

Reverend Joseph John, Deenabandupuram



Joseph John talking to farmers, 1971¹

Joseph John (* 1906; † 1998), Reverend of the Church of South India (CSI), engaged in founding a Rural Life Center in the former Madras state in India to help poor and casteless people.

Joseph John was ordained as pastor in 1934² and served in the Serkadu area (locality in Katpadi, Vellore District in Tamil Nadu State) in the 1930s. As a student during the decade of the 1920s, he had become an admirer of the work of Gandhi.³ Like Gandhi Joseph John always wore clothes of khadi (cotton) made in India.

¹ Photo of Joseph John. He directs the World Neighbors-assisted Rural Life Center in Deenabandu, India. In: What did you do for the Third World Today? Transition: A Magazine for Former ACTION Volunteers, Vol. 1, No. 10, November 1972, p. 41

<https://books.google.de/books?id=h7qoMcpODEEC&pg=RA7-PA41&lpg=RA7-PA41&dq=%22joseph+john%22+deenabandu&source=bl&ots=F384Pf8nm&sig=ACfU3U2JuitQLq2thcGve8anDpDLFbElpw&hl=de&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjBmIf3ub73AhWUSPEDHfPFA4MQ6AF6BAGREAM#v=onepage&q=%22joseph%20john%22%20deenabandu&f=false>

The Rotarian p. 26

https://books.google.de/books?id=UDMEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA3&lpg=PA3&dq=The+Rotarian+an+International+Magazine+December/+1975&source=bl&ots=yguI50hPc9&sig=ACfU3U2O146idv0Q8d07_oq-2kpFwU-lhA&hl=de&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjJqrSR5rn3AhUC_qQKHQJUC7UQ6AF6BAGNEAM#v=onepage&q&f=false

² Eugene P. Heideman: From Mission to Church: The Reformed Church in America Mission to India, 2001, p. 410

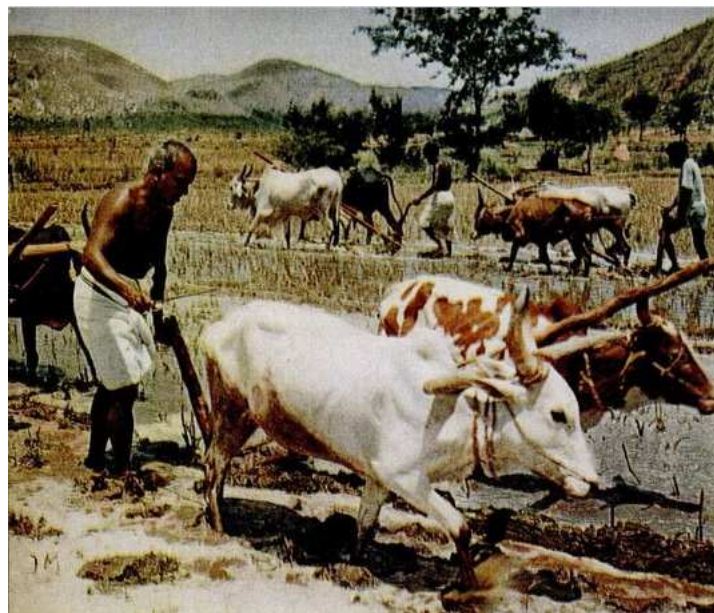
https://books.google.de/books?id=0A6ruPk7-lcC&pg=PA692&lpg=PA692&dq=%22Rt.Rev.+Sam+Ponniah%22&source=bl&ots=6T0joUA6Wl&sig=ACfU3U1ePsMAGdNfEq_u2XkvqXcX0hJQiA&hl=de&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi05auF0c_3AhXbh_0HHUlqDd4Q6AF6BAGCEAM#v=onepage&q=%22Joseph%20John%22&f=false

³ Eugene P. Heideman: From Mission to Church: The Reformed Church in America Mission to India, 2001, p. 455

He was a leader in seeking to adapt Hindu cultural and religious forms for Christian life and worship. He died 1998 at the age of 92 years.

After this encounter with Gandhi the young pastor in 1948 resigned his work as a pastor in Katpadi as did his (first) wife Ranji (Aaron) John, a doctor, with whom he had three children: Karuna, Prem Chandra and Hannah (a doctor).⁴ Later as a widower he married Padma, with whom he had more children. Joseph John's aim was to serve the poor and casteless in a remote area in the former state of Madras without outside support.

He and his wife moved to a remote corner on the border of Andhra and Tamil Nadu states to start Deenabandupuram, "Village of the friend of the Poor". With little money but a vision in his heart, he believed in people's ability to help themselves if someone gave them initial support. Joseph John acquired 500 hectares of land that was considered uncultivable. He wanted to show the farmers that a better life was possible. They dug for water in what had always been regarded as "wasteland". At 60 feet he found it in abundance.



Joseph John ploughing the field 1955⁵

The Christian Church did not look upon this action with favour for it believed that a pastor should be "behind the pulpit and not behind a plough". The upper caste landlords took his work as a personal affront as any work among the poor was wont to remove the hold the landlords had over them. Therefore, opponents of the programme burnt the pastor's house, filled a newly dug well with rubble and made serious attempts on the life of this young couple, till the leader of the opposing group fell grievously ill and was treated at the Centre. After that, things became relatively easier.

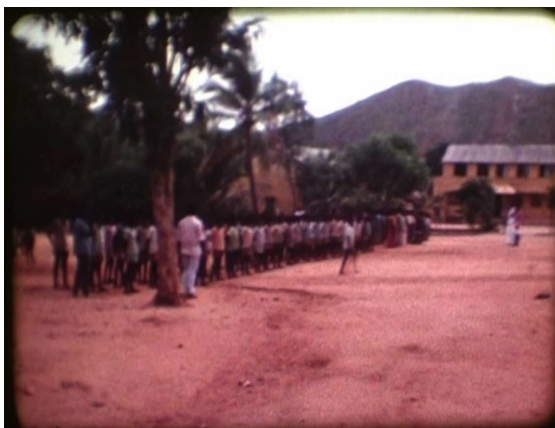
⁴ Dr Hannah Lewis maybe ??: Hannah John Special High School Sandapet is a school in India. The school is located at Vellore, Tamil Nadu - 605757. <https://in.kinderful.com/school/hannah-john-special-high-school-sandapet-157352> <https://wicc.co.in/people/dr-hannah-john/>

⁵ Dmitri Kessel. *Living by the plow and the prayer*. In: A lesson in Unity. Five different faiths merge in South India. Life, Vol. 39. Nr. 26-Vol. 40. No.1. December 26, 1955, p. 152



Dr Ranji John examining sick man. She treated 200 lepers each week 1955⁶

Early accomplishments at Deenabandupuram were medical work, especially among the large number of leprosy patients; a school, an orphanage and a small agricultural programme based on improved seeds and on practices which were just then coming into vogue. From these small beginnings has grown a large multi-sectoral programme covering 100000 population today.



School in Deenabandupuram

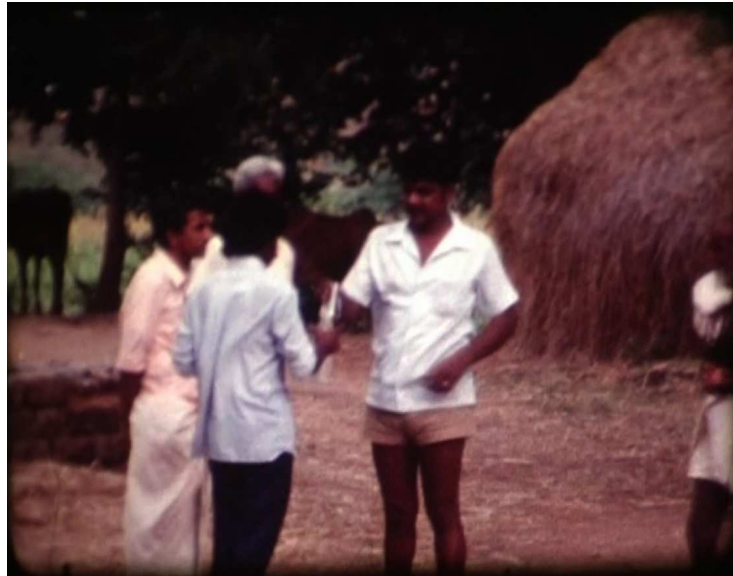
Today this once barren land is a flourishing model farm. What was then a dream is now the Deenabandupuram Rural Life Center, which serves scores of villages in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The valley in which Joseph John's Deenabandupuram Rural Life Center is located is known as the "Home of the Friends of the Poor". He has worked to settle landless people on empty land provided by the Indian government. He has also been able to find water in even the most uncompromisingly barren tracts.

⁶ Dmitri Kessel. *Living by the plow and the prayer*. In: A lesson in Unity. Five different faiths merge in South India. Life, Vol. 39. Nr. 26-Vol. 40. No.1. December 26, 1955, p. 152

Since 1955 his ideas were supported by World Neighbors. Money was not given to people but borrowed by them from a revolving loan fund. Those who were helped repaid their loans. Not only were they establishing their self-respect, but they knew that their repayments would help others.

A new dimension to the work of Joseph John in the Deenabandupuram Rural Life Center was attributed by his two sons Karuna John and Dr. Prem Chander.

Karuna John is a graduate in agriculture, from California. He directs the Center's agricultural extension program, urging local farmers to use irrigation, fertilizers, better seed and a variety of crops.



Karuna John (on the right)

With support of World Neighbors Karuna and the other workers are training villagers in such employable skills as carpentry, metal work and printing.



Teaching metal work 1971⁷

⁷ Brot für die Welt – Misereor: Entwicklungsland Indien (ca. 1972)

Dr. Prem Chander John and his wife Dr. Hari John – both physicians – direct the medical phase of the Center, which offers low-cost medical care and an extensive family planning program now reaching out to villages within a 30-mile radius.



Dr Hari John (left) counsels a woman about family planning.
She helped to shape the medical phase of the program at Deenabandupuram.

Joseph John and his family are involved in establishing a comprehensive community health project, a move to preventative medicine which treats the causes, not just the symptoms. This approach emphasizes sanitation, nutrition, increased food production and family planning like the inter-uterine device (IUD) insertions. In 1975 his clinic had 25 beds and some mobile units.



1977 Deenabandupuram Teaching Family Planning



Family Planning campaign propagating a family with two children 1971⁸

Dr. Prem Chander John also has a Master of Science degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, where he specialized in leprosy, “India’s biggest disease”. To combat this, the John family has created the Nava Jeevan (New Life) project for lepers, for whom this name has a greater meaning. Nava Jeevan’s purpose is to move lepers from dependence to independence, to bring them back into society as contributing, productive members. They started to resettle lepers from Madras in rural areas. There these families live in houses provided by the Rural Life Center, also providing them with seed and water for farming while their medical treatment is in progress. The leprosy rehabilitation center in the Deenabandupuram Rural Life Center enabled the affected people to earn their living with work in a vegetable garden.



Housing for lepers, benefiting from the services of the nearby leprosy rehabilitation center begun by the Deenabandupuram Rural Life Center.⁹

⁸ Brot für die Welt – Misereor: Entwicklungsland Indien (o.J. ca. 1972)

⁹ The Rotarian p. 26

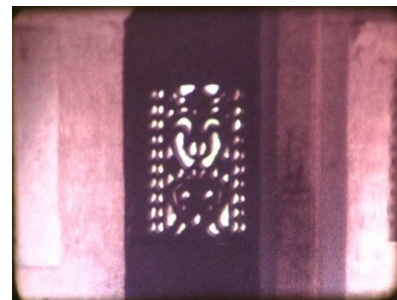


Deformation of the hands by leprosy¹⁰

Churches and worship services in indigenous India style

In 1956 Joseph John wrote a letter¹¹ to Henry Lazarus,¹² pastor of the Central Church. He wrote that the building of the church was of importance not only to the local congregation but also to the churches of the whole area. Therefore, it was crucial that it should be built in the model of the indigenous India style used in building Hindu temples. He wrote:

“Time has come when we should relate our order of worship and the mode of our building programme to the non-Christians among whom we are living. Christ is the Saviour whom the Missionary Fathers brought to us and no one can take Him away from us and this dear land. But we should humbly acknowledge that our non-Christians have not followed intelligently our worship services and our Church buildings have not been witnessing to the fact that Christ belongs to us. there has always been a certain sense of “foreignness” in both our order of worship services and in our Church buildings.”



Church at Deenabandupuram, built by Joseph John between 1959 – 1960

Following Independence, the work of Joseph John, a Church of South India pastor, in seeking an indigenous architectural style is significant. He worked among the poor and marginalized in the CSI diocese of Vellore and although he himself died in 1998 his vision of a Christian community at Deenabandupuram on the border between Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh

¹⁰ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy#/media/File:Leprosy_deformities_hands.jpg

¹¹ Eugene P. Heideman: From Mission to Church: The Reformed Church in America Mission to India, p. 718.

December 22, 1956 https://books.google.de/books?id=0A6ruPk7-lcC&pg=PA692&lpg=PA692&dq=%22Rt.Rev.+Sam+Ponniah%22&source=bl&ots=6T0joUA6Wl&sig=ACfU3U1ePsMAGdNfEq_u2XkvqXcX0hJQiA&hl=de&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi05auF0c_3AhXbh_OHHUlqDd4Q6AF6BAgCEAM#v=onepage&q=%22Joseph%20John%22&f=false

¹² Lazarus became bishop of the new Diocese of Vellore in 1976. December 22, 1956

continues. The period of the building of these churches was the 1950s and 1960. Joseph John's vision was of a Christianity, which had an Indian as well as a compassionate face. He drew his inspiration from his contact with Drs Jesudasan and Forrester-Paton at the Christu Kula Ashram,¹³ where he had lived following his formal education. He was responsible for commissioning and building a number of churches.

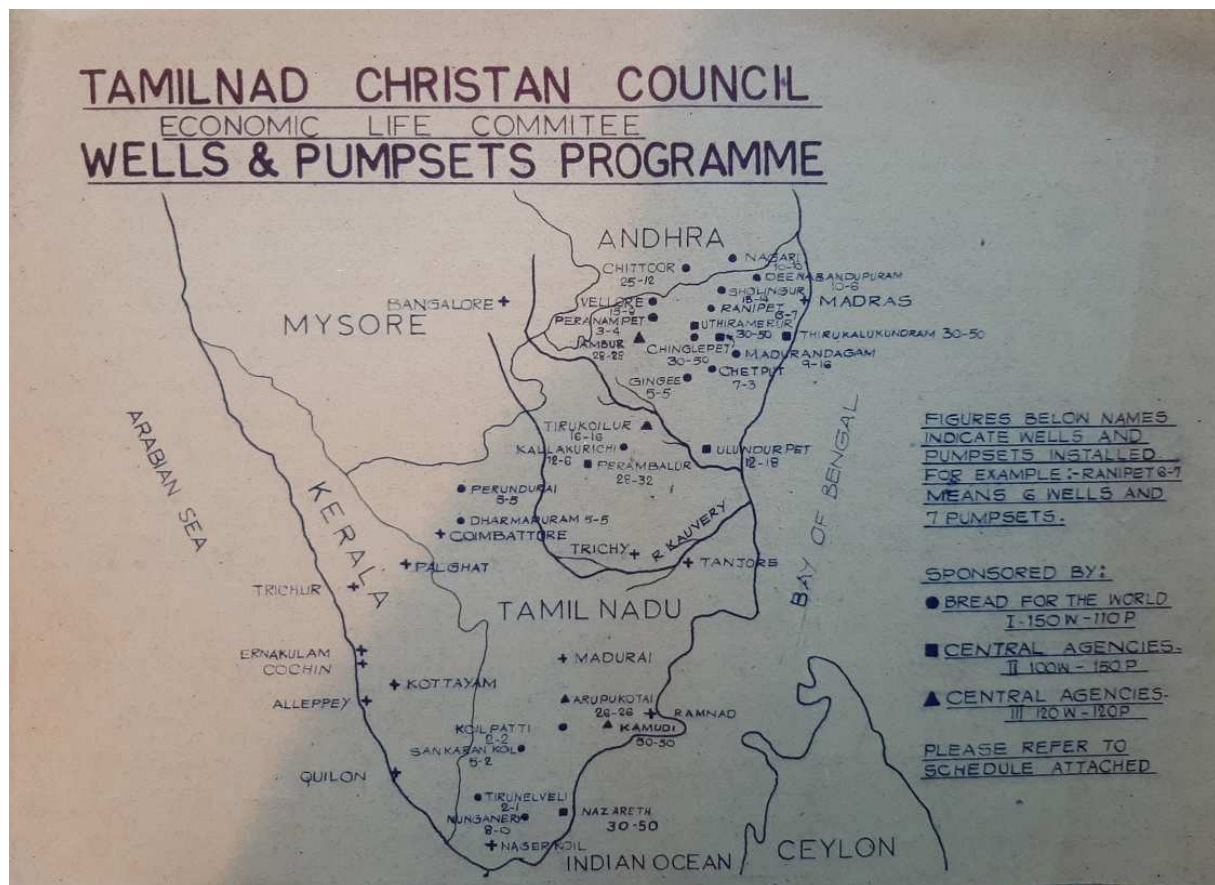
A notable feature of this church is the baptismal font shaped in the form of a lotus flower, with a cross planted in its midst. All the church buildings which Joseph John was responsible for, are designed in the form of a pillared temple hall (mandapam/ mandapa), which are built from stone, with motif carved on them which usually combine Hindu and Christian symbols. The east wall of the buildings is generally solid, while the other sides are open to the elements, and in the centre of the East wall in most examples is a niche or alcove, which is reminiscent of the womb-house (Garbha Griha) [holies of holies] to be found in the inner sanctum of a temple. However, it is notable that these niches are on a smaller scale and less detailed than parallels found in Catholic examples, where the blessed sacrament is usually housed. In these Protestant examples this did not arise and so functionality indicates no need to make the space larger or more elaborate.

According to his own precepts and expectations Joseph John was successful in creating an Indian style for his churches. However, his initiative was not, on the whole, adopted by others. Undoubtedly cost is a factor in this, but reluctance or suspicion of the imperatives behind such projects must also be reckoned to play their part.



Woman getting water from a well

¹³ <https://m.facebook.com/bishoppk Samuel/posts/christu-kula-ashram-cka-theeba-thiruvizha-2019this-is-a-place-where-indian-tradi/131846704867723/>



Tamilnad Christian Council Economic Life Committee Wells Pumpsets Programme

1. Wells Pumpsets Programme - 1966¹⁴

An unprecedented drought hit many parts of Tamilnadu during 1965-1966 and the sufferings of the poor farmers kindled the feelings of the Rev. Joseph John of Deenabandupuram. He himself had opted to live in the rural area, sharing the sufferings of humanity as a true Christian with Gandhian ideals. He was determined to alleviate the sufferings of farmers by digging wells and installing pumpsets so that dry areas awaiting monsoon rains could be immediately cultivated. With this in mind, a programme was chalked out to dig 150 wells and install 100 pumpsets to the poor and marginal farmers. The Wells and Pumpset Department of the Tamilnad Christian Council commenced operations in 1966 to relieve the sufferings of the poor farmers caused by the drought due to the failure of the monsoon by digging wells for them. The first scheme was started in 1967 to dig 150 wells and install 110 pumpsets. It was sponsored by the Bread for the World, West Germany, and United Church of Christ, USA respectively. Mr. Lüder Lüers, a good friend of Rev. Joseph John, did a wonderful work with valuable assistance of the Pastors for the upliftment of the poor farmers. They completed the first phase of 150 wells and 100 pumpsets successfully in 1969. Lüers had been sponsored by the German Church organisation „Dienste in Übersee“.

¹⁴ Brot für die Welt – Misereor: Entwicklungsland Indien (ca. 1972)

<http://tamilnadchristiancouncil.org/pdfs/Milestone%201%20&%202.pdf> Wells Pumpsets Programme - Year 1966, of which a survey was made by Hartmut Hegeler in 1972

<http://tamilnadchristiancouncil.org/pdfs/Milestone%203%20&%204.pdf> Crop Loan Programme – Phase I -1974



Lüder Lüers from Germany, founder of KNH (Kindernothilfe), 3rd from left) visits Deenabandupuram Centre with a team. (On the right Joseph John)

Milestone - Two Wells-Pumpsets – Phase II -1969-1970

The second phase of 100 wells and 150 pumpsets sponsored by the Central Agency, West Germany started in 1970. Since Mr. Lüder Lüers wanted to concentrate on his work with Kindernothilfe, he handed over the Agricultural Department to Dr Mithra Ebenezer, who was an Agricultural Graduate, in 1972. When he left in March 1972 Mr. Lüers had almost completed the task, leaving the final stage of completion to Dr Mithra Ebenezer.

The Central Office when Mr. Lüder Lüers was Head was situated in Deenabandupuram. After Mr. Lüder Lüers left in April 1972; the office was shifted to R.K. Pet about 5 miles from Deenabandupuram. In October 1972, the office was shifted to Madras for administrative convenience.

Wells-Pumpsets Programme – Phase III- 1973 The third phase of 120 wells and 120 pumpsets was started in April 1973 sponsored by Evangelische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe (EZE), Germany.





Constructing a well

Sources:

* Photo of Joseph John. He directs the World Neighbors-assisted Rural Life Center in Deenabandu, India. In: What did you do for the Third World Today? Transition: A Magazine for Former ACTION Volunteers, Vol. 1, No. 10, November 1972, p. 41

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* Prem Chandran John, international health planner. Profile in: Prabook.
https://prabook.com/web/prem_chandran.john/408979

* Brot für die Welt – Misereor: Entwicklungsland Indien (ca. 1972)

* Down memory lane. THE TAMILNAD CHRISTIAN COUNCIL ECONOMIC LIFE COMMITTEE. Backdrop.
<http://tamilnadchristiancouncil.org/pdfs/Milestone%201%20&%202.pdf>

* Eugene P. Heideman: From Mission to Church: The Reformed Church in America Mission to India, 2001, S. 410
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