

Love That Conquers Fear

Sri Lankan Christians face mounting opposition from the Buddhist majority, but their peaceful response to adversity is drawing others to the faith.

We pulled up outside the Kitulgala “Rock” church in darkness, after eight hours of rattling along gravel roads through Sri Lanka’s breathtaking hill country. The church-cum-house is built into the side of a cliff and decorated with a beaming neon cross.

At the door of the house, a small boy welcomed us with a 1,000-watt smile.

“He’s the junior pastor,” his proud father told us, patting 6-year-old Ranil* on his head. Our guide and interpreter explained that Ranil prays for people during church services, and they are healed.

People from distant villages came to the church after rumors of healing miracles spread. One man Ranil prayed for was healed of cancer. Because of the healings, new people arrive every Sunday, curious to learn more about Jesus.

The church was planted by an evangelist only a few years ago but already has a thriving membership—a remarkable feat, considering its location at the foot of Adam’s Peak, a key pilgrimage site for Sri Lanka’s 70 percent Buddhist majority.

As we talked, Pastor Rajendra handed us a fluorescent orange handbill. “This was given to every house in the village today,” he explained, “inviting people to a demonstration tomorrow.”

Buddhist monks at the local temple had called all the villagers to a meeting at 3 p.m. the next day to “chase out Christian missionaries and churches.” They castigated local shop owners for allowing Christians to set up a church at the foot of the venerated Adam’s Peak.

“It was from Adam’s Peak that Buddhism flowed into the country,” the handbill read, “but now there are two strong Christian churches in this town. ... Buddhist people, think about it and oppose this kind of activity and chase them out.”

These words are typical of the monks’ reaction to a quiet but growing revival in Sri Lanka. Between January 2003 and December 2004, mobs led by Buddhist monks attacked, looted or demolished more than 160 churches. Evangelists sent to unreached areas face incredible opposition and isolation, but they press on with the goal of sharing the gospel.

Buddhist monks, who in many areas have lost their traditional influence because of charges of corruption and social neglect, accuse Christians of engaging in “forced” or “unethical” conversions. Their complaints stem back to a time when Sri Lanka was settled by European colonialists. Though it may be true that the early missionaries used financial enticement to attract new converts, today’s Christians—including those in Kitulgala—vehemently deny such practices.

The church is built into a hillside and opens onto a main road. It has no back door and very few windows—in other words, no way of escape.

“Don’t you plan to move out before the demonstration?” we

asked Rajendra.

“No,” he replied. “God will look after us.”

This phrase seems to be the recurring anthem of the Sri Lankan church. Christians throughout the tiny island –vastly outnumbered by sometimes militant Buddhist neighbors—are simply not afraid.

On a gentle slope in another hillside town, a Methodist pastor stood in front of his 2-year-old church, a converted building once owned by a local bank. Two weeks earlier, a crowd of Buddhist monks had rushed up the hillside to attack the church during a service but suddenly, inexplicably, had stopped.

“Aren’t you afraid they’ll come back?” we asked.

“Afraid?” he replied. “Why should we be afraid? Our God is powerful!”

A senior Methodist minister shared another story about a church in eastern Sri Lanka. Buddhist monks objected to Christians gathering for worship in the town. Setting themselves up outside the church gates, they announced a sit-in fast until the church closed its doors.

Undeterred, church members gathered for a prayer meeting. This region had been without rain for weeks, but half an hour after the prayer meeting began the heavens opened with such a downpour that the monks had to abandon their post.

Irritated and embarrassed, the monks tacked posters to trees, billboards and shop-fronts, warning people not to attend the church.

On the following Sunday, two new faces appeared at the morning service. This couple had moved to the town several weeks previously—but until the posters went up, they had no idea there was a Christian church nearby.

In May 2004, the Buddhists pulled a new weapon from their arsenal—a nationwide anti-conversion law to stem “forced conversions.” Leaders of Catholic, Protestant and evangelical groups quickly released public statements denouncing the use of bribes to win new converts.

On August 17, the Supreme Court ruled that two articles in the proposed Act for the Prohibition of Forcible Conversions were unconstitutional. The monks then turned their attention to the constitution itself.

The Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees a “foremost place” to Buddhism and holds the government responsible for nurturing the Buddhist way of life. Not content with the foremost place, the monks proposed an amendment last September to make Buddhism the official state religion. This move was designed to create further restrictions for Sri Lanka’s 8 percent Christian minority.

At ground level, Christians seem unfazed by these political developments. At a community church in Wadduwa, rocks thrown at windows during church services are kept in a small pile near the pulpit to remind people of the cost of following Jesus.

The church was initially forced to close its doors in January 2004. When they risked a public service on Easter Sunday, a small crowd led by a senior Buddhist monk interrupted the meeting, slapping and beating congregants. On June 20, a crowd of 200 Buddhist villagers threw bricks, stones and petrol bombs at the church during a morning service.

Authorities finally forced Pastor Sarath to stop all public meetings, but members continued to meet in small house groups in Wadduwa and surrounding villages.

Sarath, a former Buddhist, once argued with Christians about their beliefs. "But when I was arguing with those people I realized who Jesus was," he says.

"Buddhism won't really answer those questions about how the world began or about sin," he adds. "That's why we have to keep preaching the gospel."

A young couple pioneering a church in Hikkaduwa would agree. Hounded from one rental property to another, the couple finally settled in an abandoned house owned by a foreigner who had used it for illicit sexual affairs with young boys.

Hikkaduwa, a town on the southern coast, once heralded itself as the only town in Sri Lanka with "no Hindu temple and no Christian church." When Harim and Susila moved here, a mob of 1,000 Buddhist villagers, spurred on by monks from the local temple, surrounded them and threatened to kill them, halted only by the intervention of the landlord.

Despite ongoing harassment, a small group of believers now meets in the couple's home. Harim and Susila showed us into a tiny room where a group of young people, all of them

relatively new converts, were practicing for street outreach. Their equipment—a guitar, drum set and percussion instruments—was fashioned out of garbage salvaged from the local dump.

“People are beginning to listen,” the bandleader told us. “They want to know what makes us different.”

“This is what ministry is all about,” Harim nodded, taking his wife’s hand. “Everything comes against us, but we’re willing to face it for the sake of His kingdom.”

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