

In Search of the Roots The History of YMCA Thrissur



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The Young Men's Christian Association is a standing testimony to the power of true Christian values that transcends the narrow confines of geography, politics, colour, faith and language. A movement that was started in London by a 23 year old Englishman who felt that it was 'the duty of Christian young men to witness in practical ways to their faith in the sphere of their daily life,' had surpassed the expectations of its pioneers even during their life time. When Sir. George Williams and his friends planted the seeds of the YMCA in 1844 in London, would they have ever imagined that a few decades later, in 1886 and thousands of kilometers away, a small town named Thrissur in the small princely state of Cochin (remember Kerala was not formed until 1956) would have a YMCA of its own! It is even more interesting to know that Sir. George Williams died only in 1905, and the National Council of YMCAs of India was formed only in 1891. Truly, the YMCA of Thrissur has a history that is unique in many ways.

I first wrote the history of the Thrissur (it was Trichur then) YMCA when they were celebrating their centenary in 1986. The then President of Thrissur YMCA, the late Mr. C.D.Paul was trying to trace its origin but to his great disappointment he was not able to collect any documentary evidence relating to the year of its founding in Thrissur. He could not find any information as to the names of its founding fathers. The approximate date was set at 1886-87, on the basis of the information he was able to gather from the office of the National Council of YMCA's in New Delhi. Their information was based on a brief reference to the founding of the YMCAs in Thrissur and Kunnamkulam by the CMS missionaries and by the LMS missionaries elsewhere from the Book *'The YMCA in India: 100 Years of Service with Youth'* by J.H. Dunderdale. This book gave factual information about the establishment of the YMCA in Thrissur in 1886.

'During this same period YMCAs were also organized at a number of points on the West Coast; Trichur (1886), Cochin (1887), Tellicherry (1887), Kottayam (1888) and Kunnamkulam (1888). It is more than likely that other YMCAs were organized in the towns and villages of Travancore and Cochin but their officers never took the trouble to tell others of their existence nor to preserve their records. From what little we know of the early days of YMCAs in India, it would seem that an association that wants to assure itself a place in posterity is well advised to affiliate with the National Council and to spend some money on printing an annual report.'

As a student of Church History, I took it up as a challenge to trace the beginning of the YMCA in Thrissur and Kunnamkulam. Since no documents existed in Thrissur, my only hope was to search for it in the records of the Church Missionary Society's correspondence during the

period 1886-1900. There was no need to look up the records of the London Missionary Society, as their work was in Trivandrum area. The Thrissur-Kunnamkulam area was served by the CMS and not the LMS. If it had been Calicut, Palakkad or Mangalore my research would have been in the records of the Basel Mission.

To get to the records of the Church Missionary Society, one has to go to London to do research in the archives of the CMS headquarters. And that was not any easy task. Then it came to my memory that my professor of Church History at the United Theological College, Bangalore, had visited the CMS headquarters in London and microfilmed, on 30th December 1964, extracts from the letters which the CMS missionaries had written to their headquarters. These microfilms had been preserved in the archives of the U.T.C in Bangalore and I had made use of it in 1965. Although more than two decades had elapsed, (when I was first writing the history of YMCA Thrissur) my memory was focused on the slides of the microfilm in the archives of the U.T.C where I had read about my hometown, Thrissur.

In 2011, after another two decades or more, when the YMCA in Thrissur is celebrating their 125th Anniversary I find it a privilege to once again chart the history of this movement in Thrissur. I was only more than willing to oblige when the President Mr. Pius Alapatt and the Chairman of the Souvenir Committee Dr. T.T.Paul approached me for a 'second edition' of the history of YMCA Thrissur.

The Socio-Religious Background in Thrissur

To begin with, it would be helpful to understand the socio-religious background of Thrissur during the time of the founding of the YMCA. This should however be more of academic interest. It could be said that the YMCA was formed as a result of the religious awakening in the CMS (now CSI, formed after Indian independence) in Thrissur. The CMS Church of Trichur (now the All Saints Church at Mission quarters) founded in 1842 was the second largest Christian denomination next to the Chaldean Church (established in 1814). The Syro-Malabar hierarchy was constituted only in 1887 when Bishop A.E.Medleycott was appointed as the first Vicar Apostolic for Thrissur by the Pope. At the time of the founding of YMCA in 1886 there were two other small churches in the vicinity of Trichur, namely the Romo-Syrian (now the Syro-Malabar) Church established in 1887 and the Latin Church which is now the Lourde's Cathedral. And during that time other denominations like the Orthodox church or the Marthoma church had not established their presence in Thrissur.

As the YMCA was first started in Thrissur in the CMS Mission Quarters, most of the members were from that congregation. Mr.A.E.David (he was not ordained then) was the founder President and the Reverend J.H.Bishop was the main missionary of the YMCA. At the beginning it was called the 'Temperance Movement.'

Taking on an Ecumenical Spirit

Gradually members from other denominations began to show interest in the activities of the YMCA and began take membership in the YMCA. I still remember that during my younger days, most of the Christians of Thrissur irrespective of their denominational allegiance started to become members of the YMCA. The ecumenical spirit of the YMCA had fast started to create new bonds of fellowship among the Christians of Thrissur. This ecumenical fellowship took a new turn when the YMCA, under the Presidentship of Adv. P.D.Jose, gave a reception to Mar Kundukulam when he was made the Bishop of Thrissur. It could be said that

until then the presence of Roman Catholics in Thrissur YMCA had been sparse and no one from them had become office bearers. This event was a turning point and eventually more Catholics joined the YMCA and began to take leadership in this fast growing ecumenical organization. At present, I would say without an iota of doubt, that the YMCA is very much an ecumenical fellowship of all Christian denominations in Thrissur.

Piecing Together the History

Now I shall recount the research that I had undertaken in the archives of the UTC and how I pieced together the bits and fragments to write the history of YMCA Thrissur. However I am indebted to two persons without whom my quest to trace the history of the YMCA would have been unsuccessful.

First is, **Prof. Dr. Kaaj Baago**, Professor of Church History at the UTC for my M.Th course, who had taken the trouble to sift through the many letters of the nineteenth century at the CMS archives in London. Thus he had done a great service for the future historians in India to have an easy access to the documents of that century. This detailed reference to the valuable microfilms of the history of Christianity in India is made here in order that posterity will benefit from these reels of microfilm. Need will arise in different contests and it is not easy to send someone to London to sit and read in the CMS archives. It contains letters from the CMS missionaries not only of South India, but also of North India, Pakistan, Africa etc. They all come under the scope of the research of these microfilms.

Dr. Kaaj Baago was a missionary of the Danish Missionary Society and he had been the Ambassador of the Danish government in New Delhi. That had been quite a change in the role of the man who had played a significant role in making available the copies of the valuable records in microfilm rolls. Reel No. 14 and Reel No. 15 of these microfilms in the UTC archives had become useful for the period (1886-1900) of my study on the CMS and other missionary organizations in South India.

Second is, **Fr. M.K. Kuriakose** who was the librarian of U.T.C, Bangalore. He was formerly the archivist after obtaining his M.Th. degree in Church History at the U.T.C. As I was able to spare a day in Bangalore in May 1986, I went straight to the library and requested him to show me the documents. Though I had to sit there for six hours, facing the light of the microfilm reader machine I was extremely happy because I could trace the origins of the YMCA in Thrissur. I even found some historical facts that had relevance to the town of Trichur in general and to the CMS mission school in particular. I copied them as fast as one could physically do it. Well, laptops and tablet PCs had not hit the market then! So it was all pen and paper that I had to resort to.

The following facts copied from the correspondence of the CMS missionaries in Thrissur will tell the story of the beginnings of the Thrissur YMCA as founded by Mr. A.E. David sometime during 1886-87.

The Pioneers

The men who could rightly be called the founders of YMCA Thrissur are Mr.A.E.David (who later became Rev. A.E.David), Rev.J.H.Bishop and Rev.P.P.Joseph.

Mr. A. E. David was a teacher in the CMS Middle School. In the Letter dated April 19, 1887 Rev. J.H. Bishop writes that the ordination of Mr. A.E. David and Mr. A. Philo has been fixed

for 5 June 1887, by the Bishop in Kottayam. Mr. A.E. David was recommended for Trichur and Mr. A.P. Philo for Kunnampulam. The same letter also informs.

'An F.A. Master, a Native Christian, and pupil of Mr. A.E. David, was appointed to succeed him (Mr. David) in the CMS Middle School, and we hoped that this year the school might be raised another grade, and thus, step by step, be developed into a high school, and if friends came to our assistance, we might at last, perhaps, commence the long-talked of lecture hall, with its library and Bible depot.'

Rev. J.H. Bishop who began the 1887 year with "bright prospects became seriously ill with malarial fever in 1887 early Feb. He had gone to Madras but was ordered to go to England and rest. On his journey back to England he wrote a letter aboard the ship. In that letter dated 19th April, 1887 Rev. J.H. Bishop, missionary of Trichur (writing from the S.S. Navarino, off the coast of Portugal) does not mention about the YMCA which must have started in the year under his report, i.e., 1886. However in his continuation letter dated 20th June, 1887 from Brighton in England, after his illness aboard the ship and subsequent hospitalization in London for a month, he refers to the formation of the YMCA after referring to the CMS High School as follows.

'In the town of Trichur itself we hope the CMS Middle School, may develop into a High School and that on the excellent site, procured with great difficulty, the proposed lecture hall for the higher classes of the school and for evangelistic work will soon be erected..... Mr. A.E. David wrote to me a most interesting letter about the work in Trichur prior to Mr. Joseph's arrival. He says he and his fellow-workers have formed a sort of Young Men's Christian Association. "Our chief aim is", he (A.E. David) says is, "to go to the heathen and tell them the glad tidings." The idea is to develop voluntary work amongst the members of the congregation. They collect a little money to defray the expenses of these volunteers.'

The Mr. Joseph referred to in the above paragraph is the **Rev. P.P. Joseph** who was appointed to be in charge of Trichur when the Rev. J.H. Bishop was on his leave in England. A little note on the situation of the CMS Church in Trichur during the period when the YMCA was being formed would be interesting. The Rev. P.P. Joseph was working in Alwaye when the Bishop (not the Rev. J.H. Bishop but the real 'Bishop' of the Diocese of Kottayam) transferred the Rev. P.P. Joseph to Trichur in the absence of the Rev. J.H. Bishop who had gone to England on holiday. There was an interval between the departure of the Rev. J.H. Bishop and the appointment of the Rev. P.P. Joseph. It was during this period that the Trichur YMCA was founded. About this period, when there was no clergyman, the Rev. J.H. Bishop writes as follows.

'During the interval between my departure and the appointment of the Rev. P.P. Joseph, the great enemy of the souls stirred up one or two disaffected members of the congregation to cause confusion and trouble. The Church wardens, however, acted with great promptitude, reporting the matter to the Bishop, after doing their best to conciliate their refractory brethren. The Rev. P.P. Joseph, acting under the Bishop's orders, was graciously assisted in healing the breach and in bringing about peace and harmony among all the members. Mr. Joseph wrote a very encouraging letter to me the other day, saying, how thankful he was that his other brethren's prayers had been so remarkably answered, and Satan's effort foiled.'

The Beginning Years

After reporting about the founding of the YMCA by young native lay people like Mr. A.E. David (who was recommended for ordination for Trichur that year itself), the missionary has an interesting remark about native Christians. He rightly writes:

'I am more and more convinced that real and permanent success in missionary work depends upon the spiritual life of the native Church. To strive in producing and fostering that spiritual life and directing its energies into right channels, guarding against extravagances and excesses, and promoting its healthy development, should be at least one main object of the European missionary's endeavours.'

The Rev. J.H. Bishop was in Trichur in January 1887. He left Trichur only in February 1887. The letter mentioned is written in June 1887. Therefore the founding of the YMCA referred to by the Rev. J.H. Bishop, as reported to him must have taken place in Feb-May, 1887. Since it is also stated that the founding was done prior to the arrival of the Rev. P.P. Joseph, one is able to fix the date approximately. Unless and until we find any other document stating the exact date of the YMCA, Trichur, I will place the date during Feb-April 1887.

Unfortunately the letter of Mr. A.E. David, addressed to the Rev. J.H. Bishop, is not available. Since the mail to England was not quick in the 19th century it is possible that the letter which the Rev. J.H. Bishop refers to in June must have been sent from India by Mr. A.E. David by April the latest.

The missionary in Trichur, Rev. F. Bower in his letter dated Trichur 15th Dec, 1892 informs CMS mission in London about his work in Trichur.

'The Total Abstinence Society and the YMCA are both associations which I am thankful for. The weekly and monthly meetings for prayer and Christian fellowship are times of refreshing, which, I think, all appreciate. There are two meetings weekly for the women, which my wife conducts; the one on Wednesday afternoon for the members of the YMCA and the other on Friday for women in general.....At Kunnamkulam also there are Total Abstinence Society, then YMCA and the YMCA all helpful to the spiritual life of the congregation'.

In the same letter, the Rev. F. Bower asks,

'What are the members of the numerous YMCA in Great Britain doing? We sadly want more European as well as native Evangelists, Men of God, and full of love for immortal souls.'

Referring to the deaths in Trichur as a result of small pox, the Rev. Bower writes from Trichur on 5th Feb, 1894.

'A Church only two or three furlong from ours, belonging to Bishop Mellus lost no less than 500 of its members. Church services have on the whole been very fairly attended, and at the watch night services, which was a very impressive one, no less than 900 were present, including a few Romanists.'

The Rev. J.J.B. Palmer writes on 3rd April, 1894 from Trichur,

'A little time, much less than I could have wished has been given to the YMCA in Trichur – a flourishing association founded some few years ago by the present missionaries, and fostered by their care, with now its own hall for meetings – and the kindred association at Kunnamkulam, the YWCA at Trichur, and its branch

association at the out station, Munkutti-all grown up under the same care, the last two under Mrs. Bower's presidentship – the Temperance Associations at Trichur and Kunnamkulam, and the Scripture Unions.'

Testimonies on the Early Growth of the YMCA in Thrissur

The Rev. F. Bower writes from Trichur dated 28th Nov, 1894:

'The YMCA and YWCA are two associations for which I thank God. They are doing a quiet but good work for Christ, though one would like to see a little more zeal in some of the members.'

The Rev. A.E. David writes from Trichur dated 10th Dec, 1895:

'The Sunday School work has been carried on regularly at 2 p.m.; the attendance has been very good. Some of the members of the YMCA have been working very earnestly for the salvation of theses little ones, and God has blessed us in this work. Mr. Koshi, the Headmaster of the Govt. High School, very kindly gave me last year Rs. 8 to give a treat to the Sunday School children on New Year's Day.

The meetings of the YMCA have been conducted very regularly this year, though they did not go to the distant places to preach, some of them helped me in conducting prayer meetings and Sunday-School classes; others visited the Hindu and the Roman Catholic houses on Sundays.

The second week of November was observed as a week of prayer by the YMCA in Unison with the other associations in the world, and the members were addressed by the Rev J.H Bishop, Archdeacon Koshi, and myself during the week.

Our YWCA has its meetings every Wednesday, and some of its members helped the Bible-women when they went out to distant places on preaching tours. The Total Abstinence Society is a standing rebuke and a protest to the increasing intemperance in the town.'

The Rev. T. Koshi writes from Kunnamkulam on 11th Dec, 1895:

'As there are places very near where they could easily receive help, they go to those places at once and embrace Christianity in the German Mission. The YMCA was reorganized recently. Some of the reformed Syrian Christians also have become its members, and we have meetings every fortnight in the parish school room. The YWCA meetings are held every week as usual, in various houses. A Juvenile Association has also just been started and is working satisfactorily. The want of a suitable hall for these different associations is greatly felt. May God enable us to find means to erect one soon.'

The Rev. J.H. Bishop writes on 3rd Dec, 1896 from Trichur :

'A special mission was held in September, both in Trichur and Kunnamkulam. Our missionary was the Rev. Isaac F. Row, Indian Secretary of the A.I.E. Society. Through his instrumentality, there had been in 1885 and again in 1886 a remarkable religious awakening both in Trichur and in Kunnamkulam. On this occasion services were held at 7.30 a.m., 11 a.m., 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. so as to suit all classes of the community."

'The new Maharajah of Cochin paid a quasi state visit to the High School on Nov 5th and saw it in working order, and was much pleased with the experimental science

lesson and the remarkable quickness exhibited by one of the teachers and his pupils in proposing and solving complicated questions in mental arithmetic. He himself examined some of the classes in English and Sanskrit.'

'There were a few more adult baptisms. The Rev. A.E. David baptized fifteen adult converts (thirteen in connection with the Zenana Mission). I baptized a poor old woman in Patticad (Tiger Jungle) who had learnt everything but could retain nothing; so a bright little girl, Rahel, now in our boarding school though herself unable to read, and a recent covert, prompted her grandmother, and so the formidable difficulty of the previous examination was got over''.

The Rev. Bower writes from Kunnamkulam on 10th Dec, 1897:

'The YMCA and the YWCA are associations for which I am thankful. The members are striving to do what they can for the benefit of besighted heathen around. They also work amongst the Syrian Christians in Kunnamkulam on Sunday afternoons.'

The Rev. T.I. Mc Donald on Nov. 24, 1898 writes:

'It has been my privilege to work in my spare time among the members and associates of our YMCA. Sunday by Sunday some of these fellows have gone out with me to the neighboring villages to give gospel talks to the Hindu children. They also conduct a Sunday morning reading – class for the members of our congregation who cannot read.'

The Rev. F. Bower, writes from Kunnamkulam on 9th Dec, 1898:

'The parish hall, which was in the course of erection when I last wrote, was finished and opened for use in September last. We find it very useful for meetings of various kinds, and we sometime wonder how we managed to get on so long without a place. The Temperance, the YMC, and YWC Associations all hold their weekly and monthly meetings there.'

The Rev. J.H. Bishop writes from Trichur dated 4th Jan, 1899:

'The YMCA has been resuscitated, and I hope may become a real blessing to the congregation. Mr. Mac Donald has greatly helped us in this work amongst the young.'

The Glowing Years

As the Thrissur YMCA entered into the 21st century, its presence and influence in the socio-religious life of Thrissur had become tremendous. On the platform that the YMCA created through its service wing, the Y's Men's clubs, even non-Christians had begun to take active interest in the social works of the YMCA. Slowly non-Christians began to take membership in the YMCA and have contributed a lot to the ecumenical nature of the YMCA.

The YMCA is now no more just a small hostel and place for games, it is a vibrant active social service organization. Through its student wing, the Uni-Y, it is actively engaged in training the youth in aspects of leadership, capacity building and personal development. The Uni-Y also conducts an All Kerala Patriotic Song Competition for school students, which I understand is in its sixth year now.

Through the Week of Prayer and World Fellowship meetings, the YMCA cooperates with the YWCA to propagate noble ideals and thoughts. The Ecumenical Christmas Carol Competition

that it conducts draws teams from all Christian denominations which is a sign of blessing. And personally, I myself have attended the Carol programs as the Chief Guest many times.

A very significant development that is worth mentioning is the formation of the 'YMCA Doctors' Forum' in 2011, which is a collective of doctors from various specialties who have pledged to volunteer their services for the many medical and health programs of the YMCA. It is interesting that most of them are members of the YMCA.

The publication of the official news letter of YMCA Thrissur called the 'YMCA News Thrissur' is also a significant step as it shows that the Thrissur YMCA gives importance to communicating with its large number of members and also the community. This gives a wonderful opportunity for the people at large to understand the YMCA.

As Thrissur YMCA celebrates its 125th Anniversary this year, we can be proud of the many developments and achievements that it has had during these years of the 21st century. The construction of the International Guest House on Palace Road which also houses the Administrative Office, the procurement of land at Kannara and the initiation of the Multi-Project Centre there and now the inauguration of the International Convention Centre at Kannara are worth mentioning as remarkable achievements. We have to consider this in the light of fact that the growth of Thrissur YMCA was mostly due to the efforts of its native volunteer leaders.

As someone who has been associated with the activities of the YMCA, I feel proud of the fact that the YMCA of my hometown has stood the test of time and is growing steady in its mission. I am hopeful that in the years to come the YMCA would grow in the glory of God and change the lives of many in our community.

There are many more areas and issues where the YMCA could make its unique mark and create the change that the world expects from it. May God bless the YMCA in all its future endeavours. And always remember the motto – 'Not to be served; But to serve.' ●

H.G. Dr. Mar Aprem Metropolitan is a good friend of Thrissur YMCA.
He has been most closely associated with our spiritual and ecumenical programs.

Words Do Matter

I don't know if you've heard a conversation like this. A man turned to his wife while they were sitting together in their family room and said, "Just so you know, I never want to live in a vegetative state dependent on some machine. If that ever happens, just pull the plug." She immediately got up, walked over and unplugged the TV.

What we say is important. Our vocabulary should be filled with words of hope and dreams. Be known as someone who speaks positively