

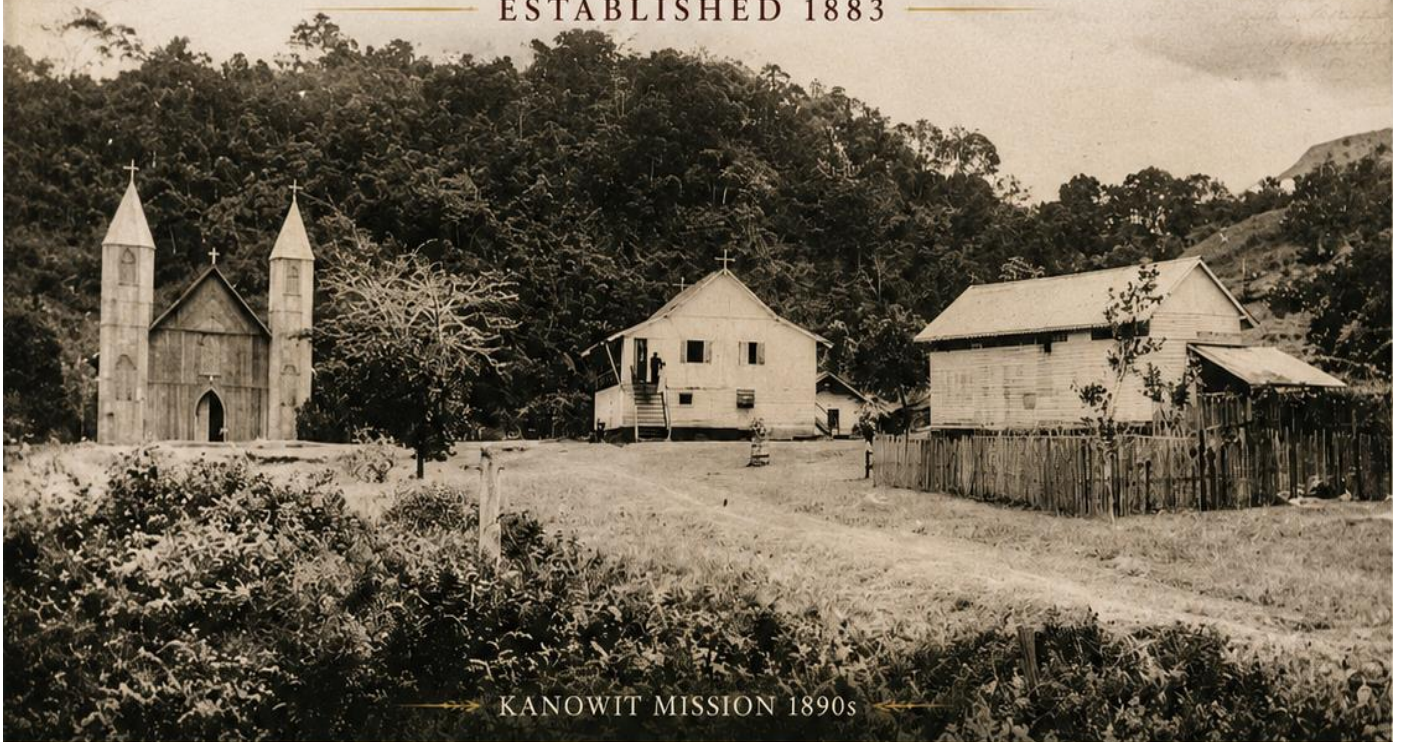


SARAWAK HERITAGE SERIES

CHURCH OF ST. FRANCIS XAVIER, KANOWIT

— A Mission Legacy Along the Rajang River —

ESTABLISHED 1883



KANOWIT MISSION 1890s



— PAULYN P. L. YAM —

*Established in 1883, the Kanowit Mission became
one of the earliest Roman Catholic centres in the Rejang Basin.*

Introduction: Church of St. Francis Xavier, Kanowit

Two years ago, while travelling downriver from Kapit to Mukah, we passed by an important historical site of the Roman Catholic Church — the Church of St. Francis Xavier in Kanowit. At that time, we only briefly stopped by. This year, by God's will, we returned to learn and better understand the rich history behind the mission and church. We are truly grateful to Father George for patiently explaining the history of the church and generously showing us around the mission grounds.

More than a church, St. Francis Xavier Mission stands as a living testimony to the history of migration, education, healthcare, faith, and community development in the Rajang Basin. Its buildings, photographs, and collective memories form an important part of Sarawak's cultural heritage and deserve continued preservation and documentation.



The present church building continues a mission legacy that began in Kanowit in 1883. Photo by the author.

Nestled along the Rajang River in the town of Kanowit, the Church of St. Francis Xavier stands as one of the earliest Roman Catholic mission centres in the Rajang Basin. More than just a place of worship, the mission played an important role in shaping the social, educational, and spiritual development of many interior communities in central Sarawak.

Origins of the Mission

The mission was established in 1883 by two Mill Hill missionaries, Father Edmund Dunn and Father Aloysius Keyzer. Kanowit was selected because of its strategic location along the Rajang River system, allowing missionaries access to Iban and other indigenous communities

living upriver. The mission was placed under the patronage of St. Francis Xavier, reflecting the dedication given by Pope Leo XIII to the Borneo mission during the sending of the first missionaries in 1881.



Fr. Edmund Dunn (Ireland), 1883-1897, (Sources: Our Office St Xavier)



Fr. Aloysius Keyzer (Netherlands), served 1883–1921; Rector 1897–1911. , (Sources: Our Office St Xavier)

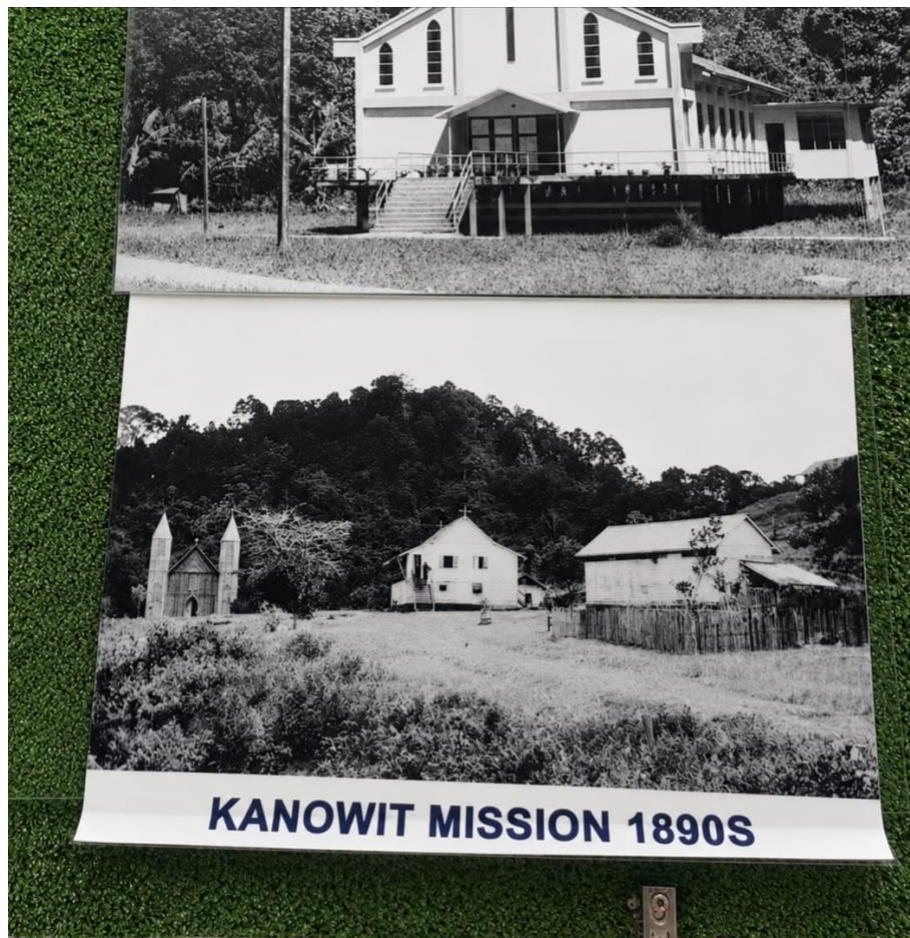
A Centre of Evangelisation in the Rajang Basin

From Kanowit, missionaries expanded their work throughout the Rajang Basin. The mission became an important centre for evangelisation, education, and healthcare. In addition to pastoral work, the missionaries established schools, medical services, agricultural initiatives and community welfare programmes.

Historical records indicate that the original St. Francis Xavier Church was built in 1885. The earlier timber church, remembered for its distinctive twin towers, was later demolished in 1967 to make way for the present church building.



St. Francis Xavier Church, Kanowit, stands as one of the earliest Roman Catholic mission centres in the Rajang Basin. Photo courtesy of the church collection.



Historic view of the Kanowit Mission compound in the 1890s, showing the original twin-towered church, mission residence and support buildings. The photograph illustrates the early mission landscape that served as a centre of evangelisation and education along the Rajang River. Photo courtesy of the church collection.

The Rajang River served as the principal transportation

corridor linking Kanowit with surrounding settlements. Priests, teachers and medical personnel travelled primarily by river, making the mission an important centre connecting upriver communities with education, healthcare and religious services.

Today, photographs preserved within the church compound provide rare glimpses into mission life in Kanowit during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These include images of the early wooden church, missionary priests, local nuns, boarding students, and daily mission activities. Together, they reflect the close relationship between the church and the local community.

Mission Architecture and Landscape

The present church complex combines modern structures with surviving historical elements. Within the compound are:

- the main church building,
- older timber mission halls,
- memorial spaces,
- cemetery grounds,
- retreat and community facilities,
- and archival displays preserving photographs and mission history.

One of the surviving heritage structures is St. Clare's Hall, a simple timber building that reflects the older mission architecture once common in Sarawak's interior settlements. Historical photographs also document earlier mission buildings raised on stilts, designed to suit the tropical climate and riverine environment.

Timeline:

Year	Event
1883	Kanowit Mission established by Fr. Edmund Dunn and Fr. Aloysius Keyzer
1885	First church constructed
1898	Sacred Heart Chapel Bawan established
1911	Fr. Adrian Klerk becomes Rector
1941–1945	Japanese Occupation
1967	Original twin-tower church demolished
1988	Fr. Ferdinand Vergeer becomes Rector
2005	Local clergy leadership period begins
2022	Current phase of mission development

The church interior today features decorative motifs inspired by local indigenous patterns, reflecting the gradual blending of Catholic traditions with Sarawak cultural identity.



St. Clare's Hall, one of the surviving timber structures within the Kanowit mission compound. The building once served as a boarding hostel for school children attending the mission school. Photo by the author.



Interior view of St. Francis Xavier Church, featuring decorative motifs inspired by local indigenous artistic traditions that show the integration of Catholic worship and Sarawak cultural identity. Photo by the author.



Remains of an uphill escape tunnel within the mission grounds, believed to be associated with the Japanese Occupation period during World War II. Photo by the author.

Sacred Heart Chapel, Bawan

Among the most significant heritage sites linked to the Kanowit mission is the Chapel of the Sacred Heart in Bawan. Built in 1898 from Bornean ironwood by the Mill Hill missionaries, it is regarded as one of the oldest surviving Catholic churches in Sarawak. The chapel served as an outstation under the Kanowit parish and symbolised the spread of Catholicism among the Iban community.

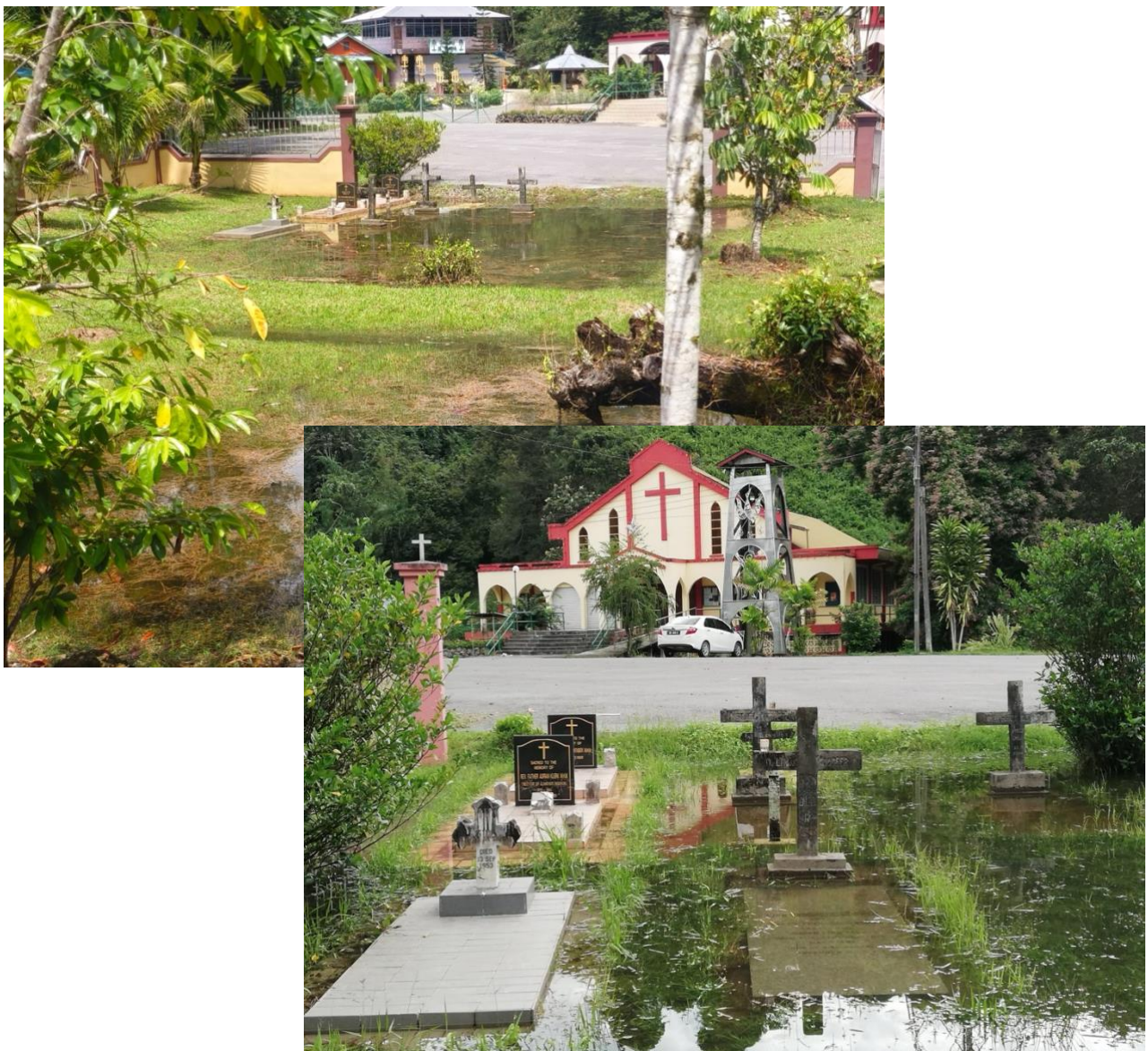


Recently restored, the chapel has gained renewed recognition as both a religious and heritage landmark. Its restoration reflects a growing awareness of the historical importance of Sarawak's mission architecture and the need for its preservation. Photo by the author.

Heritage and Community Memory

Today, St. Francis Xavier Church remains an active parish while also serving as a living repository of Kanowit's history. The church compound preserves memories not only of missionary work, but also of education, healthcare, women's religious life, and the transformation of river communities over more than a century.

The surviving photographs, buildings, and cemetery grounds collectively illustrate how mission settlements functioned as early centres of social organisation in interior Sarawak. They also reflect broader historical themes, including colonial-era river travel, indigenous conversion, local vocations, and the development of Catholic education in the Rejang region.



Historic cemetery of early missionaries at St. Francis Xavier Mission, Kanowit. Photo by the author and courtesy of the church collection.

Considerable effort has been invested in developing the church's heritage gallery and archival displays. The Kanowit Parish Heritage Committee under the guidance of Frs. Mathews and George has carefully researched and gathered historical photographs. Through these displays, visitors are able to better understand the history of the mission and the people behind its development. Such efforts serve as an excellent example of heritage stewardship, demonstrating the importance of documenting and preserving local history for future generations.

For many families in Kanowit and the surrounding longhouses, the mission remains deeply connected to personal and generational memory — a place where baptisms, schooling, healthcare, and community gatherings became intertwined with everyday life.



Sisters engaged in sewing work. Photo courtesy of the church collection.



Three Catholic sisters in traditional religious habits posing for a formal studio portrait, reflecting the early history of local women in religious vocation and mission service in Sarawak. Photo courtesy of the church collection



Above: Catholic sisters gathered in prayer before the altar, reflecting the spiritual life and devotion within the mission community. Photo courtesy of the collection.

Below: Catholic sisters carrying out daily domestic work at the mission, where prayer, discipline, and service formed part of everyday life. Photo courtesy of the church collection.

Priests, Rectors and Religious Sisters of St. Francis Xavier Mission, Kanowit (1883–2024)

Introduction

For more than 140 years, St. Francis Xavier Mission, Kanowit has been served by missionaries, priests, religious sisters, catechists and lay workers from many parts of the world. From the pioneering Mill Hill Missionaries of the nineteenth century to local Sarawakian clergy and international missionaries from Africa, Europe and Asia, their collective service helped shape the religious, educational and social history of the Rajang Basin.

1. Rectors of St. Francis Xavier Mission

Years	Rector
1883–1897	Fr. Edmund Dunn (Ireland)
1897–1911	Fr. Aloysius Keyzer (Netherlands)
1911–1941	Fr. Adrian Klerk (Netherlands)
1941–1953	Fr. Leo Barry (England)
1953–1970	Fr. Gerard (Gerrit) Bruggeman (Netherlands)
1970–1973	Fr. Richard Aker (Netherlands)
1977–1988	Fr. William Bos (Netherlands)
1988–2005	Fr. Ferdinand Vergeer (Netherlands)
2005–2006	Fr. Richard Lau (Sibu)
2006–2007	Fr. Joseph Sebastian (Dalat)
2008–2009	Fr. Joseph Hii (Sibu)
2009–2011	Fr. James Chambers (England)
2009–2013	Fr. Henry Delfin (Philippines)
2013–2018	Fr. Fabian Kong (Sibu)
2011–2013 & 2018–2022	Fr. Mathews Otieno Olili (Kenya)
2022–2027	Fr. Goerge Omuto Odero (Kenya)

2. Pioneer Missionaries (1883–1941)

Fr. Edmund Dunn (Ireland)

Service: 1883–1897

Among the earliest Mill Hill Missionaries assigned to the Rajang Basin, Fr. Dunn established the Kanowit Mission in 1883. His ministry laid the foundations for Catholic evangelisation, education and pastoral care in the interior of Sarawak.

Fr. Aloysius Keyzer (Netherlands)

Service: 1883–1921

Rector: 1897–1911

Fr. Aloysius Keyzer left Kanowit in 1911. He moved to Kuching for four years, left Sarawak in 1915, returned to the Netherlands, and died in 1921. This makes Fr. Adrian Klerk, not Fr. Keyzer, the longest-serving priest in Kanowit.

Fr. Adrian Klerk (Netherlands)

Service: 1898–1941

Rector: 1911–1941

For thirty years Fr. Klerk guided the mission through a period of expansion and institutional development, helping establish schools, chapels and mission outreach programmes throughout the region.

3. War and Reconstruction (1941–1953)

Fr. Leo Barry (England)

Serving during the difficult years of the Second World War and its aftermath, Fr. Barry played a crucial role in rebuilding parish life and restoring mission activities after the Japanese Occupation.

4. Post-War Expansion

Fr. Gerard (Gerrit) Bruggeman (Netherlands)

One of the most influential missionaries in Kanowit's history, Fr. Bruggeman served intermittently from 1940 to 1981 and was rector from 1953 to 1970. His long ministry witnessed significant growth in education, parish administration and pastoral outreach.

Fr. William Bos (Netherlands)

Serving from 1973 to 1988, Fr. Bos continued the development of parish facilities and ministries while strengthening community engagement and pastoral care.

Fr. Ferdinand Vergeer (Netherlands)

Rector from 1988 to 2005, Fr. Vergeer guided the mission through the transition into the twenty-first century, supporting parish renewal and strengthening local leadership.

5. Local and International Clergy (2005–2024)

The twenty-first century witnessed increasing participation by local Sarawakian priests together with clergy from the Philippines, India, Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, Congo and other countries. This reflects the increasingly international character of the Catholic Church in Sarawak.

Notable clergy include:

- Fr. Richard Lau (Sibu)
- Fr. Joseph Sebastian (Dalat)
- Fr. Joseph Hii (Sibu)
- Fr. James Chambers (England)
- Fr. Henry Delfin (Philippines)
- Fr. Devadas Sanakki (India)
- Fr. Mathews Otieno Olili (Kenya)
- Fr. Philip Odhiambo Obaso (Kenya)
- Fr. Oniz Kikokholo (Uganda)
- Fr. Rex Fedelicio (Philippines)
- Fr. Sudhakar Meka (India)
- Fr. Fr. George Omutho Odero (Kenya)
- Fr. Blaise (Cameroon)
- Fr. Michael (Philippines)

- Fr. Ravi (India)
- Fr. Olivier (Congo)
- Fr. Michael Lee (Sibu)
- Fr. Paul Chee (Sibu)
- Fr. Andrew Tan (Dalat)
- Fr. Fabian Kong (Sibu)

Religious Sisters Who Served in Kanowit

The religious sisters played an important role in education, healthcare, catechism, pastoral ministry and social welfare. Their dedication helped nurture generations of Catholics and contributed significantly to the development of parish life.

Known sisters recorded in the parish history include:

- Sr. Teresa Evelyn (Tebedu)
- Sr. Anna Juwin (Bau)
- Sr. Justina Theodore (Kanowit)
- Sr. Viviana Berdebu
- Sr. Audrey Jinep
- Sr. Bernadine Yong
- Sr. Sylvia Chong

Catechists and Lay Workers

The mission was also supported by catechists and parish workers whose service strengthened local faith communities.

Recorded catechists include:

Catechists

1. Thomas Muya
2. Cyril Empam
3. Jerome Dana
4. John Manggoi
5. Boniface Bangau
6. Edmund Kalai
7. John Kemarau
8. Joannes Jelani
9. Joachim Ludan
10. Patrick Saing
11. Edward Jaya

Parish administration was supported by:

- Caroline Aron
- Peter Jaya
- Olivier Boniface
- Felix Anthony
- Petrus Simon
- Joannes Jelani
- Sigie Tom
- Vanessa Anak Jelani

Closing

As one of the earliest Catholic mission centres in the Rajang Basin, St. Francis Xavier Church represents an important chapter in Sarawak's religious, educational and social history. Its buildings, photographs and community memories form a valuable cultural archive that deserves continued documentation and preservation for future generations.

END

List of references:

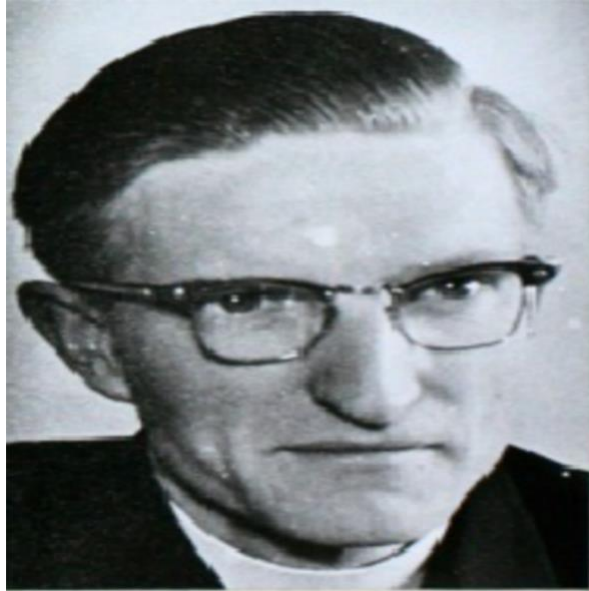
- Photographs by the author
- Mill Hill Mission Archives
- Catholic Archdiocese of Kuching Archives
- Parish Records of St. Francis Xavier, Kanowit
- Oral History Interview with Fr. George
- Church Collection Photographs
- Author's Field Notes and Site Documentation: www.sfxinfo.org

ANNEX I: Summary of Priests and Rectors Who Served

Priest	Nationality	Years Served
Fr. Edmund Dunn	Ireland	1883–1897
Fr. Francis Dibona	Austria	1884–1897
Fr. Aloysius Reyffert	Austria	1886–1892
Fr. Aloysius Keyzer	Netherlands	1883–1921 (Rector 1897–1911)
Fr. Aloysius Stotter	Austria	1898–1900
Fr. Adrian Klerk	Netherlands	1898–1941 (Rector 1911–1941)
Fr. Bernard Wensink	Netherlands	1900 (drowned while in service)
Fr. Nicholas Smeele	Netherlands	1903
Fr. Vincent Halder	Tyrol	1908–1909
Fr. Willem van Odijk	Netherlands	1912–1918, 1924
Fr. Leonard van de Bergh	Netherlands	1917–1918, 1924
Fr. Joseph Oss	Austria	1924
Fr. Anthony Raich	Austria	1925–1926
Fr. James Buis	Netherlands	1927–1935
Fr. John van de Laar	Netherlands	1930
Fr. Leo Barry	England	1934–1941, 1947–1951 (Rector 1941–1953)
Fr. Augustine Willems	Netherlands	1935
Fr. Francis Bunck	Netherlands	1936
Fr. Harry van Erp	Netherlands	1936–1940, 1946–1947
Fr. Adrian Mak	Austria	1940–1941
Fr. John Hol	Austria	1940–1941
Fr. Gerard (Gerrit) Bruggeman	Netherlands	1940–1942, 1945–1950, 1953–1981 (Rector 1953–1970)
Fr. Joseph Chin	Sibu	1942–1944
Fr. Dominic Muhren	Netherlands	1947–1951
Fr. Leopold van Rooyen	Netherlands	1948–1949
Fr. Hermann Plattner	Tyrol	1949–1950
Fr. Francis de Vries	Netherlands	1950
Fr. William Michielsen	Netherlands	1950–1951
Fr. Henry O'Brien	Ireland	1950
Fr. Charles Reiterer	Austria	1951
Fr. Alphonsus Jolij	Austria	1952
Fr. Matthews Knapen	Netherlands	1954
Fr. Thomas Taam	China	1954
Fr. Daniel Cronin	Ireland	1955
Fr. Joseph Pichler	Tyrol	1960
Fr. James Meeha	Scotland	1960
Fr. James Muhren	Netherlands	1963
Fr. Francis Kessels	Netherlands	1964
Fr. John Swagemakers	Netherlands	1964–1967
Fr. Anthony Lam	Sibu	1964–1969
Fr. William Bos	Netherlands	1965, 1973–1988 (Rector 1977–1988)

Fr. Anthony Raaymakers	Netherlands	1966
Fr. James Bede Morgan	England	1967–1968, 1972–1973
Fr. David Bingham	England	1968–1970
Fr. Dominic Su	Sibu	1970–1972
Fr. John Aker	Netherlands	1970–1973 (Rector 1970–1973)
Fr. Francis Downs	England	1973–1974
Fr. Vincent Oates	England	1974–1977
Fr. Ferdinand Vergeer	Netherlands	1977–1980, 1983/87–2005 (Rector 1988–2005)
Fr. Jacques Derksen	Netherlands	1979–1988
Fr. Richard Lau	Sibu	2005–2006 (Rector)
Fr. Joseph Sebastian	Dalat	2006–2007 (Rector)
Fr. Joseph Hii	Sibu	2008–2009 (Rector)
Fr. James Chambers	England	2009–2011 (Rector)
Fr. Henry Delfin	Philippines	2009–2013 (Rector)
Fr. Mathews Otieno Olili	Kenya	2011–2013, 2018–2022 (Rector)
Fr. Fabian Kong	Sibu	2013–2018 (Rector)
Fr. Sudhakar Meka	India	2019–2022 (Assistant Priest)

**ANNEX II: Photographic Gallery of Priests, Religious Sisters,
Catechists and Lay Workers Who Served at St. Francis Xavier
Mission, Kanowit**



Fr. John Aker (Netherlands)

(1970-1973)



Fr. Gerard @ Gerrit Bruggeman (Netherlands)

1940–1942, 1945–1950, 1953–1981 (Rector 1953–1970)



Fr. Aloysius Keyzer (Netherlands)

(1897-1911)



Fr. Francis Dibona (Austria)

(1884-1897)



Fr. Edmund Dunn (Ireland)

(1883-1897)



Fr. Aloysius Reyffert (Austria)

(1886-1892)



Fr. Aloysius Stotter (Austria)

(1898-1900)



Fr. Bernard Wensink (Netherlands)

(1900-drowned)



Fr. Adrian Klerk (Netherlands)

(1898-1941)



Fr. Vincent Halder (Tyrol)

(1908-1909)



Fr. Nicholas Smeele (Netherlands)
(1903)



Fr. Leonard Van De Bergh
(Netherlands)
(1917-18,1924)



Fr. Willem Van Odijk
(Netherlands)
(1912-1918,1924)



Fr. Joseph Oss (Austria)
(1924)



Fr. Anthony Raich (Austria)

(1925-26)

Murdered by Japanese 1945



Fr. John Van De Laar (Netherlands)

(1930)



Fr. James Buis (Netherlands)

(1927-1935)



Fr. Leo Barry (England)

(1934-41, 1947-51)



**Fr. Augustine Willems
(Netherlands)**

(1935)



Fr. Harry Van Erp (Netherlands)

(1936-40, 1946-47)



Fr. Francis Bunck (Netherlands)

(1936)



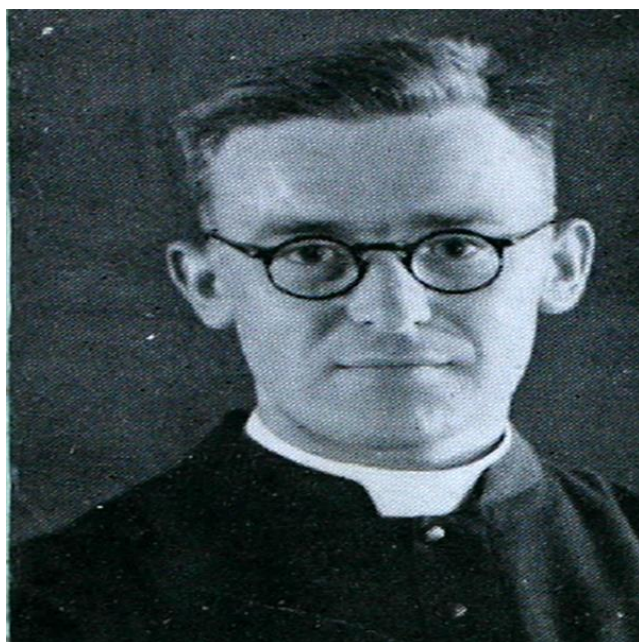
Fr. Adrian Mak (Austria)

(1940-1941)



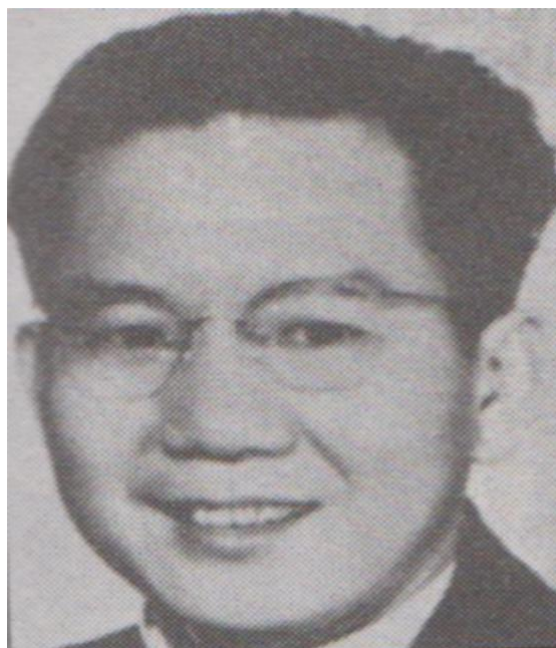
Fr. John Hol (Austria)

(1940-1941)



Fr. Dominic Muhren (Netherlands)

(1947-1951)



Fr. Joseph Chin (Sibu)

(1942-44)

Came often to Kanowit



**Fr. Leopold Van Rooyen
(Netherlands)**

(1948-49)



Fr. Hermann Plattner (Tyrol)
(1949-50)



Fr. William Michielsen
(Netherlands)
(1950-51)



Fr. Francis De Vries (Netherlands)
(1950)



Fr. Henry O'Brien (Ireland)
(1950)



Fr. Charles Reiterer (Austria)
(1951)



**Fr. Matthews Knapen
(Netherlands)**
(1954)



Fr. Alphonsus Jolij (Austria)
(1952)



Fr. Thomas Taam (China)
(1954)



Fr. Daniel Cronin (Ireland)

(1955)



Fr. Joseph Pichler (Tyrol)

(1960)



Fr. William Bos (Netherlands)

(1965,1973-1988)



Fr. James Meeha (Scotland)

(1960)



Fr. James Bede Morgan (England)

(1967-68,1972-73)



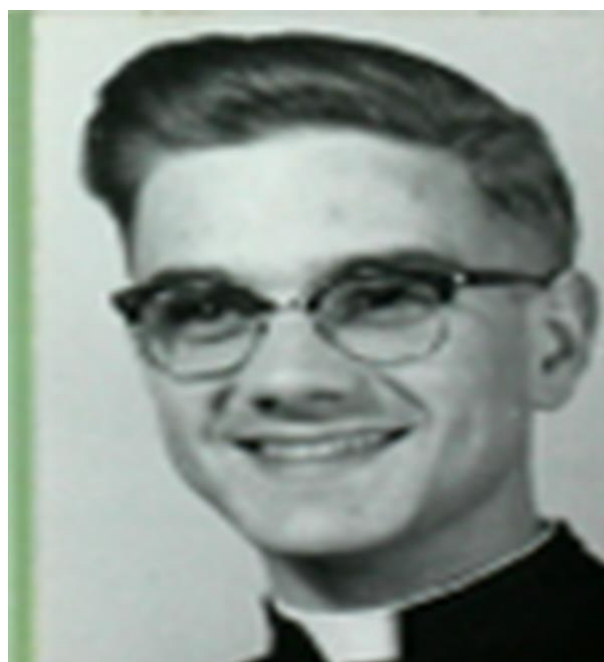
Fr. Francis Kessels (Netherlands)

(1964)



Fr. James Muhren (Netherlands)

(1963)



**Fr. John Swagemakers
(Netherlands)**

(1964-67)



Fr. Anthony Lam (Sibu)

(1964-69)



Fr. David Bingham (England)

(1968-70)



**Fr. Anthony Raaymakers
(Netherlands)**

(1966)

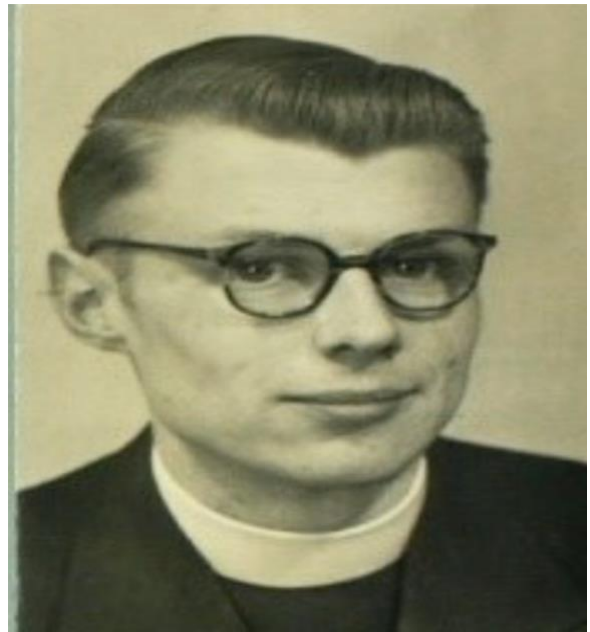


Fr. Dominic Su (Sibu)

(1970-72)



Fr. Francis Downs (England)
(1973-74)



Fr. Ferdinand Vergeer
(Netherlands)
(1977-80,83,87-2005)



Fr. Vincent Oates (England)
(1974-77)



Fr. Jaques Derksen (Netherlands)
(1979-1988)



Fr. Joseph Chai (Kuching)

(1983-84)



Fr. Vincent Chin (Kuching)

(1986-87)



Fr. William Sabang (Kuching)

(1983-84)



Fr. Michael Lee (Sibu)

(1985-89)



Fr. Joseph Sebastian (Dalat)

(1991-94,2006-07)



Fr. Andrew Tan (Sibu)

(1993-1995)



Fr. Alphonsus Tang (Sibu)

(1993-1995)



Fr. James Ting (Sibu)

(1995-98,2005-07)



Fr. Paul Chee (Sibu)

(1996-1997)



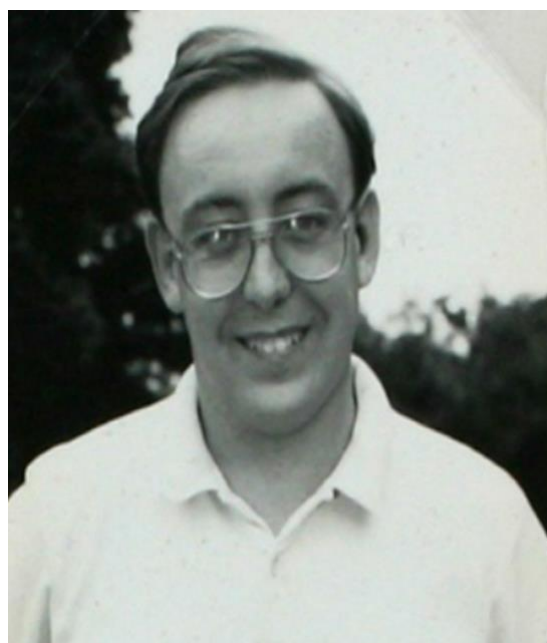
Fr. Joseph Hii (Sibu)

(2008-2009)



Fr. Richard Lau (Sibu)

(2001-2006)



Fr. James Chambers (England)

(2009-2011)



Fr. Henry Delfin (Philippines)

(2009-2013)



Fr. Mathews Otieno Olili (Kenya)

(2011-13,2018-2022)



Fr. Devadas Sanakki (India)

(2010-2011)



Fr. Fabian Kong (Sibu)

(2012-2013)



Fr. Philip Odhiambo Obaso (Kenya)

(2013-2015)



Fr. Rex Fedelicio (Philippines)

(2018-2019)



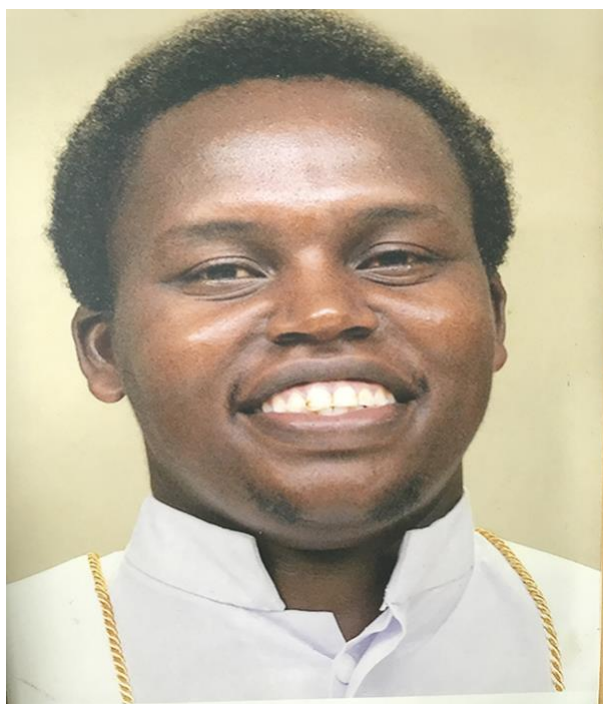
Fr. Oniz Kikokholo (Uganda)

(2014-2017)



Fr. Sudhakar Mekar (India)

(2019-May 2022)



Fr. George Omutho Odera (Kenya)

(May 2022)



Fr. Michael (Philippines)

(September 2023)



Fr. Blaise (Cameroon)

(August 2022)



Fr. Ravi (India)

(January 2024)



Fr. Olivier (Congo)

(December 2024)

SISTER & EX-SISTER KANOWIT



Sr. Teresa Evelyn (Tebedu)



Sr. Justina Theodore (Kanowit)



Sr. Anna Juwin (Bau)



Sr. Viviana Berdebu



Sr. Audrey Jinep



Sr. Sylvia Chong



Sr. Bernadine Yong

**CATECHIST WHO HAVE SERVED IN SFX
KANOWIT**



Catechist John



Catechist Edmund Kalai



Catechist Boniface Banggau

Catechist John Kamarau



En. Sigie (Clerk SFX Kanowit)



Puan Vanissa Jalani (Clerk SFX Kanowit)