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Mary Geegh: A Missionary of Love and Faith in India

By Carolyn Thornbury

For 38 years, Mary Geegh (1897-1999) served as a missionary in India for the Reformed Church of America, while Holland's local churches supported Geegh's efforts to establish her own school overseas. Though abroad, the Trinity Reformed Church and Hope College's student newspaper, *The Anchor*, documented her work as a teacher by publishing some of the farewell letters that her schools gave her and through correspondence from Geegh herself.¹ Mary Geegh embodied the warmth and passion Holland has for its community and through her missionary work, was able to spread the heart of Holland outside of its city limits and across the world.



Before her career in India, Geegh was already known for fully pouring herself into those around her. Her peers at Holland High School noted her quiet and peaceful disposition in their signings of their 1916 yearbook.² However, by no means did

Mary's willowy stature and demure presence undercut her spirited approach towards her life. She swept the floor during her declamation speeches and was recognized as the first woman in Holland to be seen riding a bicycle.³ Geegh went on to study English at Hope College, graduating in 1920. It is no surprise, then, that her temperament inclined her towards mission work across the world.

Geegh's teaching began in Chittoor, where she decided to work with the community's underprivileged children, including those whose families were lower income, children without one or both parents in the home, and

those with limited schooling up until her work. She began working at Sherman Memorial High School where she taught geography. Geegh incorporated her Christian values into her work and learned the native language of Telugu to thoroughly connect with her students.⁴ In her book, *God Guides*, Geegh shared a memory from her time in Chittoor, in which some of her students came up to her after school asking for help with a family matter. The three girls confided the stress of their home life and sought advice on how to deal with the matter. Without hesitation, Geegh took them in to comfort their worries. She explained her process of meditating with her Bible to seek comfort and guidance from the Lord. Her students were fascinated with Geegh's approach and listened with rapt attention to hear more about her faith.⁵



After her time in Chittoor, Geegh returned to Vellore in 1937, a city in Tamil Nadu, where she had briefly been 13 years earlier. When reflecting on her experiences in Vellore, she focused on working as a white missionary during India's independence movement. The rising racial tensions altered Geegh's missions. The context called for her to take a step back from her direct approach as slogans such as "White man, go home" cropped up in response to British rule. Realizing missions on her own would be ineffective as well as insensitive, Geegh began

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From the Collections Archivist



At the Joint Archives, we collect and preserve a variety of materials, then make them widely available for future learning and use. Our website is just one way in which we do this. If you have visited our pages recently, you may have noticed some newer content, including our [Collections Search](#) feature.

This tool allows researchers to explore archival collections by keyword, by subject, by name, or even alphabetically. These changes should make our collections more accessible, and encourage you to re-discover the archives online.

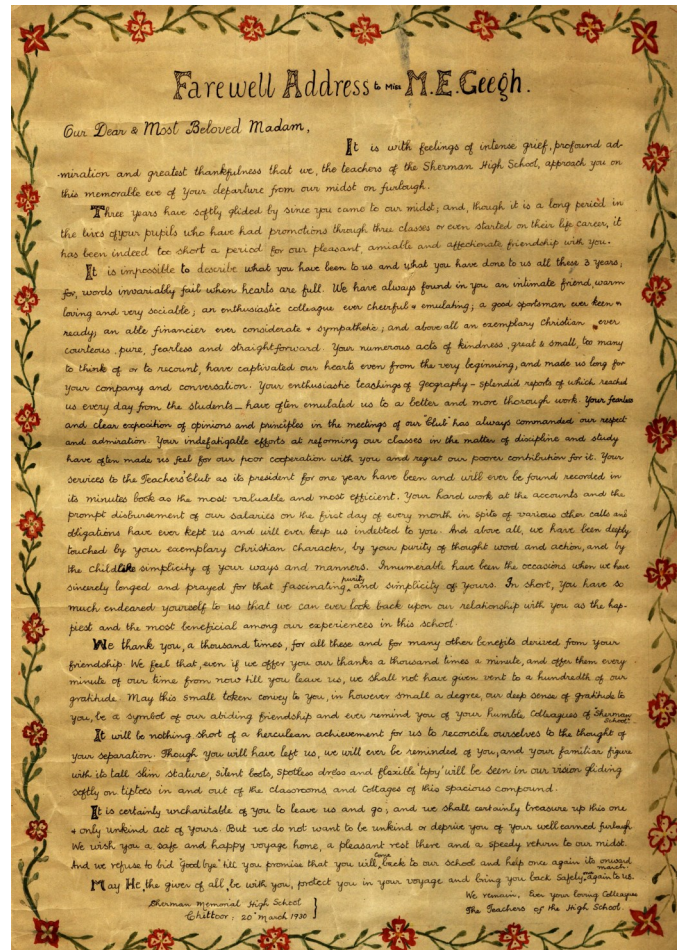
In this issue, student archival assistant Carolyn Thornbury writes about one of the newest additions to our available research collections, the Mary E. Geegh Papers. The mementos Geegh saved document her experiences in India and her lifelong connections to West Michigan. I hope that you enjoy her story as much as we do, and that it brings a fresh perspective to understanding “local history.”

Sarah Lundy

to work with Indian missionaries local to Vellore. The Indian missionaries led the work, since they were the first to be welcomed into the city’s homes. But once Geegh was introduced as a non-colonial presence, with no agenda other than to share her faith, she was eagerly welcomed alongside her peers. She changed her traditional missionary approach from sharing the same Bible stories and lessons across houses to focus on each woman’s individual needs. Understanding Geegh as a white woman working in India during the independence movement, contextualizes why she centered her missions around the local’s needs, rather than immediately imposing her own lifestyle.⁶

Her colleagues at Sherman Memorial described Geegh as an “exemplary Christian,” an honor that accurately summarized her work as an English teacher in her next stop, Madanapalle.⁷ Writing to Trinity Church from the Church of South India Girls’ School in 1955, Geegh shared how she had seen the spirit of the town shift towards “a spirit of friendliness” since her first years there.⁸ She wrote, “There is a change all around, and I need to see where I, too, must change, to demonstrate more fully the faith that is in me.”⁹ She sent an update again the next year to joyfully report the profound impact the support of Trinity Church had in Madanapalle. Geegh emphasized its financial support helped C.S.I Girls’ School operate, as the Church of South India maintained close ties with the Reformed Church of America.¹⁰

Geegh’s influence was not only being noticed back in Michigan, but to her Mandanapalle community as well. Geegh did not often exalt herself, but everyone else that she had worked with had no issue with doing so. In a whirlwind of admiration, Holland’s churches were dedicating their services to her, while her schools in India gushed over her presence in farewell letters.



Geegh’s students, who were middle-school aged while she served Mandanapalle, gave a simplistic, but heartfelt, recount of her presence at their school.¹¹ They focused on her quiet humming as she walked around her school yard, some of which may have been hymns found in the pocket-sized songbook she kept in her library.¹² The girls admitted how she continually lifted their spirits the moment they entered class.¹³ Not only was it because they finally were able to leave math class, a point they emphasized, but because Geegh took a personal interest in each of them.¹⁴ Geegh guided her students to model the character she had exemplified ever since she was a student at Holland High. *The Anchor* published one such “Farewell Address” from her fellow members of the C.S.I Church in Madanapalle. Her church built upon the admiration of her students, with an additional reverence of her faith.¹⁵

Stories such as these show how Geegh modeled her Christian spirit, not just in words, but in action. Christian

love flowered wherever she stepped because she was continually willing to patiently show others how her faith took form in her own life. Geegh's opus of love towards her community was building her own nursery school in Madanapalle in 1957.¹⁶ She was only able to do this through the Trinity Reformed Church's Ladies Aid Society in Holland, whose members raised the funds to make the school a possibility.¹⁷ Mother Geegh's Nursery School provided free education, healthcare, church services, and even housing to students and staff who could not afford any.¹⁸ After working with low income students her entire career, she took it upon herself to provide accessible care. The mission of the school was centered around the Reformed Church's belief and aspiration to model God's love to those around oneself. Mary Geegh was able to take that purpose and spread it into India, specifically in Madanapalle, where she spent most of her time.



In the spirit of this mission, Geegh's great-niece, Linn Gann, revisited her aunt's nursery school over

40 years after its founding. As a banker, Gann was eager to lend her accounting skills with the hope of financially stabilizing the school for years to come. Upon her arrival in Madanapalle, however, Gann discovered that the donation address was incomplete, meaning none of the material or monetary gifts had arrived at the school. Though the school's devoted, albeit overworked, staff kept the school scarcely afloat, the halted funds from the Reformed Church threatened the future of the school. To save the school from this bleak fate, Gann rallied enough donations from churches and humanitarian organizations to keep her great-aunt's school alive.¹⁹

Geegh's work in India is only one example of how Holland's missionaries brought change to the world as a whole. Her letters to local churches, such as Trinity and Calvin, are placed alongside those of missionaries who shared Geegh's hopeful message. From Niger to India, each message shows a common thread of thankfulness to Trinity Church for their spiritual and financial support.²⁰

Mary Geegh retired in 1962 and returned to Holland, where she remained a member of Trinity Reformed Church.²¹ It was during her retirement Geegh wrote *God Guides*, which detailed the miracles she witnessed while in India.²² With the help of her great-niece's update on her school, Geegh continued to organize fundraisers at Trinity Church to allow her nursery to continue.²³ Mary Geegh passed away in Holland in 1999, at the age of 101, leaving behind a legacy of exemplary Christianity and care for those who needed her attention the most.

About the author:

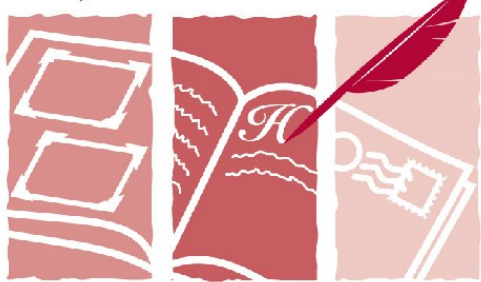


Carolyn Thornbury is from New York City, and is currently a sophomore at Hope College. She is double majoring in History and Classical Studies, with a minor in Political Science. Outside of her classes, Carolyn enjoys reading, seeing movies with her friends, and baking. After graduating, she is considering researching ancient Roman history alongside continuing archival work.

Endnotes:

- ¹Members of the Church of South India, Madanapalle to Mary Geegh, September 16, 1962. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.
- ²Holland High School, *Boomerang*, 1916, Holland, Michigan.
- ³*The Grand Rapids Press*, "Services for missionary who started school in India," April 22, 1999.
- ⁴Kym Schuetz, *The Grand Rapids Press*, "Holland's Mother Teresa celebrates 100th birthday," December 22, 1997.
- ⁵Mary Geegh, *God Guides*, (Holland, MI: Missionary Press, 1970), p. 15-17.
- ⁶Mary Geegh, *God Guides*, (Holland, MI: Missionary Press, 1970), p. 17-18.
- ⁷Teachers of Sherman Memorial High School to Mary Geegh, March 20, 1930. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ⁸Mary Geegh to Trinity Church and Sunday School, August 27, 1955. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ⁹Mary Geegh to Trinity Church and Sunday School, August 27, 1955. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ¹⁰Mary Geegh to Trinity Church, February 4, 1956. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ¹¹Students of Church of South India Girls' School to Mary Geegh, n.d. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ¹²George M. Fraser and Oxford Group. *Songs of the Rising Tide*. (London, England: Lowe and Brydone Printers, n.d).
- ¹³Fifth Form School Girls to Mary Geegh, n.d. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ¹⁴Members of the Church of South India, Madanapalle to Mary Geegh, September 16, 1962. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.
- ¹⁵*The Grand Rapids Press*, "Services for missionary who started school in India," April 22, 1999.
- ¹⁶Kym Schuetz, *The Grand Rapids Press*, "Holland's Mother Teresa celebrates 100th birthday," December 22, 1997.
- ¹⁷Kym Schuetz, *The Grand Rapids Press*, "Holland's Mother Teresa celebrates 100th birthday," December 22, 1997.
- ¹⁸Mary Geegh to Trinity Church, February 4, 1956. W14-1421. Mary Geegh Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI.
- ¹⁹*The Grand Rapids Press*, "Mary Geegh," January 31, 1999.
- ²⁰Mary Geegh, *God Guides*, (Holland, MI: Missionary Press, 1970).
- ²¹Dave Yonkman, *The Holland Sentinel*, "Mission work was woman's passion," February 1, 1999.

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