

Christian—to serve people and life without motive other than to help. What good is religion if we do not let it lead us closer to each other as human beings?

We heard in the Letter of James this morning the call to have patience, to strengthen our hearts, and to endure suffering. James was not writing this to encourage doing nothing about the needs of the world as we look to a heavenly world beyond this one. James has just written that faith without works is dead, that we are to show our faith by the lives we live. He has written against the arrogance of status and wealth, and called the wealthy to account for not using their wealth to help others. So James is not in the least about doing nothing. We are to live in this world according to a different order of things, according to Isaiah's vision. In India we saw the church carrying out its life and work in the midst of overwhelming circumstances of suffering. The church there and everywhere is to be a community of faith that does not "put its trust in princes, in mortals," as Psalm 146 says, but in God and God's promised new life for the world. To live such a life involves commitment and hard work on behalf of the needs of the world. But it also involves cultivating in ourselves patience and hope that keep us from being overwhelmed by the problems that face us.

When we were in Vellore visiting the Christian Medical College and Hospital, our first stop was the inner city portion of the hospital, named the Low Cost Effective Care Unit. We were greeted by a doctor whose name is Sarah, the director of the facility. She spoke to us about how the clinic the needs of the poorest of the city and showed us through the facility meets. She shared her own experience that the most important thing she can do for those who come there is to listen to them. She can't solve their problems, she said, but with someone to listen, people find their own strength, their own resources. I knew this was a wise spiritual woman. Later at lunch, Sarah shared with us that she was reading Thomas Merton. Kaye asked her what her greatest challenge was. After reflecting a moment, Sarah said that it was keeping hope.

That is the character of our life as people of faith, as a church, both here at the Church of the Covenant and in India. Seeing the needs of the world and of people around us. Responding to those needs as God calls us to respond. Committing ourselves to the service of people and of life without any other motive than to help, to make things better. That is our outward journey. And in the midst of all that seems so overwhelming and discouraging, learning what it means to trust not in human beings but in God and God's vision for life, what it means to keep hope. That is our inward journey.

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For more information/exploring, Google:

Church of South India, Church of North India, Tamilnadu Theological Seminary  
Christian Medical College and Hospital--Vellore

December 16, 2007/Third Sunday of Advent/David L. Edwards

### **Patience and Hope**

Isaiah 35:1-10

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom....*

James 5:7-10

*You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.*

This morning I want to share with you something of our trip to India, but in the context of Advent and Christmas. It has taken a full week for us to begin to recover from what was a physically, emotionally, and spiritually challenging journey. Only now are we beginning to look back and fully appreciate and fondly remember the people and experiences that were part of those ten days.

I returned with two overall impressions. First, as our trip ended, I realized something of the overwhelming issues facing India. Extensive poverty. The failure of rural agriculture in recent years due to the effects of global warming. The continuing influence of a caste mentality. The Indian Constitution protects the rights of the Untouchables, and yet this has not greatly improved their conditions. They are also called Dalits, literally those who are crushed underfoot or broken. They are the poorest of the poor. Christianity in India has challenged the caste system and focused its work on the needs and rights of Dalits. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul's words: In Christ there is neither Brahman nor Untouchable. At least it is so with the Church of South India and the Church of North India, Indian churches established following independence, bringing together several Christian denominations, including the Congregational Christian Church, which became the United Church of Christ. As a group representing the common Global Ministries of the UCC and Disciples of Christ, we were there primarily to visit the Church of South India as our partner church.

We arrived in Delhi after seven days of visiting many schools, hospitals, and other projects and programs supported by the Church of South India. Up till then, the poverty of the country had been more or less in the background as we saw and learned about the work of the church with the poor, abandoned, sick, and destitute. In Delhi we were plunged into a major Indian city. The sidewalks, alleys, empty lots, and even rooftops were fairly filled with homeless, sick, and presumably dying people. The streets were constantly clogged with all kinds of traffic, from motor scooters to diesel trucks. The air was so polluted that you could see and taste it. It was quite a shock.

The day before we left the country, we took a five hour bus ride to the Taj Mahal, the only tourist type thing we did. Arriving in Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal, we had still not escaped the pollution centered in Delhi. As we entered the city, we picked up our local guide, a perky young woman who introduced herself by saying she was from the Warrior caste. Perhaps this was meant to impress us. In fact, it

sounded offensive in light of all we had learned and seen of India to that point. As our bus drove through the streets of Agra, I looked out the window at the now-familiar scene—people lying on sidewalks, two of whom I noticed were being helped to sit up by companions, perhaps close to death. One man lay on his side, back to the street, covered with flies, unable to shoo them away. By the time we arrived at the Taj Mahal, which is more beautiful than you can imagine, I could not fully enjoy its splendor.

India has vast problems to deal with. Yet India is not alone in this and we are not detached from India's struggles and needs. I thought of the vision of Isaiah that we read earlier. Is Isaiah's vision of God's promise of a replenished land filled with gladness and joy anything more than a wish-dream? Can the call to strengthen weak hands and knees, or the call to be fearless rally us from discouragement or even despair in the face of overwhelming issues and problems? God's promise of new life for us and the world is the heart and soul of the scripture message and of our faith. Yet there are surely times when it seems to have no connection with the realities that surround us. These thoughts and experiences comprise one major impression with which I left India.

Yet, a second impression stands out. It comes from what we saw as we visited the work of the Church of South India and its partner projects. It is impossible to recount details of all the visits we made to schools, hospitals, and programs of the church there. We attended the dedication of school and college buildings for children and young people, built with the help of our churches here. These particularly are to serve the Dalits, those from rural areas who otherwise would never hope to attend school or college. We visited the famous Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore, noted not only for its care of the sick but its training of doctors and nurses from India and other countries, including the U.S. In Chennai (formerly Madras, pron. *che-nay*), we visited what we would call an adult care home, a modest grouping of buildings where about fifty formerly destitute or abandoned elderly people lived. We met a man there who had been a physician, but had lost his practice due to injury. His family, unable or unwilling to care for him, had put him out on the street. Such stories are common. After visiting a leprosy hospital near Vellore, we drove a short way down the road to a small compound named *Shanthi Gramam*, "Village of Peace." It truly was a peaceful place in the countryside, simple buildings with a courtyard. There victims of leprosy and cancer were cared for and able to die in peace.

We spent three days at the Family Village Farm near the town of Katpadi. There were 175 children living in small cottage groups. With each group lived an older woman who herself had been destitute and served as mother and grandmother to children from about 4 years to 17 or 18 years old. Kaye and I sat with one cottage group for their nightly prayers. I was quite drawn to the woman who cared for that group; she somehow reminded me of my own mother. These women, I thought, are

the real heroes of the Family Village Farm. We were daily entertained and swarmed by the children. They come from surrounding villages, having either no parent or parents unable to take care of them. At the FVF they are loved, well cared for, and safe. They are educated and prepared to seek a better life at the time they leave. Kaye and I were impressed especially by one 17 year old girl named Angel. We noticed her right away one evening when the children put on a performance for us. She was a dancer. Petite and athletic. Comfortable, confident, and smooth in her movements. Her hair was different from the other girls, cut short, more modern. Kaye commented that she was probably a rebel! We have always been drawn to rebels. Later Angel confided in Kaye that her dream was to go to Delhi and become a dancer and rock star.

In the city of Madurai (pron. *Mah-dray*), we stayed three days at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary of the Church of South India. Education there includes classroom academic work, but is focused primarily on the practical. Students are required to spend one of their four years there living and working out in the villages. They are also involved in the various missions that the seminary has created—a program for women who are destitute and recovering sex workers; an annual retreat held at the seminary for prisoners and crime victims and their families; an agricultural program out in the villages that helps struggling small farmers learn organic farming and land conservation; programs promoting interfaith understanding and dialogue. We attended the dedication of the seminary's new print shop where people with disabilities learn skills in printing while earning a modest income. On Sunday evening, we attended what was billed as the annual Christmas carol concert by the seminary choir. What we heard and saw were songs written and dances choreographed by seminary students themselves. Their theme was the meaning of Christ for the struggles of the poor and abused, and those suffering from human and natural disasters. I wish that every president of every U.S. seminary would visit this place and learn from it.

For Kaye and I perhaps the most impressive reception we had was in the poor Hindu villages served by the seminary and related programs. The women of one village have bought cows with small loans, which they repay with the earnings from the milk. They are very proud of their accomplishments, and the whole village gathered to welcome us. That evening, we walked through the fields to look at an irrigation project, ending up in a village where a celebration had been prepared in our honor. Colored lights were strung up in the small village square, which held the open-sided temple. Chairs were set out for us. Women and children performed dances. We were served coconut milk straight from the coconuts which the men eagerly chopped open for us. Such generosity shown by poor people moved me deeply many times during our visit. I think I was most impressed by this experience, for here were Hindu villages served by programs begun and supported by Christians who had no intention of converting anyone. To me, this is what it truly means to be