A Tribute to Rev. Dr. Eric A. Gass

It is exactly three years since I saw Eric Gass. As a friend of him I am very privileged to have known him and worked with him for several years. This is a humble tribute I give him thousands of miles from Vaddukoddai, Sri Lanka.

As we remember the life and work of Eric Gass, we specially give thanks to God for the life of one for whom Christian faith meant a life lived forward, a life lived for others around, may it be in USA, India or Sri Lanka.

Though I do not know his childhood and college days, I know later he lived and worked as a missionary in Raipur, India for the United Church of Christ from 1960 – 1969, then he and his wife Patricia accepted to work as missionaries for Sri Lanka and Nepal living in Bombay for 14 years from 1969 – 1983. Their two children too had their education in India and then proceeded to USA for higher studies. On the retirement of Rev Dr Telfer Mook in 1983 Eric Gass was appointed the General Secretary of the UCBWM and the secretary for Southern Asia. It was then they resided at Riverside Drive, New York city, the church`s world headquarters.

It was in 1998 again they returned to India for a short period, and finally retired in 2000 to settle back in USA. He had associated with the United Church Board for World Ministries for over forty-one years. During this time he also worked for the American College Trustees, the NGO Forum on Sri Lanka, and the Trustees of Jaffna College Funds. Eric was also the representative of the Trustees on the Board of Directors of Jaffna College for a short period prior to 1982. He was ideally suited for these tasks with his very intimate knowledge and first hand experience of India and Jaffna. Thus, it is reported that he has visited Sri Lanka and Jaffna many times.

He belonged to that very small, rare band of dedicated and committed men who were so receptive to the call of God. He obeyed faithfully, never looking back, once crucial decisions were made. I have experienced with him, sitting at many very crucial, decision- making meetings. He was a man of few words, but his actions had the qualities of stability, dependability and efficiency. He had confidence in all who worked with him.

We were privileged to have him many times in Jaffna. He was in his best of health then. On a few occasions he came up to Colombo but due to the grave political situation he had to return back from Colombo. Every time he visited Jaffna he was ready to take on any responsibility given to him – he had honoured us by doing the opening prayer at our Prize-giving in 1990, declared opened the new
electric generator installed at college, and the Jaffna College Branch school at Paranthan. Earlier once in 1987 he took the trouble and was able to be in Jaffna at least for just 18 hours under very adverse conditions.

Eric was an affectionate and a good hearted friend to both old and young. Jaffna College was always so dear to his heart. Even at one of the Trustees` meeting he attended in 2005, with regard to the liquidity fund, he fought hard and stressed that Jaffna College was the institution to which the Trust Fund was dedicated, and he said this with deep conviction, some emotion and with all the force he could muster. It was a very bold statement at that time, and only a missionary of his experience and calibre could make it. We are still hoping that his great aspirations for the college will not be extinguished, but its beams will shine around us for, years to come.

Eric certainly had a splendid and beautiful missionary career, lived and accomplished to the fullest for which we raise our hearts in gratitude to God. We are unworthy of such dedicated life lived in our midst. We cannot easily forget such a man, and I, on behalf of my own family, and that of the Jaffna College family give our humble thanks to God Almighty for this wonderful life of Eric Gass lived among us till Saturday 10th of December, 2011.

May the good Lord console and comfort his loving wife Patricia and his beloved children. I conclude here by saying –

“The Lord hath need of him,”

God gives us the assurance,

“We shall see him as he is”.

Noel A Vimalendran,
The Principal,
Jaffna College,
Vaddukoddai, SRI LANKA.