



In deep in India

2009

A Report by Michael Cassidy
on a recent research trip to investigate
the growth of Christianity in India



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By Michael Cassidy
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First of all, let me say we were very thankful indeed to a Foundation in the States for giving a travel grant for three of us from AE to go to India and research out as a venture of personal and organisational discovery how it is that the Indian church has grown from 15 million to 75 million in 12 to 15 years. The provision of this research grant was a tremendous blessing, and Dr Melisachew Mesfin, who leads our Ethiopian Team, Bongani Dlomo, from our AELTC programme team, and I felt very privileged to undertake this exercise.

Our overall time away was 2 weeks and we headed from Johannesburg to Dubai and then over to Chennai (formerly Madras) in the southern section of India for our first stop. Thereafter came Hyderabad in the centre of the sub-continent, then Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and finally Delhi in the north, where we were wonderfully welcomed and looked after by Marina Bang, a former AE colleague in our Communications Department, and her husband Mark. They were so dear and in the early evenings when all our interviews etc were over, they introduced us most wonderfully to both New Delhi and Old Delhi. What an astonishing city!

I don't think I have felt about any trip as I have felt about this one since the first major journey around Africa I did in 1961. I remember at that time feeling that at every stop things just fell into place as the Lord opened the way to the right leaders so that the right lessons, insights and strategies were gleaned which were drawn into the life and DNA of the AE ministry for decades to come. Likewise on this journey, I felt that everything was falling into place and that the implications for us in AE across the continent would be considerable. The Lord seemed to have gone ahead of us and opened things up so that we saw all the key people in each of these centres. Many of the ministries were positively mind boggling to us and we came away from what we were hearing and seeing both humbled and overwhelmed.



*Bongani Dlomo, Michael Cassidy & Mel Mesfin
welcomed by Mission India leaders, Drs Chiri and
Kamela Chiranjeevi*

Secrets

Inevitably, many have already been asking me what we learnt in India and how I would summarise the secret/s behind the growth, depth and effectiveness of the Indian church. I haven't yet got my summary statement fully refined, but this is my initial take.

The secrets of the Indian church lie in:

- ♦ The prayerful, faithful, courageous and purposeful proclamation of a supernatural Christ and the biblical Gospel in the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit
- ♦ Issuing in intensive and on-going training of Master Trainers and Trainers
- ♦ For maximum evangelistic & discipling multiplication + guided, tracked & evaluated chain reaction
- ♦ With every prayer cell a church in the making
- ♦ With every church growing, holistically committed, well-administered and itself a Bible school
- ♦ And every believer an effective Spirit-empowered witness.



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AE teamlet with members of the Christian Institute of Management in Chennai, India.

I have asked the friends we met in India to tell me if they think we have got this right and what in their opinion might be missing. In reality, virtually every word in the above paragraph is carefully chosen and when unpacked tells a big Indian story in itself. (See page 4ff.)

Training and Equipping

However, the key word which we heard again and again is training, training, training and training. The Indian church, at least those leaders we met, most of whom admittedly come from newer churches rather than mainline denominations, really and truly deeply believe in the principle of Ephesians 4:11 and 12, that *“He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry and for the building up of the Body of Christ.”*

In other words, the five-fold giftings within the Body of Christ (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) have one single and sole purpose, namely ***the equipping of the laity (the saints) for the work***

of the ministry. In India this training and equipping is purposeful, intentional, thorough, tracked, evaluated and perpetuated with strong intentionality so that finally a chain reaction of growth and discipleship takes place. The more thorough this training, the more certain and effective is the chain reaction. This happens as the laity are released into mission and each one understands that he or she is part of the frontline force for Christ in capturing the world for Him. As I often say to ministers when I am doing seminars: “You need to have a sign at the exit door of your church for people to see as they leave the morning service that reads:

**YOU ARE NOW ENTERING
THE MISSION FIELD.”**

This is certainly something which in many of our churches we nominally subscribe to, but in India they take it absolutely literally and that’s how the average



Michael and Melisachew Mesfin praying for local church Pastor William Carey and his wife Hebsibha of Aenon ministries in Hyderabad.

lay person sees things. He or she is the frontline minister of the Gospel in the mission field as they leave the church building or home which serves as a church meeting place.



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In many ways it's the same principle as in 2 Timothy 2:2 where Paul says: "The things which you have heard from me, the same commit to faithful people who will teach others also." So there are four links in that chain. The first is Paul, the second Timothy, the third is faithful persons who can and will teach others, and then the fourth is **others also**. So the New Testament had this chain reaction going and operative.

It is also intriguing that in the New Testament the basic place of meeting was the home. Again and again we were told that the most significant movement in India is the church planting home-church movement. By this means multiplied thousands and thousands and thousands are reached. And all of this within the context of two other strong and often hostile religions in the form of Hinduism and Islam.



Board members (l-r) Dr Mathew Thomas, Dr Vinod Shah and Dr Raju Abraham of Concern Ministries dedicated to church planting in North India. In 8 years they have planted 27914 new house churches with 336,664 new believers. They also lead the largest Christian hospital association in India.



Michael with Pastor Rod Gilbert of Mumbai and his family. Out from their centre extends an amazing ministry of preaching, discipling, deliverance and healing.

Clergy Freed up because Laity Active

It was also astonishing in numbers of places to meet ministers who really felt "freed up" for prayer, thinking, forward looking, strategising, planning and training of a faithful few Master Trainers. They are not cluttered

by over-laden administrative desks and by a thousand and one ministry calls which exhaust them and run them into the ground. The reason is that all of their lay people are doing the ministry. They also work constantly on getting their people to plant cell groups for prayer and which in due course become home churches for which leaders out of the laity are trained and developed as pastors, even if they have other secular "tent-making" jobs. It is another paradigm of course, but fascinating in the extreme.

They also stress the importance of acquiring skills as well as knowledge. People need solid and deep biblical knowledge but it is pointless unless all of this is accompanied by skills. For example, they need the skills of being able to lead another person to Christ, of discipling a new convert, of leading a prayer group, counselling those in need, preaching, and pastoring if they are called on to do so. Thus, said one pastor, "it is no use teaching your young son all the theory and knowledge about motorcars and driving unless you





Legendary Pastor Susai Joseph of Mumbai's New Life Fellowship which has a membership of 76000, the largest church in India.



Prof BE Vijayam, founder of the Carmel Missionary Training College in Hyderabad, explains to Michael and the team how their far-reaching Master Trainer programme works.

2. Faithful. I was talking there in that first clause about faithful proclamation of a supernatural Christ and the biblical Gospel. Not only did we detect these great commitments to faithfulness in terms of obedience in getting the message out, but faithfulness in the sense of being loyal and true to the biblical Gospel and the kerygmatic content of the message. The *kerygma* (1 Corinthians 1:21) is not a message that can be watered down, altered, adjusted, or made to stand on its head. It is a fixed deposit of Truth to be guarded and proclaimed as the Lord's servants are totally and faithfully true to the scriptures. (Cf. 1Tim 6:20-21)

3. Courageous. In many of our interviews we were struck by the courage so many of these brothers and sisters manifest in taking the Gospel to places or people groups where it has not gone before. This is no straightforward matter such as one might find in sub-Saharan Africa where African hearts are not hostile but profoundly and readily open to the Gospel. In the Indian context there is often much hostility from either Hindus or Moslems who often bring forth much opposition, sometimes violently, as last year in Orissa. It therefore takes courage to go and plant churches in this kind of context.

also teach him the skill of actually driving the vehicle effectively and safely." So little point in knowledge and theory without the skills.

It is also obvious in this model that the trained laity are a hundred percent supportive of their minister/pastor/shepherd, and the latter does not feel threatened by his lay people any more than a rugby captain would be threatened by his team, or a general by his army. They are all in it together and the sense of team work and partnership is awesome. In many ways this speaks about the "priesthood of believers." (Cf. 1 Peter 2:5)

Highlighting Key Notions

1. Prayerful. I was profoundly struck by the prayer commitments of almost everyone we met in the Indian church. All their endeavours seemed to be deeply grounded in prayer but more specifically in prayer which is characterised by deep faith in a God who supernaturally answers prayer. All their major endeavours are under-girded with corporate prayer and the pastors and leaders we spoke to struck us as men and women of deep prayerfulness.



Michael and Bongani in a bicycle rickshaw in Old Delhi. Alternative caption: How to build up your prayer life mega-fast! (Photo by former AE journalist Marina Bang, now living with husband Mark in Delhi.)



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Poster with map of Mumbai, plus photos of Pastoral couples in oversight of approx 50 churches planted around Mumbai by Bombay Baptist church under Pastor Stanley Mehta

4. Purposeful. Yes, we saw purposeful proclamation in the sense of the proclaimers being very deliberate with clear purposes and carefully worked out action plans which are achievable, measurable and with clearly established time lines. There did not seem to be much that we saw anywhere which was hit and miss or carelessly planned.

5. Supernatural. No one, not even a casual reader, can read any page of the Gospels or the Book of Acts without registering that what is before one speaks of a supernatural faith with the Spirit of God not only able to work in and within nature, but in going beyond nature into super-nature by supernatural power. Indian believers we met never present Christianity as a series of ideas or doctrines only, but as a living, vibrant, supernatural faith with the Holy Spirit **demonstrating** His power not only to change and transform individual lives by conversion and new birth, but also in healing, in delivering from the demonic, and in prevailing via power encounters with evil supernaturalism in its various forms.

6. Intensive Ongoing Training. If you look at my

second clause you see those words *intensive and ongoing*. This struck us again and again that the training Indian Christian leaders give to lay people is not superficial or casual, but intensive and thorough. It is also ongoing in the sense that once people have gone through initial training courses as Master Trainers or Trainers, they are required to come back again and again and again for further training and deepening. So there is a process underway of people learning constantly, being ever upgraded and never being allowed to slip back into maintenance mode or contentment with their own status quo.

7. Maximum Multiplication. Indian Christian leaders are profoundly averse simply to the arithmetic of addition and equally profoundly committed to the divine arithmetic of multiplication (e.g. 2 Tim 2:2). Over every piece of training, writing or publicising the question they seem to ask is - "How can this go the



The AE trio at Mt St. Thomas (nr Chennai), the site of the martyrdom of the Apostle Thomas who brought the Gospel to India in AD 52.

maximum distance?"

8. Guided and Evaluated Chain Reaction. This is another key commitment. Chain reactions are not allowed to be haphazard or via *laissez faire* processes. They are guided as leaders track them in



the sense of having all progress monitored, and then evaluated regularly and intensively for effectiveness.

9. Every Prayer Cell a Church in the Making. Which of us reading this communication has not been in a prayer cell? We all have. But in how many have we ever been where there was even the remotest expectation that the prayer cell could perhaps one day move on and develop into a viable church/congregation? Prayer cells we know in the West are reflected and directed back into the congregations about which they are praying. But in India the prayer cells, while doing exactly that, also direct themselves outwards to the growth and developmental potential for each of them to become a local and then a multiplying congregation. This struck us as really different and certainly significant.

10. Every Church Growing. Indian leaders we met do not allow their congregations to get into stagnation, or maintenance mode, or spiritual contentment with the way things are. Always there is a vision for growth and expansion. This is possibly because the numbers in India are so enormous and therefore there is always before Indian believers the challenge of the 1.1 billion people of India, the majority of whom do not yet know Christ. So the church dare not stay miniscule if that target remains before its eyes.

11. Holistically Committed. Again and again we were struck by the fact that ministries of practical care, holism, and compassionate action seemed to be integral to almost all the endeavours we witnessed, this often bringing real community transformation and upliftment. Maybe it is the overall poverty of India where 47 percent of its children under five are chronically malnourished by United Nations standards and where over 30 percent of all Indians are living below the official poverty line which thrusts this challenge before the church. But certainly the Lord's people there are facing it and doing so with dedication and distinction.

12. Every Church Well Administered. One of our first meetings in India was in Chennai with the Christian Management Institute. This is a very fine group of dedicated people who are not church planters or evangelists but whose strong commitment is to try and ensure that all churches in India are capably administered and financially responsible with solid accounting and reporting systems. I have not heard of Christian groups in other parts of the world, though they may be there, with this strong, clear and focused teaching commitment and calling. It struck us as very healthy and important.

13. Every Church a Bible School. In most of our churches in the West, pastors and Christian leaders would profess to be preaching and teaching the Bible. Sure. But what struck us in India was the powerful sense of intensity, intentionality and comprehensiveness which goes into their really



Mrs Shobha Sreekumaran of Mumbai, director of NIRNAY (Hindi for 'decision'), an extensive ministry in schools and churches related to HIV/AIDS. India has approx 2.4 million people HIV+ out of 1.1 billion. (Cf SA with 6.5 m HIV+ out of 45 m!)

strong commitments to ensure the Bible is taught thoroughly and understood deeply. The Bible School concept within the church also presupposes some



measure of testing out and examining whether people are absorbing and mastering the content, and getting it right.

14. Every Believer an Effective Spirit-empowered Witness. I underline something mentioned earlier in this communication of the deep Indian commitment in the church to the priesthood of all believers and to every single lay person being active as a witness. And this capacity to be active is not simply based on mastering certain content or techniques of witnessing, but in knowing and releasing the supernatural power and demonstration of the Spirit.

Conclusion

Well, we trust that what we have shared here has been of interest and a challenge to you, our friends and readers. Please take on board in your own hearts and prayers the needs of the Lord's people in India. Also pray that from wherever you are reading these communications, both you and we in AE and in the AE Leadership Training Centre, plus many throughout Africa, may be enabled to take the relevant truths and apply them contextually exactly where we all are. Let's please try to think and pray these things through till they begin to become part of our own spiritual DNA and bloodstream.

And don't forget to be in touch with us if you want to discuss any of this further.

My India trip journal will be available in hard copy (Price SA Rand R25.00, excluding postage) or by pdf file for any interested in getting the full story of our recent journey of research and discovery to India. If you want this fuller story, which I think you will find fascinating, please email drees@ae.org.za, or check the AE website at www.africanenterprise.org.za.

Appendix A: Indian statistics

1. One third the size of the USA
2. Population 1/6 of world popn., 3x US popn. Exceeds 1 billion people.
3. Density 852 people/sq mile (cf. USA 80/sq.ml.)
4. 1652 languages, 3000 dialects
5. 18 main languages.
6. Hindi is main language, English is link language.
7. 4635 people groups (39% of world's people groups)
8. 2962 Hindu people groups - 85% of Indian popn.
9. 584 Muslim people groups - 140million people
10. 339 Christian people groups - 4% of popn.
11. Over 30% of popn. below the official poverty line.
12. 47% of children under 5 chronically malnourished.
13. 50% of women cannot read or write.
14. In 2000, 3 million mobile phone users. By end of 2005, 4 million users coming on stream each month - total exceeds 100 million.
15. 2006 av income p.a. per capita \$750 (cf. USA \$46000)
16. India's economy has expanded at an average of 6% pa since 1991 and at 7% since 2004.
17. Less than 7% of India's labour force employed in the formal economy - only 35m out of 470m have meaningful job security - 21m in direct govt employ.
18. Literacy rate is 65%
19. 70m Indians migrated from rural to urban contexts between 1991 and 2000.
20. India "the 1% society". **Everything** up 1% p.a.

AE Tour Statistics

1. Travelled for 14 days
2. Total of 336 hours
3. Air distance travelled = 22000kms
4. Road distance travelled = 1500kms
5. Interviewed 50 strategic national Christian leaders.

