

The Margaya Story

Reflections – Introduction

“Where there is no vision, the people perish”. Vision in the biblical sense is a supernatural manifestation. While ‘vision’ sees what is possible, faith makes it happen. That is the summary of a 30 year old story of an indigenous ministry. People continue to perish and the vision continues. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” says the Lord. One of his greatest servants Paul, as if to give an illustration of the Lord’s declaration, writing to the church in Corinth says “You see your calling brethren that not many mighty, not many noble are called, ... God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.” This he does, “so that no flesh should glory in His presence”.

2000 years have gone by, since Paul uttered these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We at Margaya have had the blessing of experiencing this. For we were, and are ‘foolish’ in the eyes of the world and the professing church. Yet reflecting on a 30 year journey it is no coincidence or accident but the Lord’s presence and power working through vessels that are weak and broken; yet willing to say like Mary “Let it be to me according to your word” or Isaiah “Here am I send me”. Thus none could boast nor take glory for the great things He has done. Like the Samaritan leper who was healed, after 30 years of ministry all we can do is “to fall down on our faces at His feet, and give Him thanks and with a loud voice to glorify God” for He alone is “worthy to receive glory and honour and power”.

1. Philadelphia as found in the book of Revelation Ch.3:7-13 was founded as a border town in second century BC to spread Greek culture to surrounding areas and was situated in the province of Lydia.

Mirihana is strategically placed bordering the commercial Capital Colombo and the administrative capital Sri Jayawardenapura.

2) The name Philadelphia means “brotherly love” reminding the believers of the church at Philadelphia that they should love one another if they were to fulfill the great commission. Margaya Missionary Society ceased to exist in 1992 when it took a new name at the time of incorporation by an Act of Parliament. The new name is Margaya Fellowship of Sri Lanka.

The word Fellowship is derived out of the Greek word Koinonia. N.I. Bible dictionary defines it as “the membership in a local Christian church or in the community”. From the very beginning of the church at Pentecost “They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” Acts 2:42. Partnership in the support of the gospel and in charitable work of the church (2 Cor.8:4). The heavenly love that fills the hearts of believers; one for another and for God. For this love and fellowship the scriptures use a word ‘agape’. This fellowship is deeper and more satisfying than any mere human love, whether social, parental, conjugal or other.

3) Philadelphia knew what it was to live in the midst of insecure surroundings and under constant stress and strain, as the city sat over a large earthquake fault. In AD 17 a terrifying earthquake hit a huge area. Philadelphia was spared total destruction. Margaya Fellowship being an indigenous church and ministry being mainly among the rural poor villages knows well what insecurity is all about, when it comes to finances, resources and persecution.

4) Emperor Tiberius rebuilt Philadelphia after its destruction by the earthquake and the city changed its name in appreciation of the emperor. The church knew what it meant to receive a new name.

Margaya Missionary Society which began as a missionary organization found itself administrating church functions and church planting. In keeping with its God given mandate it changed its name to Margaya Fellowship of Sri Lanka, an indigenous denomination.

Early Days

Although Margaya ministry was officially birthed in 1981, it would be correct to say that the pioneering stage began in 1976. In explaining truths about the kingdom our Lord used parables. Commentators suggest that the parable of the Mustard Seed (Mt.13:31-32) and the Leaven (Mt.13:33) are to describe the kingdom as destined for remarkable growth.

In fact R.C. Trench describes it forcefully. "The Son of man grew up in a despised province. He did not appear in public until his 30th year; Then taught for 2 or 3 years in neighbouring villages and occasionally at Jerusalem; Made a few converts chiefly among the poor and unlearned and then falling into the hands of his enemies died the shameful death of the cross. Such and so slight was the commencement of the universal Kingdom of God." "Nevertheless its growth would belie its humble beginnings". (Dan.2:35). Not only has Christianity become the religion with the most number of adherents in the world but also has had such an influence in human society; whether politics, ethics, economics, art, legal realm, morality or otherwise, that removing every influence of Christianity would mean the end of all civilization."

1976 was an eventful year for Sri Lanka. A government which had its existence extended by dubious means had come to the tail end of its tenure in office. The economy was in chaos. The repressive government of the day, having already changed the secular status of the constitution, was still trying to recover from the '71 insurgency and was in for a rude shock as rumblings from the North by dissident Tamil youth had begun. The Mayor of Jaffna had been killed. In fact history records that the civil war that were to destroy the very life of Sri Lankan society for almost two decades had begun. "... where sin abounded, grace abounded much more".

The conversion and the call of God upon his servant is mentioned in the article "History of the growth of an indigenous ministry".

Once sharing at a conference abroad as to how the Lord raised the Margaya ministry it was mentioned that it was through a Sunday school ministry at Mirihana. This prompted a senior and well-respected missionary to say "I have never before thought of ministry among children as a method of evangelism but I believe the Lord is telling me something". Yes so often we can miss out on God's way of doing things, if we allow tradition to bind and blind us. The nature of man is to resist or look in suspicion especially at the things of the spiritual realm. While it is prudent to do so especially if it is extra biblical – being sensitive to the spirit's leading is vital.

It may be the still small voice or a Mount Sinai experience. What matters is not the method but have you heard the Lord speak. The Sunday school ministry that the founder was engaged in laid the foundation for ministry experience as well as character. Homiletics was not learned in a theological seminary but by trying to communicate to children from non-Christian, economically weak backgrounds, from broken homes that there is a God who loves and cares.

People who made a difference

Rev. Lokendra Abhayaratne, Lokki as many would call him was a Samuel to the Founder. Over the 30 years of ministry his contribution has been immeasurable though not seen by the human eye. In fact the spirit of Mary who stood by the son even upto Golgotha or Pentecost was his. He and Mohini (his wife) have been a real source of strength to Margaya Ministry.

Rev. Roger Herft, now a Bishop and serving in Australia, was another that the Lord used during this time. A man of God with great insight recognized the things of the spirit. His spirit of Barnabas and transparency was fresh air in struggles of trying to exist within an establishment, which was "new wine in old wineskins". It was through him that the Lord opened the first door of our Veyangoda village ministry.

Aunty Mercy was a spinster who loved the Lord dearly. Her words of encouragement and sometimes support helped us meet Sunday school expenses, which was often borne by the teachers.

As the ministry grew, more activities were added. The number of children exceeded 100. 80% of them were non-Christian. The initial core group of leaders was being saved and growing in discipleship. Through the children, contact was made with parents and meetings in homes started. Contact with important families that have been a tremendous strength to our ministry was made during the decade of the seventies.

The formation and growth of an indigenous pioneering ministry

“Sri Lanka is the only non Muslim nation which has a declining Christian population” states Patrick Johnstone in his book Operation World. It is generally believed that Christianity first arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 with the Portuguese. Protestant Christianity arrived in Sri Lanka in 1638 when the Dutch invaded the island. However the free spread of the gospel and the arrival of other denominations began only after the arrival of the British in 1798. According to available statistics in 1722 the Christian population stood at 22%. Until recently it was believed if any peoples group consisted of a Christian population of 20% or more, then that particular peoples group was considered to have been reached. In the light of that definition a peoples group that had been reached has now declined to 7%. One has to accept considering the fact of the immense sacrifices the missionaries made and the contributions made to Sri Lankan society by way of education, health, uplifting of the poor and by way of infrastructure developments, a more positive influence and expansion of the Kingdom was to be expected. It could be stated that the primary responsibility of planting a national church, which was strong enough to evangelise its own people, had failed.

Many reasons could be given for this.

Firstly, even after 2500 years the universal church is yet to discover the effective key to communicate the gospel to those of the “B” world. If a sincere self-criticism is to be made the church has to accept that many matters of the spiritual world that keeps this peoples group bound is yet to be revealed.

Secondly, many of the former colonies after obtaining independence began to react against all that had any colour to do with the former colonial rulers. It has to be borne in mind that Sri Lanka had been under foreign rule for almost 500 years and was greatly affected.

Thirdly, a revival, which began towards the end of the 19th century in the majority religion, began to gather impetus in the 20th century.

Fourthly, after independence the Sri Lankan church had to face many obstacles and setbacks. The “Sinhala only Act” introduced in the mid fifties affected the Christian community. It would be a fair statement to say that the Christian community of the day was by and large western oriented in every sense as they were strongly influenced by the missionaries’ culture. Particularly the Burgher community began to migrate. **Fifthly**, with whatever privileges and benefits that were enjoyed by the Christian community under the foreign rulers were gradually fading away and many either reverted back to their old faith or became lukewarm.

The Buddhist commission, which was appointed in the early fifties to look into areas, which affected the community under the foreign rulers, made several recommendations, which the government that came into power in 1956 began to implement. These too affected the Christian community and its growth. However a much more serious factor that influenced the church was liberal theology which had begun to influence the established church beginning in the 20th century. Their definition of evangelism broke the enthusiasm, zeal and the backbone of missions. Even the Pentecostal revival of Azusa Street of 1906, which came to Sri Lanka at quite an early stage, failed to have an impact in the short term. In hindsight the leadership of

the church being in the hands of foreign missionaries until government restrictions were introduced in the early 60's decade too had its own repercussions.

One could say the restriction of visas, which compelled the leadership to be handed over to nationals, was in a sense a blessing in disguise. However this too failed to deliver the desired results as the local leadership, training and mindset was western. In fact they came from the affluent class, educated in the English medium and very often with theological training in western bible schools and seminaries. Therefore although they were Sri Lankans their inability to preach, teach and minister in the vernacular and the inability to understand the culture, the people contextualization didn't help the cause of the gospel any better.

Jesus said "I will build my church" and hence the gospel has to march forward despite human error and obstacles. The Kingdom has to grow like a mustard seed; It is in this context that the 70's decade is important to the Sri Lankan church.

Barret describing the work of the Holy Spirit in the 80's says "The wave produced leaders who knew the culture, people and language and committed to reach their own. This was in contrast to the missionaries who had to come and learn the language and culture. It was in this background that the indigenous ministry of Margaya was birthed in the 70's decade. The pioneer of this ministry was saved, prepared and commissioned during this decade.

In the early 70's the pioneer Rohan de S. Ekanayake was seeking the truth. Having found it immediately he began to serve in whatever ways he could. A prophet from New Zealand in 1974 had prophesied over him. What began as a Sunday School ministry in 1976 today has grown into a denomination.

Man is born to trouble – As the sparks fly upwards

Rohan was born to a conservative Christian family and is the fourth in a family of six children. Having had to battle alcoholism in the home environment, he learned to stop trusting in man at a very tender age.

It is the Lord who gives breath (Gen.2:7) and death is one breath away, and human nature at its best is no basis for ultimate trust by anyone. The servant of God should come to know this truth early. 'The Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him', 'you are my portion Lord' Should be his cry. Only then will his "Gethsemane experience will be converted to victory whether it may be a 'kiss of Judas' or 'a denial of Peter' in ministry. Only then could he 'turn our wailing into dancing; and remove our sackcloth and clothe us with joy'. There is a cup of sorrow that every servant of God should drink, a narrow road to discipleship, 'a suffering towards Godliness'. To reject this is to reject the way of the cross. Something Rohan's parents instilled in him, as a child was 'Christian discipline'. Knowledge gained through such discipline as the foundation for Christian growth.

"The letter kills, but the spirit gives life' and 'having a form of godliness but denying its power was Rohan's experience in the early seventies. As a result of conservative upbringing, external godliness was adhered to with fervency. Due to this zealotry he began to see from his perspective, the emptiness within and in the church. He too was drawn by the wave of left politics that swept the youth of that period, after the '71 insurgency. He too began to believe that "the opium of the masses' was religion. The 'masks' and injustices in the church and society should be removed, he believed. Gradually he began to drift toward atheism. He began to burn with a vision to change society through a political revolution and redeem the poor who were being exploited.

What Miriam was to Moses when he was small is what Rohan's elder sister was to Rohan as far as his salvation was concerned. She was the first to accept the Lord and was baptized in the spirit. Her zealotry was no doubt an obstacle for others to find salvation.

In 1973, his elder sister was employed in Kandy. Rohan had gone there to spend a few days with her. His sister, through Rev. George Lee and Arul Anketell, had tried to introduce the gospel to him Rohan's response was 'you are trying to sell a brand of toothpaste which I am

not interested in". However after sharing his testimony, Bro, Arul had stated "you may not have been like me, but Nathaniel in the bible, though a good man too, had to come to Jesus". This was a revelation. Brought up in a conservative religious background his understanding of sin was different and in fact Rohan believed he was no sinner. Through this statement the Holy Spirit began to speak to him. He returned from Kandy with the thought haunting him, but not changed. In October, he attended a meeting conducted by Rev. George Good in Kotte. What touched him was not the message but the messenger. His spirit of love convinced him of the truth of Christ, although he was disillusioned with the Christianity he had come in contact with. He returned that day convinced that all Christians are not fakes but that there is truth in the message.

Soon after that, during a crisis at home he knelt by his bed and said the shortest prayer in his life "if you are what you say prove yourself tonight and I'll give my life to you". God did take these foolish words seriously. The Lord gave him "...beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness". The next day he was a new man – Praise be to His name. Like a deer which panteth after water, he began to thirst after the things of God. The Calvary church at Siebel Avenue, The Assembly of God Church at Kollupitiya, The Ceylon Pentecostal Mission at Nugegoda and Bethany Church were the main places where he went for spiritual food.

A prophecy from a man of God

In or around 1974, a prophet from New Zealand conducted a series of meetings at in a local Church. Rohan participated at these meetings. During his message, he prophesied over Rohan of a great ministry that the Lord was going to do through him.

God trains and equips His vessel

While Rohan was studying for his university entrance examination, a door was opened for employment in a private bank. Discipline, administration, organizational knowledge were some of the skills that he was able to sharpen in his seventeen year period at the Bank. The income too was a great blessing as during the pioneering stage of Margaya, all expenses had to be met out of his personal funds. Various contacts made too have been a tremendous blessing for the ministry even to date.

In 1975 he was looking for opportunities to serve God. He got himself involved in the youth fellowship but realized that was not the place of ministry long-term. A sports club to play cricket was initiated in order to evangelise. This gave many opportunities to establish contact with youth.

Make disciples ...teaching them to observe all things

Youth for Christ was an organization that the Lord was using in the seventies decade to train young Christians in discipleship. In the mid seventies the Nugegoda Club and then the Kotte and later the Embuldeniya club of this ministry helped in growth in discipleship and ministry. Upto that time Rohan's ministry had been limited to the Sunday school ministry. His first message outside the Sunday school ministry was at the YFC Kotte club meeting.

Rohan attended the YFC youth camp at Welimada with much expectation. However being disappointed, he decided to leave a day prior to the end of the camp. That night he fasted and prayed asking for a breakthrough as he felt that still there was something lacking in his life. He skipped devotions and continued the fast and the final session that he was to attend was on the subject of "The resurrection power". That day was a changing point as he had experienced his Pentecost. As a result of this experience with the Holy Spirit, a deeper commitment to fasting and prayer and boldness in witnessing was experienced.

There was new zeal in his Sunday school ministry where he had joined to help his mother who was in charge with around 10 children. Soon he began to visit and evangelise and the numbers began to increase and the leadership of the Sunday school too was entrusted to Rohan. Within a couple of years the number of children grew to 150. The staff too grew from three to fifteen.

June, a child who came to Sunday school was saved and had gone home and witnessed to her family members. Her brother came to meet Rohan and soon he too came to a deeper experienced in the faith and began to help Rohan in the ministry. It was during this time that the Pietersz family too became a part of the initial group.

Ministry Widens

With the growth in numbers of the Sunday school where majority were from non-Christian background contact was established with parents as well. House meetings were commenced in various places. Two incidents stand out that is worthy of mention. A house meeting was conducted in a home at Thalapathpitiya. Simpson was a notorious thug who was a menace to the people of the area. At the time there was only 1 bus that plied on this route. Under the influence of drugs Simpson had attacked the bus and the police were after him for damage to state property. He ended up one day at this meeting. He shared this with Rohan. Rohan shared the gospel with him and due to lack of experience in Ministry, encouraged him to go and report to the Police, He was taken to courts and remanded without bail. Rohan was informed that Simpson was quite angry with him for what had happened. Rohan went to see him with Pastor Roger and a relative of Simpson. He appeared to be under drugs even in prison. He was rude and abusive to Rohan and threatened that he would know what to do once one he is out. That was a disappointing day. The home cell was stopped temporarily due to threats from Simpson. Subsequently, Rohan heard that Simpson had been released from remand. Soon after his release, Simpson turned up at Rohan's home. Rohan asked him to sit, not knowing at what moment he would attack. Simpson replied "I came to ask for forgiveness. I was so abusive to you but you were silent. After you left something began happening to me. I want to know about this Jesus that you speak of". Truly something had happened to him, he was like a child. Rohan led him to Christ that night. He was delivered from Drug addiction and the violent life style completely. He was led to a church. He and his family are actively involved in the Lord's work.

On another occasion, Rohan was returning from the home cell at Thalapathpitiya when he saw the younger brother of a school day friend seated under a tree. He had been involved in left politics and many wicked ways of life. Rohan shared the gospel with him and since it was very late walked with him back home that night. This young man that night accepted the Lord as Saviour. He too joined the initial group who was meeting regularly for fasting prayer. There were times that such prayer meetings were held in the near by Police grounds in the absence of a suitable place. A Worship service was also started to minister to the adults.

And they heard the voice of the Lord

In 1979, the Logos ship arrived in Sri Lanka... They conducted an all night prayer meeting at a church in Galle Face. Rohan and David too participated. This meeting helped to widen the vision. An Anglican priest from Galle shared the needs of Sri Lanka. Rohan and David didn't fail to speak to this clergyman. That was the initial contact with Pastor Lakshman Peiris. Later on when the Margaya Missionary Society was formed he was invited to be the Chairman, which he accepted gladly. He and his wife contributed much during the period they were involved with Margaya.

A new vision

The new vision that was received through the all night meeting led by those of the Logos ship had an immediate impact on this group at Mirihana. Rohan began to stress that the need was out there in the village, and not in Colombo. They continued to meet on Fridays for fasting and prayer in the residence of the Pietersz'.

A new beginning

An opportunity had been open to venture out into village ministry. The door was open through Pastor Roger Herft who was a Godly man with deep insight. At Veyangoda there was an opportunity to pioneer work as well as to assist a local Anglican Church. David, felt led to go out into full-time ministry. Various discussions took place and by the end of the year David moved out to Veyangoda...

On 7th January 1982 the first public meeting was held at the parish hall of the Veyangoda Church. Bro.Rohan shared on the need for evangelization. Many were challenged and responded positively. With more wanting to join in as full-time workers, the need for a better guideline had been felt. Two problems arose – a name for the society and a necessity for a Chairman. This small group believed that a recognized person from the national body of Christ would help to allay fears that rise for any new movement. Out of the many names that were suggested the Margaya was chosen (“the Way”) since the **first Christians were referred as people of the Way (Acts 9:2)**. As for the Chairman, Bro.Rohan suggested the group should invite Pastor Lakshman to be the Chairman. Accordingly a letter dated 24th June 1982 was sent to him inquiring whether he could make himself available to serve as Chairman. To this he responded by his letter of 7.7.82 from U.K. where he and his family were quote “First of all let me answer your invitation, Yes I will be glad to serve as Chairman in Margaya” unquote. Pastor Lakshman relinquished his duties as Chairman in 1996.

The ministry at Veyangoda did not survive for various reasons. Nevertheless many lessons in village ministry were learnt.

The first Convention

Conventions have been a great blessing in Margaya ministry. It is an opportunity for in-depth teaching and ministry. The first convention was held in October 1982 where by this time the Pietersz family had been appointed as Warden of a children's Home. The first night was a battle with spiritual forces as the wife of a family who was attending the camp, and been possessed began to manifest during the night prayer time. With limited experience at the time, it took much time to deliver her as the spirits kept returning. Through her deliverance, later all of her family members came to the Lord.

In 1983, Bro.Rohan received an opportunity to visit India to attend the tri-annual convention of the Indian Evangelical mission held in Bangalore. This was also an opportunity to meet with the leaders of IEM and was a very fruitful visit as it gave knowledge and information on village ministry. Their contribution in the early years is appreciated.

It was in the early eighties decade that first contact with WEC International was made when South Asia Regional Secretary at the time Bro.Ken Booth visited Sri Lanka. This partnership has grown over the years from strength to strength. The simple lifestyle, sacrificial nature and the humility of their leadership, and sincere ‘agape’ love has had a great influence on the ministry of Margaya and we thank God for this rich contribution made by these saints, The guidance and assistance extended in drafting the “Principle and Practice” – 1986 edition and the “new constitution for the denomination – 1997 were two major contributions made other than the area of teaching. the late Bro.Ken and his wife Sis.Cecily, Late Bro.Roy and Sis.Daphne Spragett and Bro, Mike and Sis.Wilma Dwight and the Frost's along with all other workers of WEC who have helped the growth of Margaya are remembered with deep appreciation and gratitude.

1981 to 1985 was a period where the ministry was formally founded and organized. It was also a period where the future leadership of the Society was being formed. Bro.Gunasiri has been a modern ‘Hudson Taylor’ and a tremendous blessing to the fellowship. His sacrificial nature, priority to the Kingdom at any cost, attitude of prayer and faithfulness is an example for any to follow. Jayantha, an effective evangelism made a vital contribution at the early stage.

Sharpening of the vision

Dr.Lalith Mendis or Bro.Lalith as we used to refer to him then is a prophet of our times – a rare commodity in the Sri Lankan church. His association with Margaya especially during the period 1985 to 1988 helped focus our ministry and to add a cutting edge to the village ministry. His assistance in training our workers and wise counsel whenever sought for has helped to add an impetus to the ministry and we thank God for this vital contribution made at a very important period of our growth.

Attending the Missions Conference of WEC International at Batu in Indonesia in 1987 by Bro.Rohan helped to widen the vision on Missions.

Church planting – the New Testament model to fulfill the great commission

Our Lord's mandate to preach the good news and to disciple every convert comprises the strategic task of the church. This not only brings healthy church growth but also effective spread of the Gospel. While only 4 churches were planted upto 1987 the number has increased to 30 by 2001. This does not include daughter churches. By 2006 the number has increased to 50. We are thankful to bro Joon for his partnership in ministry.

A new era

In 1992 The Margaya Missionary Society ceased to exist as it took over a new name "The Margaya Fellowship of Sri Lanka" at the time of its incorporation by an Act of Parliament as a Christian denomination Accordingly a new constitution was drafted and adopted. Out of the 9 provinces in Sri Lanka, Margaya ministry has branches in all nine provinces. Out of the 25 Districts, Margaya ministry has now extended to 17 with over nearly 100 in full time ministry. Like the Church in Philadelphia with little strength Margaya has strived to keep his word and persevered in the calling that God has given. "I am coming soon" said the Lord to the church at Philadelphia. This promise is much nearer than then. The urgency is to fulfill the great commission in our generation.