



Mrs Maria Dyer

Missionary

Founder of St. Margaret's School

Maria Dyer was a British Protestant missionary and pioneering educator who set up schools throughout the Straits Settlements. Arriving in Singapore in 1842, she was struck by the sight of impoverished young girls, known as mui tsai, being auctioned off as slaves for the wealthy.

Appalled by the practice, she sought permission from the London Missionary society to set up a boarding school for 19 homeless girls in a shophouse on North Bridge Road. The school was opened that same year and took in needy girls, regardless of their race or religion. It was then known as the Chinese Girls' School.

At the school, the girls were taught an elementary education in English, the principles of Christianity, skills such as cooking and needlework and how to be good homemakers in preparation for marriage. For many years, it stood as the only girls' school in Singapore. This happened during a time when it was thought that education was unnecessary for girls.

Following her husband's death in 1843, Maria became a salaried missionary at the London Missionary Society and continued to work in the Chinese Girls' School and appointed Ms Grant as the school's first principal. She was determined to provide education and build schools for girls. The aim of the mission schools was to instill Christian values and behaviour in its students. It was important to teach the girls to read and write so that they were able to comprehend Christian literature.

When news of Chinese ports opening for trade arrived, the London Missionary withdrew their missions in the Straits Settlements and Maria moved to Penang with her children in 1844. Penang would eventually become her resting place when she passed in 1846.

The school Maria started, Chinese Girls' School, is known today as St. Margaret's Secondary School. It is through her devotion towards improving the lives of the impoverished children she met so long ago that has paved the way for St. Margaret's to grow into the school it is today. Devotion, one of the qualities listed in the school's motto, is one we hope is instilled in the students who pass through our doors, students who are able to stand up for what they believe in and to turn those ideas into action.