

## **A Historical Note on William Topley Humphrey: Insight into the beginnings of Saint Andrew's Mission in Singapore**

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On Whit-Sunday 1856,<sup>1</sup> William Humphrey, the Residency Chaplain of the East India Company, in a sermon in Saint Andrew's Church, Singapore, challenged the congregation to support a mission to the Tamil and Chinese and the general local population. His appeal gave birth shortly afterwards on 25<sup>th</sup> June of the same year to the establishment of Saint Andrew's Church Mission.

In spite of this importance, William Humphrey's identity has rather been neglected. Bobby Sng attributed the *Malaysia Message* (November 1906, p. 11) as his source for the Whit-Sunday sermon that launched the Anglican mission in Singapore.<sup>2</sup> An earlier and fuller account, in fact, is from William Gomes's 1887 report of the first thirty years of Saint Andrew's Church Mission:

On Whit-Sunday, 1856, the Rev. W. T. Humphrey, Chaplain of Singapore, addressed the congregation of St. Andrew's Church on the subject of Missions, suggesting to them the duty and feasibility of supporting a Mission of their own. The Malay part of the population was cared for by the zeal and piety of Mr. Keasberry; but for the Chinese and Tamil and general native population of the Island, it was high time that the Church of England should begin to make some spiritual provision. Mr. Humphrey concluded his address by making grateful mention of the labours of the Chinese Female Education Society, and earnestly urging that it was the duty of the congregation to start a Mission of their own. "I am thankful to observe," he said, " that through the blessing of God on the operation of the Chinese Female Mission, we continue to have many enquirers, whom we have every reason to believe to be sincere in desiring to enter the fold of Christ. Thus we cannot stop if we would. We cannot withhold our attention from those, who so pleasingly require it; so that the congregation of St. Andrew's must, in spite of itself, become a Missionary congregation, — a centre of diffusing to others the light, and comfort, and peace of the knowledge of Christ and Him crucified: and when one thinks that a Dollar a month from each attendant would, if regularly paid, serve to defray the cost of what might be a perfectly organized Mission, I do not, I hope, ask too much when I beg you all to consider, if this cannot be effected."

His appeal was responded to, and on the 25th of June, at a meeting held at the Fort, a Committee was organized to collect monthly, and periodical subscriptions and donations for the purpose of engaging the services of a native Chinese Christian as a Catechist for the Chinese, and a native Christian of Madras for the like office among the Tamil people. The Chaplain as Honorary Secretary was requested to address the Church Missionary Society in London to ascertain the possibility of their being able to send out an European Missionary to supervise the operations of the newly-formed Mission.

At the end of October, Peter Tychicus, a Catechist of the Tamil people, arrived

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<sup>1</sup> 11 May 1856.

<sup>2</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time. The Story of the Church in Singapore. 1819-2002*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Singapore: Bible Society of Singapore, 2003), 73, 134.

from Madras. He had been long engaged in his native land in Missionary work, and brought with him very satisfactory testimonials. He commenced his work among the immigrant Christians, Mohammedans and Heathens, holding services on Sundays in the lower room of his dwelling.

In the Chinese department of the work some difficulty and delay were experienced in obtaining suitable native agents; still progress was made through the zealous labours in the way of cottage meeting's, and other means, of the ladies connected with the Chinese Girls' School.

After a while Yan Quey was engaged as a Reader and Catechist, and Miss Cooke, the agent of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East, kindly allowed the use of a small building in the School compound as a Mission Chapel for Chinese preaching and worship, in which Divine Service was held every Sunday at 3 p.m. The Chaplain paid periodical visits for the purpose of administering Holy Communion.

At this time, the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society sent a reply to the application above mentioned, stating that it was with great regret they found themselves unable from want of men to hold out hopes of undertaking a Mission at so important a place as Singapore. The Committee agreed to defer for the present any direct application to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and go on with native agency under the superintendence of the Chaplain.

The Rev. T. C. Smyth succeeded in 1858, the Rev. W. T. Humphrey, in the Chaplaincy, and for 18 months carried on the Mission as Honorary Secretary, superintending the work of the native agents. Ah See, Sim Kam Tong, and Phoah Sin Soe laboured among the Chinese; but the native congregation, which then numbered some 40 persons, were mainly brought together through the labours of Miss Cooke in visiting and teaching the young women, who were married from her School.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, these sources did not reveal who Humphrey was and the circumstances of his ministry. In the following, I attempt to fill this gap, and in so doing uncover the important and often forgotten role that India once occupied in the Far East mission in the early nineteenth century, before the Straits Settlements became a British Crown Colony on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1867.

William Topley Humphrey was 26 when he was accepted for service in the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) in 1838. He was listed as Number 267 in the Society's *Missionary List I on Clerical and Lay Missionaries*. According to the List, he first went to the Church Missionary College in 1835, and subsequently deaconed on 18<sup>th</sup> December, 1836 and priested on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1837 by the Bishop of London. On 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1838, he was appointed to Cottayam, South India as Principal of the College. On 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1840, he was transferred to Mayaverum, South India. The Record then made a cryptic remark that on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1840, connection with Humphrey was closed, and referred readers to "Appendix to 43<sup>rd</sup> Report)". It further added that

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<sup>3</sup> William H. Gomes, *An Account of Saint Andrew's Church Mission from A. D. 1856 to A. D. 1887 chiefly Compiled from the Records of its Proceedings kept in Saint Andrew's Cathedral* (Singapore: Singapore and Straits Printing Office, 1888), 2-5. The earliest Report of Saint Andrew's Church Mission that I can locate is the 1864 Report. It did not however yield further information on Humphrey.

Humphrey became a Chaplain to the East India Company, and received medal for service with troops in Pegu War, 1852. It was during his service under the East India Company that brought him to Singapore and became the pioneer of the Saint Andrew's Church Mission. The Society's records went on to mention that he later became Curate of Northwood, Stoke-on-Trent, and Vicar of Wick, Pershore.

Humphrey was likely an evangelical, being a C.M.S. agent, when he broached the shores in India. His interaction with Hindus in India, however, changed his perceptions of the propagation of the Christian faith. On 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1841, he applied to the C.M.S. Madras Committee for permission to erect a new church building in Mayaverum.<sup>4</sup> That fateful letter precipitated his severance from C.M.S. He reflected on how the Christian faith can effectively be conveyed to the Hindi: From the little experience I have had of natives, I judge, that, in order successfully to combat the vast influence which their vast and spacious sacred courts crowded with apparently devout worshippers — their secret recesses, hallowed by many a tradition – their seclusion, and a thousand other things with which the minds of Hindoos are every day brought into contact here - if we would successfully compete with these, it must be, not to destroy, but to transfer; not by despising or ridiculing the things which they hold so sacred, but by showing them *a more excellent way* ; by providing hallowed fanes, with hallowing Services; and *putting such garb on our Religion, that they may at least not spurn it for its nakedness*. With this end in view, therefore, and influenced by a vast number of considerations which for some years have been forced upon me, but which to write at large would be tedious, I propose to erect the Church, the plans of which accompany this Letter (my emphasis).<sup>5</sup>

Humphrey observed that “in our eagerness to extend the Gospel”, missionaries of the Society hitherto had “unwittingly bar men's hearts against its reception by a too lavish dispersion of the whole naked truth among those who are not yet prepared, by previous discipline, to appreciate it”.<sup>6</sup> To him, the “heathens” cannot appreciate the “naked truth” and “the naked Scriptures”. They must be led gradually to understand the truth: first to regard Christ as the Teacher, and then later on matters of salvation. Humphrey was anxious to argue that he is not trying to undermine the evangelical principles on Scriptural authority. The point is that the Hindi adopted a completely different worldview. They did not recognize the authority of the Christian Scriptures in the first place. Hence it was not advisable to use the “naked truth” as an initial point of contact.

Students on patristics would see the similarity here with the Alexandrian model on Christian instruction. It is remarkable that Humphrey then harkened back to the practices of the early church to make the following bold proposal to the Society to build a church, complete with spire, in the early English style. (His sketch is attached in the Appendix):

1. As a fundamental principle - In intercourse with and preaching to Heathen, to be careful only gradually to bring before them the mysteries of the Christian Scheme; pressing on them chiefly repentance and faith, in order to their right initiation into the Christian Church:

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<sup>4</sup> See *Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East. Forty-third Year 1842* 1843, 125-131.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 125

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

- this to include carefulness about the measure and the kind of doctrine contained in Tracts; and to discourage a too lavish dispersion of the Word of God, without a Teacher at hand to explain it; and to exclude prayers through Christ from being taught in HEATHEN Schools, by Heathen Masters.
2. To revert to the ancient division of the people, into Hearers, Catechumens, and Faithful; so as to admit the first-mentioned only to preaching APPROPRIATE for them, and prayers FOR them - the Catechumens to be instructed separately, and to join in certain prayers for their fuller illumination - and the Faithful or Baptized alone to be admissible to the present Liturgy of the Anglican Church.
  3. With this view I wish to build a Church in the early English style, substantial as to material, and with as much ornament as funds may allow of; and of such a form as to combine under one roof distinct portions for each class, so as to hold out the portion of the Faithful to be the highest and holiest; and in this way to symbolize the inaccessibility of heaven without holiness, and cause men to feel that there was a privilege in becoming a Christian, of which Heathen were not possessed; and thus, one would hope, to lead them more to desire it. A portion should also be assigned for future penitents, who, in conformity with the censures of the Church, shall be inadmissible to full communion.
  4. To have, daily, Morning and Evening Service for the Faithful, with all the adjuncts and ceremony allowable or available; e.g. an organ, with chanting; which is much more agreeable to Tamul rhythm than is the singing of Tamul Hymns to English Psalm-tunes, by which both sound and sense is often sacrificed to the metre.
  5. The body of Catechists - Native Deacons, when practicable - to be centralised as much as possible, so as to fully carry out the above principles, by assisting at the Prayers and Service of the Faithful - instructing Catechumens, and arguing, under the immediate eye and direction of the Missionary, with the Heathen; who might easily be collected by a little stir, and by the character for piety which, by our daily Service and our attention to Form, we should gain.
  6. The adoption by the Missionary and his Assistants of an Ecclesiastical Dress, such as should be appointed by the Bishop—white, if possible; and of such a manner of life as would most strikingly convince the Natives of his being a Teacher sent from God: for until we ourselves act in such a way as will show Hindoos that we believe our Religion to be divine, we may labour long enough before we shall make them reverence it. Until they see us reverence our Faith in a way which THEY CAN APPRECIATE, they will cavil and jeer; but once meet them boldly on ground which they themselves hold as sacred, and the captious exercise of their reason will be checked by their deeply-rooted principle of faith.<sup>7</sup>

What happened to this imaginative and bold proposal can be told in brief. On the 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1841, the Madras Committee rejected the proposal, and judged that Humphrey's position necessarily disqualified him from serving "in connexion with a Missionary Society of the Church of England". The decision was transmitted to the Parent Committee in London and the Bishop of Madras. The Parent Committee on 30<sup>th</sup> November decided to sever connection with Humphrey. However, while they decided against Humphrey's continuing association with the Missionary Society, they were careful not to express any opinion on his suitability for service for ministry within the church.

The Bishop of Madras however took issue with the Missionary Society on this matter. Law XXXII and XXXIII of the Church Missionary Society had made provision for ecclesiastical disputes between colonial bishops and Committees of the Society be referred to the Archbishops and Bishops of the United Church of England and Ireland. The Bishop of Madras sided with Humphrey

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 128-129.

– “a Clergyman of my Diocese” – and appealed. This led to a series of exchanges between the Society and Madras. The storm subsided when Humphrey applied to return to England on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1842, and later took up a new appointment as Chaplain to the East India Company. The Society apologized to the Bishop, and admitted that the Madras Committee should have consulted the Bishop of Madras before they made their judgment.<sup>8</sup>

The above ecclesiastical dispute illumines the wider context of the theological ferment among Anglicans in the early nineteenth century. The re-discovery of historicity of the church and the importance of tradition took place in missionary situations as well as in the cool and measured reflections in Saint Mary’s, Oxford. Perhaps the lasting contribution of the Oxford Movement to the Anglican Communion does not lie in its challenge against the pietists and liberals of their *Christian* society – after all, they are all *Christians* – but rather in their reflections on what it means for the Christian community to exist as a Christian community in a *non-Christian* world. Missionaries who stepped out of their shores in “Christian” Britain were forced to reexamine their modes of beliefs. Humphrey, for example, recognized that truth must be embodied and conveyed with different means in cultures that did not share the Judeo-Christian suppositions. The Society, however, misunderstood him as departing from the Christian principles as understood by the Evangelicals in his day.

In a separate article, I have observed how the translation of the Chinese Prayer Book provided the occasion for the Chinese Anglicans to rediscover their identity in the historic church.<sup>9</sup> I believe it is fruitful for fellow scholars in the Anglican world to unearth the missionary context of the Oxford Movement. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Henry Newman in the first Chapter of his *Apologia pro sua vita* recognized Bishop Daniel Wilson, later Bishop of Calcutta, to be one of the formative influences in his life. Bishop Wilson was Humphrey’s contemporary in India. The following extract from his circular on 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1842, on his appeal to add a tower and spire to the newly built church in Singapore, is striking because of the similarity of his view with Humphrey’s:

The Bishop of Calcutta takes the liberty of circulating this paper with the view of ascertaining how far it may be agreeable to the gentry of this station to complete the beautiful and commodious body of their Church by the addition of a small but appropriate tower and spire, such as shall distinguish the sacred edifice from secular buildings in a manner usual in all parts of India, as well as at home. At present the Church may be mistaken for a Town Hall, a College or an Assembly Room. The strangers resorting to this great emporium of commerce have no means of knowing for what it is destined. By the erection of a tower and spire, rising about 50 feet above the balustrade of the roof, its sacred design will be manifested, and the surrounding heathen will see the honour we put upon our religion, and the care we take to mark the reverence for the solemn worship of Almighty God by the appropriate distinctions of its outward appearance. The only four Churches in India built originally without the ecclesiastical decoration of a spire or tower, were those of Kuruaul, Agra, Ghazeepore and Dinapore. Three of these have now the needful additions, raised by the subscriptions of the several stations, and the fourth, Dinapore, has its fund ready for the same purpose. The new Cathedral at Calcutta will have a tower and spire 200 feet high. The Scotch Churches at Calcutta,

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<sup>8</sup> See *Proceedings*, 113-124.

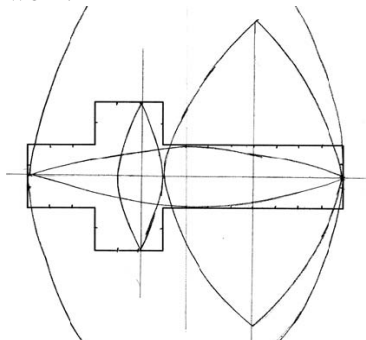
<sup>9</sup> See ‘Prayer Book Translation and the Birth of “Sheng Kung Hui”’ (in Chinese). Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia. <http://www.ttc.edu.sg/csca/poon/prayerbook&SKH.pdf>. The article first appeared in a serial in *Diocesan Echo*, Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui in 2005.

Madras and Bombay have noble spires. Nor is there any station in the territories of the East India Company so likely to rise into distinguished importance as Singapore; the vicinity of which to China and the accessions of commerce which may be expected from the blessing of peace, just established in that Empire, render such an Act of piety as the due completion of their Church peculiarly appropriate. National mercy calls for expressions and acts of gratitude to the Giver of all good, and none is more suitable than this. The Bishop is indeed persuaded that he is only anticipating the almost universal wishes of the Community of Singapore in circulating this paper. And, though the sum to be raised is large, in consequence of the high price of labour and materials in this place, yet he feels confident that the united and hearty and generous subscriptions of all classes of persons will overcome the difficulties of completing the Sacred Edifice now, as the difficulties in the commencement and progress of the work were overcome before. One unanimous final effort will now crown the preceding labours and give to Singapore a Church scarcely inferior to any in the Eastern world.<sup>10</sup>

This first church was eventually replaced by the second building some twenty years later. Daniel Wilson and William Humphrey, now in his capacity as the Residency Chaplain in Singapore since 1855, were both present on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1855 in the laying of the foundation stone of the second church.

The new Saint Andrew's Church was designed by Colonel Macpherson. According to McNair's account, Macpherson reproduced the design of the Netley Abbey, founded in 1239, in the design of the new church:

Colonel Macpherson had seen as a young man the ruins of the old church and abbey of Netley, . . . and had been so impressed with the simple character and proportions of the Early English style church architecture, of which this was an excellent example, that when called upon to plan a new church for Singapore, he, as we say, chose this as his model. We have a very good account of Netley Abbey given in 1848 by George Guillaume, architect and from his description it was founded in 1239, and was occupied by monks of the Cistercian order, who were brought over from a neighbouring monastery at Beaulieu in the New Forest where there was already an abbey dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Netley Church was built on a cruciform plan, and was proportioned according to the ancient mysterious figure called the "Vesica Pisces", as will be seen in the sketch below from his work.



Singapore Church now as we have said, the cathedral of the diocese has been much

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore 1819-1867*, 289-290.

admired for its true symmetry and exact proportion as well as for the delicate simplicity of its details.<sup>11</sup>

Would not both Humphrey and Bishop Wilson draw deep satisfaction that a vision once quickened some twenty years ago was now realized in Singapore, the gateway to the Far East: The edifice itself speaks volume of the majesty of the God and Father of Jesus Christ as succeeding generations launched out in missionary outreach to those who have not yet to know his honour and love.

Singapore, June 2005

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<sup>11</sup> J. F. A. McNair and W. D. Bayliss, *Prisoners their own Warders. A Record of the Convict Prison at Singapore in the Straits Settlements established 1825, Discontinued 1893, together with a cursory history of the Convict establishments at Bencoolen, Penang and Malacca from the Year 1797.* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1899, 71-72.

**Appendix:** Humphrey's Sketch of the proposed church. [Source: *Proceedings*, 131].

BASEMENT PLAN OF THE PROPOSED CHURCH AT MAYAVERAM

