

# SAPHIR P. ATHYAL: AN INTRODUCTION

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

Dr. Saphir P. Athyal hails from the illustrious Athyalil family which belongs to the ancient St. Thomas Christian community in South India. The St. Thomas Christians trace their origin to the tradition of Apostle Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus, who came to the Malabar coast (modern Kerala state) in 52 A.D. Apostle Thomas preached the gospel and established seven Christian communities and churches in the region, heralding the beginning of the history of the church in India. It is believed that Saphir's ancestors migrated from one section of Kerala state to another due to persecution from the Roman Catholics under the Portuguese rule. His grandmother was a well-known woman of prayer.

Saphir's father Rev C. Philipose was in pastoral ministry of the Mar Thoma Church for more than 50 years. His several uncles and aunts have been in full-time ministry. His uncle Rev Dr Chacko Joseph, who taught in several theological seminaries, was a Presbyterian of the Church of North India for many years. Aleyamma *Sanyasini*, his aunt was a full-time evangelist who led many to a living faith in Jesus Christ. Particularly notable is his uncle Rev C. Kunjukutty Athialy who, after his theological training, went to Nepal as the first Christian missionary risking his own life, and led many people to faith in Christ and established the first church in that Himalayan Hindu Kingdom.

## CHILDHOOD DAYS

Saphir was born as the third child of Rev C. Philipose and Aleyamma at Pathanapuram on April 12 1931, an Easter Sunday. Rev Philipose in those days was in charge of 8-10 small congregations at a time as a pastor. He named his second son, Saphir, a Syriac/Aramaic name meaning 'delightful' or 'pleasing'. When he was only ten days old he fell from his eight year old sister's hand and just about died; but by fervent prayers of the family he gradually came back to life. Due to that fall he had a nagging chest pain till the age of 16 in spite of various medical treatments. But then on his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, according to his request his family members and many friends fasted and prayed at their respective places, and he got a miraculous healing. He cycled about 150 km the following week and found his chest perfectly fit.

It must be noted that it was his own elder brother Chacko who led him to the knowledge of Christ as his Saviour and Lord when he was thirteen years old. He kept diary notes, with much gaps, from that day when he wrote his testimony of this new experience highlighting the page with marks of the cross all around the pages. His father, being a parish priest, was transferred as per the practice of the Mar Thoma Church every three years to a new place. So Saphir grew up and

studied in a number of places in Kerala; so was the beginning of the making of a “world Christian.”

When only thirteen years old he started his own Sunday school in his home inviting a number of children who stayed nearby. Majority of them were older than him. That is seen as the beginning of a world class teacher and leader as Saphir turned out to be in subsequent decades.

## **HIS SIBLINGS**

Saphir has four brothers and one sister, the eldest among them. His sister, Chinnama Mathew was married to the late Rev. K.V. Mathew an ordained minister of the Mar Thoma Church, and they together served the Lord. His elder brother, Chacko Athyal distinguished himself as an Old Testament teacher at Bangarapet Seminary until he retired, and then headed a successful missionary society in south India, and now he teaches part time in Bangalore where he resides permanently. His wife Saramma was in active full-time Christian ministry till she passed away some years ago.

His younger brother, Thomas Athyal, served as the Principal of several High Schools in India and the Arabian Gulf region. He made innovative developments wherever he served and made significant contributions in the field of education. He, along with his wife Annie, continues to be active in education related works, many types of social work and spiritual ministries.

Another brother Rev Dr Abraham Athyal taught in several theological colleges and served as pastor to Mar Thoma churches in a number of major cities in India and in Sydney. An author in the field of theology, he presently serves as the Executive Secretary of the Communion of Churches in India. His wife Leelamma with a doctorate in theology from Serampore, is a known theological educator and a respected voice in the ecumenical circle.

His youngest brother Dr. A.P. John, a linguist, taught at the Mar Thoma College, Tiruvalla and served as its Principal. He too a well-known author is presently involved in advanced level teaching of English in many parts of India through language labs created by him. His wife, also a teacher, now helps in church ministries and social work.

So all of them and their spouses were and are engaged in Christian work, and are widely acknowledged for their contributions to teaching and theological education. Four of the families now live as neighbors and as one close-knit family, inspiring others to say, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity”.

## HIS EDUCATION

**High School:** When Saphir was in Mallapally High School in mid-40's, a revival started in the state of Kerala and it spread throughout the society. He was one of the leaders in this movement among the young people and in his High school. During the noon break every day scores of students went up to the nearby hill and sang praises to God, prayed and shared their testimonies. An intelligent student, he obtained first class in all the public exams he wrote and belonged to the top 2-3% of students.

**Bible School:** Immediately after his High School he went to Kolar Bible Institute for Graduate in Theology studies because his father could not afford to send him for university education. While there he held the two top student leadership positions, one in his third year and the other in the fourth. He produced a chorus book in Kanada. He was an active member of the Scout Movement achieving not only the status as Sovereign Scout but also earned a number of 'Proficiency Badges'. Those four years gave him a solid general theological foundation and sound moral ethical views.

**University Years:** Then he went to Allahabad and had a very busy life; he taught at the Allahabad Bible Seminary and worked in a college library. Thus raising his own support, he pursued the Bachelor of Arts degree in English literature, Political Science and Philosophy at the Allahabad University. While there, he started a Christian Youth Group in the city which was later taken over by the Youth For Christ ministry. So also he started a Malayalam worship service which later developed as a Mar Thoma parish. He was also one of the leaders of the Allahabad Malayalee Association. He and two Naga students used to sing trio in churches and other Christian meetings; of the two Nagas one later served many years as a cabinet member of Nagaland state, and the other as its Chief Minister and now a Governor.

**Seminary Years and B.D:** In 1955 he went to USA to study at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, and did the three-year Bachelor of Divinity course in two years. The Academic Dean allowed him to take extra load on condition that every term he maintained a minimum A- average of grades which he did. He joined a singing club as one of the baritones and toured twelve states of US presenting music concerts. While there he also started a Cosmopolitan Club which continues even now. He was also one of the editors of the student magazine. Later on Asbury Seminary honored him conferring an honorary DD degree.

**Princeton Days and Ph.D. Studies:** For his doctoral studies he went to Princeton Theological Seminary. He wrote to key theological educators in India as to which field he should specialize in, and they all were unanimous in identifying Old Testament as the most needy field. He took their counsel and did his Ph.D. in Old Testament. He was the only Indian national at that time with a

doctorate in Old Testament. While at Princeton, first he took two Master degrees, one in Biblical Studies and the other in Ancient Greek History from Rutgers's State University nearby. For his Ph.D. he studied several languages, such as German, French, Syriac, and Aramaic; he also did some Sanskrit. This was in addition to Advanced Greek and Hebrew. He earned a Ph. D. (then called Th. D.) with *cum laude* high honors. For his research and dissertation he chose the topic of "Mysterious Wrath of Yahweh", amply reflecting his daring and risk taking nature.

While at Princeton he got involved in various other ministries as well. He started a Bible Study Group on the campus which helped him to maintain his strong theological convictions in the then Seminary context of overwhelming theological liberalism. He formed an India-Pakistan Association of Princeton which had regular programs during the years India and Pakistan were at war! He was a Research Assistant for the production of Septuagint Greek Lexicon. He also served all through those years as the International Students' Liaison with the Administration, and carried several responsibilities in this capacity. He was the Youth Minister for Senior High students in two churches; also he served as the Interim Minister in two churches, in different years.

Immediately after his studies he was appointed on the faculty of Union Biblical Seminary, Yavatmal in central India in 1964.

## **OWN FAMILY**

**His Wife:** In 1967 he married Sakhi Mariamma Thomas, daughter of Thomas Thomas and Aleyamma. Her maternal uncle Dr. M.M Thomas, a great theologian, prolific author, Chairman of WCC, and later on the Governor of Nagaland, was the one who brought Saphir and Sakhi together. *Sakhi*, true to her name, has been a great partner "*friend*" for Saphir not only in life but also in ministry. She took her M.A.R degree from Asbury Theological Seminary during their first sabbatical leave in which Saphir taught full-time at Asbury. Then she did her Doctor of Missiology from Trinity Divinity School, Chicago during their second sabbatical year when Saphir taught half-time at Trinity and half-time organized the program of the Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE) in Pattaya, Thailand (1989) as its Program Director. In 1991 she took a Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary in Intercultural Studies. Her well known book, *Indian Women in Mission*, is also translated into Hindi and Marathi. She published a number of articles in several journals and contributed chapters for a few books.

Sakhi taught Christian Education and Mission at UBS and was the Hostess for the Seminary. As hostess she was in charge of the venue logistics of many seminars and conferences held on the campus. She also served as Warden for Women Students once and was briefly the Headmistress of the Primary School

in Yavatmal. She taught in a few institutions in USA such as Fuller Theological Seminary, Azusa Pacific University and Gordon-Conwell Seminary. As a loving people-person she often visited homes of the faculty and students and knew their needs, and was always there to lend a hand of help and be a source of comfort and encouragement. As a good mother, she brought up two children, Vinee and Vidu, in good Christian values and she conscientiously found plenty of time for that, a worthy and significant investment indeed.

**His Children:** Vinee their daughter, born in 1969, obtained a B.A. in Psychology followed by an M.Div. (B.D.) in theology. She worked as Director of Children's Ministry for a few years in Lake Avenue Church in California. She is married to Dr. James Koshy, who did his Ph.D. in Ergonomics Engineering. He is the chief ergonomist of Mayo Clinic at Rochester in USA. They have two sons, Roshen and Rushil. Vinee helps with the women's ministry in their church, and James, as a member of the Mission Committee, is involved in mission work.

Vidush, born in 1973, after his B.A. and Master of Public Health studies, is now a Medical Doctor doing his Family Practice Residency at Rochester, New York. He is much interested in medical missionary work as the Lord leads him in the future. He is married to Merina who is a computer engineer with an MBA, and she is much committed to the Lord and interested in serving him.

Saphir has been not only a very good father to both the children but also their best friend. He brought them up in the most noble Christian values. To his wife, he has been a good mentor, and this is her joyful testimony. Next to the grace of God, Sakhi acknowledges that, the reason for what she is now is Saphir's constant encouragement and loving guidance. He took his family to important sightseeing places in India and around the world such as Agra, Rajasthan, the Bible lands, Rome, London, many select places in the US and several main cities of East Asia. This world Christian has helped his family to be global citizens.

## **HIS MINISTRY AT UNION BIBLICAL SEMINARY**

As mentioned elsewhere Saphir was invited in 1964 to join the faculty of the Union Biblical Seminary at Yavatmal, Maharashtra, a seminary sponsored by a number of churches and missions. He taught Old Testament courses, and in his second year was appointed as the Academic Dean and Vice Principal. He undertook a major restructuring of the entire curricula to make them relevant to the then challenges of the Indian context and cater to the needs of the growing churches in the Indian subcontinent.

During his sabbatical in 1970 Saphir taught at Asbury Theological Seminary. While there, the Board of Governors of UBS wrote and asked him if he was willing to take up the Principal's responsibilities. But he turned down this

important invitation giving them in writing that he considered teaching and writing as a higher calling for him than administration. After his return to India, the Board of Governors in its next meeting unanimously decided that he was the right man to be the first Indian Principal of UBS. He replied that he did not have a sense of the leading of God or inner peace about this, but he would accept it as an assignment given to him provided it would be only for three years. He was thus appointed as the Principal in 1971.

As principal the very first major thing he did was to present to the Governing Board a lengthy document of seven-year goals for the seminary—primary goals, support goals and operation plans. Its details dealt with each of the degree programs, academic standard, spiritual and mission commitments, building up Indian faculty, strengthening the library, Church relations, public relation, relocation of the seminary and affiliation to the Serampore University. Goals looked very unrealistic. But after ten years copies of the same document were reviewed by the Board to see that well over 90% of the goals were accomplished. Some of his major accomplishments were as follows:

**Strengthening Organization, Caliber and Standard of the Seminary:** He took initiative in working with the Curriculum Committee to totally revise the curricula of the B.Th, BRE and BD degree programs to strengthen them. M.Th course was added. He introduced many innovations such as special lecture series, extension education courses, senior colloquium for interdepartmental integration, faculty seminars in which faculty members presented academic papers and giving certain percentage of time for Faculty members to engage in writing. In 1986 Doctor of Theology programs in the OT and the NT were added after Serampore evaluation, but the actual courses did not start.

He took initiative in writing down and standardizing all major rules and policies of the seminary, revising its constitution and by-laws, making its logo and motto and creating the Educational Endowment Trust.

**Affiliation to Serampore ‘University’:** He encouraged UBS, while it was under the BTE of NCCI, to affiliate itself to the Senate of Serampore, The second year after affiliation all classes came under the centralized Senate examination system. In the very first year itself (1975) the students who were not under the Serampore curriculum to start with obtained one of the best percentage of passes of all colleges and got some prizes. The following year (1976) majority of the Serampore BD prizes were grabbed by four UBS students, and one of them secured the first rank with a first class. They maintained a very high standard showing that they were not only good spiritually but academically as well. UBS worked closely with the family of Serampore colleges. For some 20 years he was a member of the BTE-Senate and half of that time one of its officers. Many of Serampore events took place on UBS campus. Later on Serampore honored him conferring a Doctor of Divinity degree.

**Strengthening the Faculty:** Saphir gave a top priority to the development of a strong “national faculty,” outstanding and promising men and women carefully selected from different language, culture and denominational backgrounds. Several of them were from among the UBS graduates. After having given them some teaching experience he sponsored them for doctoral studies in Germany, England, USA and Serampore. He raised funds for their studies and kept in touch with them. Therefore, all of them returned except one who had some medical reason to go to a big city in India. When he took up leadership the faculty was made up of 5 Indians and about 15 expatriates, but by the end of his principalship the ratio was reversed.

**Enhancing Indian Ethos and Perspectives:** As UBS was administered by expatriates in the early years, naturally there were several gaps in reflecting a national and indigenous complexion, flavor and ethos. To address this issue, various course subjects were added dealing with the Indian Church, Indian religions and Indian society. Vernacular essays in the respective languages of the students were required. Worship in vernacular languages were organized on the campus. So also mid-semester Reflection Week to discuss contemporary issues and controversial points of views by bringing on the campus liberal theologians and secular leaders with whom we largely disagreed. He intentionally built close links with all the main churches and leaders of different denominations, missions and Christian organizations in India. He also served as the Secretary of the India Society for Biblical Studies.

**Financial Stability of the Seminary:** When he took over charge, the seminary was almost totally supported by funds from outside especially from US, and the government was making laws to control foreign contributions. This offered a challenging situation to Saphir which demanded a careful and conscientious planning and program. He raised sufficient funds to establish endowments and found several sources of funds within India. Seminary with its increasing running cost could therefore have near to three fourth of its support from within India when he stepped down from principalship.

**Mission Emphasis:** He strengthened the Seminary’s mission commitment. Special mission lectures were arranged with leaders such as Dr. John Stott, Bishop Stephen Neil, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, Dr. Paul Hiebert, and several others from Africa, Latin America and India. A Center of Mission Studies was inaugurated. Also Serampore M.Th in Mission curriculum was developed on the campus and UBS became the first college in India to offer the program. He raised special funds to acquire latest basic books and reference works in missiology. To him Christ’s mission was mission to the whole person just as much as to the hearts, and also to societies just as much as to individuals. Also to him mission had to seriously consider and address to three contexts—the socio-economic hard realities, multi-religious context, and our cultural settings.

**Starting an English Medium School:** There was only a small nursery school on UBS campus for the young children of faculty and married students. So he started a primary school and obtained official recognition for it from the government. Soon it got a good name and therefore children of many senior government officials enrolled there. This became a means of keeping close links with the administrators of the district and prominent citizens of the region. He upgraded the school adding one year at a time, and now it is a well-known High School in the region. After the Seminary relocation to Pune, he made plans for building an English medium school on our property, had building plans drawn up and had a groundbreaking ceremony for it with enthusiastic support from the city people.

**Rapid Growth of the Seminary and its Relocation to Pune:** Though UBS was a relatively small institution known only in a limited circle when he took charge, by the time he left it was one of the largest, well known and highly regarded theological colleges in the country with well over 200 students. Yavatmal was a small remote town with no schools or colleges nearby for the children of the faculty and students, no adequate medical facilities or conveniences and no churches for practical work except a small Marathi church. Saphir brought to the Governing Board the idea and plan of relocating the Seminary. They were not convinced of the feasibility of it for two years. The time it was voted on, they asked him to promise two things: one, to stay with the Seminary till the total relocation was completed, and two, to raise all the money that was needed for this huge undertaking. He stood up and promised both. Dr. I. Ben Wati, the Chairman of the Board stood with him all through in this daunting task. He had an “intelligent faith” in God—he “knew” God could be trusted for this challenge ahead of him.

By 1983 all the main buildings were finished and the Seminary was relocated to Pune on Oct. 2. Thinking back all the energy, efforts and time that went into carrying the burden of Seminary relocation almost single handed and along with it having to convince and carry a large and diverse Board with him on many details, Saphir would say, that it would have been much easier for him to start a new seminary by himself in Pune. It is an edifying and entertaining experience to listen to Saphir, even now almost a quarter century after the project, as he enthusiastically narrates seven “miracles” God performed which he witnessed in the relocation project.

In 1983 he asked the Board, in writing, that as he had fulfilled his promise made eight years ago, he should now be released from his principalship. But they asked him to continue for another three more years. Even after two years the Board did not have any tangible plans for a replacement for him; seeing this he gave them in writing again that whatever the situation he would definitely discontinue in 1987 as he had made plans for himself and family. He stuck to his decision to leave the seminary at the end of the term. This he did, even though the Board could appoint only an Acting Principal. Later when UBS went through



painful internal problems and decline he was officially approached to resume its leadership for three years to reestablish the Seminary: this he felt was not a wise step to take.

Dr Saphir Athyal served UBS a total of 23 years, during which time he was the Dean and Vice Principal for 7 years and Principal for 15 years. His only regret was that because of Seminary relocation which he had started he could not release himself earlier making it possible for him to do some writing and more teaching. This is precisely the regret of the scholastic world though the relocation project was indeed a noteworthy achievement.

## **OTHER MINISTRIES**

**With the Lausanne Movement:** Saphir was associated with the Lausanne movement from its very inception. He participated in the 1966 Berlin Congress, and then served on the Planning Committee of 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. For a couple of decades he was on the Lausanne Committee, during which time he served as its Deputy Chairman for ten years and also as a member of its Theology Working Group. He had major responsibilities in the two main Lausanne events. He was the Programme Director for 1980 Consultation on World Evangelization in Pattaya, and Programme Chairman for 1989 Lausanne II Congress in Manila. He helped with the organization and management of a number of Lausanne consultations and events, and contributed to some of its publications. He served as the Chairman and Coordinator of Asia Lausanne Committee from its inception, and is now its Honorary Chairman. He is one of the few Honorary Life Members of the Lausanne Movement.

**With Serampore 'University':** He was with the Serampore Senate and BTE in different capacity for about two decades. He served as the Secretary of Board of Theological Education of NCCI, as the BTE Secretary of the Serampore Senate, as the Interim President of the Senate, and as a member of the Committee on Academic Administration and the Church Relations and Coordination Committee for varying periods. The Serampore M.Th. program in Mission was initiated by him and its first curriculum was formulated on UBS campus by a Serampore Committee.

**Role in Establishing SATHRI:** He was the Chairman of the Commission appointed by the Serampore Senate to establish a Center for Doctoral Studies. After considering the possibility of developing three such centers in different regions of India, SATHRI was established in Bangalore. Its constitution was initially drafted by him. A group of him and four other leaders went to Europe to raise endowment funds that now continues to give Serampore scholarships to doctoral candidates.

**His Part in Starting TAFTEE:** UBS started Theological Education by Extension subsequent to a major Consultation on UBS campus on Nonformal Theological Education. UBS's first TEE centers were in Bombay, Nagpur and Hyderabad. Under his leadership this programme was developed further with detailed curriculum, and it grew into TAFTEE, and it was shifted to Bangalore. He served as its Chairman in its early years. UBS's Bombay extension students were TAFTEE's first graduates.

**Establishing Asia Theological Association:** During the days of the 1968 Asia Pacific Congress on Evangelism in Singapore, he called together the participants who were theologians and theological educators in Asia for two informal sessions. The group saw the need for a forum that would bring them together on a regular basis. Nothing happened until 1970 and 1971 when he made two visits to all major theological seminaries and colleges in Asia, especially the evangelical ones. He raised sufficient money in USA for calling together two theological consultations, one in Singapore and the other in Hong Kong. It is these consultations that organized Asia Theological Association. He was the first Chairman and General Coordinator for ATA most of its first decades.

Its present ministry of accrediting institutions was never in the plan of its founders during its early years. Their interest was the development of indigenous Asian theology. His small booklet, *Emergence of Asian Theology*, reflected this desire.

**Role in Founding ACTS in Korea:** He was the Chairman of the Commission appointed by ATA to establish an Advance Centre for Theological Studies in Seoul to serve all Asia. In mid-70's he made several trips to South Korea in connection with it and met with church leaders and educators. A local Board was formed who then took charge of it. Its previous President introduced Saphir to its student body when he visited them not long ago as "the founder of ACTS".

**Guest Lectureship, and Special Lecture Series:** He also taught in several well known seminaries in USA as a guest professor. During the time he was the Principal of UBS he taught at Fuller Theological Seminary, California, every summer for 13 consecutive years, and traveled to raise funds for UBS without ever spending its money. He also taught sometime or other at Alliance Seminary in NY State, Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, Trinity Divinity School in Chicago, and Azusa Pacific University in California, in addition to annual special lectures in many other institutions. He also offered courses at OMSC, New Havens, a few times.

He was the first Asian to give the Australian Bible Society's Beguin Memorial Lecture series and he spoke on "*The Bible for Today's World, An Asian Perspective*" which was printed as a booklet. He gave two other major lecture series, one was in Latin America sponsored by the Latin American Theological

Fraternity when he visited six countries and gave lectures in their main theological institutions. So also the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa sponsored his lecture tour to five countries in the continent.

### **Present Ministry with World Vision International**

After his retirement from UBS, he was invited by the World Vision International to serve as the Director of Holistic Mission and Christian Witness at the international level. In this capacity he, with his family, was in Monrovia, California, for seven years. During this time he traveled to many countries in all the continents as World Vision works in more than hundred countries. During that period he facilitated a large number of staff workshops and seminars and did some writing, one of which was the booklet *Our Mission, Our Values*. He also developed a multicultural worship book, "*Jai Jai Yesu, Our Worship, Our Mission*" with indigenous songs collected from about fifty countries from all over the world, and many other aids to worship.

Then he came back to his home state Kerala, India, and presently continues to serve with World Vision-Asia Pacific Region as its Senior Advisor in Holistic Transformation Initiatives. He works full time, travels an average of six times a year outside the country, and is engaged in training the staff in their spiritual formation, building relationships with churches, and enhancing capacity to witness to the gospel. He is presently producing a few books and resource materials relating to Christ-centered commitments.

### **HIS LIFESTYLE AND HABITS**

**Health Care and Exercise:** He has always been very regular in daily physical exercise. He played in Allahabad University basketball B team, and in the college volleyball team. He was good in badminton also. Throughout the years in UBS every day, whether rain or sunshine, he played some games, especially basket ball. In recent years, in addition to commonly done brisk walking, he follows exercises of different types, exercise that strengthens bones and muscles, breathing exercise, balancing exercise, and the like. When at UBS he started compulsory games for the students three times a week and made them very popular and even a much cherished community affair. Annual medical check-up has been a must for the whole family. As to medicines his approach is very modest and moderate.

**Balanced Meals:** He usually follows the common sense principle of avoiding fatty foods, and having less meat, but more vegetables and fresh fruits, green salads, very little dairy products except curds, and drinking 6-8 glasses of water every day. Through the years he followed a Chinese proverb which he used to

quote to other people, “Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a commoner and supper like a beggar”. He had no likes and dislikes for any particular food; this has helped him in his wide travels to other countries. He entertains a spirit of adventure and experiment with strange foods.

**Management of Time:** He has followed a strict schedule of work time, meals, exercises, going to bed, and getting up. There was a saying on UBS campus that one could correct one’s watch by observing what he did when. Every day is divided between work, rest, exercise, time with family, socializing time and so on. He made a log frame of this sort for UBS faculty and encouraged them to make the best use of time by managing it. However, there are close friends who wonder whether he errs to the side of workaholic perfectionism. Probably this may be the cost many who achieve a lot in their life time have to pay.

**Sense of Humor;** He has always seen some thing humorous in almost everything he saw and heard. He is very witty. This helped him to be a good MC for any occasion. During his principalship at UBS coffee breaks, a community affair, was a time when the whole community could laugh together during the time of announcements he made and as he commented on other announcements. He was also very good at repartee. In those days there were students who would not mind missing a class hour but would not miss “Dr. Athyal’s Coffee Break!” It was absolute fun and fellowship, but always with an educative element in it. He used to laugh at himself when he did some mistake or when fellow staff or students imitated him and made fun of his accent or mannerisms! He used to say that what Christian leaders need the most are “a sense of humor, regular exercise, and more of the Holy Spirit.”

**Love of Music;** From early years his main goal in life was to be a teacher. An alternate life vocation he contemplated was to be a musician and singer. He had some voice practice while in Seminary and he took courses such as music conducting and music appreciation, and also started learning piano. During his Bible institute days in his late teens he put together a chorus book, *Bhakti Gitawali*.

About ten years ago he produced a song and worship book called “*Jai Jai Yesu*” collecting songs from over fifty countries, and now he is thoroughly revising it into a global multicultural interchurch worship book. In family listening to music at mealtime he always kept a balance between different types of music and songs, western classical, western light music, Indian classical, lyrics, devotional songs, and music from different nations and cultures.

**Family Values:** Saphir has placed a very high premium on having regular ‘Family Altar’. Each member by turn would lead in their daily Family Prayer. After reading a Bible passage each person, from the youngest one to the senior most, would comment on the lessons to be learned and applied in life. He would see

that different forms of prayer are used during the family hour. Every Wednesday and Saturday there is intercessory prayer. The custom of memorizing a new verse every day has been maintained with moderate success.

The Athyals used to have weekly Family Forum every weekend when they informally discussed together for two hours the experiences of the previous week, the challenges of the week ahead, and any topic of interest to any member of the family. They maintained unreserved openness and transparency in the family which bonded them together. Financial matters, friendships, fears, frustrations, cultural pressures—in fact everything under the sun was openly discussed every week. He arranged for them to spend at least one year for a systematic study of Bible and theology, a principle he learned from his father. This gave them the needed Christian foundations for the rest of their lives.

He used to talk about and practice what he calls 'Family Daily Vitamins'. That is, Vitamin A: Affection within the family expressed every day by hugs, helping each other, mutual appreciation and encouragement; Vitamin B complex: Bible study, Prayer and jotting down in diaries lessons learned each day; Vitamin C: Communication open and free, transparency within the family; Vitamin D: Discipline for all the members as agreed together; Vitamin E: Entertainment and fun time together, games, trips; Vitamin H: Health, regular check-up, moderate eating of right stuff, physical exercise; Vitamin K: Knowledge, continuous learning mode, pursuing general knowledge, sharing new information at the mealtimes.

## **MINDSET AND VIEWPOINTS**

**Holistic View:** His perspective is always in terms of the interworking of the physical/material, the social/relational and the spiritual, and the interlink of the individuals and their societies. This was based on his conviction of God's sovereignty over all things. The OT concept of the sacred and the secular as interwoven shaped his thinking. His concept of mission also is then not just saving souls for heavenly life later on, but rather God's will being done on earth in all things and his rule being established in all areas of life of people. To him Christian mission should be holistic, and the scope of the gospel is the scope of the rule of God which encompasses everything, here and hereafter, now and the future.

**Local and Global:** His central commitment is to India and to the life, mission and needs of the church in India. In some international commissions or committees half jokingly he would say, "You must take into account my point of view because I speak for India with its one billion people: who among you represent one billion?" At the same time he maintained a global view. He took a keen interest in Asia and church in Asia. That is why much of his energy went into heading the Asia Lausanne Committee and its varied programmes, and so also his

concentrated efforts in strengthening theology and theological training of leaders in Asia by bringing together many Asian schools in the formation of Asia Theological Association. For us Christians in different countries of Asia to understand one another and for the church in the West to understand us, he edited an extensive volume “*Church in Asia, Challenges and Opportunities*”, a comprehensive survey country by country written by well-known Asian Christian leaders. Saphir was actively involved in the work of several global organizations for many years. His house has spread around in all rooms souvenirs and mementoes from some 70 countries in all continents he visited.

**Gender Issues:** He used to forcefully speak up relating to rightful role of women in society and Christian leadership. He considerably increased the percentage of women students at UBS, brought women into the Faculty and Governing Board. He was known for his stance for women. During the first organizing meeting of theologically trained women he was invited to be a speaker and was the only man among some forty women for the first two days of the meeting after which another male joined them. He always insisted on bringing women members on Serampore committees and church leadership.

**Theological Stance:** He preferred never to use the terms ‘evangelicals’ and ‘ecumenicals’, because many evangelicals belong to ecumenical churches. Among the evangelicals he was often viewed as a liberal, and among the liberals he was known as a staunch evangelical. He made those distinctions theologically but not in terms of structures or denominations. He was the only one who had served on both the Executive Committee of the Evangelical Fellowship of India and the Executive Committee of the National Council of Churches, and that too simultaneously.

He considered the following convictions as the bare minimum commitments for any Christian. (1) Uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of the Triune God and as our Savior and Lord, (2) Primary and ultimate authority of the Bible for our faith, life and service, (3) Personal willful response of faith to God for his invitation of reconciliation with him through Christ as the starting point of Christian life, (4) Growth in Christian disciplines under the Lordship of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit in the context of a fellowship of believers, (5) Partnership with Christ in his mission in the world always and everywhere, and (6) Looking forward to the consummation of God’s plans for the world in the personal return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom. Saphir considered all those who believe in these core biblical truths as ‘evangelicals’, and all those who do not as not Christians. Simple or complex? For him, it is simple, crucial and crystal clear.

**Small Is Beautiful:** He has a fascination for details and loved the ordinary and simple things of life. Therefore most of his sermon illustrations are from ordinary simple life of people. In a picture, photograph, movie or a scenery he observes things that many others do not see. Old looking and crude looking things

attracted him. When he visits other countries he spends time to see and understand the rural and rustic life of people. He takes interest in simple and marginalized people; for example asking beggars their names, their backgrounds, families and life details.

**Lively and Enquiring Mind:** His mind has been like a sponge that absorbs anything he comes across. He always kept learning on all sorts of different subjects. He kept a notebook in his pocket and used to jot down anything new he learned, new words, idioms, ideas, statistics and information. His complex filing system has a lot of information in it. After reading a daily newspaper he would in his mind review the news: this he did in reading books recollecting what he read chapter by chapter. While listening to a Sunday sermon or a lecture, instead of taking down notes then, he has disciplined his mind to recollect the points and write them down later on when he gets home. One of the sermons he loves to preach again and again is on “Loving the Lord with all your mind”. To him it is our mind that does matter.

**Optimism and Positive Attitude:** He has a critical appreciation of all cultures all around the world, and looks for the best elements in them to follow. He always tried to see the bright side of all events and experiences. In unpleasant experiences he would look into what good has come out of them, and sought what he could learn from them. In any criticism he received of himself he would see a core of truth in it and be grateful for it; with regard to rest of the criticism and personal attacks his attitude is best summarized in his own words, “We must learn how to fly above the clouds and be thankful to the ‘publicity’ we get free of cost.” He kept up an undying hope in all situations, and never gave up on people. He would say if a situation needs to be changed work earnestly at it, but if it cannot be changed celebrate it.

**Basic Standards He Tries to Live By:** He often used to speak about and always tries to live by three standards or principles. The standards are integrity, intentionality and intensity.

**Integrity:** To him, integrity is what a person is when no one else is looking: it is who one is before God and he alone. It is not our accomplishments or what others think of us nor what we appear to be to the outside world that really matters. The key question he often asks to himself is “Who is the real me?” The danger of falling into a ‘prison of compliments’ by others was always kept in mind, and he developed a discipline of not minding compliments and appreciations. Our basic accountability is to God. Anything done was for him and not for others to see. He considered that the most difficult part of preparing sermon or leading a retreat was his own direct access to, and intimacy with, God. He used to say, what he learned from his father, “If your tears do not fall on your sermon outline, do not preach from it”.

**Intentionality:** He regularly practiced setting goals for the institutions for which he gave leadership, for own family and for himself. He started his principalship at UBS setting seven-year goals which looked most unrealistic then, but persistently working on them he could get them accomplished. He used to encourage his family to set one year and three-year goals for themselves and for the family. Occasionally he used to ask them to imagine the scenario of what could be from five years ahead. Personal goals were set in different categories of development such as professional, mental, spiritual, social, family relations, health, and spiritual. Goals were accompanied by supporting goals and action plans in each case. Even in a simple activity like making a phone call or time with people he used to scribble down objectives and outcomes expected. He failed in only very few of his major ventures, and two of them were, one, in his attempt to establish a Christian Housing Society in Pune, and the other in producing an extensive one volume India Christian Handbook.

**Intensity:** He always tried to stretch all his faculties as he believed that they are capable of immensely more than we make use of them. When walked he walked fast, when he read or listened to some thing he did it with a keen and active mind. When he accepted a responsibility he did the work with all his capacity and concentration. He was never a mediocre. In all areas of his life, actions, talks, relationships, he lived intensely. He tried to follow the Biblical principle, “Make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil”.

*Twentieth-Century Dictionary of Christian Biography*, (1995), a reference volume which covers the lives and works of seven hundred men and women worldwide, “who have touched the course of modern church history” speaks of Saphir as,

An outstanding ecumenical churchman with a passion for educating people for effective service, he has had an extensive ministry in both the Indian and the world church. He served as president of Union Biblical Seminary in Pune, India, as founder-chairman of the Asia Theological Association, and as guest professor in over fifteen universities worldwide.... Athyal’s long-term focus has been on the need for the church to squarely face the issues of modern culture, and the need for various parts of the church universal to face this task together.

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