

Opening of first GFS Regional Office

On July 6, 2019 the Archdeacon of Nuwara Eliya opened and blessed our first regional office in Dickoya, a small town in the central hill country of Sri Lanka. The office is located a stone's throw away from the Anglican Church.

This centre will be the venue for conducting lectures for the World Project "*English for Employment Prospects*" saving exorbitant rentals for hiring lecture halls which are rare in rural locations. Apart from this main activity, it will be the focal point for starting new branches in churches in the area and training new leaders, thus ensuring the growth of the GFS in that region.

A regional coordinator was appointed and she would be responsible for running the office, monitoring branches in the area and initiating and conducting programmes, thus saving time and travelling expenses of Colombo staff who otherwise would have to regularly undertake the 5 hour journey each way by bus

There was a good gathering that sunny morning when the centre was opened - clergy, church leaders, guests, prospective students of the English Course, members and prospective members of GFS and members of the GFS Executive Council and GFS staff from Colombo. The Archdeacon ceremonially cut a blue ribbon to open the office and a short service was held after which he addressed the gathering and referred to the Ministry of the GFS as a "calling". He said that the Society is carrying out valuable work thru' the World Project and officially invited the GFS to serve in several remote areas in his Archdeaconry.

We find that as a result of our intense publicity campaign regarding the World Project and the strong recommendation given by the Bishop, the attention of the Archdeacons, area deans and clergy has been drawn towards our Society and its activities.

Our visits to churches and our professional brochures introducing the World Project and the GFS ministry worldwide have opened doors for us to enter churches with programmes and set up branches. I am very excited about all these miraculous "openings" and grateful that the clergy is encouraging us. Honestly, I never thought our World Project would have such a great impact on the Sri Lankan church and community!

We did not foresee this situation to this extent and therefore have not budgeted for additional programmes, setting up of branches and regional offices, with connected expenses. But, it is an opportunity that we should not miss at any cost to ensure that the Ministry of the GFS is once again established throughout the island - that is, in our two Dioceses.

In order to implement programmes for groups (juniors and seniors) already set up, manpower and extra visits from our headquarters would be needed. However, these branches are located far away from the headquarters in Colombo and extensive visits by headquarters staff and members has proved to be expensive, thus creating the necessity to set up regional offices manned by GFS staff.

Our model office opened in Dickoya in the hill region will ensure that the young branches we start will be cared for, new branches will be opened in other churches in the area and the emerging leadership in the branches would be trained in order to ensure the continuity of the branches.

Attempts are being made to conduct regional programmes by inviting the membership or selected leaders of the different branches to the regional office. This would unite the regional membership and ensure that each branch will support and sustain the weaker branches.

Repercussions of the April tragedy

After the April 21 Easter Day bombings, our income has reduced significantly. We were compelled to close our Hall and cancel our bookings as the GFS is located in a high security zone. Our aerobic and ballet classes could not be held. We had to enforce strict rules in our vehicle parking facility and lost our daily parking clients. Table Sales cannot be held to raise funds due to security concerns.

Our hope for the future

As the country gradually returns to normalcy and security measures are reduced, we have hope that all will be well in a couple of months. In spite of this terrible unforeseen incident, we are optimistically continuing with the World Project and look forward to conducting more English classes and taking the GFS to other areas of the island.

Jeanne Withanage

President - GFS Sri Lanka

July 8, 2019