Samuel Azariah and the founding of the Indian Missionary Society

One of the legacies of the British Empire is that many stories told of the church and the growth of Christianity in India and African nations is told from the perspective of white British missionaries. However, during this period, there were many Indian and African Christians who were instrumental in the growth of Christianity in their countries, but their stories have not been recorded.

One man we do know about was Samuel Azariah, who was born in Tirunelveli, southern India, in 1874. His parents were Indian Christians and they sent him to his local mission school. After graduating from the Church Mission college, he became a secondary school teacher.

When he went on a trip to Sri Lanka, he met Sri Lankan Christians who told him about their missionary work in southern India. Their work challenged Samuel to become involved in telling others about the Christian message. And so, in 1903, Samuel and a group of his friends set up the Indian Missionary Society which would enable this to happen effectively.

In 1909, Samuel was ordained as an Anglican priest. In the following year Samuel travelled to Edinburgh, Scotland, to attend the World Missionary Conference. He spoke passionately about the need for local people to spread the Christian message in their own countries rather than sending people from other cultures. He was critical of missionaries who travelled to India but looked down on Indian people, and those who used their position for power and control. Not everyone who heard Samuel’s message received it favourably, but almost everyone agreed it was time to support the Indian people in their missionary work. Putting this into practice was a lot harder, as it required the British missionary societies relinquishing some of their power and a change in the way of thinking about mission.

In 1912 Samuel was made an Anglican Bishop. He was a pioneer. Through his work, he enabled the Church in India to flourish. With Indian people becoming priests, church leadership could be passed into the hands of local people. Samuel instigated change in the way that missionary organisations work. Mission relationships between churches in the UK and churches in other countries began to be seen as partnerships where Christians in different countries could learn from each other and any sense of superiority is challenged. The effects of his work can be seen in India and the practice of many missionary organisations today.