

# Nerness, John Milford (1908–2001)

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## FAI LEONG, AND TERESA COSTELLO

Fai Leong began his pastoral ministry in Kuala Lumpur in 1980, after he graduated from Hong Kong Adventist College. At the time of writing, he was the president of the Peninsular Malaysia Mission.

Teresa Costello, born in the southwest United States, has served as a missionary in the Pacific under the Far Eastern Division and southeast Asia under the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) for more than 15 years. With bachelor of arts degrees in English and religion and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, she served in the SSD Communication department from 2012-2017 and is currently (2020) the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* editorial assistant for SSD. With a background in education, journalism, communication, and public speaking, she is a storyteller who enjoys gathering life experiences from those she meets during her travels with her family.



The John Nerness family.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

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John Milford Nerness served for 20 years in southeast Asia, most notably as the first president of the Sarawak Mission in Kuching, Malaysia.

## Early Life, Education and Marriage

John M. Nerness was born to John and Margaret (Thompson) Nerness on January 17, 1908 in Eagle Grove, Iowa in the United States.<sup>1</sup> He attended Silverton High School in Silverton, Oregon and Columbia Adventist Academy in Battle Ground, Washington.<sup>2</sup> Nerness was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in March 1924.<sup>3</sup> He joined the ministry as a literature evangelist in the Western Oregon Conference in 1924 after he finished his high school education.<sup>4</sup> Next, he completed a junior ministerial course at Walla Walla College in Walla Walla, Washington.<sup>5</sup> While there, he met and later married Effie, a fellow student from Ladysmith, British Columbia, Canada.<sup>6</sup>

## Ministry

Nerness began pastoral ministry in 1930 in Upper Columbia Conference.<sup>7</sup> He was appointed as the music director in an evangelistic effort in Pendleton, Oregon which began on March 20, 1932.<sup>8</sup> He continued his ministry in Upper Columbia Conference and was ordained in 1934.<sup>9</sup> From June 1935 until October 15, 1936, Nerness served as a district superintendent (district pastor) for the Wenatchee-Okanogan Church district in Washington.<sup>10</sup>

## Missionary in Far Eastern Division

Leaders of the Malayan Union Mission saw that the Adventist mission work in present-day Malaysia needed to expand, particularly in regard to the Sarawak and Brunei areas. As a result, on February 16, 1936, the Union Committee took action to recommend that formation of a new mission, the Sarawak Mission of Seventh-day Adventists. Comprising Sarawak and Brunei, this mission would be based in Kuching. This was contingent upon finding a foreign missionary to lead the mission which would then be formally organized at the 1937 union biennial session.<sup>11</sup>

Nerness accepted this call and on October 17, 1936, the Nernesses began their missionary service when they left Washington for the long journey to Singapore.<sup>12</sup> Arriving there on January 13, 1937, John and Effie Nerness were on time to attend the Malayan Union Mission biennial session.<sup>13</sup> During the session, the Sarawak Mission was officially organized and Nerness appointed as its director.<sup>14</sup> He was subsequently also named its secretary-treasurer.<sup>15</sup>

The Nernesses' first born, John Lavonne Nerness, joined the family on August 29, 1937, a few months after their arrival to Kuching, Sarawak.<sup>16</sup> In May 1939, Pastor Nerness was transferred to the Malay States Mission in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and appointed the mission president and treasurer.<sup>17</sup> On November 30, 1939, their daughter Dorothy Carol was born.<sup>18</sup>

At the close of 1941, Nerness had barely finished his first five-year term of service in the Malay States Mission before he was forced to leave on January 3, 1942<sup>19</sup> when the Japanese army invaded and occupied the land. Nerness and his family dodged the enemy bombers and torpedoes for four months using a zigzag escape route out of the region.<sup>20</sup> They went through Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand and finally landed in America. In Sumatra, Indonesia, they were in time to alight the ship minutes before it was blown into pieces by an aerial bomb.

During World War II, Nerness was assigned to the Washington Conference as a pastor<sup>21</sup> until he returned to Singapore on September 28, 1946.<sup>22</sup> He served as the president for the Malayan Union Mission upon his arrival to Singapore.<sup>23</sup> After his first term, he and his family furloughed to the United States on June 21, 1951 and returned to Singapore on August 22, 1952.<sup>24</sup>

## Later Life

After serving almost 20 years in Malaysia and Singapore, Nerness and his family permanently returned to United States of America, leaving Singapore on May 27, 1956.<sup>25</sup> He then served in the Michigan Conference as a pastor.<sup>26</sup> In 1961, he was transferred to Central California Conference to serve there as a pastor.<sup>27</sup> In 1970, he was appointed to serve as Vice-President of the Legal Association for Central California Conference.<sup>28</sup> He continued to serve in that department until his retirement in 1978.<sup>29</sup> He died on November 25, 2001 at the age of 93 in Sonora, California.<sup>30</sup>

## Contribution

John Nerness was a pioneer administrator for the Sarawak Mission, filling all three administrative roles as president, secretary and treasurer at its inception. The commitment of Nerness and his family to mission service for the advancement of Adventism in Malaysia withstood the challenges of pioneer work in unentered areas and later near-death experiences during World War II.

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## NOTES

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