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Sri Lankan Seniors Manitoba: Ten Years of Mutuality (June 2016 - June 2026) Initiate, Establish, Successes, Lessons Learnt, and Expectations

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Abstract
The idea of launching an association was raised at a house party on 31-12-1982. At this point, they decided to collect the number of Sri Lankan households. In April 1983, this group identified 50 Sri Lankan families. Of these, 39 families could be contacted. Of these, 9 were not interested in joining. The Sri Lankan Association of Manitoba (SLAM) was established on 4-2-1984 at a formal meeting in Room No. 3C01, Centennial Hall at the University of Manitoba. SLAM launched under Section 2.11 of the Bylaws, showing the vision and mission. At the 14th Annual General Meeting (AGM) held on 6-6-2015, the new Board Memberships (BMs) were elected. Among the new intentions of the BMs is to establish an organization for seniors. The aims of this article are: (a) to outline the procedure for introducing a seniors' group, (b) to observe the implementation methodology of the seniors' group, and (c) to initiate new proposals for the Sri Lankan Seniors. Sri Lankan Seniors Manitoba (SLSM) was established on June 23rd, 2017, under the authority of the SLAM.

Keywords: Sri Lankan Seniors Manitoba (SLSM), Sri Lankan Association of Manitoba (SLAM), COVID-19

Introduction

SLAM AGM was held on June 6, 2015, at White Ridge Community Centre. I attended with my son-in-law, Suranga Weligamage. He was the former SLSM Treasurer. He joined that day as a member.

At this AGM, I was elected as the President. Former President, SLAM Dilantha Fernando, proposed my name, and Athula Rajapaksha, Immediate Past President, SLAM, seconded. Both are senior faculty members of the University of Manitoba. I migrated to Canada (2012) under the Parent and Grandparent Category with my wife to spend our retirement life with our only child, Rowanthi, and her family. When I was elected as President of SLAM, I was not a Canadian citizen but only a PR holder. Furthermore, I am a pensioner in the Sri Lankan Government Service and have not been employed in Canada for a day. Athula Rajapaksa and I are alumni of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT). I stressed the need for the SLAM to act as a family and maintain collective responsibility among all Sri Lankans living in the Province of Manitoba.

On June 22nd, 2015, at 7.30 pm, the first SLAM Board Meeting (See Table 1) convened at our home, 113 Stan Bailie Drive. It was a well-constituted Board. (1) Gender balanced (out of 9 members, 3 women), (2) Different age groups (e.g., a retired person, middle-aged, a girl who started her primary education in Canada (3) There were three Doctoral students from the University of Manitoba, (4) Visaka Jakson, Vice President, previous SLAM board member. She was the only member with that experience (5). She represented the Christian community, and Visaka agreed to take over handling our first public event. The Christmas ceremony was scheduled for December 2015. (6) MBs represented existing Sri Lankan non-profit organizations (Manitoba Buddhist Vihara and Cultural Association, Buddha Meditation Centre Winnipeg Mahamevnawa, and Bloomfield Cricket & Cultural Club) (7). Three male BMs completed their studies in Canada & now employed (8). Later, Tamil and Hindu BMs joined.

During the first three Board Meetings, the following events were identified. (1) Building/Land for SLAM Office, (2) Participate in Folklorama, (3) Select low-cost venue (other than Canad Inns) for annual New Year celebration, (4) SLAM participation community activities (e.g. Manitoba Marathon, blood donation), **(5) obtain participation of two age groups namely youth (Statistics Canada: Age rang 15-29) and old (age rang 55+)** (6) As Sri Lankan business community work in isolation they were decided to establish a Business Council (7) Suggested to obtain ethnic/religion/cultural representation to the Board of SLAM (8) Strictly adhere to follow SLAM set of Bylaws of 22-6-2014 (9) Improve Facebook, Website,

connection with social media and (10) Commemorate the establishing date (4-2-1984) of SLAM.

According to SLAM Bylaws 22-6-2014, Section 2.09: Rules to follow, Robert's Rules of Order do not prescribe a strict duration for managing Board Meetings. However, we decided to conduct a monthly Board Meeting. Table 2 illustrates the progress of forming a Seniors' Group at the 11th Board Meeting (Ref. column one).

Table 1: SLAM Board

S. No	Names	Office Bearers
1	Senaka Samarasinghe	President
2	Visaka Jakson	Vice President
3	Prabidini Semasinghe	Secretary
4	Chamara Devanarayana	Treasurer
5	Priyanji Mediwaka	Assistant Secretary
6	Ishan Samaranayaka	Assistant Treasurer
		Members
7	Thilanka Jayasekara	Member
8	Chaminda Weerakoon	Member
9	Nuwan Perera	Member

Source: Senaka Samarasinghe

Table 2: How SLAM Helped to Establish a Seniors' Group

S. No	Board Meeting Date	Agenda Item No.	Description
1	22-6-2015	Other Concerns 4	New proposals suggested: (a) Participate in Folklorama, (b) Premises for SLAM, (c) Participate in two Community Activities, namely Blood Donation & Manitoba Marathon
2	7-7-2015	9	(a)Earlier, SLSM conducted a "Welcome Trip" for new members, but present members were not interested. Nuwan proposed free tickets for newcomers for the Paduru (Mat) Ceremony
		14	(b) The board assigned Nuwan and Senaka to check the possibility of starting a program for seniors, as they have not considered them so far
3	11-9-2015	5	Included the Seniors' activities in the Ethno-Cultural Community Support Programme (ECCSP) meeting on 1-10-2015. A few new proposals were submitted: (a) Youth Project, (b) Provide Free Legal Services, (c) Building for SLAM, (d) Start Folklorama
4	19-10-2015	2	The Board of Directors (BD) planned to conduct two cultural events for Seniors in 2016
5	4-3-2016	6	(a)The Trade Fair is proposed to be conducted in parallel with the SL New Year ceremony. (b) The Trade Fair was initiated to establish the Sri Lanka Business Council of Manitoba (SLBCM). It operated for a few years. It was unable to register. As a result, it was dismantled. However, the Facebook page named SLBCM is still available. Mainly, seniors are participating in the Sri Lankan trade
6	15-3-2016	8	BD agreed to allocate funds based on the approval from ECCSP for 2016
7	15-5-2016	3	(a)BD decided to conduct the seniors' first meeting on 23-7-2016. (b) Invitation email sent on 30-5-2016 to the community. (c) Booked Pembina Library, Community Hall
8	17-6-2016	3	(a)Conducted a preliminary discussion at Daya Perera's home on 13-6-2016. (b) More than 15 participants, including past SLAM Presidents and SLAM BMs, discussed the framework for Sri Lankan Seniors.
9	25-6-2016	3	At the AGM, ECCSP approved the Seniors proposal and a few others (Building for SLAM and Start Folklorama were not considered). Grant increased from $5000 to $6000
10	27-10-2016	7	(a)On 22-11-2026, the Trinity United Church (TUC) seniors' organization, named South Side Seniors, invited Sri Lankan Seniors to TUC for a Fellowship Gathering. (b) On this occasion, Tyrrell Mendis made a presentation titled "Testaments of Faith". (c.1) There was an invitation from the TUC to display his set of photos of "Churches in Manitoba" in the church (c.2) and to change each set of photos monthly.
11	25-7-2017	AGM (4.j)	On 23-6-2016, the Seniors Group was established at the Community Hall of the Pembina Trial Library with the participation of 25 eminent seniors

Source: Senaka Samarasinghe

As elaborated above, the Board of Members (BMs) planned to execute nine (9) existing and new events during the two-year term and work continuously to complete all proceedings. However, due to several constraints, only a few proposed outcomes, such as (1) establishing the Seniors' Group, (2) pursuing the Bylaws (22-6-2014) of SLAM, (3) introducing a social media window, and (4) identifying a low-cost venue to conduct the Sri Lankan New Year ceremony during the two-year tenure.

It is interesting to note that SLAM was unable to execute (1) registering as a Folklorama member and subsequently starting a new Folklorama Pavilion, and (2) planning to register with the Business Council. (3) However, establishing a youth group, (4) a block of land/building for SLAM, and (5) a welcome event for newcomers have not been considered so far.

As noted in Table 2, the preliminary discussion was held at Daya Perera's home on 13-6-2016, with more than 15 participants. The participants included past SLAM Presidents and Board Members of SLAM to discuss the framework of Sri Lankan Seniors.

Box 1: As President of SLAM, I sent the mail below to the Board Members

Senaka Samarasinghe <senaka24@yahoo.com>
To: slamboard2015@googlegroups.com
Mon., May 30, 2016, at 3:54 p.m.

Dear All,

As you are aware, last year the Multicultural Secretariat (MS) approved two new programs: (a) Seniors and (b) Youth. For the Seniors project, the Board decided to identify volunteers. When I discussed this with Daya, he sent the following link to the Senior Project in Ottawa.

SLCAO Seniors Group Meeting – Sri Lanka Canada Association of Ottawa (SLCAO)

I have attached the summary of the SLAM proposal submitted to MS for your kind attention.

Daya made a few suggestions as follows:
(1) The New Seniors' Project is not to be handled by SLAM. It must be implemented as an independent group with the SLAM Ex-Officio Member. Therefore, I proposed Board Member Chaminda Weerakoon as the Ex-Officio Member.
(2) The inaugural meeting will be held on June 23rd, 2016, 6.00-9.00 pm at the Meeting Hall, Pembina Trial Library.
(3) Qualifying age 55 and above
(4) Send a note to the community calling an inaugural meeting after the proposed
Farewell to Sarath - Radhika on July 5th, 2016

Sincerely,

Senaka
Senaka & Chandani Samarasinghe
Winnipeg, Canada

Source: Senaka Samarasinghe

Box 2: "Senior Scope" Provincial Monthly Seniors' Newspaper Depicted Meeting Proceedings & Participants' Proposals



Source: Senaka Samarasinghe

From Left to Right (Seated): (1) Ms. Sumana Dissanayaka, (2) Ms. Karuna Seneviratne, (3) Ms. Nieva Embuldeniya, (4) Mr. Herbert Ebuldeniya, (5) Mr. Priyarathna Malmuthuge, (6) Mr. Sam Wejewardena, (7) Mr. Mylu Subramaiam, (8) Ms. Chandra Subramaiam, (9) Ms. Rosy Peiris, (10) Mr. Jerry Peiris.
From Left to Right (Standing): (1) Mr. Senaka Samarasinghe, (2) Ms. Sriya Nanayakkara, (3) Mr. Elian Joseph, (4) Mr. Bennet Geeganage, (5) Ms. Shrima Bastians, (6) Ms. Sheela Wijewardena, (7) Mr. Daya Perera, (8) Ms. Tilaka Jayasundera, (9) Mr. Anura Nanayakkara, (10) Mr. Peter Bastians, (11) Ms. Sunimal Perera, (12) Ms. Lileena Mendis, (13) Mr. Sunil Perera, (14) Mr. Daya Perera, (15) Mr. Keerthi Pathirana.

The inaugural meeting was held on June 23rd, 2016, from 6.00 pm to 9.00 pm, at Pembina Trail Library. The meeting proceedings, participants' ideas, and input were displayed in Box 2, paper cutting, in the Seniors' Scope.

After establishing the SLAM Seniors Group, they arranged Fellowship Events, mainly monthly, such as movie nights. They booked a Community Hall to screen the movie, followed by a potluck dinner. Seniors always prefer old Sinhala movies. The organizing committee screened movies during the period. During the winter season, this was a very attractive event for seniors. The Access Building (134, Plaza Drive), the "community hall," was allotted free of charge. Therefore, we conducted educational programmes for our members by inviting resource personnel primarily from the Health Sector.

During the summer season, group walking sessions gathered at the Assiniboine Park Cricket Pavilion. As a senior member of this cricket club, Daya arranged this facility for SLSM. Depending on each person's ability, distances varied. Based on health conditions, several groups did their walking sessions. Some stayed in the Pavilion, as they did not want to walk. After walking, all had their lunch in the Pavilion.

Some elders preferred to read Sinhala newspapers. In Toronto, a monthly newspaper (English and Sinhala) named Yathra is published. Chandrarathna Bandara, my coworker at the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka (MASL), agreed to send 25 copies of Yathra Monthly free of charge. In mid-2016, as President of SLAM, I met with Jagit Singh Grill at his Gilles Supermarket in Mississauga to ship 25 newspapers to his Winnipeg outlet. Although we discussed payment, Jagit agreed to ship Yathra newspapers for free to help SLAM. Further, Jagit asked to obtain them from his wife, Kamal. SLAM handed the newspaper distribution to the Seniors Group. The SLSM sold a paper for one dollar as a fundraising event (Box 2). Sam (Somasiri) Wijewardena, Vice President of the Seniors Group, oversaw delivery of the Yathra newspaper. Sam completed sales, collected Sinhala and English articles, and sent them to Toronto to announce.

Box 2: Notice of Selling Yathra Newspaper



Source: Senaka Samarasinghe

The COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020 and ended in May 2023. During this period, prohibited from conducting public gatherings. As a result, events were conducted virtually via Zoom. Selected members would participate in seniors' events at home. In mid 2022, SLAM 55 Plus changed its name to Sri Lankan Seniors Manitoba (SLSM).

Member Indra Ariyaratne is talented in writing Sinhala song lyrics. To use her skills, I proposed that she write a theme song for Seniors. Namely, those who migrated from Sri Lanka to other countries. She wrote a song with deep importance and a clear objective. I thought of singing the song with one of the best singers. Sunil Edirisinghe was unique among my coworkers in the MASL. When I checked with Sunil, he said there is a set of professional lyric writers. He was more comfortable with them, and Sunil turned down my suggestion. After a few months, Sunil agreed to voice lyrics scripted by Indra. Further, he agreed to visit Winnipeg to launch the song as a cultural and fundraising event. But not as an income-generating venture.

Box 3: Seniors Song Launching



Link: https://youtu.be/dCLgqq0JbTE
Source: Triwarna Working Committee

The profit of the show will be shared with (a) Siloam Mission, Winnipeg, (b) Autism Unit, Lady Ridgeway Hospital, Sri Lanka, and (c) SLAM Dance School, Winnipeg. This fundraising was not confined to Sri Lankans. People's Representatives (PRs) at three levels: National, Provincial, and City supported the fundraising. Further, they also paid the ticket fee and participated in the show. Additionally, SLSM invited a few distinguished families, the Principal, the Indian dance school, and two Provincial newspaper editors to report the event. With Sunil, two renowned Sri Lankan singers, (a) Nuwandika Senarathna and (b) Sanka Edirisinghe, sang songs. The show was held on Sept. 15th, 2024, and the flyer is depicted in Box 3. Just after the intermission, the first event was the launch of the Senior Song. Sunil invited all the BMs to join him and sang the song.

Box 4: Flyer for the Show



Source: Triwarna Working Committee

Currently, as a practice before starting each event, the Seniors' Song is sung with all attendees.

Two Provincial monthly Senior newspapers, namely Seniors Scope and Lifestyles (English Language), cover SLSM events. Monthly, I send a short narration with a few photos. Both newspapers carry monthly SLSM news items based on space availability. The Sinhala monthly newspaper Yathra also accommodates SLSM news items in Sinhala. Yathra is not a Seniors' newspaper. However, they are obliged to publish SLSM and shipping monthly, and SLSM pays the postal charges.

At the end of 2020, Mohamed Ismath discussed with me introducing the federal grant named New Horizons for Seniors Program (NHSP). During this time, I was the President of SLSM. To implement the NHSP, the Board Members (BMs) assigned responsibility to Ismath. In early 2021, the grant noted above was approved. As a result, SLSM worked to expand its horizon for the benefit of the member community.

During the period of SLSM, five Presidents served as listed in Table 3.

Table 3: SLSM - List of Presidents

No. of Presidents	Period	No. of Years	Name of President
1st President	2017 / 2018	1 & 2	Mr. Peter Bastians
2nd President	2018 / 2020	3 & 4	Mr. Daya Perera
3rd President	2021 / 2022	5 & 6	Mr. Senaka Samarasinghe
4th President	2023 / 2024	7 & 8	Ms. Indra Ariyaratne
5th President	2024 / 2025	9 & 10	Ms. Doreen Jayawardena
6th President	2025 / 2026	11 & 12	Ms. Lileena Mendis (President-Elect)

Source: Senaka Samarasinghe

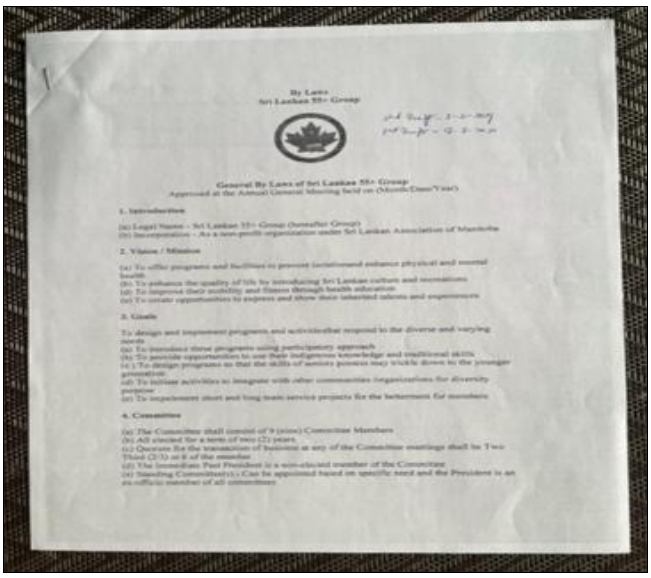
The first SLAM Board Meeting was held on 22-6-2015. At this meeting, it was decided to strengthen friendship and unity among all senior Sri Lankans in Manitoba. The group planned the overall implementation at the dinner meeting held at Daya's home on 13-6-2016. The President emailed members (Box 1) to announce the establishment of the Seniors Group. SLSM was to be implemented as an independent group within SLAM.

As noted above, SLSM did not open a separate bank account. From the beginning, SLSM was using its Mother Organization's bank account. To strengthen the link, SLSM, a BM, was nominated to the SLAM Board. SLSM agreed to adhere to the Bylaws of SLAM, which were approved at the Annual General Meeting held on 22-6-2014. Daya Perera emphasized the implications of the Bylaws for the Sri Lankan 55+ Group (later labeled SLSM). The BMs allocated this responsibility to BM Elian Joseph. The 2nd draft was discussed on 3-2-2019. The 3rd draft was discussed on 18-8-2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the bylaws were not finalized (Box 4).

For long-term stability in professional institutes such as the Institute of Engineers (IESL), Sri Lanka, and the Institute of Environmental Professionals Sri Lanka (IEPSL), their constitutions include an Office-Bearer Position called president-elect. When I was President of SLAM, I proposed such a position for SLAM. It was not accepted, as this position is appropriate for a professional institute, but not applicable to Social Organizations such as SLAM. However, I briefed the same during SLSM Board proceedings. Further, it was proposed at the AGM held at the Assiniboine Cricket Pavilion (in 2022). As our member Dhammika Peiris is a member of a "professional organization" named the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects (Established in 1956), I asked him to explain the benefits of my proposal. Managed to convince the general membership of SLSM. According to the Regulations of Governance (1-10-2026), 5 (g), among committee members, one will be elected president-elect.

This occurred just at the end of my tenure as President of SLSM. By the beginning of Indra's tenure in 2022. By then, it was functioning smoothly with all parties, namely SLAM and SLSM. It was an ad hoc decision; however, it was applied without any difficulty. However, an organization like SLSM must adhere to a well-documented constitution.

Box 4: Bylaws (Draft)



Source: Elian Joseph

At the inaugural meeting (Box 2), 25 participants. After ten years, we can observe the structure of the new members. In Box 3, at the inaugural meeting, 25 members. Out of which 12 members were in the 9-1-2026 group photo, along with 31 new members. The set of Canadian Permanent Resident (PR) Holders among SLSM members, to avoid winter, go back to Sri Lanka and come back the next summer. This can be introduced as a floating membership.

Table 4: Progress of SLSM

S. No	Year	No. of Members	Newcomers	Remarks
1	2016	25		Inaugural Meeting: 23-6-2016
2	2023	78	43	
3	2024	87	9	
4	2025	115	28	
5	2026	116	Up to Jan 2026	

Source: Bandula Perera

Box 5: Group Photo (9-1-2026)



Source: Photo Credit: Senaka Samarasinghe

Conclusion

After concluding one decade, SLSM has had close interactions with other senior groups in Manitoba. To avoid isolation, it is high time to network with other recognized senior organizations within the province. To achieve this objective, SLSM organizes at least once every other month with other senior groups, such as Pembina Active Living and the Winnipeg Chinese Senior Association.

At each AGM, SLAM elected new BMs. Similarly, the increase in SLSM members (Table 4) will make it feasible to elect new BMs. Due to the limited number of SLSM members, the set of BMs has remained unchanged.

The current Treasurer, SLAM, introduced a new accounting system called QuickBooks. It is time to adhere to the Mother Organization's new accounting system.

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