

Sophia Blackmore



***The young woman whose
life blessed hundreds,
because she obeyed the Lord***

ALDERSGATE 1995

***Prepared by:
The Board of Christian Education (TRAC)
The Methodist Church in Singapore
11 Mount Sophia, John Wesley Centre
Block B, #B1-07
Singapore 0922***

INTRODUCTION

Sophia Blackmore is well-known to MGS and Fairfield pupils as the missionary who founded their schools. But many may not know that she also founded a girls' hostel, and helped to plant a church. She did so because she obeyed the Lord.

Sophia was born on 18 October 1857 into a devout Wesleyan (English Methodist) family in Australia. As a child, she heard a great deal from her mother about the missionaries in China and Africa. Whether she decided then to be a missionary is not known, but having to help to look after her siblings postponed any ambitions she may have had for that period of time.

However, a chance meeting with a visiting American Methodist evangelist, Isabella Leonard, changed her life. Miss Leonard advised her to "seek all Christ has for you". That notion really struck her, and she 'told the Lord that at the bottom of my heart that was what I most wanted'.

This began a pilgrimage which took her, step by step, until she sailed into Singapore Harbour on 16 July 1887. Here, she laboured for 40 years, educating the women and girls of this land, and influencing thousands of others as well.

GOD MOVES IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY

Becoming a lady missionary was no easy task in the 19th century, but Sophia was led by God to overcome the obstacles, one by one, until she conquered them all.

To begin with, the Australian Church did not send out unmarried women missionaries. But Miss Leonard knew that the American women did, and so made it possible for Sophia to accompany her as far as India, where there was much work. There were no promises — only that God would find an answer.

In India, they met Rev William Oldham, who had founded the Mission and the ACS in Singapore. He had asked the Methodist Women's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) for a woman missionary to work among the mothers and sisters of the boys who attended ACS. Unfortunately, funds were short; but Mrs Mary Nind, Secretary of the Minneapolis Branch, exclaimed the famous words, 'Frozen Minnesota will send help to perishing souls on the Equator,' promising to raise \$6,000 to

open work in Singapore. But, there was no one available; the women of Minneapolis and Mrs Nind organised an all-day prayer meeting, asking the Lord to answer their prayers.



Photo taken in 1895 when Mrs Nind Visited Singapore. L to R: Emma Ferris, Mary C. Nind, Eva Foster, Sophia Blackmore.

It was about then that Oldham met Sophia in Madras, where he was attending a Methodist Church conference. Meeting her convinced Oldham that Sophia was God's answer to his prayers.

He immediately offered Sophia to the ladies as a candidate, but that was to take time. Sophia waited patiently and, trusting in God's promises, decided to stay in India to work as a teacher in a girls' school in Moradabad.

However, on the very day she started teaching, she received word from Mr Oldham that she had been appointed to Singapore, "meeting place of nations ... most appallingly in need of woman's work".

MISSION IN A STRANGE LAND

In 1887, Singapore was a strange place indeed, with strange people, following strange customs and speaking a strange language. Anyone might have found this daunting, but not Sophia, who may have wondered if her efforts could match the flourishing Church and School started by Oldham.

Within one month of arriving in Singapore, on 15 August 1887, she started the Tamil Girls' School for the 'nine little girls, with earnest brown eyes and smooth hair, dressed in their very best silken garments and adorned with much jewellery'. They were daughters of Tamil businessmen who wanted their girls to study in a school,

donating money, furniture and a rent-free shophouse in Short Street. The future Methodist Girls' School grew steadily and moved, first to the Christian Institute in Middle Road, then back to a new building in Short Street, and then to the summit of Mt Sophia where it functioned until 1992.



Some of Sophia's students

Sophia lost little time in establishing a mission in Chinatown, visiting the homes of Baba women, particularly around Neil Road. They spoke Baba Malay, a variety of Malay she was learning. They were inquisitive, curious to know where she came from, whether married, how old she was, and why her mother did not get her married off. She weathered these embarrassing questions with her shaky Baba Malay and keen sense of humour, conscious that she was the Lord's ambassador.

Before long, she was regularly visiting 90 homes, making more than 800 visits in one year! The ladies, themselves uneducated, and hardly ever allowed to go out, gradually became eager to know the Truth and asked her to teach their children about Jesus. Within one year, in August 1888, Sophia was able to start a Chinese girls' school, with 8 little girls, in Cross Street. It was to be known Fairfield MGS, after a generous American who had given money for the building in Neil Road.

NO HOME? NO PLACE LIKE NIND HOME

S Sophia began taking in homeless girls when Mr Oldham requested her to take in the sister of the boy who had

been accepted by the ACS Boarding School. From this one girl, her Deaconess Home was to take in many others, some narrowly escaping being sold. By 1911, on its 21st birthday, and now re-named Nind Home in honour of the lady who had the vision, there were over 100.



Founder's Day at Nind Home (June/July 1932)

Keeping Nind Home open was not an easy task — money was always a problem, and it was saved on several occasions by timely gifts from those who cared. The little girls themselves had grown to fear the ‘hantu and pontianaks and unseen things’, and it was here that they were taught how the Heavenly Father cared for them. There were outbreaks of illness; some were forced to leave. But the Home survived; the girls grew up well-trained and educated.

By the time Nind Home closed when the Japanese occupied the country, it had provided hundreds of girls with a Christian home environment. Many became good mothers, teachers, business and professional folk, and leaders of the community. Ellice Handy (nee Zuberbuhler) was one, becoming first Asian Principal of MGS after WWII.

All had learnt to read and write, to memorise Bible verses and pray at all times. Most of all, they had learnt to put their trust in the Lord. The prayer the girls said at bedtime puts it best:

*“Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”*

PLANTING A CHURCH

Sophia also played a key role in planting one of the earliest Methodist churches. Her girls at Nind Home, worshipping in Baba Malay, were the first Methodist group to do this. They met at first in their study room, and then moved to the Middle Road school building in 1894 and became the ‘Baba Church’. Here, the Church began to grow steadily, but it was the Sunday School that soon attracted hundreds of children.

So popular were the Sunday School classes, that they had to meet elsewhere — in the regular school rooms, and, on weekdays, along the five-foot way, sometimes in the open. They were interrupted by noisy hawkers, spectators, and even irate mothers who dragged their children away by the scruff of the neck. But the numbers grew, until there were as many as 900 children at one time! Sophia was glad to have assistance from lady helpers and young men from the Epworth League (Youth Group), while she herself taught several classes. Their singing, particularly of their favourite song, ‘Jesus Loves Me’, attracted the neighbourhood children. They also eagerly looked forward to stories of Jesus in the language they readily understood.

In this way, the Baba Church attracted people from the two Girls’ Schools, as well as from the ACS, together with others who were attracted to the preaching. It grew rapidly to become Kampong Kapor Methodist Church, one of the most influential Methodist churches in Malaya and Singapore.

FORTY YEARS ON

Sophia went home to Australia in 1928. She had indeed been a faithful servant because she had ‘sought all that Christ had for her’. Through her, the lives of many hundreds had been touched, all because she had responded to her Master’s call to serve Him in simple faith, knowing that

Jesus loves me...

For the Bible tells me so.

*Written by
Mr Earnest Lau*

*Archivist
The Methodist Church in Singapore*