Meyers, Ellen (1865–1958)

LINDSAY MORTON

Lindsay Morton, Ph.D. (Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand) is an Assistant Dean (Teaching and Learning) and lectures in Literary Studies at Avondale College of Higher Education in Cooranbong, Australia. Dr Morton is on the Board of Advisors for the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies and is an associate editor of an academic journal. Her research explores the relationship between ethics and epistemology in narrative journalism; she has authored or co-authored 16 publications.

Ellen Meyers was a pioneering Adventist missionary who devoted her life to serving the people of Burma, Fiji, and India.

Early Life, Marriage and Conversion

Mary Ann Ellen Hunt was born at Barrackpore, India, on March 8, 1865. She grew up in an Anglican family near Calcutta and attended a private school in Darjeeling. While she spoke English at home, Ellen was also fluent in Hindi and Urdu, both languages that would enable her ministry in later life. In her teenage years Ellen Hunt met Herbert B. Meyers, an optometrist, and they were married in St. Paul’s Cathedral, Calcutta in 1881. The following year Ellen gave birth to her first son, William, who would be followed by three more boys, Cecil, Dudley and Harold.

In 1894, the first Australian Seventh-day Adventist missionaries were sent to India. Captain George Masters, his wife, and son, Fairley, worked as colporteurs in Calcutta and its surrounds, at which time they came into contact with the Meyers family. Fairley Masters later recalled, “Pastor [Elder D. A.] Robinson wished me to remain in Calcutta for a few weeks and canvass the suburbs, which I was glad to do. I learned afterward that the book I sold to Mrs. Ellen Meyers, an earnest Christian woman, was a steppingstone in her acceptance of Bible truth.” The Meyers family began studying the Bible and attended Robinson’s mission, with Ellen Meyers later reflecting, “Elder Robinson must have preached for an hour but it seemed too short. I realized God had provided meat for my soul. I was to grow, and so all that was preached at those meetings I kept on record and fed myself by deep study till the truth gradually did its work of transformation.” A. G. Stewart notes that at her conversion later in 1898, Ellen Meyers became the first member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in India.

Mission Work

Following a successful period as a colporteur in Singapore with his oldest son William in 1900, Herbert Meyers moved the family to Rangoon, Burma, the following year, while William left for Australia’s Avondale School for Christian Workers. Ellen used this time to start a day school in their home, at one stage attracting 18 pupils. Evangelistic meetings were held, which resulted in the first Burmese Adventist convert in 1902. Several companies of believers were set up before the Meyers family returned to Calcutta in 1905. The following year Ellen took her three younger sons Cecil, Dudley and Harold to study in Cooranbong, Australia. She remained there for four years while they trained in ministry at Avondale and at day school respectively, before returning to India with her youngest son. Sadly, at that time her husband disassociated himself from the Adventist faith, and the couple subsequently separated permanently, with Ellen returning to Australia in 1910.

In 1911, Meyers responded to an invitation to serve the Indian community at the Fiji Mission. This was the beginning of over three decades of service in this country. Meyers and her son, Harold, arrived in Suva on October 28, 1912, on the S.S. Atua. By June of the following year, Meyers had begun a day school for children and married girls, and a night school for young men on the veranda of her house. This, in spite of her misgivings about focusing on anything but evangelism: “The danger presented itself of placing the secular before the all-important, namely, teaching God’s Word. I could see the great need there was for this, and I still see that need…Every time I pleaded at the throne of
grace for an open door, a petition would come to teach English.” The school was soon full to capacity. A new mission house was built on a hill in Samabula in 1914, and despite the isolated location and unrest around the outbreak of war, 16 students enrolled in the new mission school. Meyers wrote:

Soldiers patrol the streets day and night in fear of German invasion. Ships are prohibited from coming. The wealthy…have bought their food supplies, and the result is that everything which is left is very expensive, and there is no prospect of more shipments for a while. I have held to my post. The war years brought Alfred and Lillian Chesson to Fiji to help with the work, the first converts to Adventism from the Samabula mission, and a child by the name of Stanley Chowla into Meyers’ care. Stanley accompanied Meyers to Sydney on furlough in 1917 where they remained for a year before returning to Fiji. Following another furlough in 1918, Meyers returned to find student numbers dwindling at Samabula, but the work continued and after three years and another change of location to Toorak, “prospects for the Indian work were very bright…the barrier wall between Hindus and Moslems and Adventist Christians was breached.”

A decade of difficult work and isolation took its toll on Meyers’ health, and in 1922 she was replaced by Grace Niebuhr and Pastor George Masters, the son of Fairley Masters, to look after the girls’ and boys’ schools respectively for a year while she received rest and treatment at the Sydney Sanitarium. Meyers returned to Suva in 1923 to continue her work of teaching, nursing, and at times, acting as midwife. In 1925, the school was temporarily converted into a hospital due to a typhoid epidemic. Meyers nursed five patients, including Pastor E. B. Rudge’s son, Neill Rudge. The president of the Australasian Union Conference, reported over 300 cases just over a week into the epidemic, and himself assisted in the care of the patients until the crisis was over. The work continued, and on June 1, 1927, the mission opened a school for girls in Samabula. Enrollment was strong, with 42 students aged between five and sixteen in attendance. That year, there was reportedly one organized church with 21 baptized members, and an M. V. society with a membership of 15 in Suva.

By 1928, Meyers’ health had deteriorated to the point where it was untenable for her to work. Meyers was 63 years old when she returned to Australia for an operation and convalescence at the Sydney Sanitarium. Her service to Fiji was marked by a civic farewell at the Suva Town Hall, which Singh notes was “attended by a wide cross-section of local society including representatives of the Indian Reform League, the Young Fijian Society, the YMCA, the SDA mission and senior government officials.” News of her departure made the headlines in the daily newspaper, and Harold Hilton Meyers notes that as her ship pulled out, “there on the wharf in front of a large farewell sign was the Suva police band in all its splendid regalia paying a final civic tribute to a practical SDA Missionary.” After long years of service in Fiji, Meyers was to remain in Sydney for the next decade.

In 1939, Meyers returned to India with her foster son, Stanley Chowla, who had recently graduated from Avondale College and was appointed to mission work in Poona. Once he was established, Meyers went to live with her oldest son, William, and his family, who were well established there. Eight years later, with failing health and eyesight, Meyers finally retired to Australia in 1947. On leaving, she wrote: “I leave India with mixed feelings. I have a divided heart. India is my birthplace and Australia my land of adoption. On my return to India, after thirty-five years’ absence, I lost sight of my friends and so many had fallen asleep…There is an unexplainable sadness about saying goodbye, and I wonder why this experience comes to us so often.” At 82 years old, Meyers travelled independently back to Australia on the S.S. Madura. She resided with a good friend in Balgowlah, a northern Sydney suburb.

Ellen Meyers lived her final years with her son, Dudley, in Westmead. She died in 1958 at the age of 93. Her funeral was presided over by A. G. Stewart who “had first welcomed her to Fiji’s shores in 1912 and, almost half a century later, laid her finally to rest at Sydney’s Northern Suburbs Cemetery.”

Legacy

Meyers lived her life in accordance with her beliefs and faith in the power of the gospel to transform lives. Her faithful service as a teacher, nurse, evangelist, and mother earned her the title “Mother Meyers”—a role she played both literally and figuratively to hundreds in her care. Working primarily as a teacher, Meyers also provided medical support and advocacy for the women and children in her care. She was a faithful and persistent evangelist in spite of difficult conditions and periods of ill-health. Meyers’ legacy is evident in the lives of her children and the communities to whom she ministered over decades of selfless service.

Sources


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“Pastor Rudge Assists in Hospital Nursing.” Australasian Record, June 8, 1925.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
4. Singh, “This Noble Lady,” 64.
10. Ibid.
12. Singh, “This Noble Lady,” 64.

24. “Pastor Rudge Assists in Hospital Nursing,” Australasian Record, June 8, 1925, 8.


26. Ibid.

27. Singh, “This Noble Lady,” 69.


29. Ibid, 6.


32. Singh, “This Noble Lady,” 69.