

A WITHERED CHURCH IN KERALA, INDIA

WILL SHE DIE OR REGAIN HER STRENGTH?

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INTRODUCTION

The challenges of today, world-wide, emphasize like never before the pressing need to fulfill the “Great Commission” of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is imperative that our churches stay alive and grow to meet this requirement. However, the lack of growth and the failure of many churches pose a great hindrance to this goal. This case study is an example of a church that failed; my purpose in highlighting it is to convey a better sense of awareness to Church leaders. The church under study exposes how a dominating leader can actually choke the growth of a local church.

BACKGROUND

India is bestowed with a vast and rich treasure of natural beauty, traditions and religion. Its principal mountain ranges boast of numerous exquisite hill towns, most of which owe their origin to the British settlers in India. Some of the highest passes are believed to be the abodes of the innumerable Indian gods. The hills offer spectacular views of mountains and sparkling streams, cool climate, adventure, wildlife and most of all a salubrious retreat from the heat and dust of the plains. India is also rich in cultural traditions and religions. From north to south and east to west, the dances, the music, the cuisine, the festivities, the crafts, the languages, the worship of different gods and goddesses and the customs of this fascinating land are as diverse as ever. Yet, Indian culture exhibits an eternal harmony of spirit. In a land with such variety, reaching people with the gospel in towns, cities and villages is extremely difficult due to the challenges raised by the cultural multiplicity, age-old caste system, language barrier, and assortment of religions, values and attitudes.

Geography of El Puram¹: El Puram is a village, which gradually developed into a small town in the Idukki district of the state of Kerala.

Kerala is a land that lies between the high ranges of the Sahyadris in the west. Kerala, gifted with mountains, valleys, trees, a wide variety of plants and grasslands has a share of just 1.2% of the total land area of India. The region, with varying topography, fertile soil and an ideal climate has been the abode of man from time immemorial. According to the 2001 census, Kerala has a population of 3.18 cores.²

¹ To maintain anonymity, the name mentioned is a pseudonym. The original name has been divulged to the professor.

² Prepared by the State Council of Educational Research and Training, Social Science - part I (Government of Kerala, 2005)

The Idukki district forms a small part of the state of Kerala.

*In the year 1972, the district was formed of Devikulam, Peerumedu and Udumbanchola taluks from Kottayam district and Thodupuzha taluk from Ernakulam district. Idukki, the mountain district of Kerala, gets its name from the Malayalam word 'Idukku', which means a narrow gorge. The charming district flanked by the Western Ghats in the east is bounded by Thrisur district of Kerala and Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu in the north, Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts of Tamil Nadu in the east, Pathanamthitta district in south and Kottayam and Ernakulam districts in the west.*³

These districts consist of majestic mountains and verdant valleys. Roughly 1,500 sq. km. of the reserve forest area offers a haven for the enchanting wildlife and exotic flora of Kerala. The district is also the “power house” of the entire state, as the hydroelectric power station at Moolamattom supplies nearly 60% of the power supply needs. The Idukki Arch Dam built on the Periyar River is the first of its kind in the country. But Idukki, in itself, is an industrially backward district. The tea industry provides the main source of income to the district while pepper is the most important commodity produced and exported from here.

Interestingly, this district has played a significant role in the spiritual development of the country, especially the south. However it does not boast of any significant history of the rise and fall of any dynasty. The Ramayana gives a graphic description of the flora of the Pamba valley in Idukki, with a high range of altitude varying from 2,500 feet to over 5,000 feet above sea level.

The district of Idukki boasts of a mixed culture; this is due to large-scale migration to the district from other parts of Kerala and from neighboring Tamil Nadu. There are 245 tribal settlements in the district, of which 74 are in Thodupuzha, 2 in Peerumedu, 126 in Devikulam, and 34 in the Udumbanchola Taluks. Almost all, the scheduled tribes⁴ inhabit the extreme remote hilly banks, as well as the deep interiors of the dense

³ May 1, 2007, Accessed online at: www.google.com, History of Idukki.

⁴ This is the official name given in India to the lowest caste which is given special concession in recognition of their disadvantaged status.

forests of this district. According to the latest census, approximately 11,516 scheduled caste tribal families live in this district.

The main population of the district is made up of the scheduled tribes, which include Malayarayan, Mannan, Muthuvan, Ooraly, Paliyan, Hilpolayan, Mala pandaram, Ulladan and Malayan. Among the scheduled tribes, the Malayarayans surpass all the other factions in both socio-economic and educational aspects.

Among the most celebrated festivals in Idukki, is the Adimali Fest; it has become the most prominent tourism and agricultural festival of the high ranges since 1991. Every year the festival is celebrated at Adimali during the last week of December.

An agricultural fair and exhibition are an integral part of the Adimali Fest. Hundreds of farmers bring their super-size products for display. Exhibition stalls of various government departments, institutions and agencies are of great attraction along with the exhibition-cum-sales stalls of the trade fair.

In this context, the agricultural fair at Thodupuzha is also noteworthy and is held every year under the aegis of the Agricultural Society⁵. The town of El Puram is also part of this district and shares in all its beauty.

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Being a typical town in the State of Kerala, El Puram town also has the above-mentioned characteristics. Here the community consists of different religious beliefs- such as faith in Hinduism, Islam, Christianity- and have a variety of culture, caste and language (Malayalam and Tamil). But there was no Christian work in El Puram to teach the people to reach God. By the prayer and teamwork of a few committed brethren, the work started in Hallur, Kanam, Chennar, Semi valley, and Hillppara⁶.

The team was led by Mr. Jommon⁷. He then published the need of an evangelist in El Puram in his monthly magazine "Hill View Echoes."⁸ Mr. N.Rajan⁹ responded to this advertisement and began visiting different

⁵ Kanchiyar Rajan , Noolmazaha (Malayalam) (Kattappana Saphala Books, 2005)

⁶ All the names used are pseudonyms.

⁷ To protect the person, the name used is a pseudonym.

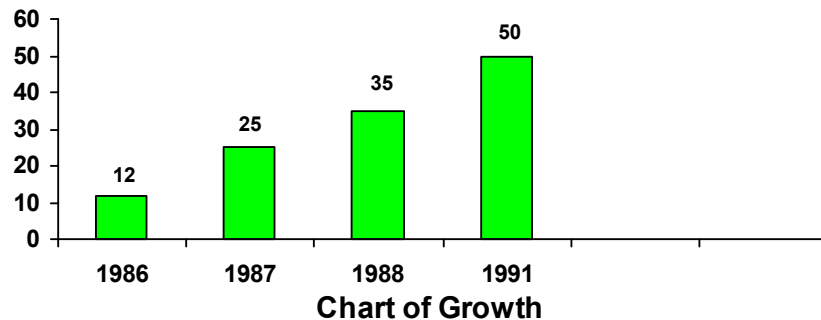
⁸ This name of the magazine is fictitious.

⁹ To protect the person, the name used is a pseudonym.

houses and nearby places along with some team members- especially with Mr. K.M. Mani¹⁰ - fifteen days a month. As the result of his efforts, some people came forward and started an Assembly gathering at El Puram on August 29, 1986. The attendance when they began consisted of evangelist Rajan and his family, K.M. Mani and his family and John and his family- a total of 12 members in all.

Mr. P. Varghese, an evangelist, introduced some people from Hillppara, and with the help of these people, Mr. Rajan and Mr. K.M. Mani extended their evangelistic activities to Hillppara. Many were attracted to the Savior and they, too, began to attend the worship with the saints at El Puram. By 1987, the attendance increased and there were now 25 members to participate in the Lord's Supper.

This growth resulted in inspiring responsible people in the Assembly to meet the need for a place of their own to gather together. They purchased some land and the construction of the building was started with financial help from other churches, particularly with substantial financial and material help from Mr. K.M. Mani. In 1989, the construction was completed and Mr. M.A. Joyel¹¹ inaugurated the hall. As the evangelist of the assembly, Mr. Rajan also played an active role in its construction. They continued the gospel work and by 1991, the number of Assembly members increased. At this time there were 40-50 members participating in the Lord's Supper



But the believers from Hillppara had many difficulties to face if they needed to continue their attendance in El Puram. Some of the hardships encountered were due to the long distances they had to commute and the health problems of the elderly people. This was how the worship meetings were started at Hillppara in 1992. Evangelist Rajan faithfully travelled there to conduct the worship services every Sunday after their meeting in El Puram.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Evangelist Rajan needed to return to Tamil Nadu in 1993 because of the struggles that he, his wife, and children had faced. Mr. K.M. Mani also created a problem for his family because of his adamant mentality. At that time, Mr. Rajan met with a motorcycle accident and he left El Puram and entered into fellowship in an assembly in Tamil Nadu.

LEADERSHIP FAILURE

The church moved forward under the leadership of Mr. K.M. Mani. He had been a member of the Church in Hallur before the church started at El Puram. According to him, he had been the only educated man in the assembly at Hallur. The ministry of the Word in the church was given by uneducated men without knowledge of the Word or personal spiritual growth. It was this situation that prompted him to leave that Assembly at Hallur and start the work in El Puram with Mr. Rajan.

“You can put too much emphasis on people feeling good about themselves, without regard to performance. When that happens you might get high morale but low performance. You want both.”¹²

So his concept was that only people who produce good results should feel good about themselves.

PROOF FROM A PERSONAL STORY

This is highlighted by the personal testimony of Sosa, one of the believers, who was a member of the church at El Puram. Her story becomes significant at this point.

She says, “Mr. K.M. Mani was one of the members of the Hallur Church. He was one of the few educated men with Bible knowledge in that church. As time passed he started dominating the believers and the elders of the church. He wanted everyone to listen to and obey him. Though he had good Bible knowledge, his life was not according to what he preached.”¹³

Sosa’s view of Mani was that though he was an educated man, he was misusing that God-given ability and knowledge. The main reason for his dominating nature was based on his own education and Bible knowledge. Unfortunately his knowledge was restricted to his head and

¹² Ken Blanchard, *Leadership by the Book*, (New York: William Marrow & co., INC, 1999), p. 147.

¹³ A personal interview with Mrs. Sosa, a member of the Hallur Assembly.

not rooted in experience. He soon became a dictator. She mentions how this nature was evident even when he dealt with his own family matters.

He even had problems in his own family. He did not allow anyone to say anything but wanted every one of them to do what he said and to ask his permission for anything they wanted. This was the situation in the church too.¹⁴

He had evolved into a dominating leader not just in the church but was also the dominating head of his family. He was slowly but steadily sowing seeds that would ultimately precipitate ruin in both the family as well as in the church of God. As the result of this situation he was forced to leave this Assembly. And she says about his leaving:

Mr. K.M. Mani left the church and joined Mr. Rajan who had started work in El Puram. He continued being the main person there. As the time went on, problems started in the El Puram Church too. He tried to dominate everyone there. Bro. Rajan too did not have any freedom even to decide for his own family.¹⁵

His move to the other location was likewise characterized by his mentality to continue his controlling behavior. Mani did not change. Soon it became evident as it began to encroach on to the personal affairs of the evangelists. He was simply moving from one place to another and from problem to problem.

Sosa continues to elaborate on the manner of his ministering of the Word,

He would always take Genesis 2 explaining the nakedness of Adam and Eve. He was not pure in his heart and mind. No one liked to listen to him, but if anyone criticized any thing he said, he would shout back and suppress him or her.¹⁶

He was not even pure in his own heart and mind. His dominating nature had led him to develop a corrupt heart and mind. His forceful nature once again expressed itself when he approached Sosa's family to attend his church. She says:

Mr. K.M. Mani came and asked the elders of the Hallur Church to take our family to the El Puram Church. I did not want to go, as I was aware of his nature. But my husband being the younger brother of

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Mr. K.M. Mani could not resist him and asked all of us to attend the El Puram Church.¹⁷

The Christian testimony in that place began to gradually deteriorate. The people were no longer drawn to listen to the gospel preached there. Soon some believers in the Assembly started to leave. She clearly describes what happened:

We continued there with no interest and had no spiritual upliftment. All who came there were very sad and felt no interest to attend the church. Due to this kind of situation, one by one people started leaving the church.¹⁸

The believers were not growing under his leadership at all and they were all well aware of the condition to which they had been reduced. His nature and the manner of his dealings led even a lady to question his leadership. Her final words before her family left the El Puram Church are significant. She says:

I was very sad and upset. The next day was Sunday and I waited for him and as he was coming to the church asked him, “Why do you walk with Bible preaching when your life is not according to what you preach? What is the example you show to others?” Finally I said, “If you want this church to grow, you should either change your life or step down.”¹⁹

Here, the words of Ken Blanchard describing the leadership methods of the Lord Jesus become pertinent:

He showed us that true leadership starts on the inside with a servant heart; then moves outward to serve others. Jesus isn't interested in having us fill a certain quota of servant-hood requirements, but in having us develop a servant heart. Then everything we do will be to serve others and the highest good.²⁰

On the contrary, Mr. K.M. Mani exercised one-man leadership and did whatever he liked. His adamant nature caused severe mental disturbance to the believers who in themselves were genuine in their faith. The servant-heart leadership was not even remotely close to his heart. However, people who came to him with selfish motives - (material help) - pleased him and made use of him.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ken Blanchard. P. 44

Neil Summerton suggests:

It is evident that much can go wrong in Christian ministry where the individual is accountable for performance to none but himself or herself, where they are not subject to guidance, comment, and if necessary criticism from others. And it does not help to claim accountability only to God.²¹

Most of the members were poor both financially and educationally. The farmers and coolies who labored in the Estates attached no importance to their spiritual growth and the growth of the Assembly because of their hard work and lack of time. Thus, they ignored call for the every member's ministry of the church which is implied in the Great Commission. Horald Rowdon cites Keith Barnard:

If a local church is to be true to Biblical principles of operation, it is important that it should seek not only to affirm but to practice the priesthood, gifting and service of all believers. Christian ministry should not be restricted to any caste or group, and certainly not to the 'minister' of a local church.²²

Now, here in this church, the Christian ministries were totally centered around this dominating leader. The believers ended up in a situation where they were not able to recognize or fulfill their role in the local church. Horald Rowdon continues further citing Keith Barnard:

In the past, churches with a Brethren background were often accused of reacting so strongly against one-man ministry that they were in danger of suffering 'any-man ministry' instead! Today in a changed cultural context, many of those churches are learning to consider paid staff a God-given resource! It is therefore vital that the wider church does not now lose that valuable emphasis – the clear Biblical teaching that every Christian has gifts and should be affirmed, encouraged, and set to work as a living expression of God's grace.²³

His statement highlights the fact that the church should have an atmosphere where the gifts of the believers are discovered, developed, and encouraged if growth of the church is to be evident.

²¹ Horald Rowdon, *Serving God's People*, (Great Britain: Pater Noster, 2006). P. 26

²² *Ibid.* P. 49

²³ *Ibid.*

Exemplary leaders know that if they want to gain commitment and achieve the highest standards, they must be models of the behavior they expect of others. Leaders model the way.²⁴

Now in this case with a leader of Mr. Mani's type, the example he sets and the circumstances of the believers, combined together, will ultimately culminate in the breakdown of the church.

PROOF FROM THE ACTIVITIES OF THE CHURCH

The activities of the church before the change of leadership:

1. Worship service every Sunday from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
2. Daily house visits
3. Hospital ministry
4. Team work
5. Arrangement of gospel meeting with YMEF, Campus Crusade, Happy Melody etc.
6. Prayer meetings in homes
7. Bible studies
8. Sunday school for children
9. Conventions
10. Personal evangelism²⁵

The activities after the change of leadership

1. Worship service every Sunday morning from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
2. Bible studies
3. Personal evangelism²⁶

The activities of the church now

1. Worship service every Sunday morning from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

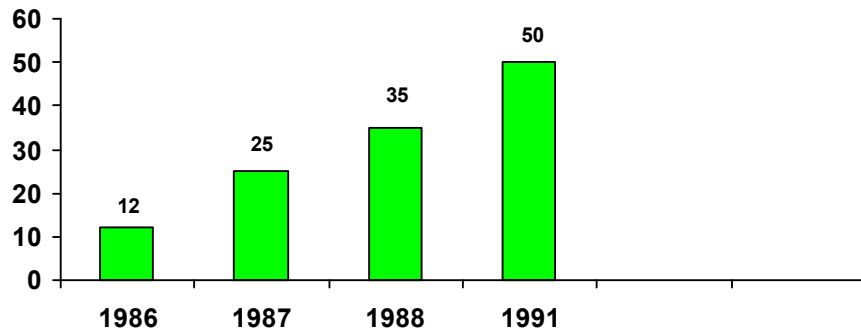
²⁴ James M. Kouzes, **Leadership Changeless** (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), Page-140

²⁵ Personal interview with N. Rajan, now in Tamil Nadu, dated April 2007.

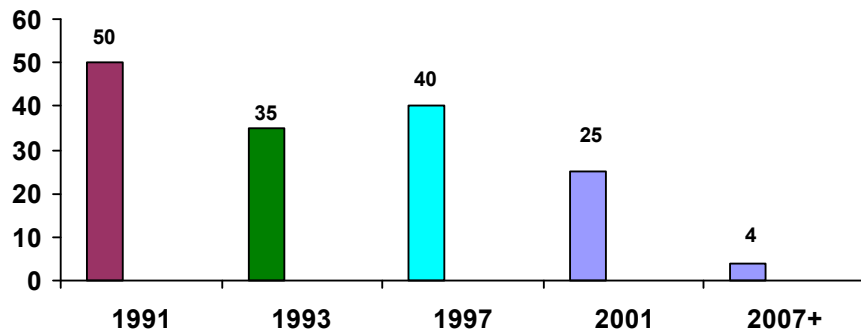
²⁶ Personal interview with K.M. Mani, dated June 2007.

PROOF FROM THE RATE OF WORSHIP ATTENDANCES

Attendance before the change of church leadership



Attendance after the change of the church leadership



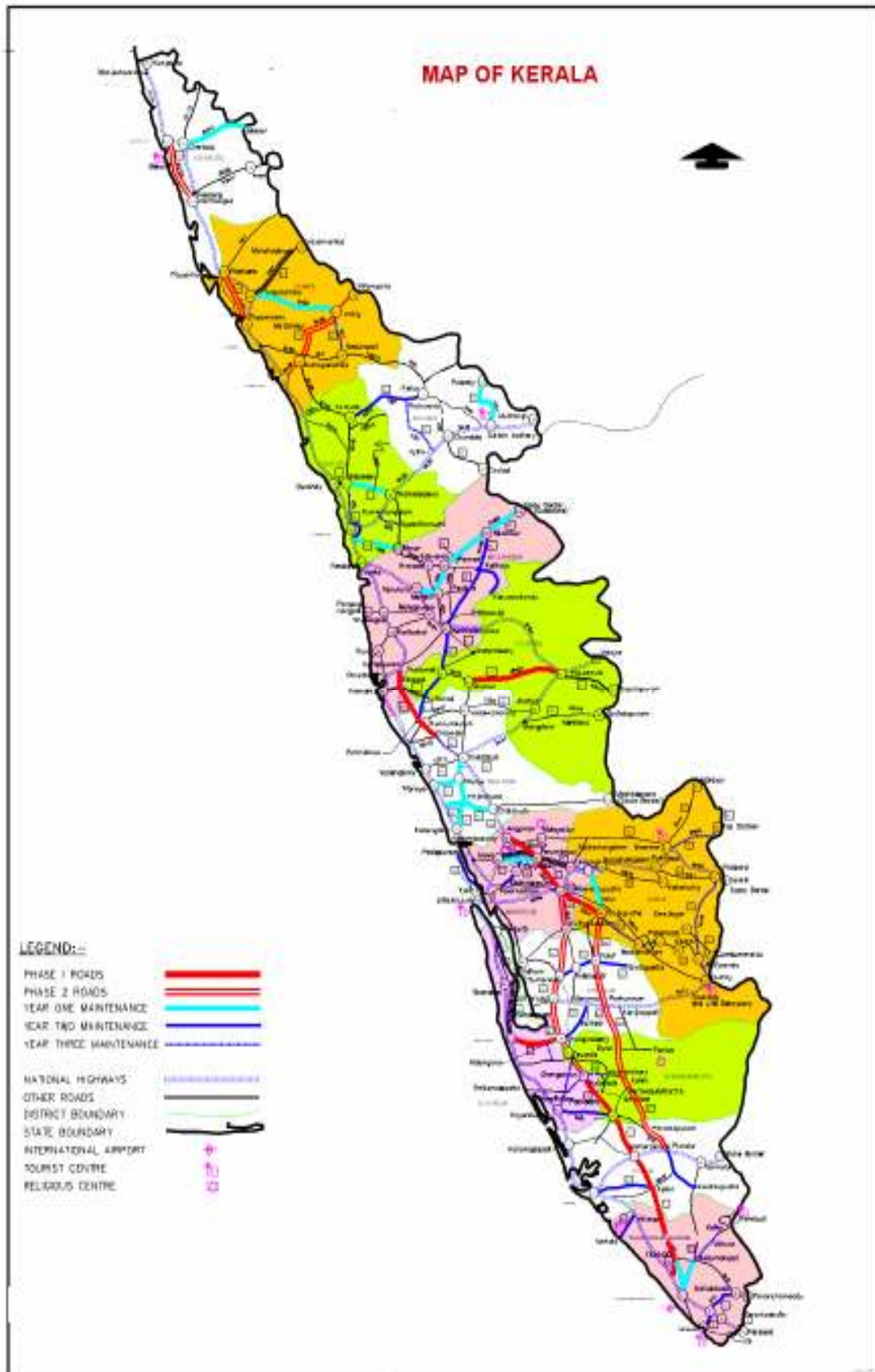
The above graph confirms the following inferences:

Leaders often just don't know how to develop people; they end up doing all the work themselves. In addition to burning themselves out, their people remain dependent on them and underdeveloped that they don't even realize their leadership behavior isn't aligned with their beliefs. They may have good motives and intentions, but lack effective leadership methods.²⁷

²⁷ Ken Blanchard, P. 55.

Conclusion

The local church at El Puram showed a distinct pattern at the beginning until the change in leadership. The church was growing with all its varied activities. But the rate of growth began to decline and the church soon became inactive and ineffective. A church that ought to have grown and stayed alive in a non-Christian environment had been reduced to a failure in the present history. What will be the future of this Church? Will she die or regain her strength?





A mountainous view of Kerala



Pepper



Pepper plant



IDUKKI ARCH DAM



A View of the Tea Plantation in El Puram

APPENDIX-II

I, (Sosa), was born and brought up in a Jacobite family. After my marriage, Mr. Kuruvilla, the elder of the Hallur Assembly shared the gospel with me and I accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal savior in 1976. I began to attend the Hallur Church. There Mr. K.M. Mani was also one of the members. He was one of the few educated men with some Bible knowledge in that church.

As the time passed he began to dominate the believers and the elders of the church. He expected everyone to listen and obey him. Though he had sufficient Bible knowledge, his life was not in accordance to what he preached. He even encountered problems in his own family because of his controlling nature. He would not permit anyone to say anything but forced each one to do exactly what he told them to and to ask for his permission before undertaking anything. A similar situation prevailed in the church too. For a short while the elders and the believers tried to co-operate with him and accommodate themselves to suit his ways but certainly that could not go along for long. After some time they retaliated by ignoring him and finally resisting him. But he did not bother too much about them as he considered them uneducated and ignorant of the knowledge of the Word of God. The believers in turn refused to consider what he said too seriously. As a result, Mr. K.M. Mani left the church and joined Mr. Rajan who had started the work in El Puram. He continued in his ways, striving to be the main person there too.

As time went on, soon problems started to surface in the El Puram Church. He tried to dominate everyone there too! Even Bro. Rajan was not allowed to have any freedom to decide, sometimes even in matters of his own family. He also had some financial problems. One day he met with an accident. This situation made him decide to return to Tamil Nadu with his family. It was then that Mr. K.M. Mani requested the elders of the Hallur Church to take our family to the El Puram Church. I did not want to go as I was already aware of his nature. But my husband being Mr. K.M. Mani's younger brother could not refuse him and soon all of us began to attend the El Puram Church.

He started to express the same personality, commanding everyone there too. He would often preach from Genesis 2, highlighting the nakedness of Adam and Eve. He was not pure in his own heart and mind. No one liked listening to him but if anyone criticized anything he said, he would shout back and suppress him or her. He was a bad testimony to the

people around him. Whenever we tried to share the gospel to anyone they would point out to Mr. K.M. Mani and say, “Why should we come and submit to this type of man? We are fine in our own beliefs.”

We continued there with no interest at all and enjoyed no spiritual growth or fulfillment. All those who attended were very sad and expressed no real desire to attend the church. Due to such a situation, one by one, people began to leave the church.

At one time, a monthly meeting was held in Peernadu. All of us had planned to go. However, just that morning, there was a big upheaval in Mr. K.M. Mani’s family. They got into some argument with each other and he beat his son and wife, and then took them to the meeting! Many who came there knew him and his nature. In fact, two brothers who once attended the El Puram Church asked me about him. “How is he going on now? How are you all getting along with him?” I told them all what was going on.

By now I was very sad and disturbed about the situation. The next day being Sunday, I waited for him to come out. As he neared the church I asked him, “Why do you walk with the Bible, preaching like this when your life is not in accordance to what you preach? What is the example you show to others?” Finally I suggested, “If you want this church to grow, you should either change your life or step down.”

Then for two weeks we did not go anywhere as he had taken us there promising that my husband’s drinking habit will change - which did not happen - and soon even my children’s and my spiritual life spiraled down. Sensing this was not good we again started attending the Hallur Church.