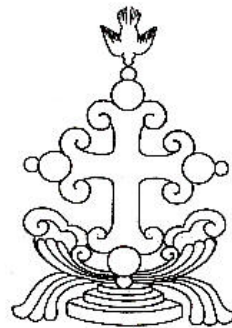


The Syrian Christians of Penang

Rexy Prakash Chacko





PHT Talk



THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS OF PENANG

Unbeknownst to many, a community known as the Syrian Christians—who trace their faith heritage to the earliest days of Christianity—lives among us in Penang. Originally from Kerala, India, this community traces its roots to the evangelistic activity of St. Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century AD. They have established themselves in Malaysia, more specifically Penang, for about a century. Yet, their presence and origins are seldom spoken about within Penang's rich multicultural tapestry. Join us for this talk as we journey through the eyes of a young Penang-born Syrian Christian to explore the history, faith heritage, and cultural legacy of this small but remarkable community.

Rexy Prakash

Rexy Prakash Chacko is an engineer by profession and a nature lover by passion. As the author and co-author of four books on nature-related topics, he is better known for his interest in hiking and wild orchid research. However, Rexy—being part of the miniscule Syrian Christian community in Penang—also has a deep interest in his community's heritage. He has travelled to Kerala, India and Tur Abdin, Turkey—important centres of Syriac Christianity—to understand and learn about the history and liturgical practices of his faith community.

Date: 26 Oct 2025, Sunday

Time: 2pm to 3pm

Venue: Penang Heritage Trust

Fee: Member RM10 Non-member RM20



Register Now



Contact Us

04-2642631 /

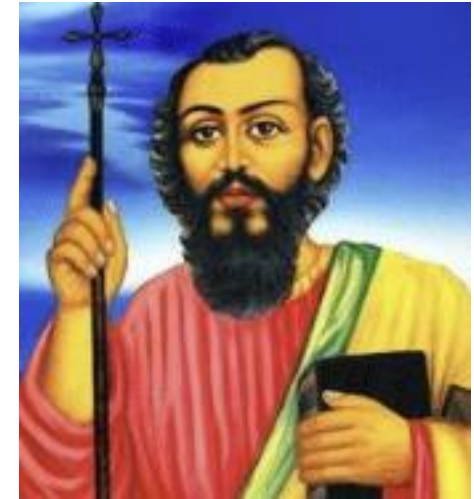
Email: info@pht.org.my

Why are we called Syrian Christians?

Are we from...Syria?

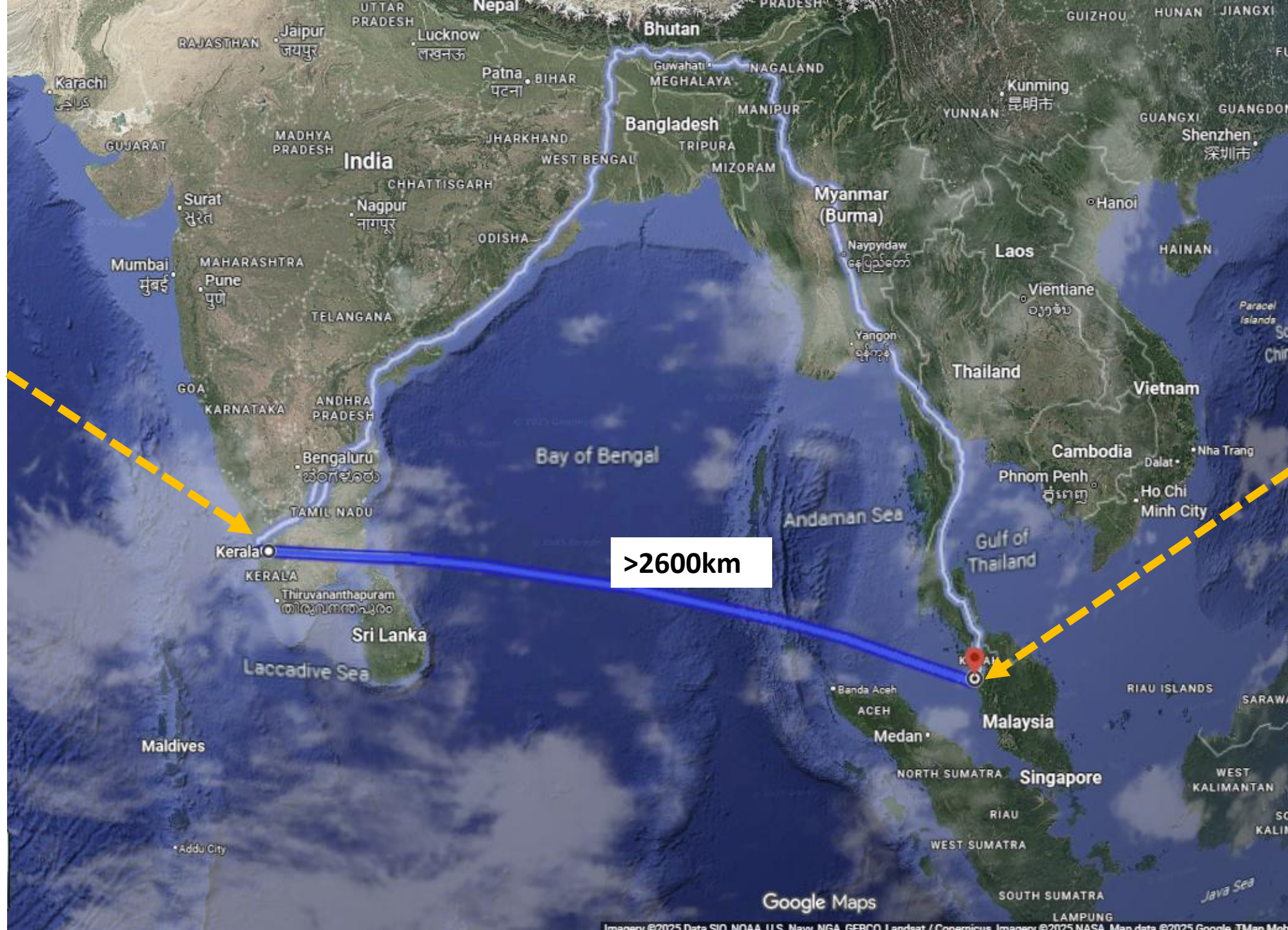


- **No**, we are not from Syria...
- Our ancestors hail from the Malabar Coast (today's Kerala in India). The reason we are called “**Syrian**” Christian is because we follow the Syriac Liturgy (form of worship).
- Community formed in the 1st cent AD and originally called the **St Thomas Christians** or just **Nasrani**. It was formed through St Thomas' evangelization in 1st cent AD. In the subsequent centuries influenced by Church of the East (Syriac Christianity).
- “Syrian” is an archaic translation (before founding of Syrian Arab Republic) of the word “Suriyani”.
- In modern English, *Suryani Kristiani* (സുറിയാനി ക്രിസ്ത്യാനി) would be translated more accurately as ‘Syriac Christian’.



St Thomas

Kerala,
India

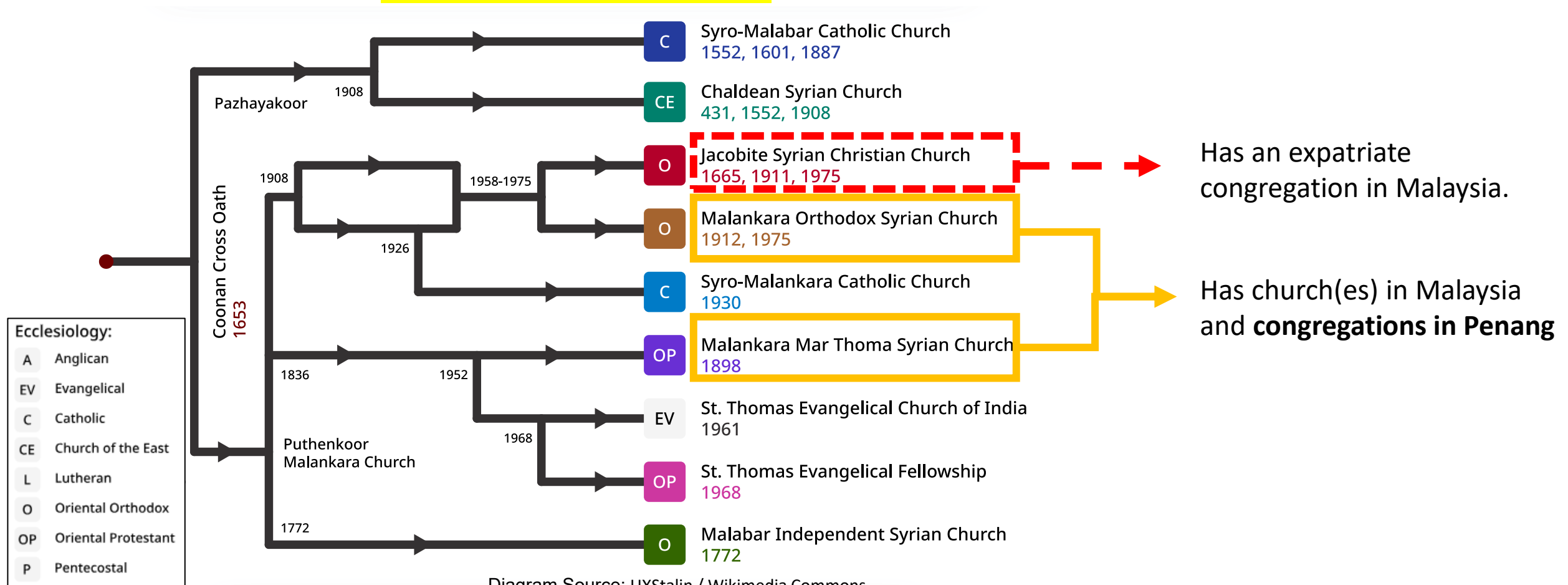


Penang,
Malaysia

Do all Syrian Christians belong to the same denomination / church?

- They were one church community till foreign (Portuguese) intervention in the 16th century.
- After 16th century, splits happened and there are now several churches that fall under the 'Syrian Christian' umbrella.

Branches & Denominations

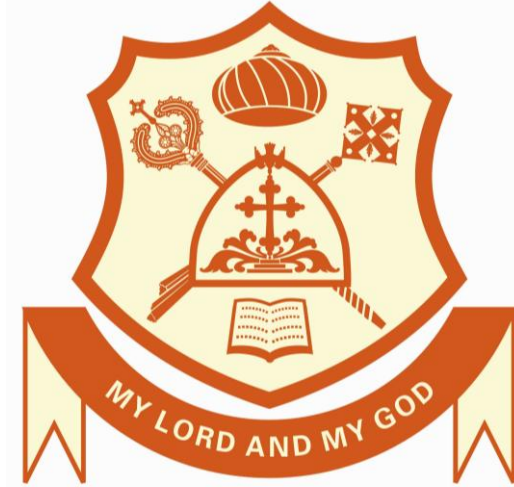


Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church



- Often referred to as just 'Mar Thoma'.
- Ecclesiology is **Oriental Protestant**. Follows a reformed version of the Liturgy of St James (Reformed West Syriac-Malankara Rite).
- Formed in the 1890s from the nucleus of the Malankara Church.
- Has several churches throughout Malaysia.
- Small congregation in Penang numbers less than 20 members

Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church



- Often referred to as just 'Orthodox'. Mistakenly referred to as 'Jacobite'.
- Ecclesiology is **Oriental Orthodox**. Follows the Liturgy of St James (West Syriac-Malankara Rite).
- Formed in 1912 from the nucleus of the Malankara Church.
- Has one church in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- Small congregation in Penang numbers less than 20 members (including expatriates from India).

Syrian Christian Worship Service is called the **Holy Qurbana**

'Qurbana' meaning 'Sacrifice' in Syriac , hence 'Holy Qurbana' means 'Holy Sacrifice'



Opening of the Setro (Red Curtain), at the beginning of the public celebration of the Holy Qurbana in Manjanikkara Monastery (Jacobite), Kerala.

Photo Credit: Remy P. Chacko

Scenes from the Holy Qurbana & Nativity service in the Cathedral of St Mary the Theotokos (Orthodox) in Kuala Lumpur.

Photo Credit: 1. Simon Varghese 2. Remy P. Chacko

Liturgy Book – to guide the congregation through worship

Mar Thoma Liturgy and Hymnal Book in English

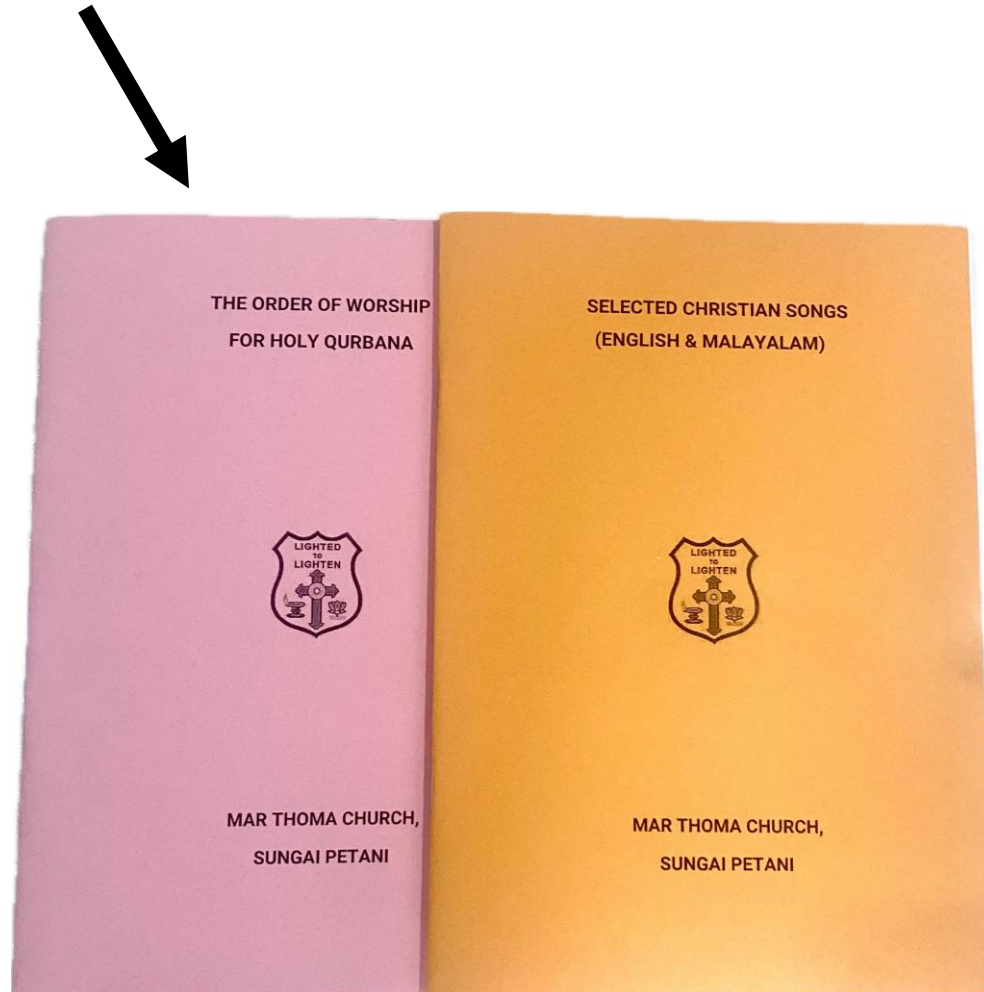


Photo Credit: Melvin John

Orthodox Liturgy Book in Malayalam and English



Photo Credit: Remy P. Chacko

Languages

The Lord's Prayer (Mathew 6:9-13)

Malayalam (Vernacular)

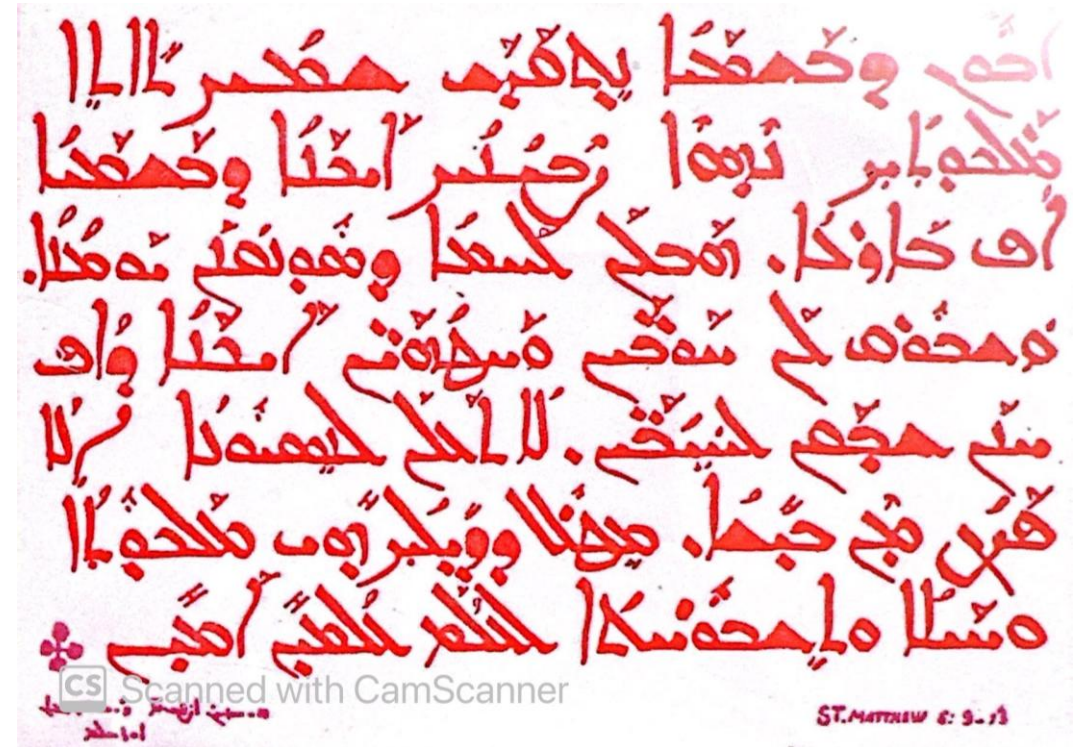
പട്ടക്കാർ:- (ഒരു പ്രാർത്ഥന. അവസാനത്തിൽ) സ്വർഗ്ഗസ്ഥനായ ഞങ്ങളുടെ പിതാവേ!

ജനം:- നിന്റെ തിരുനാമം പരിശുദ്ധമാക്കപ്പെടണമേ. നിന്റെ രാജ്യം വരണമേ. നിന്റെ തിരുവിഷ്ടം സ്വർഗ്ഗത്തിലെപ്പോലെ ഭൂമിയിലും ആകണമേ. ഞങ്ങൾക്ക് ആവശ്യമുള്ള അപ്പം ഇന്ന് ഞങ്ങൾക്ക് തരണമേ. ഞങ്ങളുടെ കടക്കാരോട് ഞങ്ങൾ ക്ഷമിച്ചതുപോലെ ഞങ്ങളുടെ കടങ്ങളും പാപങ്ങളും ഞങ്ങളോട് ക്ഷമിക്കണമേ. പരീക്ഷയിലേക്ക് ഞങ്ങളെ പ്രവേശിപ്പിക്കരുതേ. പിന്നെയോ ദുഷ്ടനിൽനിന്ന് ഞങ്ങളെ രക്ഷിച്ചുകൊള്ളണമേ. എന്തുകൊണ്ടെന്നാൽ രാജ്യവും ശക്തിയും മഹത്വവും എന്നേക്കും നിനക്കുള്ളതാകുന്നു. ആമീൻ.

Malayalam is a Dravidian Language.

Spoken by Malayalees. Main language in Kerala, India. Evolved out of Tamil about 1000 years ago.

Syriac (Liturgical/Worship Language)



Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic.

Spoken by Syriacs in Levant, Upper Mesopotamia (SE Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon)

Cultural practices



Margam Kali



Nasrani Theenmura



Pesaha Appam



Tying of the Minnu during Wedding

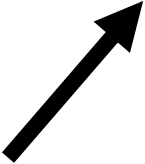


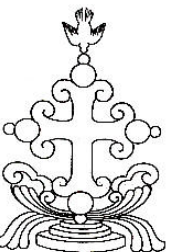
Chattayum Mundum

Common Names among Syrian Christians

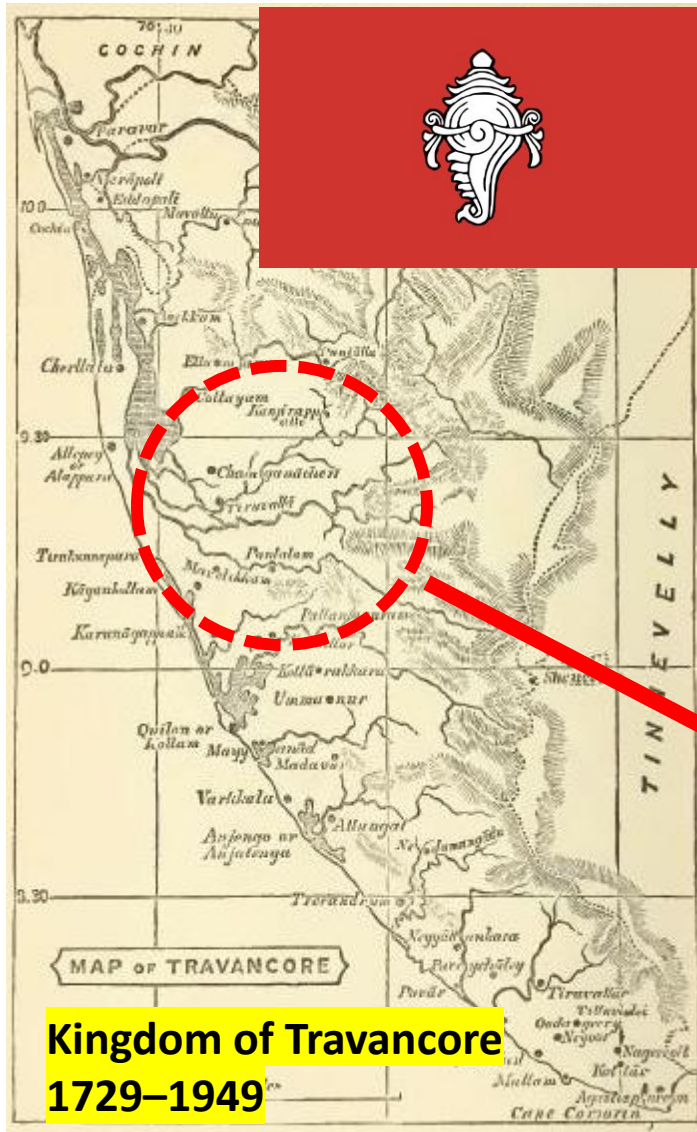
No	Malayalam-ised Syriac Name	English Translation of the original Syriac
1	Chacko	Jacob
2	Cherian	Zachariah
3	Kuriakose	'Of the Lord'
4	Kuruvilla / Kurien	'Of the Lord', derived from No. 3
5	Verghese / Vergis	George

Naming Convention (e.g.): K. T. Alexander


Kanianthara Thomas Alexander
(Family (Father's (Individual's
Name) Name) Name)



Migration of Syrian Christians to Malaya (specifically Penang)

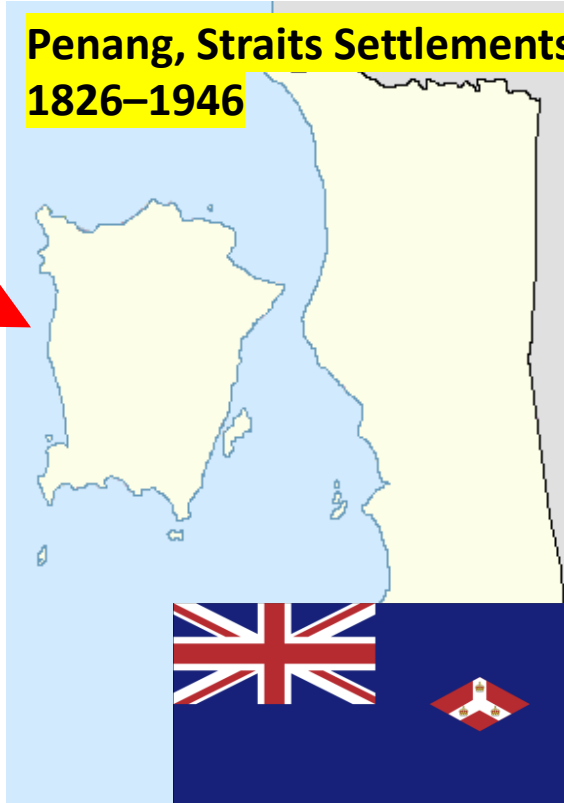


**Kingdom of Travancore
1729–1949**

Map and flag source: Wikimedia commons

- Migration of Syrian Christians to Malaya occurred in the 1900s. Ninan Inspector was the first Syrian Christian to land in Malaya (T.K. Ninan, 1994)
- Most of the early Syrian Christians migrants came from central parts of Travancore (before formation of Kerala), e.g. Tiruvalla, Aranmula, Kozhencherry
- Travel to Malaya was by ship, Madras to Penang. Some came on SS Rajula.

**Penang, Straits Settlements
1826–1946**



- “Many of the early Malayalee Christians disembarked at Port Swettenham (Klang) ... much less in Penang” (T.K. Nainan, 1994)
- K.C. Alexander arrived in Penang in 1928.
- Rev Fr. T.J. Joseph, an Orthodox priest arrived in Penang in 1936.
- Successive waves came after WW2 to Merdeka (1957).
- From the 1980s, a number of Syrian Christians expatriates and those from other states came to Penang to work in the FTZ.

Important institutions in the lives of Syrian Christians in Penang

Religious

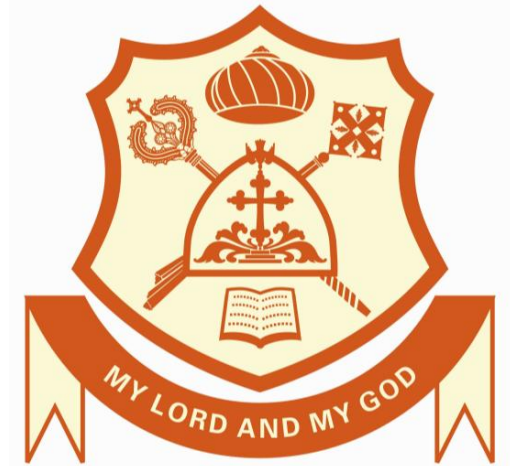
Mar Thoma



- Organized as the Penang Parish.
- Meets the spiritual needs of the Mar Thoma community in Penang.
- Used to meet in Penang, but in recent years has been meeting in Sungai Petani, Kedah.
- Visiting priest comes from Klang church.

Religious

Orthodox



- Organized as the Penang Congregation.
- Meets the spiritual needs of the Orthodox community in Penang.
- Meets in Penang.
- Visiting priest comes from Kuala Lumpur church.

Socio-Cultural

North Malaysia Malayali Samajam (NMMS)

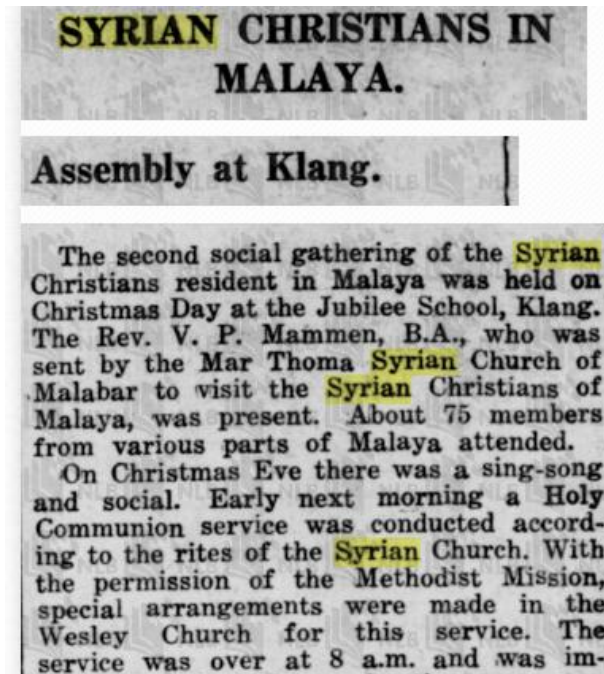


- Also known as “Kerala Samajam”, founded in 1951. Syrian Christians played a role in its formation.
- Non-political and non-religious. Fosters social, educational and cultural interest in the Malayalee community.
- Well known for its Onam and Merdeka celebrations each year on 31st Aug.

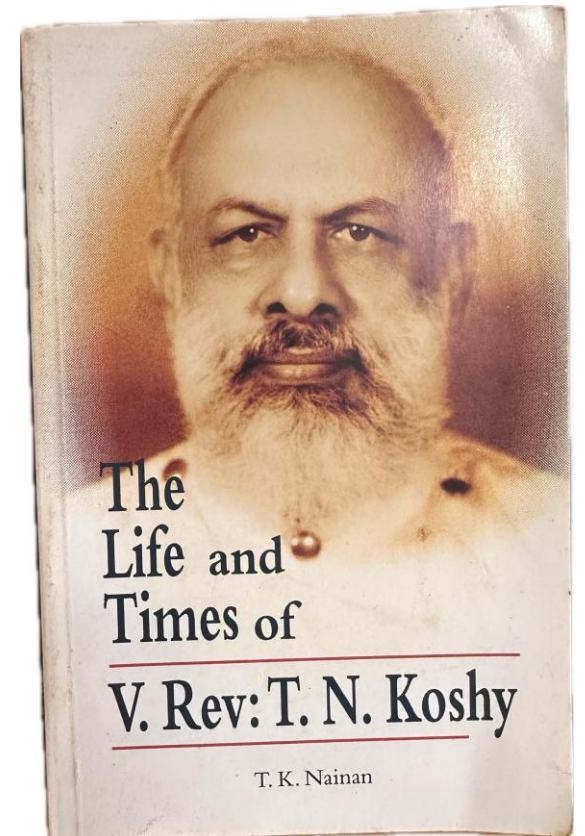
Mar Thoma Church in Penang



- The 1st "Syrian Christian Social Gathering" was held in Klang on 25th Dec 1926, attended not just by those in Klang but a "**few from far away Penang**" (T.K. Nainan, 1994)
- The 2nd social gathering in 1928, also in Klang had in attendance an 'Abraham Joseph' based in Penang.
- The visiting priest during the 2nd social gathering, Rev V.P. Mammen went on to visit Marthomites in Penang.
- *"The **Marthomites of Penang**, Kuala Lumpur and other places took the initiative to obtain an Achen (Priest). But those in Singapore and places around had little faith of such a prospect"* (T.K. Nainan, 1994).
- These efforts bore fruit when Very Reverend T.N. Koshy (Koshy Achen), was posted to Malaya in 1936.
- Koshy Achen travelled extensively to tend to the needs of the Mar Thoma community in Malaya-Singapore including Penang.
- By 1966, there were monthly Mar Thoma services in Penang and Butterworth. It was conducted by a Rev C.K. Varughese (T.K. Nainan, 1994).
- Currently services are held each quarter of the year, in Sungai Petani



Malaya Tribune, 31 December 1928



Mar Thoma Church in Penang



Mar Thoma Church activity in Tanjung Bungah, 1990s



Mar Thoma Church service in Sungai Petani, 2025



Very Reverend K.S. Mathew in Sungai Petani Mar Thoma Community Center, 2024

Orthodox Church in Penang



- Arrival of K.C. Alexander in Penang in 1928 (a member of the Orthodox Church)
- Rev Fr. T.J. Joseph, an Orthodox priest arrived in Penang in 1936.
- Services were held each quarter of the year in the 2000s till 2020. Services restarted in Penang in September 2025.

Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle
8 Dec 1936

**ORTHODOX SYRIAN
PRIEST**

**Arriving In Penang On
Thursday**

Rev. Fr. T. J. Joseph M.A.B.D. of the ancient **Orthodox** Syrian Church, Malankara, established by St. Thomas the Apostle of India in the 1st Century (A.D. 52) will be arriving in **Penang** on Thursday by S.S. Rajula. He has been newly appointed as the Vicar in charge of her Church in Malaya, by his Holiness Moran Mar, Basselios, Geevarughese II, the Catholicos of the East. The supreme head of the Church is his Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius, Afreem II, the Patriarch of Antioch, the successor of St. Peter.

The Singapore Free Press and
Mercantile Advertiser
12 Dec 1936

The Rev. Fr. T. J. Joseph, M.A.B.D., of the ancient **Orthodox** Syrian Church, Malankara, established by St. Thomas the Apostle of India in the 1st Century (A.D. 52) has arrived in **Penang** by s.s. Rajula. He has been newly appointed as the Vicar in Charge of the Church in Ma'aya, by his Holiness Moran Mar, Basselios, Geevarughese II, the Catholicos of the East. The supreme head of the Church is His Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius, Afreem II, the Patriarch of Antiech, the successor of St. Peter.

Arrival of the Rev Fr. T.J. Joseph received coverage in the local media

Orthodox Church in Penang today



Holy Qurbana (Communion Service) conducted by Rev. Fr. Joshua Jacob in September 2025



Pastoral visit by Very Rev. Philip Thomas Cor Episcopa in April 2025

Photo Credit (Clockwise): 1. & 4. Remy P. Chacko, 2. - 3. & 5. Ephraim K. Varugheese

Syrian Christians in the North Malaysia Malayali Samajam



Above is a group photograph of the Penang and Province Wellesley Kerala Samajam Working Committee Members. SITTING (left to right): Messrs. P. R. Nair (Hon. Secretary) C. Abdullah (Vice President); R. K. Krishnan (vice President); M. C. Chacko (President); P. K. Kesavan (Hon. Treasurer) Mrs. Bhargavi Kesavan; Mrs. R. G. Senan; STANDING—1st. row (left to right): Messrs. K. A. Kurup; P. M. Anandan Nair; K. Anandan Nair; V. V. Joseph; C. Kumar B.A., V. C. Mathews; K. Chakrapani (Hon. Asst. Secretary) C. Unikrishnan B.A. (Literary Secretary); STANDING 2nd row (left to right): C. J. Gomes (Sports Secretary) B. M. Ismail; K. Kuttan Pillai; K. Abbas Khan; N. Achutan Pillai; P. Neelakandan; K. P. Varughese.

Indian Daily Mail, 27 October 1952

- During Mr. M.C. Chacko's tenure, the NMMS moved into its current premise along Jalan Masjid Negeri.



- NMMS is non-political and non-religious. Syrian Christians engaged with their Hindu and Muslim Malayalee friends here in activities which benefited the community in the social, educational and cultural spheres.
- First NMMS president, **Mr. M.C. Chacko** was a Syrian Christian (from the Mar Thoma Church). Hindu and Muslim Malayalees were also represented among the elected office bearers.
- He worked as an Instructor (Teacher) at the Penang Technical Institute (among other places) and was a great orator.



Syrian Christians in the North Malaysia Malayali Samajam



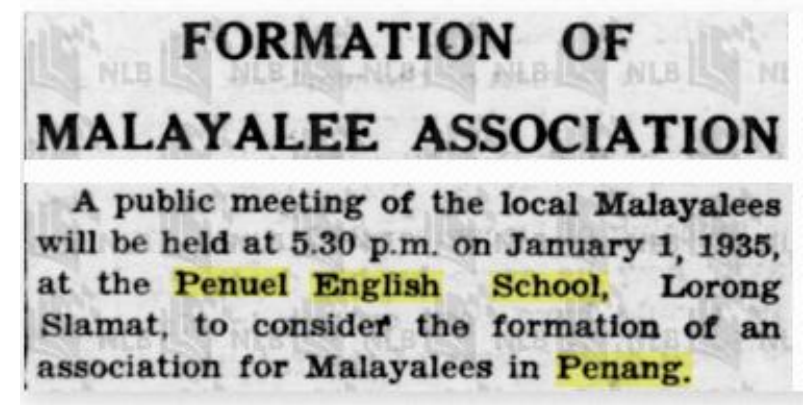
- Mr K.C. George and late Mrs Rosamma George (Ivy) were very active committee members of NMMS.
 - Mr K.C. George was the President of NMMS from 1987-1993 and is **currently** one of the trustees.
 - Both Mr K.C. George and Mrs Rosamma George (Ivy) were very enthusiastic about the Malayalam language, conducting Malayalam classes which ensured the preservation of the mother tongue among young, Malaysian-born Malayalees in Penang.
-
- Both of them played a pivotal role in the **Mar Thoma church in Penang**, opening their homes to visiting Mar Thoma clergy who came periodically to conduct services in Penang.

Syrian Christians in Education



Photo Credit: K.T. Alexander's collection

- **K.C. Alexander** arrived in Penang in 1928.
- Played an important role in the Penuel English School (involved in the administration) which was located in Lorong Slamet.
- Quite interestingly, the school also played host to discussions on the **possible formation** of an association for Malayalees in Penang (16 years before the formation of NMMS).



Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle, 31
December 1934

Syrian Christians in Education



Photo Credit: K.T. Alexander's collection

- **K.T. Joseph** arrived in Malaya in the early 1920s.
- Career in education brought him to various parts of Malaya.
- In 1956, promoted to Sr. Education Officer and became Headmaster of Bukit Mertajam High School.
- Apart from his professional role he also studied the Cherok To'kun relics (in BM) and wrote an article on the Pallava writing.
- Also started a Rotary Club which is now the Rotary Club of Butterworth.

Memoirs of K.T. Joseph

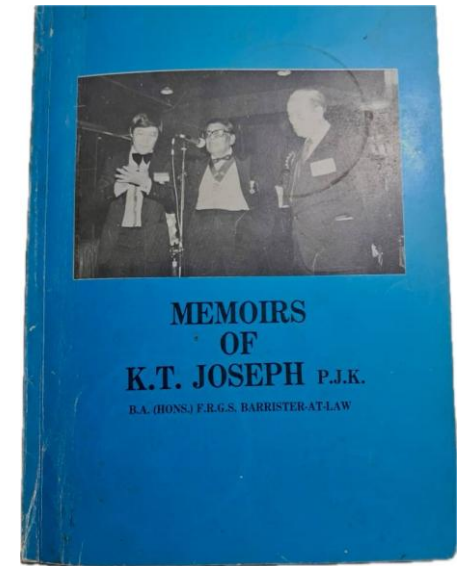


Photo Credit: Dr JK Joseph, his grandson

Syrian Christians in Engineering



Photo(s) Credit: K.T. Alexander

- **K.T. Alexander** is the grandson of K.C. Alexander.
- Born in Penang, attended Penang Free School.
- Earned a prestigious scholarship to study Civil Engineering in Imperial College London.
- He was a Construction Manager in the **widening** of the 1st Penang Bridge (2006) and in the **construction** of the 2nd Penang Bridge (2009-2012).



1st and 2nd Penang Bridges.
Photo(s) Credit: Remy P. Chacko

Syrian Christians in Entrepreneurship (Tourism and Logistics)

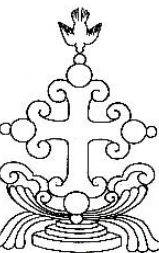


Photo Credit: Vergis Mathews

- **Vergis Mathews** moved from the Klang Valley to Penang in 2009.
- CEO and founder of Eco Coach & Tours. He launched it while in the Klang Valley and when he moved to Penang it evolved into a leading inbound tour service provider for MNCs.
- Started Six Cuisine Restaurant in Penang, a boutique fine-dining establishment.
- Previous chairman of MATTA Penang (2016-2023).
- Council member of Penang Arts Council (2024-Current).

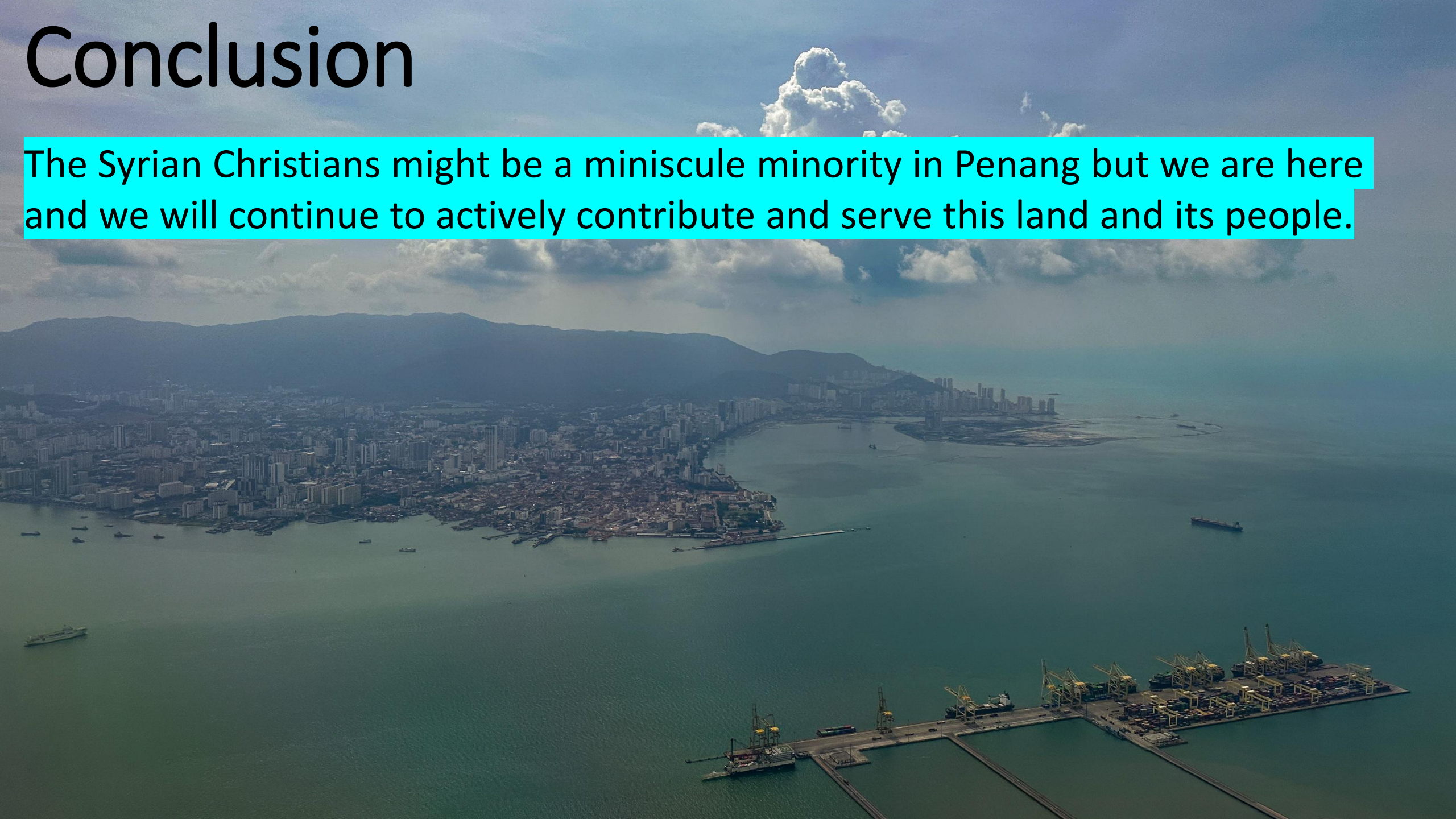
Syrian Christians in Medicine

- A high percentage of people within the miniscule Syrian Christian community in Penang are medical doctors both in the Private and Government sectors
- In fact about 3 from this community serve as medical professionals in the Penang GH.



Conclusion

The Syrian Christians might be a miniscule minority in Penang but we are here and we will continue to actively contribute and serve this land and its people.



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