

Tracking the Spirit and Thriving Under Persecution in India

Submitted by Rev. Herb Hoefler

During my recent annual trip to South Asia, I travelled a lot, staying only a couple of nights in any one place. What impressed me was a church thriving under persecution.



LCMS partner churches in India and Sri Lanka are under much pressure from powerful private organizations, government laws and policies. In India, members are primarily from the “outcaste” section of the society, and it is from here that the vast majority of converts to Christianity have come. In order to inhibit conversions, converts lose all government privileges provided the outcastes. There also are anti-conversion laws in seven states. Members in Sri Lanka are all in remote mountains, having been imported by

the British colonialists from India two centuries ago. These workers are looked down upon as vestiges of colonialism and are “captured” on the estates.

Despite the persecution and restriction, churches are thriving. While there I observed mass baptisms of about 200 people. In one section of the Indian church, there have been about 1000 baptisms in the last few years. All of these people come from the outcastes and lose all their government benefits upon conversion.

In this region of the church many social ministries exist: mentally retarded, deaf, hospital, schools, boardings, nursing school. A major reason people have come to respect the Christian faith is because they see it in action in places like this. The favorable reputation makes it difficult for anti-conversion forces to get a foothold to prevent baptisms.

The India Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Lanka Lutheran Church have unique programs of sending new seminary graduates out to unchurched areas for a three-year probation period. Only after the experience of new evangelistic work and church planting are graduates brought into established congregations for ordination. Twenty-five more probationers-as-church planters will be coming out this summer.

Another unique aspect of the spread of the Gospel in India is how it spreads outside the established church. I had done research on this phenomenon 30 years ago, and now it has developed into something of a movement to Christ. During my trip, I met with 80 high caste Hindus who worship only Jesus and are developing their own worship forms, leadership, and structures in a regional gathering.

The Spirit of God moves powerfully in ways we cannot restrict or predict. As we say in our Northwest District, we are just trying to “track the Spirit.” Thanks be to God!

