

Cultural integration through Christianity

150th anniversary of the Holy Emmanuel Church, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

Article by the Revd Fernando Keerthisiri Fernando, chair of the Interfaith Desk of the Diocese of Colombo, Sri Lanka. He is a former lecturer, postgraduate dean and acting principal of the Theological College of Lanka, in Pilimatalawa, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Holy Emmanuel Church, in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, celebrates its 150th anniversary this month (December 2010). This church offers a remarkable example of how universal cultural values of Christianity can be integrated and assimilated by a local Sri Lankan congregation. Over the years, members of the congregation have gone on to become professors, lawyers, engineers, accountants, carpenters and teachers who have enriched their professions with Christian values. This church deserves congratulations for its efforts in trying to maintain an inclusive attitude within an increasingly exclusive society.

Background

On 27 December 2010 the Great Church, or *Mahapalliya*, at Rawatawatte in Moratuwa will be celebrating its 150th anniversary. Although Holy Emmanuel Church is 150 years old, the Anglican congregation there has a history of over 200 years. When the British took the coastal areas of Sri Lanka from the Dutch in 1796, many buildings where the Dutch worshipped became places for Anglican worship – the established religion of the British Empire. Accordingly, at Rawatawatte, from the latter part of the eighteenth century a Dutch building became a place of Anglican worship.

The Dutch structure was built in 1675 on the site of the general cemetery behind the present church. As the old building was in a dilapidated state, a new church was built in 1815 to replace the Old Dutch building. As the church was closely associated with the then British Governor Sir Robert Brownrigg it was called *Brownrigg Palliya*. By the mid-nineteenth century it was in poor condition and a proposal was presented to the Bishop of Colombo by Gate Mudaliyar Jeronis de Soysa to ask the governor to authorise the building of a new church to replace the old one. Consequently the necessary authorisation was granted to build the new church. Hence the church celebrating 150 years was created in 1860 as an offspring of the previous churches.

General context: early saga

With more than 200 years of Anglican worship, Moratuwa is proud of its history of almost 500 years of Christianity. After the arrival of the Portuguese at the Galle harbour in 1505, by 1519 Roman Catholicism was practised in various areas in Moratuwa. When the Dutch seized the coastal areas from the Portuguese in 1658 there were many well-established and flourishing Roman Catholic churches in Moratuwa. When the Dutch persecuted the Portuguese and Roman Catholics in Sri Lanka due to their opposition in Europe, almost all Roman Catholic churches were smashed and in many places Dutch Reformed churches were erected. The Dutch Government in Sri Lanka prohibited all religions except the Dutch Reformed Church. The Dutch Reformed church building that stood behind the present church at the arrival of the British was built in the context of the social history of Moratuwa, which was an integral part of the history of Sri Lanka.

The church in society

Although introduced as a foreign faith, Christianity in Moratuwa is strongly rooted today, with all its social and spiritual consequences. In the last 500 years Christianity has progressed and grown, while shaping and reshaping all sociological conditions in the western coastal area of Sri Lanka. The history of the past two centuries of the congregation and the 150 years of the Holy Emmanuel Church at Rawatawatte is a living witness to this growth and progress.

Today the culture of Moratuwa is inseparable from Christian culture, which is well rooted in the area. Apart from other Anglican churches and churches of other denominations, Holy Emmanuel Church and its daughter churches (namely the church of St Michael's and All Angels, Willorawatte, St Paul's Church in Moratumulla, The Church of the Healing Christ in Kadalana, and the Chapel in Uyana) have been playing a vital role. One of the unique features of this church is that from the beginning it has been conducting worship mainly in Sinhala. This came through the day-to-day life of people in the area who have been proud of their language, even under the British regime when prominence was given to English. This is quite unique as the Anglican Church was the official religion of the British Empire.

Today the tower of this church stands firmly at one end of the village of Rawatawatte as a landmark and has marked the boundary of the neighbouring village of Idama for 150 years, and is an integral part of the identity of these villages. The clock of this tower rings its bells every 15 minutes according to its own style and has become a natural rhythm of the area crossing boundaries of the villages in Moratuwa.

The spiritual nourishment given by this church through liturgical activities has been spreading through members, organisations and the activities of the congregation. This church consists of many organisations that accommodate men and women of all ages and meet their needs for education, cultural activities and spiritual sustenance. For instance the Sunday school, which comprises over 500 children and more than 70 teachers, has been functioning as the 'children's theological college', training for the next generation of the church. The Youth Fellowship provides a space for young people to come together to release energy in a creative and productive manner in an atmosphere of faith, to prepare themselves to take over the responsibilities of church and society. There is also a Junior Guild which encourages adolescents to be responsible and respectable. Fathers and mothers belong to the Senior Guild and Mothers' Union respectively, to meet and work together as senior members of the congregation. There is an Aesthetic Group to enhance the talents of people for the glory of God and for the extension of his kingdom.

For liturgical activities there is a well-established choir and a Servers' Guild (Altar Servers) to support the worship of the congregation. Various forms of worship take place, with the Eucharist or Holy Communion at the centre of all these acts of worship. Other services include baptisms, marriages, funerals and memorial services. All these forms of worship are conducted by laity and clergy under the guidance of the vicar and assistant curates.

Although Holy Emmanuel Church, Moratuwa, is a parish in the Anglican Diocese of Colombo it is mainly governed by the trust deed of the Parish. Administration of the parish is led by the vicar and the board of wardens who are the trustees of the parish. Their duties are facilitated by a permanent office manager supported by assistants and some other members of the parish. One of the unique features of the administration of the parish is that the cemetery is managed by a board of wardens apart from the main board of wardens of the parish.

This church has produced a remarkable example of integration and assimilation of the universal cultural values of Christianity into a local congregation in Moratuwa by retaining Christian integrity and identity. Over the years members of the congregation have become professors, lawyers, engineers, accountants, carpenters and teachers whose professions have been enriched by Christian values. For

example, the skills of carpentry have been making a significant contribution in the areas of the daughter churches of St Paul's Church in Moratumulla, St Michael's and All Angels Church in Willorawatte, and the Church of the Healing Christ in Kadalana, which are the strong areas of the Master Carpenters of Moratuwa.

Conclusion

Over the years this church has been fortunate to have scholarly and practical clergy enriching the life and work of people not only in this church but also the whole area and beyond. For instance, three former vicars of this church became Bishops, making a wider contribution to church and society. After serving as vicars both EA Copleston and Harold de Soysa became the Bishop of Colombo in turn, while Roger Herft is the present Archbishop of Perth and the chief guest of the 150th anniversary celebrations.

Located in a prominent place this church and its members have existed peacefully with people from all spheres of life. The ways in which they have been trying to maintain an inclusive attitude to accommodate various people have been remarkable compared with the growing exclusiveness in Sri Lanka society. As this congregation celebrates the 150th anniversary of their present church let us congratulate them and wish them every success in carrying on their good work with such commitment in the days to come.



The clock tower of Holy Emmanuel Church, in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.