

The Birth Story of The Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa

- HAROLD DE SOYSA -

In July 1956, a Conference on the training of Clergy for the Church in Ceylon was held at the Study Centre of the National Christian Council, attended by representatives of the different Churches. Hitherto the Church of Ceylon has been the only Church which has had, in the Divinity School, an institution for the training of Clergy in Ceylon – even though some of our Clergy have received their training in India or in England. The other Churches have been sending their Ordinands outside Ceylon, chiefly to Bangalore and Serampore. Our training at the Divinity School is through the language medium of English and largely on the lines of the Theological College in the Church of England. Of late our College worship has been equally divided between the three languages, so that all students learn to worship and to conduct services in Sinhalese and Tamil, as well as in English, and all students are taught both Sinhalese and Tamil in order that they may be competent to minister in both, as well as in English.

At this Conference, however, the need was clearly and emphatically felt that the training of our future Clergy should be more closely related to the ways in which the nation was evolving, through the new influence prevailing in our education and culture, if they were to be able to fulfil adequately the Christian ministry.

These thoughts were expressed in the following decision:-

1."Having regard for present trends in Ceylon's educational and cultural development, we are convinced of the urgent need to supplement our present theological training of Sinhalese Clergy and ministers with a training which is more closely integrated with the swabasha life and thought of our people. This is necessary for two reasons:

a.for the sake of presenting the Gospel to the people of Ceylon in the language and idiom of the swabasha - speaking people of the country.

b.for the closer integration of the Church into the life of the nation, and the indigenisation not only of its worship, but of its life and thought.

2.We do not think it is feasible for any one (still less for all) of our denominations to run their own separate theological training institutions in Sinhalese. We believe, however, that we ought to consider together whether a joint institution on the lines of the Training Colony at Peradeniya might be not possible."

At this conference we were thinking primarily of training in Sinhalese, because training in the medium of Tamil was available in Colleges in India, whereas, of course, training in the medium of Sinhalese was not available elsewhere. But, later in the course of the work of the Committee that was set up it was decided that Tamil students would be admitted to the proposed College in Ceylon, and catered for on the same lines as the Sinhalese, and that it would be a Swabasha College with both languages streams, though at the start we would not be able to have the Tamil stream.

As a result of this Conference and the letter sent to the Churches, a Joint Consultative Committee was set up by the Church of Ceylon, the Methodist Church and the Ceylon Baptist Council, their representatives having been elected by their respective Standing Committees. This Consultative Committee, beginning in April 1957, proceeding to draw up a Scheme for an inter- denominational Theological College, and in September 1958 succeeded in completing it. These proposals were sent to the National Christian Council, requesting them to invite the Churches officially to set up a Joint Committee of the three Churches to recommend steps for the setting up of the College, and also to get in touch with the Theological Education Fund, which is an organisation of the World Council of Churches, to request financial help from them. In October 1959 our Diocesan Council passed the following resolution:

"This Council acknowledges the great importance of providing theological education in Sinhalese for

candidates for ordination in the Church of Ceylon and hears with interest of the possibility of providing such training on an inter-denominational basis. The Council resolves that this diocese should send representatives to the Joint Committee to be formed for this purpose by the National Christian Council and decides to join in the foundation of such an institution on condition that adequate safeguards are provided for the worship and special study of Anglican students, and the financial implications can be separately met.”

In March 1961, the Joint Committee submitted its final report to the National Christian Council, with certain recommendations. The National Christian Council sent these proposal to the Churches, inviting them to accept these, and to set up a Governing Board of the College, consisting of 4 representatives from the Church of Ceylon and 3 representatives each from the Methodist Church and the Sri Lanka Baptist Sangamaya.

In October 1961, our Diocesan Council, having considered the proposals in the Report, passed the following resolutions:-

“This Council (1) accepts the proposal of the Joint Committee appointed by the Churches to report on the setting up of a United Theological Training Institution in swabasha; (2) consents to the appointment of a representative Governing Board to take such steps as are necessary to inaugurate the Institute, subject to the provision that satisfactory arrangements are made for the worship and the doctrinal teaching of the Anglican students; (3) undertakes to meet its share of the financial responsibility for the maintenance of the Institution.”

As a result of all this thought and work, there will be dedicated to the Glory of God, and for the training and the building up of the Sacred Ministry of the Church in Ceylon, on July 10th, the Theological College of Lanka.

Site – It is situated in Pilimalawa, which is on the main Colombo – Kandy road, six miles from Kandy and four miles from the University at Peradeniya, in a rural area, surrounded by a Sinhalese village community. The Methodist Church had a school here, called Ferens, and made this property and buildings available to the Theological College on a long lease at a normal rent.

Staff and Students – The College is to have accommodation for 30 students of both languages streams, and will have a staff of 4 full-time lecturers. These have already been appointed and are:-

- The Reverend G. Basil Jackson, M.A. (Cantab.), Principal (Methodist)
- The Reverend Canon H. E. D. de Mel, B.A. (Lond.), (Church of Ceylon).
- The Reverend Carlyle Pietersz, B.A. (Cey.), B.D. (Serampore) (Baptist).
- The Reverend D. J. Kanagaratnam (Anglican), now reading for a B.D. of Serampore of Bishop’s College, Calcutta.

In addition to teaching, the members of the Staff are expected also to write and to publish theological works in swabasha, to be the reading material for future students and other members of the Church. It has also been decided that in a few years the Christian Institute of Buddhist Studies, which is now housed at the Study Centre of the N.C.C., will also move to the College at Pilimalawa, and its Director will be available to help the students with their study of Buddhism.

Courses of study—There will be two courses possible:

- a. A three-year Course leading to the Licentiate in Theology of Serampore College, which would be taken in Sinhalese and Tamil. This will entitle successful students to proceed later to the B.D. of Serampore if desired. English will be specially taught to enable students to benefit by theological reading in that language.
- b. A one-year course for English – trained ordinands which would include chiefly Sinhalese, Buddhism and Pastoralia, with special reference to the Ceylon cultural background.

Our Divinity School will continue in Colombo as at present, and after their three-year course here in the English medium, our students will spend a fourth year at Pilimalawa doing the one-year course in the swabasha medium. We hope similarly to provide at the Divinity School a short course for any student from Pilimalawa who would like to do further work in English, so that by this means the clergy trained in both places will be brought together and integrated. Further, if God grants to us to have a united Church in the

future, these two Colleges will become two parts of one institution, and the Divinity School may become the centre for work for the B.D. and for other specialised or higher studies.

Denominational Worship and Study – The point which our Diocesan Council quite rightly wished to have safeguarded about the teaching and worship of Anglican students has been written into the Constitution of the College as follows: “Every Federation shall have the right to recommend for its own students any special doctrinal teaching it may wish to emphasise. Every Federation shall have the right to arrange for Divine Worship for its own students according to its own use, due regard being had to the arrangements made for united worship and to the general order and discipline of the College.”

Finance – This College could not have been started were it not for the magnificent generosity and encouragement of the Theological Education Fund, whose Director, the Reverend Dr. Charles W. Ranson, and Associate Director, the Reverend James F. Hopewell, have both visited us and spent a great deal of time in giving us valuable help and advice. On their recommendations the Fund has given us a sum of over Rs. 400,000/= for capital expenditure for renovation of existing buildings and putting up extra buildings for both staff and students, and for the College Library. They have also provided scholarships for the training of members of the staff. But they gave this to us on the undertaking given by the Churches concerned that we would raise the money for our running expenses. The salaries of staff and other major items of expenditure have been calculated as amounting to Rs. 23,000/=. And of this sum the two Dioceses of the Church of Ceylon have agreed to raise Rs. 11,500/=: the Methodist Church Rs. 6,900/=: and the Baptist Church Rs. 4,600/=. Of the Anglican Contribution, the Diocese of Colombo has provided Rs. 5,000/= to our budget, and the Diocese of Kurunagala is giving Rs. 3,500/=. This means we need a further Rs. 3,000/=. We made an appeal to the C.M.S. and the S.P.G. in England, and it is likely that they will very kindly help us to find this required amount for a period of three years. During that time we must try to increase our local contribution so that we meet our quota in full. The Methodist and Baptist Churches are paying their quotas in full already.

Scholarships and Bursaries – In addition to this, for the cost of food, light, school servants, etc., we are asking a fee of Rs. 750/= a year from each student. This will have to be paid by the student or by the Church on his behalf. It is very unlikely that many of our students will be able to find this fee, which means that we shall have to rely on the generosity of Church congregations and groups and individuals to offer scholarships and bursaries, such as we have at Divinity School. Already as notified in last month's Churchman, the Jerusalem and the East Mission, through the kind suggestion of the local Secretary, the Reverend W. H. W. Jayasekera, has offered a full Scholarship to be called the Jerusalem Scholarship. This will support one of the Anglican students fully for three years, and when he leaves another student will be similarly supported. We have received a second similar scholarship from the donors of the Felix and Joseelyn de Alwis Fund, who provide a scholarship at the Divinity School. And a third scholarship has been given by Major and Mrs. F. A. de S. Adihetty of Galle, to support one of the students from the Divinity School who will go to do the short course of a year. We are immensely grateful to these generous donors who have made these kind offers even before the College started. And we would commend their example to others so that all our students there may be supported. Each student needs a sum of Rs. 750/= a year, or Rs. 2,250/= for the full course of three years.

It is now known that the Methodist Church will be sending two students and the Baptist Church one to the College at inauguration. Our Diocese will be sending three students, who come from the parishes of Christ Church, Baddegama, St. Mark's, Dandugama, and Holy Emmanuel, Moratuwa.

A College like this will face many difficult problems at the outset, and many anxieties. Above all, therefore, all of us in the Church need to support this venture with our constant prayer, that God may grant the wisdom and guidance of His Holy Spirit to all who bear positions of responsibility and all who teach, as well as to those who will offer their lives to God in the Sacred Ministry and go to this College to be prepared to fulfill their calling. May this College be used to bring glory to God's Name and for the benefit of His Church and the increase of His Kingdom in our country and for the salvation of many souls.

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