

Origins and Early History

The Theosophical Order of Service (TOS) is the service arm of the Theosophical Society (TS), a world-wide organisation devoted to the promotion of universal brotherhood without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour. Dr Annie Besant founded the Theosophical Order of Service in February 1908 in response to the wish of a number of members 'to organise themselves for various lines of service, to actively promote the first object of the Society.' The aim of the TOS was to make Theosophy practical in order that the sum of human misery, within and around the areas of every branch of the TS may be visibly diminished; to seek to model the conceptions arrived at by study, for their adaptation into useful forms of daily life, thus obeying the precepts of the Masters, and to offer a common work to all who are willing to act on these principles.

The motto chosen was: '*A Union of Those who Love in the Service of All that Suffers*'.

Supporters of the TOS immediately heeded Dr Besant's call to action and began to form Leagues that focussed on particular problems in their society. In India, the "League for the Abolition of Child Parentage" opposed early child marriage. In Britain, the "League for the Child Problem" dealt with all matters relating to children. In the USA, three Leagues were formed, one focused on prison and hospital reform, another disseminated and taught Theosophy to the poor and the incarcerated; the third focussed on forming a Theosophical University. By the close of 1908, the response to the TOS was so overwhelming that an International Council was formed. By the end of 1910, there were sixty-one Leagues around the world. Very early in its life, the TOS widened its compassion to include the animals and Anti-Vivisection Leagues were set up.

The first Organising Secretary of the T.O.S was Dr. Louise Appel (1908-1909), followed by Mrs. Elizabeth Severs (1909-1912) and subsequently by Mrs. Ethel Whyte (1912 until 1919). In 1922, a European Federation was created with its Headquarters in London, with Mr H Baille-Weaver, as Chairman and Arthur Burgess as Organising Secretary. Both were extraordinary in their own ways. Baille-Weaver was Editor of the Journal Theosophy in England and Wales and was also Vice-President of the National Anti-Vaccination League in Wales. Arthur Burgess, though physically handicapped, worked tirelessly travelling throughout Europe and Australia, starting TOS groups and lecturing on the need to make Theosophy practical. In 1925, the TOS became the International Theosophical Order of Service (ITOS) and produced a Journal, Service, edited by Arthur Burgess.

In 1925, he wrote, "To arouse the desire for Service, to indicate and provide paths of Service, to keep alive in those treading its paths the true spirit of Service – these are the three objects which may be said to represent roughly the goal towards which every Secretary is striving."

Arthur Burgess passed away in July 1926 and was succeeded by Ralph Thomson who had to resign from his position due to ill health. Thompson was succeeded by Max Wardall who set out to restructure the TOS. Wardall wrote: "There are no important or unimportant posts in the Theosophical life. The humblest server in far off lands is indispensable to the unity of the whole, but if he does not realise that unity he loses in part his inspiration." He emphasised international work and activity in several countries, including Brazil. In June 1931, Max fell ill due to exhaustion and his activities were curtailed. On September 20, 1933, Dr Besant passed away and in December of the same year Robert Spurrier succeeded Max Wardall.

The international work was carried on by Robert Spurrier. A National Council of Animal Welfare was organised. Other work involved outreach to prisoners and cooperation and support with a number of other associations.

The TOS would not have survived during its early inception without the support of the Theosophical Society. In the very beginning, with Dr Besant's message fresh in their minds to make Theosophy "practical", members felt Theosophy had to be lived and by helping those who suffered, the first object of the Society was being achieved. It was only normal that one needed to help those less fortunate.

Good News: The TOS had the pleasure of celebrating over one hundred years of existence. It was founded by Dr Annie Besant in February 1908. A gathering was held at Adyar, India in early January 2008, right after the International Convention of the Theosophical Society.

* Much of the history of the early years of the TOS came from the excellent publication, 'The Theosophical Order of Service', the 2007 USA Commemorative Issue, by Ananya Rajan to whom we are most grateful.