

**Report by Andrew Bowden on the IRCEA Conference  
at Chennai (Madras), India  
November 2002**

1. Prior to the Conference I visited the Diocese of Amritsar in the Punjab, North India, and stayed with the former Bishop of Delhi, Bishop Magbul Caleb. I therefore had the chance to find out a good deal about the key issues for the Church of North India today, and to visit a number of villages and village based projects in an area heavily involved in “the green revolution” in farming.
2. I was also at this stage able to visit two tribal settlements, one of nomadic charcoal burners, and the other of nomadic cattle herdsmen. Also a Tibetan Refugee settlement at Dalhousie in Himachal Pradesh.
3. The conference was organised by the Church of South India at their Centre at 5 Whites Road, Chennai, and they did us proud. We were welcomed as distinguished guests, fed splendidly, allowed full use of the facilities available and invited to no less than four “cultural entertainments”.
4. The International Rural Churches Ecumenical Association (IRCEA) brought together participants from Australia, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, Indonesia, Korea, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Romania, Germany, England, Wales, USA, Canada, and of course, India. I was one of only three Anglicans. Most of the participants would have regarded themselves as belonging to a ‘Protestant’ Church; but there was one Roman Catholic – from the Solomon Islands.
5. The political situation in the Chennai area was such that we were, sadly, unable to stay in villages in the province of Tamil Nadu: but we were privileged to visit three projects in neighbouring provinces. A farm institute which trains small farmers in organic and low input farming; a technical college for village girls who had dropped out of local education; and a multi-project initiative in local villages run by one of the larger CSI churches in Chennai.
6. The theme of the conference was “Voices of the Voiceless”. We were challenged to recognise that many in Indian villages are “voiceless”: - notably the Dalits (the Untouchables) and women (particularly girl children). The Church seeks both to speak on their behalf, and to help the voiceless to speak for themselves.
7. As always at these conferences, it was fascinating to share stories about rural issues from around the world. What most impressed me was
  - a) The evidence from Australia, Canada and USA of the complete abandonment of rural settlements which no longer make economic sense: and the concentration of “services” in urban centres of 5,000 plus, and
  - b) The detailed account of local ministry in the Uniting Church of Victoria where forty plus congregations already have authorised leadership teams.
8. The experience of others inevitably helps one to reflect on our own situation. What follows is an outline of my thoughts on the future of farming, and of the churches ministry in rural areas as I reflected on what I had seen and heard.

## **Future of the Countryside**

### *A. The countryside as a factory for food production.*

1. “Globalisation” of the world food market means that there are only realistically two futures for farmers.
  - a) Large scale intensive farming, selling to a national/world market.
  - b) “Healthy” farming selling to a local market.
2. Both sorts of farmers need:
  - a) Political protection from multi-national corporations.
  - b) Farming cooperatives as defence against corporations.
  - c) Extreme flexibility to exploit new markets.
  - d) Marketing skills.
  - e) Liberation from “cultural chains”.
3. In some cultures the “chains” are so heavy that “liberation” is the top priority. In Europe, agricultural workers escaped from feudalism:
  - a) Through the development of trade.
  - b) Through training in skills.
  - c) Through converting to a cash payment economy.
  - d) By leaving the village for the town.

Arguably the final emancipation of agricultural workers in UK did not happen until the 1950s!
4. It would seem therefore that it is right for the churches to encourage a “voice for the voiceless” by:
  - a) Championing them politically.
  - b) Offering training in skills.
  - c) Developing their marketing skills.
  - d) Helping them to move away from villages in a planned/ordered way.
5. In the long run the need for villages which are “factories for food production” will shrink (as in New South Wales, Australia), the numbers of people involved in farming will decline, and the remoter rural areas are likely to become depopulated.

## B. *The Countryside as a place for Leisure.*

1. The use of the countryside as
  - an attractive place for retirement.
  - an attractive place to bring up young children.
  - an attractive place for a “healthy/ecological” lifestyle.is likely to increase.
2. This will depend on whether rural settlements are within reach of larger urban centres.
3. These settlements are likely to cluster around and encourage the re-development of settlements of 5,000 population plus as the place where financial and social “services” are located.
4. There will inevitably be conflict between those who see the countryside as a place of work, and those who see it as a place for leisure.

## C. *The Churches ministry in Rural Areas*

1. God’s is the creation. God’s are the people. God longs for everything/everyone to achieve fulfilment and for His love to be appropriated/appreciated. He has entrusted to the Church the message of reconciliation.  
The conference encouraged us to ponder what ‘reconciliation’ means in our home context.
2. Following Jesus, the Church is especially to care for “the voiceless” – human, animal and inanimate - and to work for ‘fulfilment’, for the coming of the Kingdom.  
The conference encouraged us to ponder – who are the ‘voiceless’ in our home context.
3. This means being prepared to become involved in local and national politics.  
It means using “scientific skills” (such as sociology) to inform wise decisions.  
It means devoting resources to training and education of those most in need of help; and to the shifting of ‘cultural’ prejudices.  
The conference encouraged us to ponder what are our cultural prejudices back home.
4. It also means providing “ministry” in villages. There is a major discussion going on as to whether the Churches should concentrate their efforts on providing highly trained, paid **ministers**, or should seek to call out and support congregations and teams within congregations to “run their own show”.  
In India, as in the UK, the Churches inherit a highly authoritarian culture, which puts great emphasis on the highly trained paid minister. In India as in the UK, this culture is proving unsustainable in the modern economic climate. In India as in the UK, key thinkers are questioning the theological validity of such a culture.