

GRADE SIX HISTORY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER CHURCHES

Lesson 1

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES: A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Aim:

1. To learn about the beginning of Christian Churches.
2. To study what is common to all churches.

Bible Verse: Colossians 1: 18

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Main Ideas:

The beginning of Christian Church

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples and other believers gathered in Jerusalem for prayer. The Holy Spirit came upon them as Jesus had promised. These believers who are ordinary people became extraordinary when they received the power of the Holy Spirit. The first Christians were Jews who believed

that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior expected by them (Acts chapters 1 and 2).

In the early stage the church grew very rapidly even though it experienced very much oppression and persecution. Such persecutions lasted for about 300 years. The first group of opponents was some Jews. The reason for their opposition was that the early Christians believed and proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom they had crucified on the cross. Later, the Roman Government also persecuted Christians severely. They compelled Christians to worship the Roman Emperor. But the Christians refused to do so. The Government considered Christians as anti-nationalists. However, this policy of persecution changed in the fourth century when the Roman Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity and granted freedom of Religion to the Christians through the Edict of Milan. The Church grew rapidly in various regions of the world in the following centuries.

The church exists for its mission. The mission of the church is the continuation of the mission started by Christ. As fire exists by its burning, the church exists by its mission.

Characteristics Common to all Churches:

The church is a body that maintains unity in Christ. This is the ideal nature, but we see today the church divided into many denominations. It is our task to strive for the unity of the church which is already a reality promised by our Lord.

The church is holy which means that people are set apart for the rule of God. They are in the process of sanctification and cleansing. In the world of sin and chaos, the church continually struggles to maintain her true character and holiness.

The church is catholic: The word catholic means universal or comprehensive. This term in relation to the church refers to all people of faith in Jesus Christ or the whole body of Christians.

The church is Apostolic: The word apostolic means one who is sent with a mission. The Disciples of Christ were sent by the Lord with a commission to bear witness to the gospel. The churches which are born as a result of the apostolic preaching are apostolic in character.

The church is a worshipping community: This is the most visible characteristic of the church. The community acknowledges the Lordship of God in Christ and adores God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, i.e. the God as the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer.

The church is a pilgrim community: Through worship, the community is sustained, fed and strengthened for the journey. The goal of the church through its constant mission is to continue the offering for all people at the altar of the Lord (Romans 15:15).

Discussion questions:

1. Explain the beginning of the Christian Churches, after reading Acts chapter 1 and 2.
2.
 - a. How did the early Christians face persecutions?
 - b. What qualities do you find in these early Christians?
 - c. If you were a Christian during the time of persecution what would be your response?
3.
 - a. What are the characteristics common to all churches? Explain each in a sentence or two.
 - b. Evaluate your church based on these characteristics.

GRADE SIX HISTORY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER CHURCHES

Lesson 2

THE MALANKARA CHURCH THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Aim:

To overview the growth of our church in Kerala from the 1st to the 19th century.

Bible Verse: Matthew 28:18-20.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you; And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Main Ideas:

Thomas was one of the disciples who were with Jesus Christ when the Lord gave them the above commission. Thus being sent as an Apostle, Thomas set out to India. According to the strong Indian tradition, he reached Cranganore at the Malabar Coast in the year A D 52. We, St. Thomas Christians, believe that St. Thomas set out to India in search of the “lost sheep” in this great nation, India.

Tradition says that the Namboodiri Brahmins (upper caste) community in Kerala was attracted to the new teachings and several of them received baptism. We believe that Thomas established seven churches in the Malabar coast, and they at (1) Cranganore, (2) Chavakad (Palur), (3) Parur near Alwaye, (4) Gokamangalam, (5) Niranam, (6) Nilakkal (Chayal), (7) Quilon (Kalyan). A few families among them were chosen to be responsible for the administration of the Christian Community. Tradition again says that St. Thomas then continued his mission and reached the east coast of India and died a martyr's death at a place now called "St. Thomas Mount", and was buried at Mylapore in Madras.

The seven churches St. Thomas founded in Kerala grew slowly. They made an impact around their surroundings. The neighbors called these Christians "Nazranes", meaning the followers of the man of Nazareth. Very little is known about the detailed history of the early period of the Church.

The Syrian/Persian contact:

The arrival of 400 Christian families from East Syria in 345 A. D. marked a significant turning point in the history of St. Thomas Christians. Trying to escape persecution in their homeland, the Syrians were led by a business person called Thomas of Cana who had brought with him a bishop in the ship. The Nazranes (local Christians) received the new immigrant Christians very favorably. The Syrian group later settled in the land and intermingled with the local people. It is also known that following Thomas of Cana, several priests and prelates paid visits to India from the land of Persia.

The visiting leaders belonged to the Nestorian church. Their influence was felt very strong in the local church during the sixth century as they started a great missionary movement. The liturgy and teachings of Nestorians attracted the Malankara

Christians. As a result Nestorianism began to flourish in the church. The Nestorian Liturgy was in the Aramaic language, the language spoken by Jesus himself. The Malankara Church continued the Nestorian worship practices and kept strong connection with them till the 15th century.

The Roman Catholic Contact:

Vasco de Gama, a Portuguese sailor, skillfully navigated the oceans and arrived in the west coast of India in 1498. In fact he landed in Calicut, Kerala. Being a devoted Roman Catholic, he inspired the Roman Catholic Missionaries to work among the native Christians. By 1599 the Roman Catholic missionaries compelled the Malankara Christians to embrace the Latin version of Roman Catholicism. This was done at the Diamper Synod (Udayamperoor near Cochin). Archdeacon Geevarghese signed on behalf of the Malankara churches in the Synod of Udayamperoor as Alexio-de-Menezes as the Roman Catholic Archbishop strongly backed by the armed forces did not leave any other options open to the Malankara Church. But still, a small group of native Christians stayed away from signing the document and continued their original practice. Later they gained more power and still continue as the Church of the East (Chaldean Church) in Trichur.

Declaration of Independence:

The greatest turning point in the history of our Church took place in the year 1653. About 25,000 devoted Christians under the leadership of Archdeacon Thomas and 633 clergy marched to Cochin fort. Confronted by the Portuguese cannons, they withdrew to the church at Mattancherry, where there was a cross. They wanted to take an oath declaring that they would have nothing to do with the Portuguese in future. So they tied ropes to the cross and touching the ropes they took the following pledge. "We and our children shall never be under Rome."

The granite cross was slightly leaning and so this oath is known as the "Coonen Cross Oath" (Coonen means bent). It was a declaration of independence from foreign control. People were determined to hold on to their faith as practiced over many centuries. Archdeacon Thomas was consecrated a Bishop with the title Marthoma I, by the supporters. He was the first Indian Bishop of the church. He sought the support of sister churches in Antioch, Babylon, Jerusalem and Alexandria.

The Jacobite contact:

In the year 1665, Mar Gregorious arrived in India from Jerusalem as per the request of Malankara Christians and re-consecrated Marthoma I. The Church which declared freedom from Rome was now gradually brought under the yoke of Jacobitism (followers of Jacob Bardeaus, a monk from Syria).

The Anglican Contact:

Another visitor called Claudius Buchanan from the Church of England reached the Malabar Coast in 1806. He was a chaplain attached to the British Army in Calcutta. He met the then Metropolitan, Mar Dionysius the Great. As a result of this connection, the gospels got translated into Malayalam in 1811. Two years later, in 1813, a seminary for the education of the Syrian Christian clergy was founded at Kottayam. In 1816 the first Anglican missionary, Thomas Norton, arrived in Malabar followed by the famous trio, Benjamin Bailey, Henry Baker and Joseph Fenn who arrived as a mission of help, not to build a new church but to rebuild the old church. Even though the Malankara Christians encountered different influences and teachings, many people kept their original faith through centuries.

Study questions:

1. a) Discuss the tradition of Apostle Thomas coming to India and establishing 7 churches in Malankara (Malabar).

- b) Mark on the blank map the places where St. Thomas founded seven churches in Kerala?
2. a) What is so significant about the migration of Thomas of Cana during the 4th century?
b) Explain the belief and practices of the church in Malabar (Kerala) during the period from 4th to 16th century.
3. How did the Malankara church accept or reject a foreign church domination after the establishment of the Portuguese rule?
4. When strong powers and influences come to our faith, what is our response? (Am I keeping the original faith in Jesus Christ?)
5. What is Coonen Cross Oath? How was the church different after this event?
6. Discuss how the church in Malabar had gained from the Anglican contact.

GRADE SIX
HISTORY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH
OTHER CHURCHES

Lesson 3

MAR THOMA CHURCH &
REFORMATION

Aim:

1. To learn what we gained from the Reformation which transformed the Malankara Church.
2. To continue the spirit of Reformation through the Mar Thoma Church.

Bible Verse: Psalm 119:105.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Main Ideas:

Through the influence of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), a group of clergy and laity had the opportunity to have English education in the Malabar church. When they studied the Bible they realized the low spiritual level of their own church. In those days public worship was conducted in the Syrian language. People understood very little of the meaning of the worship. The clergy did not have sufficient training. Even young boys were ordained as priests at the request of interested parties. Regarding the declining conditions of the Malabar church prior

to reformation, Dr. Alexander Mar Thoma writes, "some of the vestiges of the Roman connections remained even though independence was established". Celibacy of the priests was insisted upon, prayers to the saints and the Holy Qurbana for the departed (dead) continued. Compulsory fees were levied on the occasions of rites and ceremonies like baptism, marriages and masses for the departed. These fees were the main source of income for the clergy. The Bible was a closed book. Religious life consisted of certain rituals, ceremonies and festivals. People were steeped in ignorance and superstition. Therefore the missionaries felt the need for purification of the church from within.

Abraham Malpan (Malpan means professor or teacher) was the pioneer in the Malankara church reformation. He was teaching in the Kottayam Seminary. He and eleven other priests submitted a memorandum to the British Resident in 1836 suggesting much needed changes in the church. This is called "The Trumpet Call of Reformation". He translated the Syrian liturgy which was used for centuries, into the Malayalam language and started celebrating the Holy Qurbana in Malayalam at his own native place, Maramon.

As a church we celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Reformation in the Malankara Church in 1986. In North America we arranged a public meeting along with the Family Conference at Chicago. A special volume was published by the Sabha Council of our church. It consisted of both Malayalam and English articles. (*Naveekaranathinte Thritheeya Kanaka Jubilee*, Mar Thoma Sabha Council, 1986.)

Results of Reformation in the Malankara Church:

The following prayers and practices were discarded.

1. Mediation through the so-called saints.
2. Prayer and adoration to Virgin Mary.

3. Prayer and mass for the dead.
4. Auricular confession (confession to the priest).
5. False teachings and practices such as associating concessions with payment of money to priests, seeking forgiveness of sins through offering oil, incense, candles and bodily penance.

Revival:

All these steps led the church into a revival in all spheres of church life. Moreover, the leaders of the reform exhorted the people:

- a. Return to the gospel message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
- b. Clean up wrong ways of life such as horoscope and other superstitions.
- c. Take up the responsibility to be witness of Jesus Christ. All these were based on the study of the Word of God. People were encouraged to study the Bible and live a life in accordance with it.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the major practices of the church as well as that of the society that were challenged by the leaders of the Reformation.
2. Who was Abraham Malpan? Explain "the Trumpet call of Reformation? When was it made?"
3. What were the prayers and practices rejected by the Reformers?
4. Explain the revival brought in the Malankara Church as a result of Reformation?
5. Discuss how the Mar Thoma Church holds on to the Reformation principles and practice.

GRADE SIX HISTORY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER CHURCHES

Lesson 4

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE MAR THOMA CHURCH

Aim:

1. To learn how the Reformation has changed our perception and values on church administration.
2. To understand the working of different organizations and representative bodies within the church.

Bible Verse: Psalm 119:15-16.

I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

Main ideas:

Abraham Malpan felt the need for reformation in the church on the basis of the Word of God. He never intended to form a new church. But he was excommunicated (explain excommunication) by the Metropolitan Chepat Mar Dionysius because of the reformation principles that he upheld. He held firmly to his conviction that "salvation" is by faith in Jesus Christ alone, as revealed in the Scriptures. The reformed group was convinced that they continued in the apostolic faith brought to

India by St Thomas. Hence they accepted the name, "The Mar Thoma Syrian Church". They decided that the church should retain its Episcopal traditions, and therefore Abraham Malpan sent his nephew, who was a priest, to Syria to be consecrated as an Episcopa (Bishop) by the Patriarch of Antioch. It did not mean that the Church of Antioch had any special authority over the Malankara Church and we always upheld the independence of the Malankara Church.

"Sabha Prathinidhi Mandalam" (Representative Body):

With regard to administration, a constitution was adopted emphasizing democratic values. The members of the decision making body, known as the "Sabha Prathinidhi Mandalam" are elected for a term of three years. Each parish of the Mar Thomas Church is represented in the Sabha Prathinidhi Mandalam according to the size of their membership. Sixty-five percent of the Sabha prathinidhi Mandalam members are elected from the Laity and thirty five percent form the Clergy including Bishops. All decisions affecting the church concerning faith and administration are made by the Sabha Prathinidhi Mandalam.

Episcopal Synod:

The Episcopal Synod consists of all the Bishops of the Mar Thoma Church and the Metropolitan is the supreme authority. The Episcopal Synod has to approve all the decisions of the Sabha Mandalam, before they can be implemented. The Metropolitan has special power to send back the decisions for reconsideration by the Mandalam. Thus the church is following the combination of democratic values and Episcopal authority. The Bishops of the church are elected by the Sabha Mandalam. To be elected as Bishop the candidate has to get 75 percent of votes of both the clergy and laity counted separately.

Sabha Council:

There is an executive committee called the Sabha Council elected by the Sabha Prathinidhi Mandalam, for a period of three years to assist the Metropolitan in implementing the decisions of the Mandalam and in general administration of the Church. Each Diocese will have at least three members in the Sabha Council.

The Diocesan Administration:

For administrative convenience, the Mar Thoma Church is divided into Dioceses, each headed by a Bishop. At present (2009) we have 11 (eleven) Dioceses and ten Bishops.

Regional Administration:

Dioceses are divided into regional groups called Centers consisting of adjoining parishes. The organizations of the church such as, Youth fellowship, Sevika Sanghom, Voluntary Evangelist's Association (Edavaka or parish mission) and Sunday school send representatives from the parishes to their regional body for common activities. All organizations have their own committees on the Diocesan and Regional levels which plan and execute the activities of the respective organization.

Parish:

The Mar Thoma Church has at present over 1,000 parishes spread throughout the world. The Vicar of the parish functions as the president of the parish administration. He is at the same time the representative of the Metropolitan in the local congregation. Matters of policy are decided by the General Body of the Parish which consists of all communicant members of 18 years and above. Policy is implemented by the Executive Committee, which is elected by the General Body. The basic mission entrusted upon each parish is to declare the good news of salvation to the community in which the parish exists.

Financial Matters:

The parishes and the church are supported by the voluntary contributions of the members. Before reformation, stipulated fees were levied, to be paid at the time of conducting special ceremonies like baptism, wedding or funeral. Subscriptions are now paid on voluntary basis.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the highest decision - making body of the church? Who approves these decisions?
2. Identify the members of the Episcopal synod?
3. Explain the process of forming the diocesan assembly.
4. Make an organizational chart for the parish starting with the president (vicar) and identify the role of each office bearer.
5. How do we raise the funds to meet the expenses of the parish?

GRADE SIX HISTORY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER CHURCHES

Lesson 5

GLOBAL OUTREACH OF THE MAR THOMA CHURCH

Aim:

1. To learn how the Mar Thoma Church has expanded from Kerala to different parts of India and to other countries.
2. To realize how the Mar Thoma community has grown in America, rooted in faith and loyal to the church.

Bible Verse: 1 Corinthians 3: 7 & 9.

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. For we are God's fellow workers: you are God's field, God's building.

Main Ideas:

Up until the beginning of the 20th century, The Mar Thoma Church was mostly confined to Kerala. Before its formation, the state was three distinct provinces known as Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar each of which had a sovereign ruler. When the ancient writings refer to Malabar Coast, they really refer to all of Kerala. The introduction of English education paved the way for better opportunities for the members of the

church both inside the state and away. People moved to other parts of India because there existed more opportunities for higher education as well as better jobs. Perhaps based on the example of Abraham who traveled to unknown territories, Christians in Kerala had the courage to leave their homes and dear ones and go to distant places to take up work among unknown people and circumstances. Non-Christians would not travel as far as the Christians. Thus the members of the church who went to different cities steadily grew. They tended to support each other particularly in the early stages of their fortune seeking trips. As compared to other people groups, numerous Christian young women would go for training in health care professions such as nursing, laboratory technology, and other professions.

Wherever the members of the church settled, they remained devoted to the faith received in their childhood. They joined in worship with fellow Kerala Christians where they had opportunities to do so. However, when the number increased and there was a small community of believers, they started to worship in Malayalam. Gradually congregations were developed in most of the large cities in India. Meanwhile, through the influence of the Evangelistic Association and Maramon Convention a few Ashrams were started in different parts of India like Ankola on the west coast, Sihora in Madhya Pradesh and other places. All these Ashrams have undertaken valuable service to the community around by establishing hospitals, schools, and other social service activities, along with preaching the gospel.

Expansion of the Mar Thoma Church into Other Countries:

Along with the expansion to different parts of India, members of the Mar Thoma Church began to go to Malaysia

and Singapore in the 1930s, seeking opportunities for work. They found work mostly in schools, hospitals and other offices. Small groups were formed in different places in Malaysia and Singapore for worship and fellowship. The church sent Rev. T.N. Koshy was sent to give them pastoral care.

With the development of the oil industry within the Arab countries, members of the Mar Thoma Church have gone to work there also in large numbers in the past 50 years. They have established congregations and regular worship services. But direct evangelism is prohibited by law in Islamic countries. But we can still intercede that they open up some day to the gospel message.

From the late 1960s to early 1970s, Mar Thoma families migrated to North America and Europe for higher education and employment opportunities. The small immigrant communities began to gather together as prayer groups to maintain and foster their spiritual identity. In 1972, the first regular Mar Thoma services began in New York and laid the foundation for the formation of a number of parishes and later the establishment of "The Diocese of North America and Europe of the Mar Thoma Church" in 1988.

By 1980, the Mar Thoma Church entered into a "sister-church" relationship with the Episcopal Church of North America enabling our rapid growth in the U.S. It was indeed the vision of late Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Mar Athanasius Suffragan Metropolitan that made this possible. We are greatly indebted to him. It was another great mile stone when a diocese was recognized with Rt. Rev. Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Suffragan Metropolitan as its first diocesan bishop in 1988.

Now we have the Diocesan headquarters with a resident Bishop since 1993. There are 43 clergy, serving 60 parishes and 20 congregations. His Grace Rt. Rev. Dr. Geevarghese Mar

Theodosius is the present Diocesan Bishop. The growth of the church has been really incredible in the USA & Canada since the late eighties. By the grace of God at present the diocese has strength of 5000 families and about 20,000 members.

The Diocesan Assembly:

As explained in the previous lesson 4, the Diocese of North America & Europe is one of the eleven dioceses of the Mar Thoma Church. All policy matters are decided by the Diocesan Assembly, which consists of all clergy of the diocese and elected representatives from each parish. The Diocesan Assembly has an elected executive committee called the "Diocesan Council".

Discussion Questions:

1. Explain the pattern of growth of the Mar Thoma Church beyond Kerala.
2. Discuss with your parents their early experience in forming a worshipping community in America.
3. Discuss the growth of the Mar Thomas Church in North America.
4. Write a short account of the formation of the Mar Thoma Parish in your area, after interviewing a few senior members.

Administration of the Mar Thoma Church

Head of the Church Synod:	: The Mar Thoma Metropolitan Valiya Metropolitan, Mar Thoma Metropolitan, Suffragan Metropolitan and all other Bishops (In 2008 Ten Bishops)
Sabha Mandalam	: (Large body, representing all parishes, 3 year term) (Both laity & Clergy)
Sabha Council	: (The executive body elected by Mandalam)
Diocesan (eleven)	: Diocesan bishop, Assembly, Diocesan Council
Diocese of North America and Europe	: Sinai Mar Thoma Center, New York
Diocesan Assembly	: Representing all Parishes in the Diocese
Diocesan Council	: (Executive body elected by the Assembly)
Parishes	: Vicar (Archens), General Body, Executive Committee
Organizations of the Parish	: (Sunday School is one of them) Members of the Church: Parish members as Prayer Groups.