

## FACES OF LUTHERAN MISSIONS IN INDIA



*Louise Ellermann*

### Louise Elisabeth Ellermann

**Born:** August 3, 1884  
Evansville, Indiana

**Died:** January 11, 1957  
Clarinda, Iowa

**A brave and dedicated missionary nurse who showed Christian mercy to the sick—especially women and children—in South India.**



CHRIST SHOWED GRACE AND COURAGE TO HIS FAITHFUL SERVANT LOUISE ELISABETH ELLERMANN, the first health care worker in Lutheran foreign missions. Her ministry at her medical dispensary in India opened up a new avenue for missions. Not only did she present a different kind of missions (health care) but she also reached a different demographic group. This was the first overtly “social” ministry which the Missouri Synod participated in and led to clarification of how social ministries could be properly tied to the proclamation of the Gospel. Her long-lasting legacy lies in the subsequent inclusion of health care as a central part of missions in the Missouri Synod.

The call for a nurse to the mission field arose because the male missionaries were not allowed to speak to, much less evangelize, women in the India. Therefore, several Ladies’ Aid societies raised the \$600 annual salary to send a female nurse to India. Louise Ellermann was commissioned for the task on July 1, 1913 having been trained as a nurse in Indiana. She arrived in India Nov. 4, 1913 and spent several months living with the Gutknecht missionary family. During this time, she traveled to several hospitals learning the culture, the state of medical care, and learning enough Tamil to be able to distribute medicine. By May of 1914, she started doing house calls.

She was very concerned with the treatment of women in India, as well as all people of lower castes. She saw a major component of her work to provide dignity to people who were treated with very little. Soon after arriving, she set up a “medical dispensary” in Bargur. She continued to do house calls, but it was far more efficient to set up a dispensary wherein people could come to her. Not only did this have the obvious benefit of reducing travel time, but it opened up her ministry to a completely different group of people. The women who were not allowed to speak to men and were kept isolated in their homes (to whom “zenana” mission women were sent as the only ones who could get access) were only among the higher caste communities. She continued to visit these women, but aimed to reach a wider audience. Her dispensary, by contrast was visited by women of the lower castes, men, and children.

This created a completely different missionary model. Not only did it open her ministry up to a wider audience, but it also created a completely different model of evangelization. Rather than speaking to women in their own homes while providing medical care, having a medical dispensary allowed opportunities to speak to a wide audience. The dispensary was soon visited by up to 50 people per day. While patients were waiting on the veranda to be seen by the nurse, devotions and sermons were delivered. Each patient was given a ticket number which on the far side held gospel story. At the dispensary, Ellermann treated all sorts of ailments such as fever, worms, cataracts, rheumatism, tuberculosis, and scorpion stings because she was the only medical worker in such a long distance. She did her very best to aid as much as she could because the nearest doctor was nearly 50 miles away.

After she returned from furlough in 1921, the Missouri Synod had finally sent a doctor, Dr. Theodore Doederlein to set up a hospital in Ambur. Ellermann then moved her dispensary to Ambur and they had parallel missions – Ellermann continuing her outpatient medical dispensary and Doederlein with a new inpatient hospital.

In addition to treating as many people as possible at the dispensary, Ellermann was also called upon for the medical care of all of the missionaries’ families. She frequently traveled hundreds of kilometers for weeks at a time to treat these people. Her relationship with other missionaries eventually turned sour and due to some conflicts among the community at Ambur, she decided not to return to India after her second furlough in 1927. The board of missions was very loath to allow her to resign. They pointed out that new nurses who would be sent to India desperately needed her experience to mentor them in this mission. They said, “My dear sister, you are our first nurse in the foreign work. The sacrifices you brought are not required by woman [sic] who follow your pioneer work... The matured opinions of missionaries are worth a thousand times more for the proper planning of work in the Orient than is commonly supposed. We need you and your seasoned advice. We need you and your valued experience.” After some vacillation, Ellermann made her peace with the mission with a seeming resolution to the conflict, but still did not return. Instead, she returned to Indiana and married Joe Sunderman.

Louis Ellermann broke new ground and showed tremendous courage with the introduction of social ministries, evangelization of women, and the major challenges of doing medical work with very little professional support staff.

*The first missionary nurse in LCMS history whose works of mercy opened the door to the Gospel through her visits to the sick and dying.*

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### Louise Elisabeth Ellermann

- August 3, 1884 - Born in Evansville, Indiana.
- August 17, 1884 - Baptized Trinity Lutheran Church, Evansville, Indiana.
- April 3, 1898 - Confirmed in Trinity Lutheran Church, Evansville, Indiana.
- Summer 1907 - Graduated as nurse from Deaconess Hospital, Evansville, Indiana.
- 1907-1913 - Nursing for Metropolitan Insurance Company in Evansville making house calls.
- April 24, 1913 - Mrs. Zucker raises \$600.00 per year from Ladies' Societies to send a nurse to India.
- July 1, 1913 - Louise Ellermann has been selected and will be stationed at Krishnagiri. The full \$600 has already been pledged.
- October 4, 1913 - Leaves United States for India.
- November 4, 1913 - Ellermann arrives in India at Krishnagiri.
- December 1913 - Went to Kodaikanal and spent time with Mrs. Gutknecht (wife of a missionary); Began a "munchi" Tamil language training course.
- March 3, 1914 - Has visited several hospitals in Koda, Villore, and Madras. She has learned the culture of Indian medicine and picked up enough Tamil to provide medical care.
- May 10, 1914 - She moves to Ambur and starts doing house calls.
- August 11-14, 1914 - Ellermann travels to Trivandrum, Nagercoli, and Krishna.
- June 3-4, 1914 - Sets up a make-shift dispensary on the veranda of Stallman's bungalow.
- June 18, 1914 - Is setting up a dispensary in Krishnagiri by dedicating a room of a house for it.
- October-November 19, 1914 - Stayed in Travernia to treat Rev. Gutknecht and his wife who have malaria.
- December 30, 1914 - In Bargur where she has a dispensary and also makes extensive house calls.
- March 15, 1915 - Makes clear that she does nursing at a dispensary and is not primarily doing zenana work.
- January 15, 1916 - She is in Bargur and makes clear that she would like to go to Ambur but cannot because the bungalow's roof has collapsed and a plague that currently in Ambur.
- July 1916-November 1917 - Spends 6 months in Nagercoil caring for Mrs. G. Huebener.
- June 11, 1918 - makes the comment that the spiritual side of her work would be better if there was a missionary nearby. As such, she hopes to move the dispensary to Ambur.
- March-April 1918 - Spent eight weeks in Kodai.
- June 13, 1919 - Leaves on steamer from Colombo Ceylon for furlough in America.
- July 16, 1919 - Landed in San Francisco.
- December 31, 1920 - Left the United States to return to India.
- February 11, 1921 - Returned to India in Ambur.
- March 1, 1921 - Dr. Theo. J. Doederlein agrees to set up a hospital in Ambur.
- May 19, 1921 - Without a temporary building for the dispensary in Ambur, Ellermann begins work on the back of her bungalow
- February 6, 1924 - Informs the Missouri Synod Mission Board that she would like to resign at her next furlough in 1926 due to conflicts with other missionaries.
- August 29, 1924 - The Mission Board does not want to accept her resignation and will discuss this with her further when she arrives in America.
- June 3rd, 1926 - Leaves on steamer from Colombo Ceylon for furlough.
- September 2, 1926 - Ill in America, has to have her tonsils removed.
- April 2, 1927 - Despite many protests, the board finally accepts her resignation.
- July 13, 1927 - Decides that she can go back to India for another term if the board needs her.
- July 25, 1927 - Board agrees that she can return, but would like for her to go through a medical examination first.
- August 10, 1927 - Has gotten engaged and will not be able to return to India after all.
- September 8, 1927 - Married Joe Sunderman in Clarinda, Iowa. Started a career farming with Mr. Sunderman in 1927.
- During World War II - Served the local Red Cross as a nurse.
- January 11, 1957 - Dies in Clarinda, Iowa at the age of 72 years.



AFTER MORNING PRAYERS I BEGIN. I AM sure in the practice of my profession I will always be loyal to the patients, physicians, government and mission under whom I serve. I try to lead my life and practice my profession in uprightness and honor. Whatever house I enter it is for the good of the sick. And I will strive in every way for improvement...I am sure this is paving the way for the missionary... These poor women are shut up into their homes and their lives are very dark and bare. Sometimes we think life at home is narrow and hard, but it is rich and luxurious, no matter how hard a woman must toil, in comparison with the lot of a Hindu woman, hemmed in, with nothing to think of, no chance to grow, no outlook for this life or the next. As a Christian woman I hope to guide these gentle dark faced women to a better life. ... As a nurse I have many chances to relieve their body from pain and suffering. I am busy and I hope useful, and I am very thankful and happy.

—Louise Ellermann