

NAME: Rogers Morgan Govender

SUBJECT: The Making of an Indigenous Clergy
in South Africa: TRANSCRIPT

FOCUS OF RESEARCH: The Revd. J.M. Sundrum (Anglican Priest)

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs Monica Thumbadoo - daughter of
Revd. Sundrum

INTERVIEWER: Rogers Govender

VENUE: The home of Mrs Thumbadoo in Overport
Durban.

DATE: 14 September 1994

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH MRS MONICA THUMBADOO RE HER FATHER
THE REVEREND JOHN MOSES SUNDRUM

ROGERS Thank you for being prepared to be interviewed about your father the Reverend Sundrum who was an Indian priest in this diocese. Before we talk about your father, perhaps you would like to like to tell me about yourself.

MONICA I am Monica Thumbadoo the fourth daughter of Revd. Sundrum. I was born in Pietermaritzburg where my father was priest-in-charge of St. Paul's Church. I am 67 years old and a retired schoolteacher. I have been involved in various ministries in Christ Church Overport. I am a Layminister and have been ministering at Overport for many years.

ROGERS Monica, you are also a Laypreacher, aren't you?

MONICA Yes. I am a licensed Laypreacher as well and I have been involved in preparing confirmation candidates, and selecting and helping to train Layministers. I lead worship, visit the sick and other duties that the priest feels necessary to give to me at times, and is not able to do himself.

ROGERS Tell me about your children.

MONICA I have four daughters. The eldest Ramola lives in Canada. She has a Masters degree in English and works with the American Indians and the Canadian Police trying to work projects and programmes that can make for more sensitivity and understanding the culture of the American Indian. She is married to a Canadian and they live in Ottawa. My second daughter Camilla also has a Masters degree in library science from the Univesity of Toronto in Canada. She works in the library of Natal University in Durban. My third daughter Zenula is a social worker. She worked for several years as a resident social worker at Lakehaven Children's Home in Newlands Durban. She is now superintendent of Durban Child welfare. My fourth daughter Beulah lives in Johannesburg where she works for ERA (Easy Reading for Adults) and this is a library thrust for the man on the street. She also works at Wits University.

ROGERS Monica what sort of education did you have to become a schoolteacher? Where did you study?

MONICA I studied in Durban but when my father passed away I had to find a job pretty quickly and so I got a teaching post in Clairwood....

ROGERS So you were an unqualified teacher at first?

MONICA Initially unqualified after matric and then did part-time classes and completed my T3.

ROGERS Did you eventually become part of the Dept. of Indian Affairs? How long are you retired now?

MONICA I did not really retire, I resigned, about seventeen years ago.

ROGERS How many years have you been a widow?

MONICA Twenty two years this year.

- R ROGERS Won't you tell me about your father? His initials were J. M. What did they stand for?
- M John Moses
- R Any significance to his surname Sundrum?
- M He was really Sundrum Pillai which signifies a good caste. It means the Pillai's of the accountancy group. 'Kannoko Pillai' meaning those who do books for people.
- R Do you remember when and where he was born?
- M He was born around 1881 or so.
- R Did he come from a large family?
- M My grandparents were Daniel and Hannah Sundrum. During a famine in India many of the local Indians emigrated to British Guyana.
- R Which part of India did you grandparents come from?
- M Madras. The story goes that on the boat to British Guyana my grandfather Daniel met Hannah and fell in love with her. Her family were also emigrating to British Guyana. In British Guyana they married.
- R Were your grandparents christians or not?
- M Yes they were Anglican christians.
- M Daniel and Hannah were christian names. Hannah was a 'bible-woman' as they called her in those days. And after they had four children they went back to their ties in India. My grandfather felt that he would lose out if he didn't pick up again on his Indian culture. So he took the whole family back to India. My grandmother used to go around as a sort of evangelist.
- R So your father grew up in a family that was very involved in the work of the church in one way or another?
- M That's right.
- R Would that have influenced your father eventual decision to become a priest?
- M I think so. From a young age he displayed qualities of becoming a priest. He enjoyed going around with his mother evangelizing and because of this learnt a great deal about christianity.
- R I believe that your father at some stage found himself in Mauritius. Was that prior to or after ordination?
- M It was after ordination.
- R So he was ordained in Madras?
- M He was ordained in Mauritius.

R How did he find himself in Mauritius?

M He studied there. He first studied in Wesley College, Royepatta in Madras and then he went to the first Theological College for Natives and Colonial Clergy with four other students, in Mauritius on 6 January 1908.

R Why was he unable to study fully in India?

M I am not sure. I am not sure whether there was a theological college in India at that time. But there was this one opened in 1908... by Bishop Gregory and it seems that there were five resident students at the time.

R Were those students from India or local?

M Some of them were from India...others were locals from Mauritius.

R What did your father qualify with in terms of theology?

M I don't know.

R When was he ordained?

M Deacon in 1911: priested to do missionary work in 1914, in Mauritius.

R Where did he serve?

M He worked in Port Louis Mauritius, from 1911 - 1920.

R Did he marry your mother at this stage, in Mauritius?

M No he married my mother in India. He went to India and I think he wanted to marry and come back and take up a post in Mauritius. He married and went back to Mauritius as Priest-in-charge of St Mary's Port Louis from 1911-1920.

R Any children born in Mauritius?

M The first child Louisa died. My brother Stephen was born in Mauritius. This was soon after the first world war and the influenza epidemic broke out.

R Tell me how your father found himself in Pietermaritzburg Natal?

M I think they (were) looking in Pmb for someone to take services in the tamil vernacular.

R For the Indian people?

M Thats right, in about 1919.

R So he responded to an invitation from the Bishop or the dean of Pmb.?

M Thats right.

R Were there any other Indian clergy in Mauritius to the Natal invitation at that time?

M I don't think so. I know he mentioned the names of one or two of his friends....Revd Gamaliel Thomas, but.....

R How did he adapt to South Africa?

M I know he seemed to have adapted very well. They talked very well of the congregation who made them very welcome in Fmb., got the home ready, got the curtains, and did up the rooms and received them very well, and he seemed to settle in St Paul's very well.

R I see that your father had other Indian predecessors at St Paul's. In 1892 - 1916 there was the Revd Joseph Nullathumby; in 1894 there was the Revd Simon Peter Vedamuthu; and in 1917 the Revd Koilpillai. Your father followed Revd Koilpillai.

How did your father adapt to the African people around Fmb.?

M I suppose he would have found them different but because my father was a very caring person I think he was just fond of everybody, especially the poorer classes. He seemed to have really reached out to them (the poor).

R He worked with the poor? Mainly in the Indian community?

M In the Indian community.

R Your father spent most of his ministry in what was then known as the Indian Mission. Lets work these dates out:
1911 - 1920 St Mary's Port Louis
1920 - 1929 St Paul's Fmb.
Thereafter? Where did he work?

M He was transferred to St Aidan's Mission in Durban. He worked there from 1929 - 1943.

R So he died whilst still active in the ministry?

M Thats right.

R Can you say how he died?

M There were no cars in those days and they had to walk and catch their buses and I believe a few months before he actually died he went up to see some parishioners in Rosburgh (St Michael's Church). And he walked up a hill and came back with a slight facial paralysis. He overcame that but at the end of that year he had a heart attack and died. The strain of travel, walking, walking up-hill and down-hill visiting sick parishioners, in Sydenham, Merebank, as well as Durban.

R How did your father dress as a priest?

M Always a black suit and clerical collar except when he was on duty when he wore the necessary robes.

R How did the local Indian people in FMB. and Durban respond to him?

M Very well.

R Found himself at home here?

M He did because I suppose one of the main reason is that they all spoke tamil. He was quite comfortable in a tamil speaking society.

R So he communicated very much in tamil?

M Very much. He conducted services in the church in tamil

R Tamil liturgy?

M Yes.

R Where would this liturgy come from?

M He brought his books with him.

R Conducted the Eucharist in tamil?

M In tamil. Beautiful....

R Sermons in tamil?

M Yes. And pastoral work mainly in tamil.

R Was there a prevalence of tamil speaking Indians?

M Yes.

R Perhaps it was easy to convert tamil speaking people? Tell me about his relationships with people of the Hindu community.

M He had very good relationship with most of those who were not christians at the time in Durban. I know he belonged to the Benevolent Society, which is a cultural, charitable society. He did a lot of work in his spare time, with the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society as well. Because of this he mixed with a lot of people of other faiths, including people in the Muslim and Gujerati communities.

R He was able to mix very easily?

M He was a very good friend of Manilall Gandhi who was the son of our Mahatma. And our Manilall's daughter actually came and lived with us for a while so that she could learn to speak English, because when she came from India she spoke Gujerati all the time and just to get her out her shell.

R Was you father able to speak English?

M Yes. He conducted services in Tamil and in English.

R How did he relate to the colonial attitudes in South Africa? Did he have any problems with them?

M He could have had problems in personal ways because he was a very strong person, with principles and as much as he would have liked to go along with the colonial kind of thinking, I don't think he would have allowed that to take over and dominate his life as a minister. Because I know, he worked with the Revd. William Satchell and he did a lot of work between these three churches.

...But I know at times there was tension because of the colonial attitudes. ...No big problem but that must have been a hurtful situation (not recorded).

R I notice that he was invited to a very important position to be rector of a parish of nine years. Any comment?

M I think he did his very best at St Paul's. He had the assistance of some of the lady missionaries there. There was Esther Payne Smith, and Miss Badham. There was an orphanage that Miss Badham was in d charge of. There was a school opened under Esther Payne Smith's name. My father seemed to be working well with these ladies. In 1915 the church included Richmond, Newcastle, Greytown, Estcourt. It became quite demanding for him. St Paul's also included Howick, Ladysmith, Dundee, Glencoe, Dannhauser, etc. He conducted services once a month in these places.

R Did he have any involvement in the wider church or the diocese? Did he hold any positions in the diocese?

M Not that I know of.

R Tell me about his ministry generally. What was his ministry like?

M He was a good preacher, great love for the poor. He would go out of his way to help the poorer members of his congregation.

R Were there many poor people in his parish?

M Yes. He also encouraged some of the younger boys in Pmb to train as altar boys. One did become a priest the Revd J.C. David, who went to study in Ceylon.

R Revd David seemed to have arrived at St Paul's as a priest about ~~to~~ twenty years after your father left St Paul's. Can you comment on the fact that another Indian priest was only ordained nineteen years after your father arrived?

M I really don't have a reason. I was too young. I think they were always encouraged. The youth were encouraged. Those who were interested in becoming altar servers and I said Revd David and in Durban the Revd James Francis were two who responded to that encouragement.

R I notice that after your father left St Paul's in 1929, the next ten years saw the Revd Spooner as rector of St Paul's. Any Indian candidates during that time?

M No.

R Would you say that your father was an evangelist?

M Yes.

R He make many converts?

M Yes he did in Pmb and in Durban. I only remember this as a child because it was not a very popular thing to go around and evangelise people, especially the largest community in Durban was the Hindu

R So it was not something that people liked?

M That's right. If there was someone interested in marrying a non-christian, he would then convert person. It was then as a child that I remember comments being made about christians coming and evangelizing their people. But under these circumstances (marriage) I think quite a lot of converts were made.

R Would your father have a rule or prerequisite that both parties had to be christian to be married?

M He would have said that in very firm terms. Stanley Naidoo's father being one. He had to convert to christianity to marry. The home (girl's) in Pmb had to close because of financial difficulties and the girls were sent to various members of the parish and several came to our house because my father was a priest and he had to find homes for them after that. Two stayed with us, Rhoda Naidoo whose father was a kind of catechist. When they came looking for a bride from Umkomaas this family came to us. There was this very nice young man, an extremely nice young man, but my father made sure he converted him before he married Rhoda (Stanley Naidoo's mother).

R This practice is changed in Indian parishes today. Non-christians marrying christians are not compelled to convert but have to agree to baptizing their children and required to allow the christian spouse to worship Christ. Any comment compared to your father's time?

M I think they were very staunch christians, my father and his contemporaries. I don't think they would have looked lightly on anyone marrying a non christian or a Hindu for that matter. I married a non-practising Hindu. I don't know what my father would have done had he been live!

R You married after your father died?

M Yes. My mother had quite a few difficulties. She had to be interviewed by Bishop Leonard Fisher and he advised against my marriage, and I remember Revd James Francis came home with some forms they required my future husband to sign that the children would all be baptized and confirmed.

R I want to observe whether the prevailing attitudes of the white missionaries perhaps crept in as it were, because you said that Bishop Fisher also advised against your marriage to a Hindu. Did the white Anglican missionaries adopt a similar stance as your father?

M Oh yes I believe that strongly and their attitude was definitely that you became a christian if you wanted to marry a christian.

R During his time at St Aidan's your father worked with Revd Satchell. Were there any other clergy on the staff at that stage? Just an observation..... your father came to Pmb because of the need for a priest to minister in the vernacular and the need to minister to the indigenous Indian congregation and yet he was replaced in Pmb by the Revd Spooner who served at St Paul's for ten years from 1929 - 1939. From 1939 - 1947 the Revd W.T. Langley was the rector of St Paul's. White clergy replaced your father who came to assist Revd Satchell.

St Aidan's Mission had three churches to run, two schools, and the hospital. I don't think the Revd Satchell could have managed that by himself. He definitely needed assistance.

Did your father's successors in Pmb speak tamil?

I don't think so, but I think the congregation was able to speak some english by then. They had attended school and the children of the congregation in my father's time were all educated.

Did your father at any time get to be in charge of St Aidan's or always work under Fr. Satchell?

No, he always worked under Fr. Satchell.

Any reason for that?

I think that was because there were over three churches.

How did the local parishioners relate to your father and Revd Satchell, being white?

I think there were little (some) difficulties and conflicts at certain times because the Indian of that time and even now did not lose the colonial mentality.

[tape stopper recording some details at this stage]

What do you mean by that?

I mean they would prefer to go and confide and seek advice of a White priest. They just believed that a white priest would know it all.

Based on what?

Colonial mentality where you looked to the white man. I grew up in that kind of society.

Does that attitude still prevail today?

To a large extent. It is very difficult in an Indian parish for parishioners to really discuss openly or differ in opinion with a white priest if he were their rector. It happens over and over again.

What would be your hope to rectify or to educate people in terms of this particular problem of relating to White and Indian clergy?

M I would hope that the younger generation, the more educated ones, who think for themselves and are not really influenced by their parents, who come from that kind of colonial era, I think I would encourage them to speak up at meetings, get onto councils, and really give their opinions about what they feel, because right now I feel there is that silence when they should speak out. And they are quiet in a meeting or vestry meeting when the (White) priest is speaking. And if there are a few, if I may use the word, arrogant young men who want to run the church in their own way, dominating the vestry meetings and even if the White priest is not more stronger there can be conflicts. And I find in situations like that the general members of the congregation don't stand up and speak out. They will tell you what they felt after the meeting. That doesn't help.

R There tends to be a move towards cross-cultural appointments of clergy to parishes these days. In some our Indian parishes we have had White clergy being appointed as Rectors. I am sure that you may be aware that in Indian parishes where they have Indian Rectors, these parishes tend to give them a very rough time. Any comment on that?

M My first comment on that is that they have not lost their colonial mentality. Maybe they not educated enough some of them. The educated ones, it seems, usually withdraw from the church situation. If they stayed in, maybe they would contribute. But quite often you will find that the ones who are graduates and who think for themselves give constructive opinions are not there in council meetings and not there in church situations. And you find that the older ones fall into the very same trap by being silent and by allowing the few dominant people to take over.

R How can we empower our people as well as our clergy to minister in so-called Indian parishes, and conduct their lives in a way that is not placed them in a bad light as compared when White clergy are in authority in their parishes?

M A deep question. But I don't think the situation is hopeless. The age range is very important here. The young mothers and fathers between the age of 25 to 40 can have a very big say in the life of the parish. Quite a lot of them, if they are graduates they seem to keep away, and the older members and the younger ones are in the parish. Their contribution is not as constructive as it would be had these, the middle group, gave their support to their church. To encourage the priest, whoever he is, White or Indian, to try and draw these people who are sitting in the pews and not giving their opinions and not getting involved in any way but are getting involved in things outside of the church. They should be drawn in and used constructively for the growth of the whole body. But it doesn't seem to happen. I think one of the greatest failings here is desire for power. Taking roles in the church doesn't seem to be spiritual any more. It is so very secular. If you want a certain role or position in the church, then for that particular meetings where the elections are done (vestry meetings) you can bring your whole family who never even comes to church, but they are present to gather votes for you. That is very wrong.

- R When you look back on the years of your father's time as an Indian priest, in two Indian parishes, very significant parishes, how would you compare his experiences as an Indian priest with Indian priests in Indian parishes today?
- M He may have had difficulties along the same lines and I think they would have elected those who were teachers of the early days, those who were educated. Being a closer community and smaller congregation he could get more response from them than from a larger congregation with more educated people as you have now but are not a close family as the church should be. And so you get the same ones who want the power or want the authority returning each year with the same kind of roles. Sometimes you can have three to five years with the same people dominating the church.
- R Do you think things have changed in respect of cross cultural appointments of clergy today? How do you see it in comparison with the old days?
- M A change will come about. It is a positive change
- R Do you think it is a positive thing to have cross-cultural appointments today?
- M I think it is a positive thing. But I would like to see more of a team ministry where individual talents can be shared among many churches. They could then come together and share notes about what is needed than have one parish priest who may be very good at evangelising, but cannot even chair a meeting and because of his lack in administrative skills, and so loses out to the people who want to dominate in that situation. A shared ministry will help. That could be White, Black Indian, whoever.
- R Do you think it is easier or difficult to be an indigeneous priest in a parish today?
- M I think it is difficult. The congregation know you because you come from that parish. They know your weaknesses, your strengths. If they like you fine. But if they don't like you they can be difficult. But if they don't know you at all when you come from another parish, well then they bide their time
- R Do you think it was a good thing that your father came from outside? (the parish)
- M Yes. Because I used to hear comments about the Revd J.C. David. Because he came from the local parish in Pietermaritzburg (St Paul's) he was not accepted with open arms, there was more criticism.
- R Revd David's appointment to St Paul's as a priest, the parish from he came, was a very negative experience for him?
- M Yes

- S Would you care to comment on the present move in the diocese towards ordaining community clergy - people ordained from the local parish for that local parish in a non-stipendary capacity?
- M I think it can also work very well because this particular community priest is chosen to work among the people, they know him, they accept him, they know they need him besides the local Rector and the church they have. This is like an extra I think they will respect that. Those who do not attend church regularly and want the attention of their Rector will welcome a community priest.
- R What about the fact that his or her family background will be well known to the congregation? Do you think this will be helpful to him or her?
- M I think people are changed now, they are more enlightened and more educated. And I see from our local first lady minister Mav Laban. I think she has been accepted and she has done a lot of excellent work at St Barnabas Clare Estate.
- R So things are changing? The future looks brighter?
- M Yes. The future will tell. It will also depend on the person (personality).
- R Would you say that indigenisation worked?
- M It worked. It was necessary at the time. Somebody had to understand the culture, customs, etc. The people expect the priest to understand their customs, culture and needs.
- R Monica thank you for this interview. For your time, sharing insights and memories. Hopefully this will assist the church in the future. God bless you.