request of Kuruvilla, C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer (1879-1966) visited Kottayam on 22 March 1940 to lay the foundation of the 'Beggar Relief Centre'. He could secure financial help for the centre from the government through the Dewan. Kuruvilla never misused his friendship with the Dewan for personal gains.

Kuruvilla was the Headmaster of the M.T. Seminary School and simultaneously was also the Principal of the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary at Kottayam for 19 years (1926-45). The Mar Thoma Syrian Theological Seminary was established in Kottayam on 3 July 1926 (St. Thomas Day) as the Episcopal Silver Jubilee Memorial of His Grace Titus II Mar Thoma Metropolitan.

The Most Rev. Dr. Juhananon Mar Thoma Metropolitan (1893-1976) had the privilege of being Kuruvilla's student while studying at M.T. Seminary School. Kuruvilla taught him again at the United Theological College in Bangalore during his B.D. course. Later the two of them became co-workers at M.T. Seminary School and Theological Seminary for almost 10 years.

Kuruvilla was closely associated with all the activities of the Mar Thoma Church. He was an able advisor to the Metropolitans Titus II (1866-1944), Abraham Mar Thoma and Juhanon Mar Thoma. He acted as mediator whenever problems arose in the Mar Thoma Church in connection with liturgy

revisions and reforms. Kuruvilla has spent most of His life teaching and is considered as one of the greatest educationalists Travancore produced.

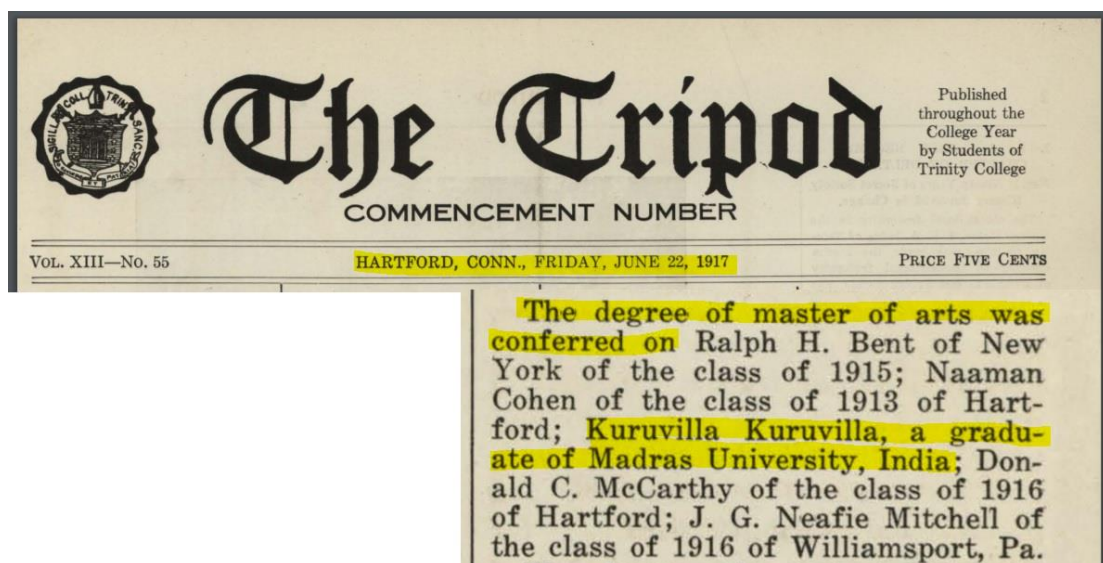
Kuruvilla was also a writer and some of his books (in English) are:

1. Christ and His Message for India (With a foreword by C.F. Andrews)
2. A History of the Mar Thoma Church and Its Doctrines
3. Studies on Revival in Kerala Churches.

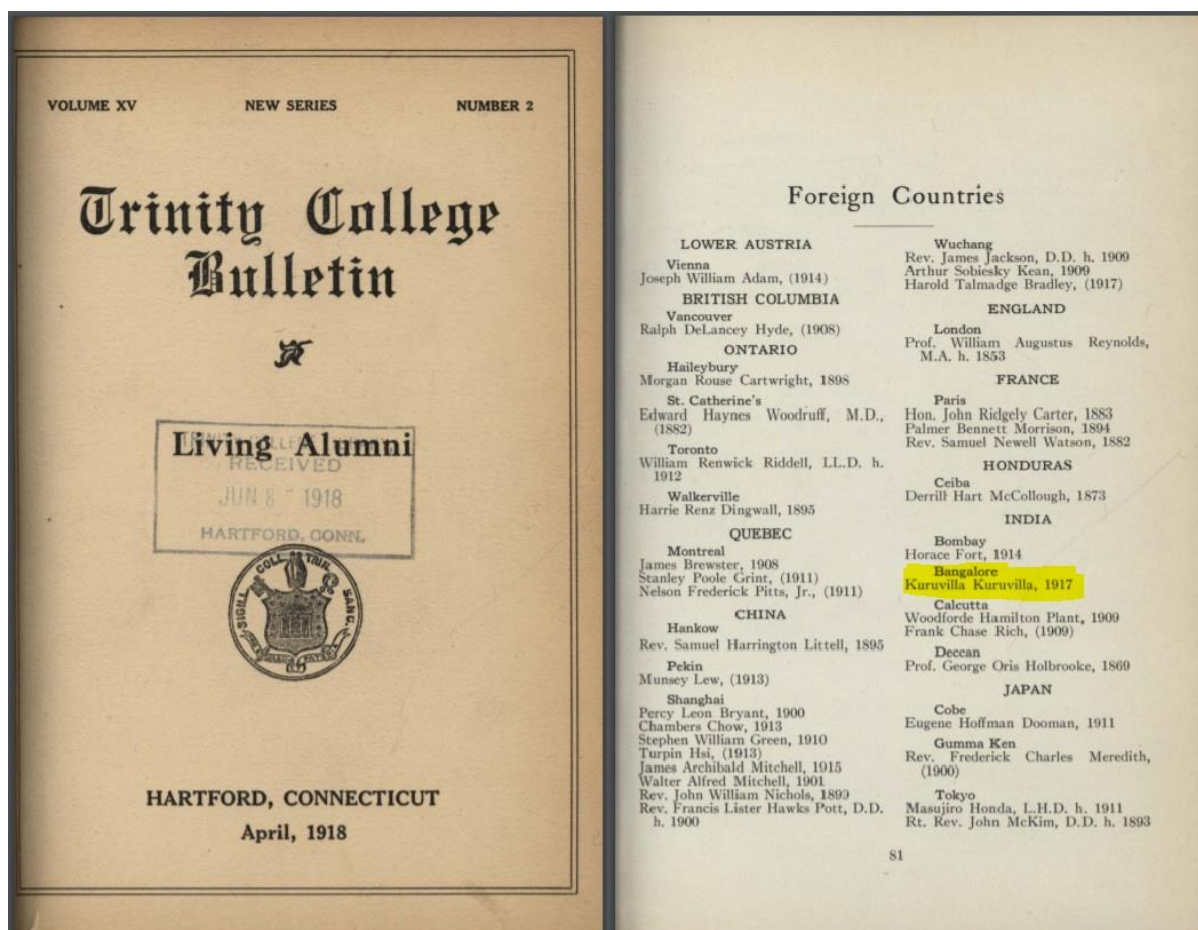
He served in various committees of the Mar Thoma church. He was part of the governing councils of many educational institutes owned by the Church. Kuruvilla spent most of his life in Kottayam town. In 1942, he shifted residence to Tiruvalla and was called to his heavenly abode on 12 June 1962.



Picture courtesy of <http://gurusreenarayana.blogspot.com/2012/06/one-religion-for-man.html>



News of K. K. Kuruvilla's graduation from Trinity College in the Student Newspaper – The Tripod, 22 June 1917
<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3031&context=tripod>



From Trinity College Bulletin, April 1918 (Living Alumni)
<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1064&context=bulletin>

References

- Alexander, M. (1993). *Fault Lines - A Memoir*. New York: Feminist Press, City University of New York.
- Alexander, M. (1999). *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*. South End Press.
- Bose, A. K. (2014, 10 18). *Gandhi memorial at M.T. Seminary*. Retrieved from Deccan Chronicle:
<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/141018/nation-current-affairs/article/gandhi-memorial-mt-seminary>
- Council, I. M. (1928). *Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council, March 24th - April 8th, 1928*. Oxford University Press.
- Mathew, K. M. (2015). *The Eighth Ring: An Autobiography*. Penguin Books Limited.
- Pillali, M. S. (2015). *The Ivory Throne : The Chronicles of the House of Travancore*. Harpers Collins.