

Voices of the Voiceless

Chennai, India

November 2002

The two New Zealand representatives, Judith Milmine from North Otago and Robyn McPhail from Mid-Canterbury, have just returned from the International Conference on Rural Ministry in Chennai (Madras), India, thoroughly invigorated by the experience of meeting with participants and contributors from diverse parts of the rural world.

Organised by the International Rural Church Ecumenical Association in partnership with the Church of South India the Conference brought together people from Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, England, Germany, Indonesia, Korea, New Zealand, Romania, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, United States and Wales, as well as leaders within the Church of South India closely involved with Rural Mission. India is an ideal place to reflect on rural church life and mission, given that 80% of India's population live in rural villages (contrast 15% of New Zealand's population).

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Church of South India input to the conference introduced participants to major aspects of their mission work particularly in relation to the most disadvantaged people of that land, Dalits (formerly called 'untouchables') and tribal groups, and in raising awareness of the plight of the girl-child (male to female ratio as low as 1000:927 in some areas, compared with 100:103 in other parts of the world). A Buddhist monk addressed the conference on Pluralism, the issue of Globalisation and Poverty was presented from an Indian perspective and a series of Bible studies engaged us in some profound conversations between Bible texts and pressing contemporary issues. The keynote speaker, Korean Kim Yong-Bok argued the case for *Life* to be the focus and reference point for all human endeavours. In particular he views traditional rural communities and their close interaction with the land and with one another as the clue to future life on this planet, as opposed to the death that he sees coming from excessive modernisation and industrialisation. He says: "This is not to idealize or romanticize rural life, but to give primary and basic place to the rural, for the rural community has provided a basic paradigm of life. Rural community is really the base of the political economy of life."

How is one to describe the impact of this conference? One word likely says it all – *transforming*. Transformed through the experience of meeting *India* and, in India, meeting many different people with a passion for Christian faith and mission.

RNN, November 2002

Who was Absent?

When the International Rural Church Ecumenical Association met in Chennai, India for its recent conference there were some notable absences.

Although an invitation had been sent to the Governor of Tamil Nadu to be present at the Inauguration he was absent. That was not his own doing. It was because the Church of South India had withdrawn the invitation.

On October 30 the Assembly of Tamil Nadu had passed an Ordinance forbidding conversion by any religious movement. The Ordinance required that any person converted would have to report to the Government. The person who was the agent of conversion would also have to report. A memorandum presented to the Governor by Dalit, Muslim and Christian leaders pointed out that people carrying out well meaning acts of benevolence and charity in the fields of education, health care and social services could be construed as trouble makers.

It was in protest to this Ordinance that the invitation was withdrawn.

There were also others not present. Rev Dr Lai Thilma of Myanmar was not allowed out the country. Dr Thirpa Tharpa felt it necessary to stay in Nepal during a period of severe political

upheaval. The coming to power of the Communist Party made the future of the Church in its present form uncertain. His people needed his leadership.

But other people from around the world were present. Some knew the dangers of living in countries hostile to Christianity while for others the practice of their faith was relatively easy. I wondered whether they will ever take their faith lightly again and whether their understanding of those who are under threat would cause them to value their freedom more highly.

Lloyd Vidler, Bowral, NSW, Australia

Stories from Around

Interspersed through the “Voices of the Voiceless” Conference in India, participants gave voice to struggles and achievements in their own rural communities, presenting a wide variety of stories of faith and life. The following is adapted from the Conference Report, delivered to participants during the closing session.

In **Australia** there are three significant voiceless groups that the church is trying to represent, advocate for and support. They are Aboriginal community, the declining numbers of the farm families, and the struggling rural communities.

Bangladesh is a developing and agricultural country. In 19 Bangladesh achieved its sovereign independence from Pakistan. The Christian community is a very small minority, 0.3% of the population. The Church of Bangladesh has a great involvement in the multicultural community, with one Synod, two Dioceses, four Deaneries, two city Pastorates and 71 Congregations. The motto is “Spiritual and social ministry for Christians and their neighbours and sharing with global communities”.

The rural area of **Canada** is changing radically due to depopulation – the number of farmers is decreasing. Farming is affected by globalisation issues, city people are moving to rural areas to live but work in the cities and rural communities are disappearing.

The church is trying to face the challenges of rural areas by: new models for ministry; support for the family farm; finding ways to be in solidarity with First Nations; ecumenical shared ministry; and reorganising Canada’s multi-cultural and multi-faith mosaic in all its approaches to mission and ministry.

In relation to the **United Kingdom**, Roger Greene is an agricultural chaplain and he outlined the effects of Foot and Mouth disease on local farmers and the support offered in the name of Christ’s church. Andrew Bowden talked about keeping in touch, particularly through the magazine “Country Way” and the Rural Theology Association which shares a theological perspective on rural concerns (www.rural-theology.org.uk). Michael Cruchley, as Rural Officer in Wales, reiterated the impact of Foot and Mouth disease and also spoke about issues of gender and tradition still inhibiting rural mission.

The Evangelical Farmers Organisation in Wurttemberg, **Germany**, has a well-developed education and social-diaconal programme. The education programme covers faith and agricultural concerns and other groups are working on agriculture, politics, genetic engineering and Third World issues. The diaconal programmes provide support labour for farmers and families in sickness and other needs. The town-country group is committed to improving communication between town people and farmers. (More below in a separate article.)

Kerala, India: In 1985 new small congregations started the Bethel Evangelism Fellowship to motivate and equip congregations to do evangelism. To train the laity to start house churches the BEF set up the Bethel Theological Institute. It printed a booklet “Training for Evangelism” with five courses and fifty lessons and, to train people for research, set up in 1996 the Huebener Research Centre. Research has included a comprehensive study of villages and towns; socio-religious transformation 1800-2000; contemporary socio-religious phenomenology; problems, conflicts, bondages, quests; dimensions of the Gospel that meet the problems and quest; and a new day of Church and Mission.

The context for the **New Zealand** rural churches is an historically Christian culture (but not an overly religious approach to life), a sense of being in change overload, and decline in church

attendance. There are stories of hope: for example, a church reopened by the enthusiasm of young parents leading worship as a team, and new models for leadership where traditional clergy “butter” has become too thinly spread.

The **Romanian** representative saw the most important subject of the Conference to be enriched understanding of Matthew 28:19 “Go ye therefore and teach all nations”. “All nations” means the whole world from a social, cultural and a political point of view. This will be the way to bring peace on earth.

Solomon Islands: A small country with a population of some 400,000 and 85% in the rural area. Christianity is the major religion practised in the Solomon Islands. 95% of the population are Christians and attend church activities regularly. Religious instruction is taught in schools as part of the curriculum and also programmes are organised for women, youth and children.

The rural population depend on agriculture for their subsistence and to generate cash. Women take pride in these activities as their capacity and ability is measured in these terms. In addition to cultural concerns women also play a large role in the growth and advancement of the rural church through implementation of policies. As such, women in the Solomon Islands have been strong supporters of the church.

Sri Lanka is a small island south of the Indian peninsula with four religious groups – Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Moslem. 7% of the population are Christians, 7% Moslem, 32% Hindu and the remaining Buddhist. Ethnic problems have troubled Sri Lanka. Now that the government and LTTE (Liberation Tigers for Tamil Elaam) are in peace talks the people hope for the best. Churches are working in rural areas, especially the Church of South India in the Jaffna region, with 90% of the church being rural and all Tamil speaking. They are now getting more conversions in all the churches in Sri Lanka.

USA: The Rural Church Network provides necessary and essential links for church leaders, pastors, and congregations to eliminate the feeling of isolation and powerlessness (www.rural-church.org). An emphasis on seminary education both before and after graduation is one of the major foci today.

Small churches are joining together in parish systems to support one another and provide presence in their communities and at higher judicatory levels.

Is Our Church Structure Ecclesiastical ‘Baggage’ and Our Theology Scaring the Wits Out of those Whom We Seek To Serve?

The greatest strength of Yahweh is in not having to vie with the colossal ‘baggage’ of the adversary Pharaoh. It is this element of ‘self-emptying’ that enables Yahweh to stand in solidarity with the powerless and the groaning. The operating pre-requisite here is to share the victims’ vulnerability and their pain. The singular goal is not to demonstrate how powerful one is but to empower those who groan that they may become subjects of their own destiny. Thus, slaves are turned into honourable partners in the Lord’s redeeming acts.

Who said victims do not have resources, both human and material? Look around: you shall surely find a Moses, a Joshua, a Miriam etc. In my 16 years ministry as a rural pastor the greatest realisation I have received is to look at my Dalit congregations with new eyes – to see them not only as those discriminated but also as a resource – an inexhaustible resource. It is God of Exodus who enables us to see Adivasis of India, Aborigines of Australia, Maoris of New Zealand etc. not merely as broken peoples but as precious resource. Remember the saying of Jesus: “The stone which builders have rejected has now become the chief corner stone.”

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It is for this reason that, in most cases, those who seek to serve the victims find their ‘baggage’ excess. Generally speaking, all accrued ‘baggage’ either in spiritual or material realms reflects the values and ethos of the dominant. Without this realisation on the part of those who seek to serve the victims, they find that their good intentions have only proved counter-productive and may be even

with negative results. The church, especially the rural church, may need to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage all over again, marking a fresh start with those who sigh. It is then that the church experiences the “dying and rising” of Jesus as she ‘self-empties’ all that does not matter or ‘excess’ in sharing the vulnerability and helplessness of victims. The church needs to re-embark on her pilgrimage amidst those who sigh, again and again, for the simple reason that the God of Exodus is abundantly and surely manifest amidst those who sigh.

Daniel Premkumar, Church of South India Synod
Department of Dalit and Adivasi Concerns

Future Directions for Agriculture

1. It is good to see that the churches are incorporating agriculture as a topic into socio-political discussions. Often one gets the impression that a strong “city-church” perspective dominates:
 - a. The seats of church government are in cities
 - b. Throughout Germany the offices of rural church services are located in cities and this does not to make a practical and personal connection to the rural area any easier.
 - c. A career in the church often requires service in urban parishes.A danger exists to regard concerns of agriculture and rural areas with an urban view. For example, the first draft of the “Social Word of the Churches” in 1997 did not mention agriculture and rural issues and they were only added during the review process.
2. If there is any interest within the church in agriculture and rural areas then it is primarily in the topic of Creation Theology – the protection of the environment and animals ranks first. Rural support services, however, are also concerned with people living in rural areas, thus taking on a social-service task. Quite often this creates conflicts in setting priorities, especially when evaluating agricultural policies.
3. The church must acknowledge, accept and incorporate in discussions the social part of agriculture, the people’s economic, living and working conditions.
4. The problems of agriculture and the rural areas are often seen as factional and special interests in social terms. Church Statements must emphasise the interconnection of nutrition, ecology, energy, climate control and environmental protection.
5. The strong paradigm that churches use for guidance in creation theology should actually incorporate ecological, agricultural and social aspects. Not only should ecological variants and economic habits (e.g. the Protestant work ethic) be looked at but, above all, attention should be paid to the people who rely on agriculture for their livelihood.
6. The churches’ discourse on Creation Theology is sometimes ‘eco-missionary’. Social sensibility should give special consideration to economic working conditions and social living conditions as farming families cannot address only creation theological interests (environmental protection, animal protection, food product protection, consumer protection) but must also consider economic factors. They also have a right to adequate quality of work, time off, and income.
7. Visions for agriculture should always be visions for society as a whole. It is important from a prophetic point of view that agriculture not miss out on its connection to overall society.
8. The general social feeling in agriculture in Germany shows a high level of insecurity and unhappiness. One feels marginalized by society. A statement by the church should first of all show solidarity with this ‘part’ of the body of Christ and an understanding for its difficult social position. It should recognise the contributions of agriculture to society as a whole. Not only should farmers be asked to change farming paradigms, but also to be shapers of the agricultural reality in agronomy, agricultural research, journalism, politics, industry and trade. Changes implemented in these will bring changes in agricultural practice. Demands on the farming community are unsuccessful if one-sided and not incorporated into the total complex of agrarian society.

Clemens Dirscherl, Evangelical Farmers’ Organisation, Wurttemberg, Germany

Field Trip to Agricultural Institute

From our arrival at Kasam Agricultural Institute, at Katpadi some 100 kms west of Chennai, we were treated as honoured guests, complete with garlands of flowers and a banner of welcome.

tion in the coolness of the chapel and we learnt some of l by American missionaries early in the 20th Century, at local people many of whom are tradition's underdogs – (l groups). With the Government's "green" revolution banner of welcome. ease production, the Institute was forced to be involved in encouraging large scale fertiliser and chemical use. In recent years the unsustainability of such methods – in terms of both the well-being of the soil and the financial capabilities of small farmers – Kasam has reclaimed traditional methods alongside up to date developments in holistic, integrated farming systems and in biological enhancement and control. The result is a viable farming system for even the very poor small farmers to improve their health and livelihoods.

Kasam Institute comprises 330 acres, of which 180 acres is in a large variety of crops. Hills denuded of forest are being replanted and Dr Shankar introduced us to their special project – rain water harvesting. We were able to inspect the ground works and see for ourselves how "water must be made to walk not run", so that instead of more than half the rains rushing down to the sea more can be allowed to soak into the ground. Feeding the water table is crucial especially in recent years with only one monsoon occurring instead of two.

"water must be made to walk not run"

The Demonstration Farm on the flat land showed us good practice in integrated farming methods with fruit trees and coconuts alongside rice, and also poultry and fish farming. Rice is cropped in a rotation system with one year including a legume, usually millet. Village people are first approached by visiting during community festivals and giving out seeds to people who are interested. Two women also make visits to villages to help introduce the idea of learning better farming methods. To avoid dislocation villagers come to Kasam for training courses that are usually only three or five days duration.

Among the new ideas put alongside traditional methods are using a sweet enzyme to promote germination and introducing to the paddy (rice) crop a variety of snails that will eat weeds without damaging the paddy. Both stem from Korean research brought to Kasam by Professor Chung Ho-Jiw, a theologian turned farmer and agricultural researcher.

The principles behind the Kasam Institute were clearly displayed in the education centre, through charts used to teach visiting farmers and also to seek support for the project throughout the Church of South India. Theology of respect for God's creation is closely linked with good ecological practice, the result being a sound economic base for small farmers.

Adapted from the Conference Report

Conference Statement

We the delegates to this the 2nd International Rural Church Ecumenical Association meeting at Chennai, India urge the churches of the world to pray, work for and stand in solidarity with rural communities and congregations.

We acknowledge the good things that have improved rural communities in our day. We recognise and regret many negative actions taken in the past through colonialism and exploitation.

We stand with the marginalised rural people of the world. We want to challenge the total acceptance of globalisation which can result in rural deprivation and economic hardship, as well as increased terrorism and conflict throughout this world.

We ask Christians all over the world specifically for prayers and action:

- For peace and peaceful coexistence that people may work and trade without conflict and the threat of war.
- For economic justice that producers and labourers will be paid a fair price for their products and labours.

- For the environment that exploitation of the land, forests and oceans will give way to an ecological balance.
- For minority groups that their voices will be heard and their concerns met by those in power.
- For rural communities that governments, health, educational and financial institutions will work toward the development of sustainable rural communities.
- For viable rural communities for future generations.
- For rural congregations that their mission and worship will be enriching and their witness significant.
- For national church and funding bodies that they may treasure rural congregations and work whole-heartedly for their development.

We as delegates commit ourselves to praying and working for fulfilment of the above list of issues and we ask the officers of this association to forward this statement to the appropriate church bodies.