



Gerald James Christo and his wife Birol.

Photo courtesy of Gordon Christo.

Christo, Gerald James (1924–2018)

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Gerald J. Christo was the first Indian national to serve as Secretary and President of Southern Asia Division, and represents the transition from expatriate to national leadership at many levels—school, Mission, Union, and Division.¹

Early Years

Gerald James Christo was born to Peter Brian and Margaret Christo on September 11, 1924, their only son and the youngest of five children. The Christo family lived in Simultala, Bihar, not far from Karmatar, the second mission station opened by Seventh-day Adventists in India in 1900.² In Simultala Peter Christo owned some China Clay mines. Gerald was saved from an early death when a worker who arrived early for work saw the child slip and fall into one of the pits of miry clay, and rescued him. The Christo family learned of the Adventist message through a missionary, Christian Jenson, around 1930 when he took shelter in their home one stormy night. The family moved to Calcutta, where Gerald enrolled in the SDA school at 36 Park Street. Later the family moved to Lahore, now in Pakistan.³ Here Peter Christo passed away in 1935 when Gerald was barely ten years old. After his father's death (1935), Gerald joined his sisters at Vincent Hill School and College (VHSC), the first Indians to be admitted to the Adventist school reserved till then for children of missionaries. Gerald joined VHSC in standard 5 and completed High School in 1940. He continued his college work at VHSC and graduated as valedictorian of the class of 1942, the only one from the commerce department that year.⁴ At the urging of the college principal Gerald returned to VHSC for a year of ministerial classes.

Overcoming Challenges

Gerald Christo began his denominational service toward the end of 1943 as stenographer to L. C. Shepard, manager of the Oriental Watchman Publishing House, Poona (Pune).⁵ As a graduate of VHSC, primarily established for children of missionaries, Christo's wages at the Oriental Watchman Publishing House was much higher than graduates from Spicer Memorial College, catering to nationals; but the salary was much lower than missionary children graduating from the same VHSC. Besides this inequity in wages that bothered Gerald, the salary was insufficient to cover the charges of the missionary family he was boarding with. After three months he left OWPH to take up a job as sub editor in the news division of All India Radio in Delhi with double the salary.⁶ A few months later he returned to church employ as manager of the Vincent Hill School Bakery depot in Kulri. When it closed for the winter, he canvassed briefly in Kanpur and was picked from there in 1944 to join the Vere-Wood evangelistic team in Lahore as song leader. At one point he scheduled an appointment with a former VHSC school mate who had become a recruiting officer in the Royal Indian Air Force, but a severe attack of typhoid and a relapse prevented him from meeting that appointment. When he finally recovered he joined the Union office staff at Delhi as an office secretary and assistant to the Sabbath School Secretary of the Union,⁷ and thereafter remained in denominational service until his retirement in 1990, and continued in significant post-retirement service until 2005.

In 1946 the Northwest Union appointed Gerald as English and Math teacher, and cashier/accountant at the Hapur school. With encouragement from Principal T. R. Torkelson, Gerald also began preaching in Urdu, the vernacular widely spoken in North India. Two years later he was transferred to Spicer Missionary College to

teach secretarial courses. Here he also assisted in putting together the first copies of the *Spicerian*, the college news magazine, as campaign manager and editor.⁸ He also served as office secretary to the college principal in addition to full time teaching.⁹ At the end of the school year on March 28, 1949, Gerald Christo married Birol Wallang-Kharkongor who had just completed the junior college degree in elementary education. Meanwhile, Gerald was appointed Dean of Men, at Spicer, the first national to occupy that position. Two sons were born at this time, Glenn and Gordon.¹⁰

In 1952 Gerald Christo was called back to Hapur, this time as principal of the Urdu medium school.¹¹ The next year his mother passed away, and a daughter Sonia was born. Two years later Gerald Christo was transferred as principal of Lasalgaon High School in the state of Maharashtra.¹² A fourth child, a daughter, Lorna, joined the family in 1955. In March 1956 he was ordained to the gospel ministry¹³ and was asked to pastor the Bombay church, the first national to serve as pastor evangelist of the English church in that city.¹⁴ Christo then served three years as Union Evangelist, holding series of meetings in Jabalpur, Allahabad, Delhi, and Lucknow in the traditional large white tent. In many cases he remained behind to care for follow up work. In 1959 their third son and last of five children, John was born.

Because there were no Adventist schools in the vicinity, the older sons were sent to live with an aunt in Delhi who was principal of the English medium church school that operated on her premises. A year later Gerald Christo was appointed Education and Youth Director for the Union, and the family transferred to Hapur where Mrs. Christo was appointed headmistress of the Hindi medium school. As youth leader Pastor Christo emphasized follow-up of interests in youth created during weeks of prayer.¹⁵

Years of Leadership (1962-1990)

The 1962 General Conference session at San Francisco elected Christo the first national Division Youth Director, at the age of thirty seven. During his term of service he conducted the second Division-wide youth congress for Southern Asia, after a gap of twelve years. In 1966 Christo was asked to lead out in a school of evangelism in Goa, newly liberated from Portuguese rule. The same year saw Christo move from Division youth departmental leadership to the presidentship of Northeast India Union. His Union leadership position was noted for development of regional leaders who would ensure a remarkable growth in stewardship, evangelism, administration, and self-support in local fields. His influence went beyond Northeast Union to affect the future growth and planning in the rest of Southern Asia Division. One result of this was to consolidate leadership and utilize available resources to the maximum benefit in the field, particularly in the vast northern India stretching from the borders of Pakistan to Bangladesh and Burma. Such consolidation was effected in 1971 with the amalgamation of Northeast and Northwestern India Unions, resulting in the formation of Northern Union. Gerald Christo was elected president of this new union. In 1975 at the General Conference session in Vienna, Austria, Christo was elected the first national Secretary of the Division. As secretary he worked closely with the

Division officers and took the initiative to strengthen the already expanding national leadership by opening new initiatives in sponsorship and higher educational opportunities both in India and abroad. Christo continued this development trend even after he was elected in 1980 at the Dallas General Conference Session as the first national president of the Division.¹⁶ He was reelected president at New Orleans in 1985. In 1986 Andrews University conferred on him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. Before the 1990 session was convened in Indianapolis, Christo voluntarily opted for retirement.

In the closing years of his leadership, the Southern Asia Division was facing many challenges, particularly related to functional continuance with headquarters in Poona, Maharashtra. The functional challenges and the administrative uniqueness related to denominational operation as a church led to experimentation with several organizational strategies. Finally, Christo led out in a move to shift the Division headquarters to the small town Hosur in South India, a move that was initially met with some resistance, but which ultimately was considered fortuitous when the nearby city of Bangalore (now Bengaluru) gained international importance. Another major action was the reorganization of the Division with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka leaving to join the Far Eastern Division and Pakistan joining the Trans European Division. Southern Asia became a Division consisting of India with the smaller countries of Nepal, Maldives and Bhutan.

Post-retirement Service

Gerald Christo chose to retire in 1990. However, when a call came to conduct evangelistic meetings in three cities in the Philippines, he responded eagerly. Pastor and Mrs. Christo travelled to Cagayan and Isabella in the north and to Digos in the south. Soon after an urgent call came for Christo to serve as interim president of Bangladesh Union. Gerald Christo's mother was born in Dacca, the capital of Bangladesh, and the country had been part of Southern Asia, though at this time it was in the neighboring Asia-Pacific Division.¹⁷ Christo served in Bangladesh for four months till a replacement was found. Next, the Christos were called twice to serve as pioneers in Mongolia. What they knew and didn't know about the place was daunting, but they went anyway. During their stay, Pastor Christo was able to get the Adventist church registered and recognized by the government in Mongolia. In 2000 they were called back to Mongolia when the resident missionary was to take his leave and attend the GC session. This time there was no hesitation as they looked forward to meeting the members who had become friends. This service extended to five months.¹⁸

Meanwhile, their home church in Hosur needed a pastor, and naturally they turned to Pastor Christo. He accepted the call and immediately led out in the construction of a new church structure. The services were being held in the Division office worship hall, but it had become far too small. The evening of the church dedication a truck slammed into Christo's car and pushed it off the road, into a ditch and against a wall, but he was miraculously unhurt. The dedication ceremony included a thanksgiving service. A few years later Pastor Christo led out in the collection of funds from alumni of Vincent Hill School and College and had Sabbath School rooms

for the Hosur church constructed as a memorial to his alma mater.¹⁹

For years Pastor Christo had suffered from various physical ailments, but years of a physically active life had helped him recover. In 2016 he lay seriously ill and was anointed. He recovered and continued an active life. On August 30, 2018, he finally fell asleep after ensuring everything important to him was cared for, even making arrangements for his own funeral.

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NOTES

1. Charles Tidwell in his SUD newsletter referred to Gerald Christo as a "bridge" between national and foreign workers, "breaking down the barriers between them." His comments are reprinted on the back cover of Christo's autobiography, *Out of the Clay Pit* (Hosur: Thomson Graphic & Co., 2009).
2. "India," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996): 751.
3. Gerald Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 9, 13.

4. R. A. Garner, "Vincent Hill School and College Closing Exercises," *Eastern Tidings*, Dec 15, 1942, 3, 4. See also Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 16.
5. "Gerald James Christo," Worker's Service Record, Southern Asia Division Secretariat Archives.
6. *Worker's Service Record*. See also Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 18.
7. *Worker's Service Record*; Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 24, 25.
8. "College Begins School Newspaper," *The Spicerian*, Vol 1 No. 1 (Oct 21, 1948), 1.
9. Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 32.
10. *Worker's Service Record*.
11. Robert H Pierson, "Northwest Union Biennial Session," *Eastern Tidings*, March 1, 1952, 8.
12. R. W. Kedas, ed. "Schools in Maharashtra: Lasalgaon," *Advent Movement in Western India, 1905-2005* (Pune: Earnest & Frank, 2005), 111.
13. D. S. Johnson, "Ordination Service Held at the Quadrennial Council on March 17, 1956," *Eastern Tidings*, Apr 1, 1956, 15, 16.
14. Gerald Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 43-47.
15. G. J. Christo, "MV Week Follow-Up," *Southern Asia Tidings*, June 15, 1960, 6, 7; "The Entire Church Behind Youth Evangelism," *Southern Asia Tidings*, June 15, 1961, 2, 3.
16. "Nominating Committee Report-3," *Adventist Review General Conference Bulletin*, no. 3, April 21, 1980, 32.
17. Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 105.
18. Newsbreak, "Retired Administrator Develops Mongolian Ministry," *ARH*, July 24, 1997, 22; Gerald J. Christo, "Taking Risks in Mongolia," *ARH*, May 14, 1998, 16-19. See also, Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 106-111.
19. Christo, *Out of the Clay Pit*, 18-124.

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