

Ecumenism at Andhra Christian Theological College

A 16-year-old's perspective.

Chris asked me to talk about the ecumenical movement in India, from the perspective of a "mish kid". (Missionary Kid--my words not his) Three qualities I believe that it takes to be a successful missionary are: to have a strong, selfless commitment to the cause of bringing the message of the good news of the Gospels to others; to have a dogged determination to get the job done; and to be a people person.

The love of God is how my parents lived their lives. That was the message that they carried throughout their work. They were never about hell fire and damnation. The message they took to the Dahlits (politically correct term for outcasts) is that God's love is for everyone and through the love of God you can transform your life. And that is truly what happened to countless people in India. The early work of the missionaries was to the Dahlits, because they were the only people the Indian government did not care about. "Oh go work with the outcasts, they don't matter to us" seemed to be the attitude. But missionaries also had to bring a skill to India, either be an educator, a doctor or in my Dad's case, an "agricultural advisor". His training for that was growing up during the depression in Idaho, where everyone had a cow to milk and vegetable garden in their back yard. But Dad foremost was an educator. He and Mom oversaw countless mission schools during their time in Andhra. So thanks to the Indian policy, missionaries built schools and hospitals for the Dahlits.

The second quality to survive on the mission field is a dogged persistence, a stubbornness really, that no one, no thing, no attitude is going to keep you from getting the job done. And in the name of Jesus Christ, it was grindingly hard those first few years in India. Think about being a young family with two little girls and a baby boy in arms, the only white people in a village community. Your nearest missionary support is 100 miles away by Jeep. Mom told me several times that it was a good thing that the terms were 7 years long. Lucky seven, huh?

But when you have a language to learn with a completely different script and alphabet, and new customs to adjust to, that is what was needed. The first 6 months was taken up by intensive 8 hours a day language study, learning to read and write Telegu. If the term had been only two or three years, as is typical now, they likely would have been too discouraged to ever return.

Mom said, "It took all of the first term for us to see that we were making any progress. By seven years we were fully into the work, could see we were making a difference, and were eager to return to India after a year of deputation in "The States". So your reward when arriving back to the U.S. is to travel the country drumming up support for your work before you return. See what I mean about needing dogged persistence and a commitment to Christ?

The saving grace for missionaries during that time was truly "the slow boat to China" that stopped off at India along the way. Before passenger travel by airplane, people found their way overseas by no frills passenger ships which stopped at many ports to drop off passengers and pick up new ones. There were two types of tickets, first class and everyone else. Of course no way were mission boards able to send missionaries first class. It didn't matter. Those first ships took 6 weeks to 2 months to get to India.

Stopping off at ports along the way, dropping off some passengers, picking up new ones, with a day or two to reload and reorganize the holds.

That was when my parents relaxed and recuperated. What excitement we had as a young family watching the boat plying its way along the Suez Canal. Clinging to and climbing the ship rails to get better views of the hold being unloaded and reloaded we kids were mesmerized. Some goods were loaded by crane other goods by coolie labor. The East didn't have longshoremen, but all the ports I remember from Egypt to Vietnam, had lots and lots of coolies carrying boxes on their heads up those gang planks. You come to understand the meaning of "gang" plank.

The added perk to this enforced vacation was sightseeing in all the exotic ports, Italy, Singapore, and Japan to name a few. These extended trips is how missionaries of that generation were able to rest and recover so that when the disembarked on U.S. soil and regained their land legs, they were ready to go to work again.

The third quality to have to be a successful missionary is to be a people person. You need to be able to cross all kinds of divides not only physical but cultural as well. Which brings me to the Ecumenical Movement in India, because not only are their cultural divides between countries but also between denominations. So people trying to bridge those divides might say, "You are going to sprinkle that baby and call it baptized? For crying out loud (and the baby may well do this) an infant can't make up its own mind to accept Jesus Christ as its personal savior."

"But that's the point isn't it? We want the baby saved and ready to enter the kingdom of God if anything should happen."

"What is this, grape juice being passed off as wine? That's not communion."

"Common cup, I don't think so even if there is alcohol to sterilize the cup in real wine."

And so it goes. That is not even bringing up the theological differences like trans-substantiation versus con-substantiation, or the importance of the Trinity.

When my parents returned to India after a 5 year pastorate in Salem, Oregon they returned as teachers in the newly established ecumenical seminary Andhra Christian Theological College. These were the perfect jobs for them. They truly loved that assignment best. Dad taught church sermon preparation and preaching as well as his passion - church history. Mom was the librarian and English teacher.

At that time the Telegu Baptists had a seminary at the coastal town of Rajamundry, the Lutherans had Luthergari in Kakinada, and the Church of South India had seminaries in Dornakal and Gooty. But these seminaries were only able to prepare what was called Bible Teams, to go out into the villages spreading the Gospel. If the students were already high school educated and qualified, they had to be sent up to Serampore College in West Bengal for complete seminary training. That was the first college in India, in fact all of Asia. Founded in 1818 by William Carey. It would be like having to go to Spain from Italy for school. (Remember each state in India has its own language, customs and traditions.) The need was great to have a seminary in state to educate the Telegu Christians.

The denominations in Andhra besides Baptists were, Lutherans, Methodists, Church of South India (Anglicans) and Mennonites. When missionaries first arrived 150 years ago they did not want to compete with other denominations so the state was divided up with the missions in different cities. If I wanted to spend time with my Lutheran girlfriend on vacation, I had to catch a train to Guntur. Of course things changed over the years and after 100 years the big cities like Secunderabad had all the denominations represented in thriving churches. In the 1960's the different denominations began working towards an ecumenical seminary. It was no easy task sorting it all out, but by 1964 Andhra Christian Theological College was open and operating to train young pastors.

My parents arrived back in the mission field from Salem in 1965. The seminary had opened on the Luthergari campus until land could be purchased in Secunderabad and buildings erected for the new campus. I was sixteen and remember moving into a house that was still being completed. Everything was done except a Western style kitchen with counters. It was no problem for our cook Sugunama, because she was used to cooking over low stove on the floor in her own home. I've watched many a meal being prepared in Indian homes from a squat position.

I think I left for my first semester of boarding school before the house was done. In my memory our house was on a huge plot of land and there was very little else except other buildings under construction. When Steve and I returned as newlyweds in 1969, the building was finally done. And then when we returned as a family in 1990 the campus had truly finished feel with trees, established well-worn foot paths and red gravel roads.

Building a physical campus is one thing. How do you create a unified culture of a school from so many different traditions? The formative years of the seminary were not easy. Think about starting up anything and then add to that the differences to work through when you come from different branches of Christianity. I remember many dinner conversations where Mom and Dad aired their frustrations. It was not easy - but the work of compromise got done.

To accommodate the differences, some classes are taught jointly and others are taught specifically to the students of that denomination. For example early church history can be taught to everyone. Then after Martin Luther decided enough was enough and their histories diverge, each denomination gets separate lessons. Each denomination has its own hall. There are two hours of instruction each week about the liturgy, history and policy of each denomination. The rest of the time is filled with classes jointly taught.

How about the administration? It wouldn't be fair to have the Church of South India running the school. There may be favoritism etc. This is resolved by having the principal on a four year term. Each participating denomination gets a turn on the rotation. Lutherans for 4 years, CSI for 4, and Baptists for 4. It was a great challenge to work through the differences and build a joint seminary. Requiring dogged determination, a willingness to cross divides and a selfless commitment to the greater purpose of educating young Christian minds for the work of Christ.

Andhra Christian Theological College is now a successful seminary, training young pastors and Bible teams for the work in India. As I am remembering there were about 10 young Telegus in training in each class, so it was probably similar in other denominations. Who knows the class sizes now almost 50 years later? WOW does that date me.

The work I know the most about is the library. My mother was given the herculean task of organizing it with the books from the previous three seminaries. When I was home on break I would help her with unpacking boxes, relabeling and shelving. This past year when G. Peter came from India for my Dad's service he told me he worked his way through seminary being my parents' gofer. After school he ran errands on his bike for my Dad, taking the mail to the post office, delivering things around campus etc. Then after dinner with Mom and Dad he would work in the library shelving books for Mom. He said his day ended at 10:00 PM. But he added that he loved my parents dearly and they taught him so much about being a pastor during those formative years as a young man.

Peter and his brother Andrew grew up in our home, sons of Sugunama who took care of Johnny and Marjie. Sugunama a young outcast had acquired a 4th grade education in a missionary school. Tired of breaking rock on the side of the road into gravel for paving, she showed up at our door and pleaded with my mom for any job. "I'll sweep your floors; just let me work for you." So Mom took her in because she had just had a baby boy, John and needed a nanny. Sugunama took care of baby John and then along came Marjie. In the meantime she had her own two Peter and then Andrew. So there were four little kids running around the house in her care. I remember being scolded many a time in Telegu for some misdeed by Sugunama. Mom as the administrator of the girl's boarding schools in Kurnool and the adjacent towns, had full time work, and believe me Sugunama had a full time job as well with four little ones plus the four older siblings to manage. Between Sugunama and my oldest sister Tracy Ann we were kept in line.

Sugunama's sons Andrew and Peter are both pastors of growing churches in Andhra with at least 1500 in attendance each Sunday. Both received their degrees from Andhra Christian Theological Seminary. There is such a thirst for the message of the love of God in India, so once you get a church started it grows and grows. I've mentioned to some about Pastor G. Samuel who started the church in Secunderabad. His church now has 10,000 members, with one hundred satellite churches. They sponsor village work, clinics and housing for displaced women to train them for life on their own. And those are just the stories I know from the Baptists. I'm sure the Lutherans, and Anglicans have similar success stories.

I was hoping Margaret Martin of Mountlake Terrace Baptist could have been here today, as she volunteered as a missionary at ACTC in 1987. Margaret has had a career in the Seattle public library system so she used her skills in the seminary library. At ACTC there was no fulltime librarian; Mom did the job after class with student aids. And before she retired she secured funding to pay for a student librarian. But keeping the shelves organized is a difficult task, so when Margaret arrived in 1987 years had gone by without the library getting the kind of attention it needed. She worked hard to once again get the library in order. When I talked to her this week, she said that 1987 was the best year of her life. She loved to see firsthand the transformative power of mission work. She said it truly has made a

difference in her life. Not only did she gain a new perspective but she also became a second mom to an Indian family. Albert who was trained in mission schools became a successful business man for the big Indian power company. His children are all college educated and part of the emerging middle class. His youngest came to the U.S. and is now living in Atlanta working in the field of computers. Kamal and his wife Jyothi and their two little boys are the age of Jen and Anthony's family. In fact they were here in February for my dad's memorial and we all had a curry dinner fixed by them at Margaret's house. They consider her their American mom and grandma. And she truly is. She goes to Atlanta or they come to Seattle for yearly visits. She told me that has been is such blessing brought into her life as a single woman.

So that is my experience of a small slice of ecumenism and missionary work in India. From observing my parents work, I saw how it took great dedication and a selfless commitment, and a stubborn determination to get the job done. Their work and their love for the people of Andhra brought meaning to their lives and greatly impacted the lives of others. When you keep the love of God as your guiding principal great things are possible.