

MISSIONARY PROFILE - Bishop Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah



Known affectionately in Dornakal Diocese as Thandrigaru (“father”), Bishop Azariah was the chief inspirational force behind mass movements that brought roughly 2,00,000 outcast Malas and Madigas, tribals, other people considered low-caste into the fold of Christ during his lifetime.

Coming from a humble background, Rev. Azariah was born in the village of Vellalanvilai in the southern Indian district of Thoothukudi on 17th August 1874. His father, Thomas, converted to Christianity in 1839 while at a Church Missionary Society school. He named his son Samuel after the Old Testament prophet, possibly because of the 13 year gap after he and his wife Ellen had a daughter. It is said that Samuel learned to read from palmyra-leaf books and write with his finger in the sand. Unfortunately, his father passed away early, but his widowed mother, a paramount influence in his life, reared him, without sparing the rod, as commanded in Proverbs 13:24. Such upbringing helped him keep his tryst with God early every day, at 4:30am, as Christ showed us in Mark 1:35.

Samuel Vedanayakam then went to Madras to study Mathematics where the British principal of Madras Christian College gave him the name Azariah to distinguish him from other boys. He though could not receive his degree, as post completing his course work in 1893, he fell ill and later decided not to retake the exam. Azariah though valued being B.A (Born Again) over any earthly degree. He then became an evangelist with YMCA at the age of 19.

Azariah was married to his devoted wife, Ambu Mariammal Samuel in 1898, whom he is said to have described as ‘the most spiritually minded girl in Tirunelveli.’ She was one of the first Christian women in South India to take a

college course. Right from the beginning and all through life, she kept pace with him, sharing his inward growth and outward responsibilities.

In 1902 Azariah traveled to Ceylon (now Jaffna) in Sri Lanka to evangelize among the indigenous Tamils, where he found a completely indigenous missionary society, worked and supported entirely by Tamil Christians. At the dead of one night there, he found himself kneeling in an agony of prayer. For the first time, he faced the bitter truth that India, with all its religious heritage, had left the spread of the Gospel to be undertaken by foreigners. Out of the travail of his soul that night, was conceived and dedicated to God a purpose that never wavered and was to bear fruit many fold.

Azariah imparted his vision to his wife and a few other kindred spirits. His wife had an entry in an old diary, 'Started to pray for an Indian Missionary Society (IMS)' and it was literally prayed into being in 1903. Consistent with Biblical principles, no public appeal was made but both workers and money was forthcoming (Luke 22:35). Its highly avowed principles still remain, '*Indian workers, Indian money and Indian management*'. The goal was also to remove the western appearance of the Church in its building (as still seen in the Epiphany Cathedral, Dornakal) and services.

Azariah was more encouraged by the YMCA's promotion of the Indian leadership. Local CMS missionaries had actually put mission theory into practice by trying to establish self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches. This led to the launch of another indigenous missionary society, National Missionary Society of India (NMS), with him as the first General Secretary.

In 1909, Azariah left the YMCA to become an ordained Anglican missionary of the IMS to Dornakal in the Telugu-speaking dominions of the Nizam of Hyderabad. In 1912, after three years as a priest, he was promoted to an unprecedented indigenous bishopric in the new diocese of Dornakal. He remained the only Indian diocesan bishop in the Anglican Church until his death.

Though a bishop, Rev. Azariah was willing to pay the price to fulfill his mission to the people of Dornakal. He spent much of his time traveling across his vast diocese by bullock cart or bicycle, usually accompanied by his wife and coworker, Ambu. His village sermons often attacked "the four demons – Dirt, Disease, Debt, and Drink". Threat of thieves and the danger of the tiger-infested forest too did not deter this missionary priest, who took the Gospel to many places. By 1924, the Diocese of Dornakal had 8 English-born priests and 53 Indian clergy. By 1935, his

diocese had 250 ordained Indian clergy and over 2,000 village teachers, plus medical clinics, cooperative societies, and printing presses. There was great evangelical momentum during his tenure. At the end of his life the Diocese grew to about 240,000 Christians.

Rev. Azariah also wrote many books and articles with *Christian Giving* (1940), which was translated into more than 15 languages, being very popular. Bishop Azariah was also an avid ecumenist and one of the first to see the importance, indeed the necessity, of a united Church, as our Lord and Saviour prayed in John 17:21, to mission and evangelism.

Bishop Azariah moved on to eternal glory on January 1, 1945, two years before a dream of his, the inauguration of the united Church of South India (CSI), for the first time unifying an Episcopal Church (Anglican) with non-Episcopal Churches (Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist) since the Reformation. Two of his sons at that time were serving in his Diocese, one as a doctor and the other as a priest. His eldest daughter had long been his right hand while his youngest daughter, a true follower of her mother, was married to a missionary priest. Two younger sons and eight lively grandchildren then were seen by him.

Bishop Azariah held fast deep in his heart, all through his life that “By the grace of God I am what I am; yet not I but the grace of God in me.”