

Cause for Thanksgiving
Valley Center November 24th 2007

The psalmist encourages us to "Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands! Serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing. Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name." Psalm 100:1, 2, 4. Today I would like to share a brief report of my recent mission trip to India, and praise the Lord for the progress of His work there and around the world. There is good news—God's work is going forward! While I was gone, fires swept across southern California at an amazing rate. The "fire" of the gospel is likewise sweeping across the world! God is getting ready to finish His work!

We left October 19 and arrived in Hyderabad (somewhat south and central), India, late Sunday night (it was closer to 2 a.m. Monday when we got situated in the Hotel Harsha) where our traveling companions, having come a week earlier, had reserved some rooms. The next day, about 4 a.m. Monday, after about 2 hours of sleep, we hired a car and the five of us packed in to make a quick trip (I use the word "quick" advisedly!) to Khamman, east of Hyderabad, where some of us had worked earlier this year in evangelism.

We were blessed to be able to retrace our steps from last January and end up in the very same small village where we had held meetings. When the people recognized us, they were very excited and welcomed us into their homes and we had a great time exchanging news, though we were "language challenged."

From there, we went to the city of Khammam, and located the Vishnu Hotel, where last December and January we had lodged, and enjoyed a nice breakfast in their restaurant. It was wonderful to see some of the same people in the hotel, who recognized and greeted us warmly.

Then, back in the car to make the four-hour return trip to Hyderabad. Tuesday we spent in town and prepared for the seven-hour train ride south to Cuddapah (the first syllable is pronounced "cud", like what a cow chews) which would leave that evening. While eating in the hotel restaurant, we noticed two friends with whom we had worked when last here, Union President Pastor Methuselah and Treasurer Johnson. It just so happened that they were there having breakfast also! Therefore, we had a chance to talk with them. Small world!

Our friend Murray, who works in the Union office, had purchased the train tickets and accompanied us to the station to see us off. We had also acquired 200 Bibles in Telegu, a gift of the Kindergarten class at the La Mesa SDA Church. So with our luggage and 5 boxes of Bibles, we hustled onto the train. The four women had a sleeper compartment to themselves, and I was next door with some kindly gentlemen, none of whom snored.

Murray had provided us with the names of the preceding stops, so when Cuddapah was the next station, we garnered our suitcases and the boxes of Bibles and stashed them next to the door so we could exit quickly. The train was supposed to arrive there at 5 a.m., but was about 45 minutes late. Happily, there was a Maranatha worker, Seresh, waiting to meet us. To make sure he was there when the train arrived, he had come at 3 a.m.!

Our transition to the two cars he had retained was smooth, and as the sun arose we were traveling to the location of the school compound, about 60 kilometers (38 miles), but about 1 ½ hours by car. That's because, for those of us used to roads in America that are basically pretty good, the highways in India suffer by comparison. A periscope is needed to see out from some of the potholes (I'm exaggerating only a little!). It is true that cars sometimes have to come to nearly a complete stop to negotiate the road challenges.

Beside the condition of the pavement, there are the assortment of other wayfarers sharing the space, including dogs, sheep, goats, bullock and carts, water buffalo, pedestrians, motorcycles, auto rickshaws (basically a motorcycle with an enclosure) and a few cars. All of the foregoing claim the right of way, and so maneuvering among the claimants and conditions reduces your speed significantly. A car in India can operate without many things, but not without a horn! It is also not uncommon to see a lane sectioned off so that a local farmer can use the road surface to dry his chilis or peanuts. India is a strange and wonderful place where yesterday meets tomorrow. You might see a gentleman along the road with a prod stick in one hand to encourage his bullock and a cell phone in the other. India is the country that boasts the most billionaires, yet the presence of poverty is everywhere.

Wednesday morning about 7:30 we arrived at the school campus, which is situated on a parcel of land about 13 acres in size. This would be our home for the next two weeks.

The purpose of our mission was actually two-fold. Part of it had to do with the preparing of the children's home on site, and the second part had to do with visiting villages and holding meetings in newly constructed churches.

A short time ago, a plan was conceived to evangelize 100 villages within a radius of about 100 kilometers of Cuddapah, and so teams were formed and meetings held about a year ago. In excess of 20,000 converts were baptized as a result of these meetings and steps were taken to begin the construction of churches. To date, about 75 of the churches have been built and as we were there, the last nine lots were purchased so that now, the land has been acquired for all 100 churches. Both Sabbaths that we were there featured new churches being dedicated.

With all of these newly baptized members, it was felt that there needed to be schools to train young people to take their places in church leadership, as well as being educated in various lines of useful vocation. With that in mind, a new boarding school was dreamed to serve this need, with a capacity of about 1200 students. In addition to the school, it was felt that a "children's home" would be beneficial to meet the need of many orphans, as well as some children whose parents simply cannot afford to take care of their children.

Leading out in this endeavor and working in close conjunction with Maranatha is the Fjarli family of Medford Oregon. Our project was christened officially "Fjarli 13" (a clue as to how many of these projects they have sponsored!). God bless those who risk all for mission work! Only when we gain the other shore will the true results of such sacrifice be known! One brother in our group, a veteran of many such mission trips, confessed his aspiration to "Go broke before the Lord comes." Another brother said that he didn't sleep much the night before, and nudged his wife. They had recently made the last mortgage payment on their house, so that it was now free and clear, but he asked his wife if it'd be alright if they put a new loan against it so they could make a sizeable contribution toward the new school. She said, "Yes" and during worship that morning they pledged \$50,000.

The face of poverty looms with stark reality in India. Many work for about a dollar a day. I watched as a woman worked in an area next to the street. She had a rubber strap, about one inch high, that she used to make a circular border about six inches in diameter. Inside of that, with about a 16 oz hammer in hand, she broke fist-sized rock into 1 1/2" gravel, the purpose of the strap being to keep the

fragments from flying in all directions. This was her work. This is what she did all day, and perhaps earned 40 rupees, or about a dollar. Many work for far less, only a few rupees a day.

However, by going to school and learning English and a skill such as computer competency, they can improve their lot in life dramatically. The purpose of our schools there is to provide such education, as well as Christian leadership training. It's an enterprise that is very worthy.

So, we were located on the campus of this new school, which had just begun construction last April. There are many buildings partly completed, and a few, such as the children's home, guest home and principle's home that were just finished. The day we arrived they were applying the final coat of paint to these!

We were honored the first weekend we were there by the visit of Don Noble and his wife Laura (Don is the president of Maranatha International), Dick Duerksen and his wife Brenda (Dick, a long-time friend and alumnus of San Diego Academy, is head of Maranatha Mission Stories, and can be viewed on many TV stations as well as the web at maranatha.org. Perhaps it will be that the opening of this children's home will be the subject of a future episode) and Ron Watts, the president of the Union Conference, who were there to participate in the grand opening.

A group was commissioned to go to Cuddapah Thursday and Friday and purchase furniture, drapes, carpets, children's clothing and toiletries so as to be ready for the grand opening of the children's home on Sunday. Sue Smith, Kathy Jones, Carol Dickson, Tammy Hintz, her mother Margaret and others led out in this adventure. Bruce Fjarli challenged them to "shop like a man," and they fulfilled their assignment in an admirable way.

Saturday night after sundown found us in the children's home, moving and making up bunk beds to ready them for Sunday's invasion. The next morning, which brought a respite from the nearly incessant rain, saw many hundreds, perhaps thousands of villagers and families coming and sitting on provided tarps to witness the opening of the new children's home. A crowd graced the rooftop, Wrigley style, of what will be the girl's dormitory. One of the honored guests was a certain gentleman who had owned the property previously. I need to back up here for a minute and tell you a little about him.

When it was desired to build a school, suitable land was sought. Many hours were spent in researching properties to find one that was within budget and would fit the need, but the search was not going well. The one who was in charge of this (I'm sorry—I can't remember his name!), then approached Doug Clark, project manager, and said something like, "Why don't we advertise for free land." Doug's response was less than enthusiastic, but nevertheless, permission was granted.

Amazingly, there were some responses, among which was a beautiful and valuable tract close to Cuddapah. The owners were willing to donate it for a school! Excitement ran high, and just as Samuel of old rested his approving eyes on David's oldest brother Eliab, it was considered surely to be the one of God's appointment. But then another response to the ad surfaced, and when the worker traveled (somewhat reluctantly; after all, the Lord had already provided!) to see it, he was met by the owner, who showed him first of all the local government school. It was a small, dilapidated structure, with a few students roaming the grounds and the teacher absent, as was the usual pattern. This man was a Hindu, but greatly desired to have a suitable school built on his property. He pointed out that there were no other educational facilities close by (which was not the case with respect to the other parcel).

The Maranatha worker left feeling convicted that this should be the location they would choose, but was told that the official decision had to be made by committee. Great was his disappointment when he learned that the committee had selected the other more valuable plot. But then when steps were taken to transfer the title, it was discovered that there were title defects which prevented the transaction from going through! The land further from Cuddapah was now acquired, a gift from a Hindu gentleman who felt impressed that his farm should grow students and not peanuts. What a blessing! And what a joy to see this man, with his family, present to enjoy the opening of the children's home, and see the large buildings nearing completion for the boarding school! The radiance in his face was something to behold! How marvelous that our God puts in the hearts of His children, of whatever background or faith, to share their worldly goods for the advancement of His cause!

That morning, following the opening ceremony, we were allowed to take a child by the hand (with a "yellow ribbon" designating which were the privileged ones) and lead them through the doors into their

new home. Pradeep, the young man I accompanied, was somewhat shy and reserved. I tried to imagine how these children felt as they entered this building, with its bars on the windows (we were told that they served the dual purpose of keeping the bad guys out and the good guys in!). And yet, as the days unfolded, the laughter and happiness expressed by the children spoke volumes about their joy as they settled into their new residence. Most had never had their own bed, much less with a mattress. The prospect of plenty of good food, clothes and medical needs being supplied, education in a good school with a Christian emphasis, with a future brighter than they could ever hope for, could not help but replace the tears of uncertainty with smiles of elation.

Beginning the next Tuesday we conducted a "VBS" for the children, with the group divided into three sections, each participating in Bible stories and lessons, crafts and games in alternating fashion. Of course, anything we said had to be translated. They seemed to enjoy the well-traveled stories I shared such as the "Flying Kite Prayer" and "The Fish That Swallowed The Key."

A highlight was the morning we presented each child with his or her own Bible. The children of the Kindergarten class in the La Mesa SDA Church had contributed the money to purchase these Bibles, and during a break from other activities, several of us had gathered together to glue onto a blank page a picture of the Kindergarten Class, along with a written statement about the donation. Each child was called forward to receive a new Bible. Some gave the traditional folded hands expression of greeting, some said "Thank you, sir," and some just beamed. One girl, Anusha, looked straight at me and said, with a beautiful smile on her face and in perfect English, "Praise the Lord." I thought of things here in America that cost about \$2.50, the price of that Bible, and wondered if consuming a couple of sodas or that dessert was equal to the value of placing a Bible in the hands of those children!

Walking on the gravel pathway from the principle's house to the cafeteria I found myself frequently passing by the children's home, sometimes listening to the sounds of their music, or hearing my name being called out accompanied by an excited wave. To be a small part of such a wondrous adventure was thrilling. Sponsoring a child in the children's home costs \$25.00 a month. What's that? That might buy you a dinner for two in a decent restaurant. Less than a dollar a day to have an inestimable impact on a child's life; to actually give them a chance. That amount buys the clothing, food, medical and educational

needs. It's hard to compute that such a small amount would be adequate to furnish all this, but through economy and good management, it is done. If the Lord speaks to your heart and you would like to sponsor a child, please get in touch with me and I'll let you know how it can be done.

The illustration of the starfish was shared by team members. The story is told of a man on the seashore who tossed a beached starfish back into the ocean. An observer commented that, given the thousands of starfish on the shore, it would be impossible to make a difference for all of them. "No," replied the man, "But it made a difference for that one." Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that because we can't "save the world," it's useless to make any effort at all. You don't have to "save the world." Jesus did that. Just make a difference in the life of one. Make a positive impact on some one.

Our day consisted of group worship at 8:00 a.m., followed by some announcements, then breakfast. The food there was great. Paveen, the chief cook (who also demonstrated his talent in jump rope during a VBS game session, much to the delight of the kids watching and counting out loud) and his Maranatha workers did their best to give us ample and delicious food.

They felt compelled to provide "American fare" for us foreigners (a couple of times they served pizza that would compare favorably with anything here), but we lobbied strongly for more of the national cuisine. Sometimes they brought out the Indian food, but we were told that at any time we could sneak into the other room where the local help was fed, to satisfy any further culinary curiosity, which we did! Some of our group became so comfortable with Indian food and style that all metal utensils were discarded in favor of "digital" implements. I hope that there are no serious repercussions when returning home!

After breakfast, it was time to prepare for the VBS to begin, and depending on which team you served, you'd either be telling a story three times to the three different groups (as was my calling) or conducting classes in crafts three times, or supervising games to three different groups.

Then it'd be almost time for lunch, which was about 1:30 or 2:00. Following the meal (which was the last for most of us) we'd get ready to go out to the villages. For some teams (they divided us into four different teams) the drive to the village might be as much as three hours one way! The team I was with, led by Dr. Roger and Carol

Meharry of Idaho, was fortunate to travel about 45 minutes to get to our sites. On arriving in the village, we'd locate the Gospel Outreach worker, who knew the members, and he would lead us from house to house to meet and pray with the people. We wouldn't spend much time in each house, so as to be able to visit as many as possible, but we'd inquire as to their family and if there were any particular prayer requests.

Conscious that this would no doubt be the only time I'd ever get this chance, I would usually take a minute or two to say something like (through the interpreter), "Thank you for letting us come to your house today. We want to tell you that God loves you and has forgiven your sins. Jesus is coming back soon to take you home to live with Him forever. Keep looking to Him!" Then we'd pray, placing our hands on their heads or shoulders and give them a beautiful picture of Jesus and Steps To Christ in their language. With an invitation to attend the evening meeting, we'd be off to the next door, which might be only a few feet away.

To try to describe the living conditions in the villages evokes sympathy and marvel. Muddy paths strewn with trash and refuse; humble hovels for dwellings, most of them smaller than my kitchen. Bed racks placed outside the house in the daytime to conserve space; many of them without any electricity and certainly no indoor plumbing; animals roaming the outside areas. And yet, stricken in their poverty, they are happy people. Shame on us for taking our opulence for granted! By what edict did it happen that I was born in America the land of plenty, and not somewhere else? It brings to mind the Scripture, "To whom much is given, much will be required."

They are also spiritual people, open to learning about the true God. After working a long day in the fields, yet they will come to the church and sit on the concrete floor to hear and sing about Jesus! After the close the service, they will request individual prayer; it might be 20 or 30 minutes after the end of the service before we would leave. I asked myself the question, "When did it ever happen that someone after church came up to me and asked me to pray for them?"

Our meetings were designed to spend two nights in one church, and then move to another location. We'd start with singing, both in Telegu and English and then have a Bible story. Then we'd show portions of the "Jesus Video," a presentation of the life of Christ based on Luke's Gospel and spoken in Telegu. Then we'd have a health feature and sermon with an appeal for baptism or rededication,

followed by more of the "Jesus Video," and close with prayer. Of course, there were frequent stoppages because of electrical challenges. Maranatha had purchased generators to provide better electrical service, but even then interruptions occurred on occasion.

During one of our meetings, a local gentleman asked if he could give his testimony. He came forward and told (translated into English) how he had been afflicted with a serious illness. He heard a "Voice" that told him to go and pray in the "Sabbath Church." He had no idea what that meant, but inquired and located a nearby Seventh-day Adventist Church. After several weeks of attending he began to feel better, and then one night had a dream in which he saw hands coming out of the sky and touching his body. He was completely healed and stood that night before us sharing his story with conviction and power.

The thought crosses my mind that there might be someone reading this who someday will be prompted by God's Spirit to go on a mission trip. Yes, there's plenty of work to be done here in America, but there's something special about sharing His love in these remote areas. It's refreshing to see the eager response among those who have never heard about Him before. It's touching to see how satisfied they are with so little. It's thought provoking to compare our lifestyle with theirs. It's a life-changing experience. Why not consider exchanging a "mere vacation" for a "mission adventure." If you do, and have regrets about it later, please let me know!

Soon it was Wednesday, November 7, when we would board the train from Cuddapah to Chennai and begin our flight home. On my trip to India I saw innumerable bullock and buffalo, countless monkeys, two peacocks and one cobra snake. I saw a school built to children's education and God's glory. I saw His work going forward. I saw the happy faces of youngsters learning about Jesus and His love. I saw people I hope to see again soon when Jesus comes back to take us home. What a day that will be!