

Lutheran Mission Matters

Winner of
Concordia Historical Institute's
2017 Award of Commendation



Encountering Mission

Rejuvenating the Lutheran Identity in India: Indian Christians Meeting Luther Five Hundred Years after the Reformation

Sony Lawrence

Abstract: The IELC Lutherans in India have had a rich past with respect to preaching, teaching, publishing, running schools and hospitals during the MELIM missionary era. However as missionaries left India, there was a lack of conscious effort to uphold these distinctive Lutheran attributes. Consequently, the younger generation, which constitutes about half of today's IELC membership, is unaware of its rich past in terms of history, practice, and theology. Being born Lutheran, they are now struggling to define their Lutheran identity. It is in this context that the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation is upon us. The IELC Trivandrum Circle is planning to use this opportunity to rejuvenate the Lutheran identity among its members, young and old.

Introduction

Christianity in India is believed to have begun with the visit of the Apostle Thomas in 52 AD to the state of Kerala in western India. Over the centuries, Christianity flourished as pockets of small but vibrant communities (Syrian Christians, for example) in various parts of South India. However, the spread of Christianity gained momentum with the arrival of the Portuguese, led by Vasco da Gama in 1498 and the Roman Catholic missionary Francis Xavier in 1542.



Sony Lawrence is a member of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church. He is the Bursar and associate professor in Computer Science at John Cox Engineering College, Trivandrum, India. He is also the convener of the Reformation 500th Anniversary Celebrations Committee of the IELC—Trivandrum Circle and the President of Lutheran Laymen Fellowship in the Trivandrum area. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne and another Master's Degree in Engineering from MS University, India.
sonylawrence@gmail.com

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The Lutheran presence in India began with the arrival of the Danish Halle missionaries, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plustschau, in 1706 at Tranquebar, a Danish colony in the eastern coast of India. In 1895 the then Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States entered into the Indian mission field by sending Theodore Naether and Theodore Mohn to Krishnagiri in the southeastern part of India under the banner of Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM), the forerunner of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC).

In the early years, MELIM missionaries concentrated their work on the Tamil speaking people of South India initially by establishing schools taught by Indian teachers. This led to the formation of Lutheran “stations” in Krishnagiri, Ambur, Bargur, and Vaniyambadi. The first baptism took place after five years of mission work in 1900 at Ambur.¹ In the following years, many more missionaries joined the Indian mission field, and by the year 1911 there were eleven MELIM missionaries and about 350 MELIM members. In 1912 the mission expanded to the Malayalam speaking area of the present day Trivandrum, South Kerala. By the year 1957, 283 congregations with 29,185 members and 105 national pastors,² the Concordia Seminary at Nagercoil (1924), a printing press at Vaniyambadi (1926), a hospital at Ambur (1923), and many schools, including high schools, were in existence.³

By the 1950s discussions had begun on the formation of an independent Lutheran church. This move was an earnest attempt by the missionaries to aid the native church in assuming leadership and responsibility. It may also have been due to the rise of nationalism after the Indian independence in 1947. On January 8, 1958, the IELC officially came into being as an independent Lutheran church with three district synods—Ambur, Nagercoil, and Trivandrum—and a constitution of its own.⁴

The growth of IELC has been marginal over the years, now numbering an estimated 500 congregations, 250 clergy, and about 100,000 members over the three district synods. It is only a speck among the 3.5 million strong Lutherans spread among the 13 other Lutheran denominations, which were formed from the various mission initiatives similar to MELIM. According to the 2011 Census of India, there are 27.8 million Christians, of which 6.13 million are in the Malayalam speaking area (state of Kerala) and 4.42 million are in the Tamil speaking area (state of Tamil Nadu), the two languages groups where the MELIM missionaries were active. Regional statistics show that relatively new church bodies have a larger membership statistic than the IELC. Other church bodies, despite having lesser membership than the overall Lutheran population in India, have a greater say in the Indian economic, social, and political spheres. Clergy apart, members of other denomination have no acquaintance with or are unaware of a church that calls itself Lutheran, which is true in most parts of the world. Though the Indian Lutheran heritage spans over a period of over 300 years, Indian Lutherans face an identity crisis. Defining who they are, describing their heritage and what they believe have become a challenge to most who

call themselves Lutheran. This identity crisis runs much deeper among the younger generation of the IELC.

Theological and Pastoral Formation within the IELC

The outcome of the various measures ensured for theological education and pastoral care within the IELC has varied from time to time. Right from the beginning of the MELIM, missionaries were focused on starting schools to educate the local people. These schools focused not only on secular education but also on compulsory religious education, as it was the main purpose of starting such schools. In 1952, MELIM had 99 schools with 273 Indian teachers. Most of these schools were attached to local churches, so much so that about half of the students of these schools were baptized members of MELIM congregations.⁵ For MELIM, schools were a stepping stone to bring the Gospel to the local people to the extent that they even refused government funding when they were pressured to exempt students from attending the compulsory religious education.

The missionaries made special efforts to train the people who were entrusted to teach the Bible to the school children. In fact, one of the criteria for appointment as a teacher to these schools was his or her ability to teach the Bible. Special in-house training programs were conducted for these teachers so that they were able to be better teachers. Moreover, catechists were also assigned the task of religious teaching, and by 1952, there were 141 catechists also teaching in schools.⁶

This methodical evangelistic practice continued for about twenty-five years, even after the formation of the IELC. However, since then, religious education in IELC schools has virtually stopped. The primary reason is that most of the missionaries had left the country by then, and those schoolteachers who were directly trained by the missionaries had retired from service. Moreover, fear of reprisal from social groups and compliance with government norms have also attributed to this problem. However, there are schools where non-mandatory Bible classes still do take place but not to the same extent or with the same enthusiasm as previously.

The outcome of religious teachings at schools was twofold. First, the teachers and catechists had extensive, rigorous, continuous, and firsthand theological training from the missionaries themselves. This created a class of faithful and steadfast laymen who confessed and practiced the Lutheran theology. They were so trained that some were deputized to preach and conduct Sunday worship at various preaching stations and churches, and some even eventually entered into the Office of the Holy Ministry. These laymen were pivotal in the theological and numerical growth of the IELC. They were a helping hand to the pastors in planting new preaching stations, special Sunday schools and congregations. Since they were teachers, they commanded respect in the secular community and people lent an ear to what they had to say. They also acted as safeguards in preventing false teachings

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from entering into the church. To this day, heresy and false teachings have had minimal impact on IELC due to the faithful witness of these men. They identified themselves as confessional Lutherans and were standard bearers of the Lutheran identity.

Secondly, Christian children who studied in these schools were catechized in Lutheran theology. They had a firm knowledge of the Bible and the catechism and were pillars of their respective congregations. They were also witnesses to the true Gospel in their places of work. They were not ashamed, but in fact were proud in identifying themselves as Lutheran Christians. In fact, some of them were the backbone of the once strong youth movement in the IELC. The non-Christians who attended these schools benefited in attaining a disciplined education, and some have boasted that they still can recite the Small Catechism from memory.

As was alluded to earlier, such religious teaching in IELC schools (any Christian school, for that matter) has come to a standstill. Though there are diverse arguments for the cause, it virtually closed the doors for laymen to be trained in Lutheran theology and practice (both as teachers and as students), especially as part of their work or academic schedule. It has also affected the catechetical ability of the IELC. Today, the IELC is lacking laymen and women who are trained in the basics of Lutheran theology and practice, which has affected her ability to properly teach the Word of God, especially to Sunday School students, the youth, and the women's groups.

Because of the faithful work of the pastors and of these lay leaders, the theology, worship and practices in IELC congregations have, over the years, remained the same. Today's younger generation is keen on following these traditions, mostly because that is what they are used to doing. Most are unaware of why they do the things they do and why they say the things they say. Some of these internet-savvy second- and third-generation Lutherans have begun to question certain beliefs and practices out of genuine concern. Most often their queries and concerns are not satisfactorily answered. They are not properly equipped to defend their Lutheran identity. It is the responsibility of the church to ensure their sense of belongingness in the church through proper catechesis. This issue must be addressed appropriately and quickly, keeping in mind the shift in Indian demographics as about half of the 1.3 billion Indian population is below the age of thirty.

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The process of pastoral formation in the IELC is worth discussing here. The MELIM missionaries were keen to provide proper Lutheran theological training to the local people, since they were often used as helping hands in the mission field. Keeping this in mind and the need to train future pastors, Concordia Theological Seminary was opened at Nagercoil in the year 1924, just about thirty years after the first MELIM missionary arrived in India. For decades, the MELIM missionaries themselves were its faculty members. They were particular in upholding the Lutheran identity in the theological education and pastoral formation in the IELC. The seminary became the catechetical hub of confessional Lutheran theology and a place for theological discourse among the missionaries on the theological challenges that they faced.

The seminary was the cynosure of Lutheran theology when the MELIM missionaries were at its helm. However, as they left the country, the seminary has not been able to maintain the same degree of excellence in the field of theological education. In fact, the quality of education has suffered over the years, mainly due to lack of well-trained faculty and partly due to the issues within the IELC administration. The seminary has not been able to be the driving force in Lutheran theology and practice, which it once was. Pastor refresher courses, which were once regularly conducted by the seminary, have not been conducted in recent years. Moreover, due to the current academic restructuring mandated by the affiliating university, the seminary curriculum is currently ecumenical in nature. Study of Lutheran theology is limited to only a few courses. In using this new curriculum, present-day IELC seminary students are being trained along with students of various other denominations. This has affected the distinctive Lutheran identity of the seminary and its pedagogy. It is yet to be seen how these changes will affect the theology and practice of the local congregation and, eventually, the IELC as a whole.

Lutheran Theological Literature

In order for any ideology or theology to be transmitted from one generation to another, written documents are a necessity, and in the appropriate regional languages. MELIM was a champion in publishing literature that was distinctively Lutheran in order to help in its preaching and teaching. They made special efforts to publish theological literature in Urdu, Tamil, and Malayalam. Dr. D. Christudas gives a brief summary of the MELIM publications:

MELIM from its very beginning in 1895, prepared tracts and printed them for distribution in connection with evangelistic work. In 1914 and 1925 two sermon books, written by F. Mohn and N. Samuel, were published. Besides, Lutheran small catechism and one hundred Bible lessons were published in 1917. In October 1921, a Tamil monthly *Sathia Satchi* (True Witness) was started. Malayalam monthly *Christiani* started publishing from 1925. An

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order of service and hymnal was issued in 1940. Hymnal, Catechism, Augsburg Confession, Matthew's Commentary, Bible Stories, Bible History, Agenda, Small Agenda, Enchiridion and Passion History were the oldest Malayalam publications. Another notable publication was the *Christava Siddhantha Deepika* (The Light of Christian Thought), a theological quarterly; published by the Concordia Seminary [Nagercoil] faculty from 1948 onwards. Separate book depots were also opened in each district to distribute these publications.⁷

The importance given to publishing Christian literature by MELIM can be seen from the fact that a printing press was established by missionary Dr. A. A. Brux in the year 1926, barely thirty-one years after the beginning of MELIM. Most of Lutheran literature was printed from this press. Up until the late 1970s, roughly toward the end of the missionary era, the IELC was fairly rich in Lutheran literature, which was used for teaching its pastors and laity. The Vacation Bible School textbooks published by MELIM were used not only in the Lutheran Church but also as templates by other denominations to develop their own VBS literature.

The current state of Lutheran publication in IELC can be deduced from the fact that the press established by MELIM is no more in existence and that all the district book depots have been closed down. Printing and publishing of Lutheran literature is unfortunately not taken up by the IELC today. Though, over the years, the hymnal and Small Catechism were published, no scholarly literature or study materials have been produced. However, few devout laymen have taken initiatives to publish relevant books on basic Lutheran doctrine on their own, and few circles in the IELC have done the same. This is only a drop in the ocean when compared to the ocean of literature needed for theological sustenance in the IELC. All the books mentioned by Dr. D. Christudas above, except the catechism and hymnal, are out of print. There is no Lutheran literature in print that helps the pastors and laymen to understand the Lutheran theology and practice. This literature gap is replaced by literature published by other denominations, which is often reflected in preaching and teaching. Transmission of Lutheran theology in institutions of pastoral formation relies on, even today, oral transmission, that is, by word of mouth. Even 310 years after the first Lutheran presence in India and 125 years after the beginning of MELIM, the Book of Concord is not fully translated into either Malayalam or Tamil language, although the Augsburg Confession and the Smalcald Articles were published by MELIM in 1956. However, some efforts have recently been made to translate and publish the entire Book of Concord. Lutheran classics like Dr. C. F. W. Walther's *Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, *Pastoral Theology*, etc., are unknown among the pastors and laymen. The library of a Lutheran pastor in India has fewer books and less Lutheran literature than those of a first-semester seminary student in the United States.

The lack of Lutheran literature in the IELC today has seriously affected its ability to explain to itself and its members its teaching and practices. The members of the church lack proper reading materials to enrich themselves in Lutheran history and theology. They are left at the mercy of Google to find answers to their questions and doubts and for clarifications. They are not able to find answers as to what defines them as Lutherans. Questions related to the Lutheran theological identity remain unanswered.

The Five Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation

With Lutherans in India, especially in the IELC, who are grappling with their identity, the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation has come as a blessing. Though most of the members have only a minimal knowledge of Luther, the Reformation, or the theological issues behind it, the Reformation and Luther does evoke some sense of nostalgia in them. This can be attributed to the fact that the typical pastor and his congregation are proud of being Lutheran. Even though most of them are not cognizant of their Lutheran identity, they do not hesitate to identify themselves as Lutheran publicly and are not apologetic about it. The members are conscious of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation and believe that it is a great opportunity to show off their Lutheran identity in their neighborhoods and among friends, Christians and non-Christians alike. The Lutheran Church in India sees the anniversary celebrations as an opportunity to instill in its membership the crux of their identity. The members see it as an opportunity to enunciate the Lutheran identity to the outside Christian and non-Christian community.

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The Trivandrum Circle of the IELC consists of twenty-four Malayalam speaking congregations in and around the city of Trivandrum in Kerala, South India. Its membership is a snapshot of the general populace in Kerala, including government servants, businessmen, teachers, retirees, private company employees, laborers, and farmers. The membership includes also a fairly good mix of the young and the old, with faithful pastors serving them.

Preparations to celebrate the Reformation anniversary began at the Trivandrum Circle in the latter half of 2016, with its General Body appointing a committee to come up with a vision document to properly celebrate this historic event. The

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committee submitted a set of recommendations that were accepted by the General Body. The committee set the agenda for the yearlong celebrations, stating that the celebrations should (a) be Christ centered, (b) educate the members on the Lutheran theology, practice, and heritage, (c) be a witness to the general public for both Christians and non-Christians.⁸ These guidelines were aimed at addressing, as much as possible, the question of Lutheran identity: Let the five hundredth Reformation anniversary celebrations rejuvenate the Indian Lutheran Church from within to without.

First and foremost, the celebrations are to be Christ centered, as the Reformation is not about Luther but about Christ and His Gospel of saving poor miserable sinners through God's mercy. Second, the renewal from within is to be achieved through reassuring the members of their baptismal grace. Their faith is to be strengthened with continuous teaching on the Word of God through Bible classes that especially cover topics that Lutherans identify themselves with the most but often struggle to comprehend. Celebrations should focus on

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satisfactorily answering the questions relating to the Lutheran identity—its practices and beliefs through catechesis and publishing the necessary literature. The rich heritage of the Reformation and the history of the Lutheran Church and the work of the MELIM missionaries are to be brought out in through these celebrations so that a sense of belongingness and pride is generated among the members. Finally, the celebrations are to be a witness and testimony to what God has done to and through the Lutheran community, especially to the outside community. Other Christian denominations and people groups that are not familiar with the Lutheran community are to be made aware of the existence of such a vibrant Lutheran community through these celebrations. In summary, the aim of the five hundredth anniversary celebrations of the Reformation is to have Christocentric festivities beginning from within the church and leading to without.

To meet the above objectives, the IELC Trivandrum Circle chalked out a yearlong plan to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, commencing from October 30, 2016 and ending on October 31, 2017. The following is a summary of the various festivities:

Inaugural meeting: The inauguration of the yearlong celebrations began on October 30, 2016, with a ten-mile-long motor vehicle rally from Kazhakootam to Calvary Lutheran Church, Peroorkada, the venue of the inaugural ceremony. The

rally was flagged off by Pramod Kumar, the Assistant Commissioner of police and a faithful Lutheran of the Trivandrum Circle. Members donned custom-made T-shirts and caps inscribed with a logo that was specially designed to commemorate the anniversary. A specially designed flag was hoisted at Calvary Lutheran Church by K. M. Justus, the oldest active Lutheran in the Circle, to denote the beginning of the celebrations. This flag will be kept flying until it is lowered at the closing ceremony of the yearlong celebrations on October 29, 2017. A logo to commemorate the anniversary was also released. The inaugural celebrations were jointly organized by the Trivandrum Circle and the Lutheran Laymen Fellowship, a registered organization for the Laymen within the Circle, which has been organizing Reformation Day programs since its inception in 2001.

Reformation Flame: A public event named “Reformation Flame” was held in the open air auditorium, Gandhi Park, at the heart of Trivandrum City, just a stone’s throw away the famed temple where treasures worth billions of dollars were found recently. This program held on February 18, 2017, was a first of its kind in the history of the Circle, where a public confession of faith was made, with an address by Prof. D. V. Bernard, former principal of Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil. It was also a public declaration of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation with a display of music from church band troupes and a candlelit mass choir, comprising about 450 members from the Circle, singing Reformation hymns.

Literature published: As part of the celebrations, a variety of Lutheran literature was published as a small step to fill the gap in the availability of Lutheran literature. A special edition of Luther’s Small Catechism and a book titled *Christiya Aradhana* (Christian Worship), originally written by Dr. M. L. Kretzmann, were published. The *Christiya Aradhana* was chosen for reprint, as there was no literature available on the explanation of the Lutheran worship. Another book titled *Cheriyā Katechismusinte Paaddavivaranam* (A study guide to the Small Catechism), originally written by George Mezger, is in the process of being published. This 350-page question-answer model study guide, whose existence was not known to most pastors and laymen when published, will be the only available study guide on Lutheran theology in the Malayalam language.

In an effort to teach the Sunday School children the history of Reformation and its theology, in addition to the regular course work, three additional chapters related to Reformation were added to each class on Reformation history and on Lutheran doctrine. In the middle of September, students took a test on these topics. The 2017 Vacation Bible School lessons were modified to include Luther’s history and Reformation theology.

Each year a study book is published for Bible classes for the women's group and the youth group. This year a study book on *Lutheran Theology and the Leaders of the Reformation* was published with articles on the causes of the Reformation, the 95 Theses, Luther's rose, the *Solas*, the theology of the cross, the priesthood of all believers, and the two kingdoms, along with short biographies of Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, John Huss, and John Calvin.

In addition to the above, a multicolor wall hanging calendar with important events that shaped the Reformation marked in it was made available. Custom-made notebooks with the picture of Luther nailing the 95 Theses and a short history and timeline of the Reformation were also made available to school and college-going students.

Walk for Reformation: To create awareness among the general public on the Reformation and its five hundredth anniversary, members of the Trivandrum Circle assembled at the Museum Park compound in Trivandrum City on April 8, 2017, and walked around the park for an hour. The members, wearing badges and the custom-made T-shirts with the Reformation logo, joined hundreds of people on their regular evening walk as an expression of their Lutheran identity.

Oikumenae 2017: A seminar, Oikumenae 2017, was held on May 7, 2017, at Gospel Lutheran Church, Thundathil, with heads of the Malankara Syrian Church, Cardinal Cleemis Catholicos; the Orthodox Church, Dr. Gabriel Mar Gregorios Metropolitan; and Mar Thoma Church, the Rt. Rev. Joseph Barnabas Episcopa, as speakers. Each of the dignitaries spoke of the Reformation from his church's perspective. Bishops pointed out that that the Church at the time was in need of a Reformation and that Martin Luther was the reason for the Counter Reformation! One bishop said that it was God who chose Luther to reform the Church and that the current Pope even said that the Church could err. They all agreed that, although there are doctrinal differences, all Christians can stand together to the common good of the humanity.

The purpose of the Oikumenae 2017 was to enable the Lutheran clergy and laity to listen to the different perspectives on the Reformation and also to let the other denominations know of the strength of Lutheran community and its celebrations of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. At the close of the event, the Circle president and the bishops jointly planted a mangrove on the church premises to mark the event.

Thanksgiving for the service of MELIM missionaries: On the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, the Circle felt it appropriate to offer thanks and praise to the Triune God for the service of the MELIM missionaries and the native Indian pastors and laymen who helped them in the mission field. A thanksgiving service was arranged, along with the dedication of the newly constructed church building of the Trinity Lutheran Church, Plavuvila, on August 6, 2017. Prof. T. Joy, former principal of Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil, delivered the sermon, highlighting the sacrifices made by missionaries and also exhorting the church to engage in active mission work.

Mission Centre at Oolikuzhi: One of the visions of the committee was to start a new mission station in the anniversary year. The Oolikuzhi Mission was established by the Beracha Lutheran Church, Vattappara, and was functioning in a private home. Upon request from the church, the Circle took it upon itself to purchase a property and build a permanent structure as a monument to the five hundredth Reformation anniversary. Through the support of its members, the Circle was able to purchase land and build a structure worth about \$15,000, the dedication of which was scheduled for October 22, 2017.

Exhibition on the Reformation and MELIM/IELC: The Lutheran Laymen Fellowship of the Trivandrum Circle organized a two-day exhibition on the history of Reformation and also that of MELIM and IELC as part of the closing ceremony of the yearlong celebrations. The exhibition that was held October 28–29, 2017 highlighted the major events that shaped the Reformation and the life of Martin Luther. The rich heritage of MELIM—featuring details of MELIM missionaries, a timeline of events beginning with Theodore Naether’s arrival, and the formation and history of IELC—was part of the display.

Closing ceremony: The closing ceremony of the yearlong celebrations took place on Sunday, October 29, 2017 at Calvary Lutheran Church, Peroorkada. On October 22, 2017, a vehicle rally processed from the Trivandrum city centre to the Calvary Lutheran Church as a proclamation of the conclusion of the yearlong celebrations. Prof. P. J. Kurien, the Vice-Chairman of the upper house of the Indian Parliament inaugurated the closing ceremony. The keynote address was delivered by a former state police chief and theologian Dr. Alexander Jacob. Former Chief Minister of Kerala Oomen Chandy, the members of the state legislative and of the parliament were among those who attended. The Trivandrum Circle members took this event as time of celebrating the five hundredth anniversary of the reclamation of the pure Gospel.



Photo credit: Tony Lawrence

This is the closing ceremony of the yearlong celebrations of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation organized by the Trivandrum Circle of the IELC.

People on the Dias (Left to Right): Prof. P. J. Kurien, Vice Chairman, Rajya Sabha (Upper house of Indian Parliament), who inaugurated the closing ceremony; Mr. Sony Lawrence, Convener, Reformation 500th Anniversary Celebrations Committee; Mr. C. I. Baiju, Secretary/Treasurer, IELC Trivandrum Circle; Rev. A. J. Joseph, Chairman, Reformation 500th Anniversary Celebrations Committee; Rev. Surgi George, President, IELC Trivandrum Circle; Mr. K. Muraleedaran, Member of Kerala Legislative Assembly; and Dr. Alexander Jacob, Former Kerala Police Chief and Theologian, who delivered the keynote address.



Photo credit: Tony Lawrence

This is the audience at the closing ceremony.

Endnotes

¹ D. Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore* (ISPK, 2008), 42.

² Joseph Rittmann, “Reading the History of MELIM in Context 120 Years Later,” *Lutheran Mission Matters*, XXV, no.1 (Issue 50) (May 2017): 140–142.

³ Luther W. Meinzen, *A Church in Mission Identity and Purpose in India* (IELC Press, 1981), 241–244.

⁴ Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67, 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

⁸ Minutes of the General Body of the IELC Trivandrum Circle held on September 18, 2016.