

# Christian, John Leroy (1900–1945)

## LALRAWNGBAWLLA, AND JUDSON CHHAKCHHUAK

Lalrawngbawlla, B.A. in Religion (Myanmar Union Adventist College and Seminary), M.A. in Education (Adventist International Institutes of Advanced Study, Philippines), has worked as an evangelist, teacher, high school principal, and pastor since 1990. He currently serves as director of Publishing Ministry, Spirit of Prophecy, and Voice of Prophecy in Myanmar Union Mission. He and his wife Vanramliani have three daughters and one son.

Judson Chhakchhuak is from Mizoram, Northeast India. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Religion degree with an emphasis in the New Testament from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, the Philippines. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Theology degree from the Adventist University of the Philippines.

John Leroy Christian was an Adventist administrator, pastor, missionary, researcher, professor, lieutenant-colonel, and author.

## Early Life

John Leroy Christian was born on October 28, 1900, in Houston, Minnesota, in the United States. He was the second child of Andrew Ernest Christian (March 21, 1870-July 29, 1920) and Bertha K. Christian (April 2, 1878-June 20, 1962) who married on July 27, 1898.<sup>1</sup> John Christian's seven siblings were Hervey, Rolland, Alice, Andrew, Clarence, Paul, and Marie. Unfortunately, two of his siblings died when he was growing up. His sister Alice passed away when he was six years old<sup>2</sup> and his brother Andrew died nearly four years later.<sup>3</sup> During Christian's early years his family moved to Idaho. Raised by Adventist parents, he was baptized by F. D. Wagner in Boise, Idaho, in 1915.<sup>4</sup>

## Education and Marriage

Christian completed grade 8 in 1914 after attending public schools in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Idaho. He had to drop out school for one year to carry cement and plaster for a construction project, and to feed straw



John Leroy Christian.

Photo courtesy of BJW. Source: *Find a Grave*,

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56754847/john-l-christian>

into a steam-powered thresher machine in the North Dakota and Saskatchewan wheat harvest.<sup>5</sup> He attended Maplewood Academy from 1916 to 1918. He completed his high school education at Gem State Academy in 1918-1920. After his graduation from Gem State Academy, Caldwell, Idaho,<sup>6</sup> Christian, spent three and a half years at Walla Walla College in southeastern Washington State, graduating in 1924. He financed his education through colporteur work.<sup>7</sup>

On June 30, 1925, Christian married Bernice MacLafferty (April 21, 1902-July 22, 1977) in Nyssa, Oregon. An accomplished musician, her beautiful music and singing was appreciated in Burma mission field<sup>8</sup> in the later years of their ministry. John and Bernice Christian had three sons: Winslow Leroy (1926–2005), Louis, and Maynard Spaulding (1931–2017). Winslow was born in the United States while his siblings were born in Burma.

## Ministry

John Christian's ministry began in June 1922, while still a student in Walla Walla College, as a Missionary Volunteer and field secretary in the Montana Conference. He continued in this work after his graduation from college. In 1925, he was called to Laurelwood Academy where he taught history and supervised the library for one year.<sup>9</sup> He became a principal, and after two successful years at Gem State Academy (1926-1927), Christian received a call from the General Conference to be a missionary in Burma.<sup>10</sup> He accepted the call and traveled to Burma<sup>11</sup> (now, Myanmar) with his family. They arrived in Rangoon on September 5, 1927.<sup>12</sup> Christian replaced R. A. Beckner, who had served as a principal of Meiktila Technical School (MTS) from May 1925 to September 1928.<sup>13</sup> MTS was founded by Robert B. Thurber in 1909,<sup>14</sup> and by 1928 when Christian took over as the principal<sup>15</sup> it was in bad shape.

Christian's first task as a principal was to convince the union mission committee that the school was in need of infrastructure—classrooms, administration office, and dormitories—and to solicit funds from the Southern Asia Division. To do this, he had to draw building plans and submit them for approval. He eventually became the school building engineer, while simultaneously managing the school and teaching history.<sup>16</sup> During his tenure, a new administration building and dormitories were erected. He also worked hard until electric lights were installed around the campus,<sup>17</sup> reportedly the first ones in Meiktila town, according to family lore.<sup>18</sup>

In 1930, Christian was ordained as a gospel minister in Poona, India.<sup>19</sup> He remained as a principal in MTS until 1932. In January 1933, Christian exchanged positions with Joseph Phillips, becoming superintendent (equivalent to president) of the Burma Mission.<sup>20</sup> Phillips, the former mission superintendent, became principal of MTS.<sup>21</sup> While mission superintendent, Christian helped students to continue higher education after completing high school. He also conducted professional training for teachers in Kalaw City every summer. In his free time—usually in summer—Christian visited Shan State to collect contributions for students' support.<sup>22</sup> John L. Christian became widely known in Myanmar. His books on the history of Myanmar were accepted as authoritative and accurate by the Burmese themselves. He was even elected as a member of Burma Research

Society of the University of Rangoon.<sup>23</sup>

In 1935, Christian returned to the United States and continued his study and research. He received a B.A. degree from Walla Walla College and an M.A. degree from Stanford University. Christian's experiences in Burma inspired an interest in Burmese affairs, which was why he authored several books relating to it. Not long after the Institute of Pacific Relations published his authoritative book *Modern Burma*, the University of Washington invited him to teach. The United States government then called him to Washington as a specialist on Burma affairs. Upon the request of the United State Army, Christian was commissioned as an officer on February 16, 1942. Serving at the Pentagon and in Army Intel in Wheeler, Texas, he rapidly advanced to lieutenant-colonel.<sup>24</sup> Christian was assigned to the Southeast Asia Command in October 1943.

## Later Life

In October 1943, Christian was sent to India where he was attached to British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten's general staff corps. On May 3, 1945, while he was acting as an observer for the army and attached to the 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Division of the British army, he was the only American on board a landing craft that struck a mine during an amphibious operation in the Rangoon River. He lost his life there at age 44.<sup>25</sup> He was memorialized at Fort Leonard wood (renamed Fort Aguinaldo after Philippine independence) near Metro Manila, Philippines. His name, rank, and U.S. state residence are memorialized among thousands of marble inscription honoring those killed, but not buried, because no bodies or remains could be found.<sup>26</sup>

## Legacy

Christian a thorough knowledge of Burma, its people, and its problems because he traveled extensively throughout the country and was able to read, write, and speak Burmese. The fruits of his study and activity have been seen in many of his published works of which the best known is his *Modern Burma: A Survey of Political and Economic Development*.<sup>27</sup> *Modern Burma* was recognized as the standard descriptive work on Burma even by the Burmese themselves. He wrote some thirty general articles or monographic studies of Burma, India, Thailand, and China in American and foreign journals. His experiences and scholarly mind enabled him to portray the most sympathetic understanding of Burma and its people, interpreting Burma to the world. Although Christian worked for the United States government in his later life, he did not fail to labor for the Adventist Church. While all church activities in Burma were stopped during the Second World War, he worked untiringly for the liberation of the Burmese people, and he took time to work for the welfare of the Burmese Adventist members and the reopening of the Adventist church work in Burma.<sup>28</sup>

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## NOTES

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3. According to oral family information recorded in Ancestry.com, Andrew was born on September 8, 1907, and died on June 15, 1910. See "Christian/Hammond Family Tree," Ancestry.com, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

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