

The India Mission

It all started last year, during our Purpose Driven Life Campaign. I was reading Day 33 of Rick Warren's book where it was talking about how real servants act. He pointed out how real servants make themselves available to serve. They stand by ready to serve. Rick pointed out that being a servant means giving up the right to control your schedule and allowing God to interrupt it whenever he needs to. In fact, for a servant, interruptions are divine appointments for ministry and a servant is happy for the chance to practice serving. Jesus compared his followers to soldiers. He said, "*No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him.*"

So, I prayed this prayer to God: Jesus, today I make myself available to be used by you. Whatever happens today, I will not say "no" to that opportunity if it brings you glory and helps others.



Not 5 minutes after my prayer I got a call from my friend Waldo Werning who asked me to go to a place I knew very little about and where I never imagined myself ever going. He needed pastors to mentor Indian pastors in the Purpose Driven Life principles. And he was inviting me and my wife to go with him to India to help pastors and lay leaders there develop ministry plans using the principles he had written about in his book, *The 12 Pillars of a Healthy Church*.

Immediately, I thought of a hundred reasons why I could say no. One big one was he expected Hope to raise \$15,000 to support this conference in India. And I thought, How can we afford that? It was hard enough raising that kind of money for a sound system. (By the way, God raised the money we needed in only 2 months.) I also thought about all the trips I was going on already with PLI. Plus, why would I ever want to go to India? I really did not. There was no logical reason for me to go. How will I ever manage this? And what will my wife think? I don't usually answer for my wife, but there was the problem of this prayer that I just prayed. "Lord, I will not say no to you today." I know he heard it, so I had to obey. "Yes, Waldo, we will do our best to go." If not for that prayer and my faith commitment to God, my fear and my belief that we were somehow limited would've won the day. But, here we are by God's grace, and I personally have learned so much already. I have learned again that wherever God guides, he provides. He always sees to it that his mission is provided for. If he tells you to go, he will make a way. I am convinced now that "Catch the Vision of His Mission" happened because God wanted it to happen.



There were so many things about India that struck us. It is a completely foreign country. Everything you can think of is different. The food was different. They crack their corn by throwing the ears of corn in the road so the cars crack it off the cob.

There were animals in the middle of busy highways!
This was my shower while we were in India.



We visited Mumbai (Bombay) and went to the slums where my Facilitator, Rev. Alfred, started 8 children's ministries. The children's ministries were maybe in a garage of some kind. They are in the largest slum in all of Asia. 700,000 people live in these slums with nothing more than a tin roof and maybe a tarp for a wall.



The conference was in a mountain village. There were lots of monkeys to greet us as we traveled up the narrow mountain road.



What was the mission to India all about? It was, in a sentence, **to empower and mobilize God's people for Mission.** The Leaders of the IELC gathered together at Trivandrum, India, on September 5, 1996 and adopted this purpose statement unanimously: The purpose of the "Catch the Vision of His Mission" process is to empower and mobilize IELC believers for making mature disciples by a process of education and action in families, congregations and Districts through Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 14; Ephesians 4; and 2 Timothy 2:2 models. To make every disciple a Bible student and a missionary.

On July 16, 1997 at Cape Comarin all the participants in the IELC adopted unanimously the mission of restoring to the heart of the local church a Great Commission passion. Their strategy was to help church leaders be functional and congregations healthy through leadership training, mentoring, and Biblical resources for intensive nurture/educational activities. They committed to center on every member a Bible student and every member a missionary. The plan was to have three conferences, one every two years. But it didn't happen as planned.

One of the reasons it took so long to do what we finally did this year was not just church politics, but the cultural problems as well. The IELC had just elected a new two weeks before we got there. Before this there was no recognized church leader of the IELC for over 8 years. This caused huge administration difficulties for us. Along with that, India had an anti-conversion bill from the previous government administration, which made things very difficult. To share Jesus or to even invite someone to church was to risk jail time, and there were spies everywhere. But we thank God that he opened the door last June with a new more liberal government. So we were able to come with few obstacles.

The one question that we kept asking ourselves and the leaders of the IELC was, **What does God want us to be and do?** We wanted them to be able to say, "This is what God wants." Not shallow selfish things like "this is what I want" or "this is how we like to do it." Notice is says be and do, not just do. For too long we felt the church has focused on what it should do and so it has been program driven. We wanted to focus on who the church is. Being has to do with the character and heart. It's more than external things and decoration. It has to do with spirituality and growth, which means you have to get into God's Word.

There was one verse that kept echoing in my head during this whole experience. It was my confirmation verse: Acts 1:8, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" I always heard the part about being a witness, but I didn't always understand the part about going "*to the ends of the earth.*" This is who we are to be as Christians. It is in our heart to go to the ends of the earth to tell people about Jesus. It is not an option, we are compelled by the grace of Christ who lives in us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. It is a test of obedience, which God promises to bless.

And so, Arla Mae and I went to India in obedience to our Lord's Great Commission. One of the things that happened was that two weeks before the conference only 30 people had signed up, and we were hoping for 70. But by the end of the conference there were 139 men and just as many women. We were overwhelmed and unprepared. And we had no where near enough material, but we made do. It was "no problem." I want her to tell you a couple things about what it was like and a few words about her work with the women.

Thank you Arla. On the first Sunday there, each of us pastors were taken to different churches in the Ambur district. I was privileged to preach at two different churches, and had a wonderful time, even though I had prepared no sermon in advance.

Let me give you an idea of the whole process of “Catch the Vision of His Mission”



The idea was to sit down with the leaders of the IELC and first present the 12 pillars of the Healthy church to them which include:

1. Empowering Leadership
2. Gift-Oriented Ministry
3. Passionate (day-by day) Spirituality
4. Functional Structures and how to organize the church for effective ministry
5. Inspiring high impact God exalting Worship
6. Multiplied small groups, which reproduce and grow disciples
7. Fruitful Witnessing and Evangelism
8. Loving Relationships
9. The Centrality of God’s Word
10. Mission and Vision-Driven
11. Biblical Financial Stewardship
12. Church planting

Along with that we gave lectures on the Purpose Driven Life, which was part of my assignment since we had just been through that here at Hope and we have been teaching these principles for over 6 years.

After each large group session with the men we would break up into smaller mentoring groups. My group started out with 10 church leaders including 4 pastors, 4 teachers and other leaders chosen by their pastors. We discussed any points that needed clarification, and then they worked on their Master Ministry Strategy. Over and over we asked the question: **What does God want us to be and do?** We asked questions like why is your church here? Why is it in this place among this people? Why do you want to do what you are doing? What will you attempt to do? How will you do it?



This was one of the most important steps of the whole process and even now many churches are being blessed because church leaders brought some concrete ideas home to their congregations to work on.

What we did here with the Ambur District of the IELC is the beginning of a godly process that we pray will transform India in ways we can only imagine.

Here, in America, we seem to limit the word of God in so many ways, but there is nothing subtle about it in the hearts of so many heroes of the faith in India. They know the power of the Word of God and they live and breathe it every day. So, I wanted to spend the rest of our time introducing you to some of the amazing people of God that we met in India. These are just a few of the everyday stories that we heard.

My wife and I met a wonderful woman of God. She was a midwife and used to take the female babies who the parents wanted killed and find adoptive parents for them. This was hard since Indians don't generally believe in adoption. A Hindu man, who was her neighbor, threatened her life because she was a Christian. She had to escape by hiding in the bushes and so forth. But the wife of this Hindu man went out looking for this woman. When she found her she told her that her husband had become sick and asked her, "Will you come and pray for him?" The woman did go and she prayed for the Hindu man in his home. She finished and said that she would be back in one week. When she came back the man ran out of his house to greet her. He was completely healed. And through this man the whole village came to know Jesus. She currently has no home or income and believes that the Lord will provide for her, and He has. She is now 73 years old.

One Christian evangelist we met talked about how while he was out doing evangelism work, his mother in law decided to prepare his daughter for human sacrifice so to some god. This was the child's grandmother, but she saw herself as the matriarch and said, "I can do what I want." The man came back and found his daughter being prepared for sacrifice and finally said to the child's grandmother, "Then if you must kill, kill your own daughter (his wife) and not my daughter." Fortunately no sacrifice took place in that family that day. But this happened in modern India.

Fernandez' was a young man in my mentoring group. He told me about how his uncle was tied to a tree in public and punished for witnessing about Jesus. He was smiling as he told me about how his uncle was tied to a tree and punished four times for witnessing about Jesus. Finally, he told me how the man who had led the punishment converted to Christianity as a result and that the whole village converted to Christianity. He was thankful to be a part of Catch the Vision because he would take many of these ideas back.

Pastor John Sundaram, the mission director of the IELC, and also my friend who translated my sermons was faced with a difficult decision. He was well aware of the anti conversion Bill from the Government, and spoke about how there were many spies who would be glad to turn him in. But a family was presented to him who was ready for baptism. They included about 8 people. He did it, and took pictures. This made his son very concerned because the pictures were evidence and he could go to jail for it. But the family said, "Don't worry pastor, I won't tell. I'll say that I wanted it and you offered nothing in the way of conversion. Don't be afraid."

John was also out one day and met a woman carrying some wood on her head from out beyond the "Shepherd walk" they called it. He had never met anyone from there and didn't know there were people there. She invited him to come and share Jesus with her people. He walked over 14 miles through dense forest, which took the whole night. When he got there he met people who spoke an entirely different language, but managed to share Jesus with them and now there are two congregations. The trouble was that they have no written language, so they can't read the Bible. On August 7, we went to see some of these people's children who were attending school way out in rural India. It was a mountain village and we had a rough time getting there by bus.

We had a brief service before underneath the trees with monkeys watching us above, because they had no chapel yet, and really no money to build it. There were also some King Cobras around, but we didn't see any. About 100 children sang to us from the school. There were children from at least 4 different tribes and a number of "gypsy" children. They spoke Tamal and at least two other languages that were unwritten. There we dedicated a cornerstone for a new chapel and Scriptorium where the Bible would be written in these unwritten languages. Our names were on the stone: Rev. John Luther and Arla Mae of the Catch the Vision of His Mission Team 2004.

On the way back down from this experience I felt like I could die right there, having accomplished my mission. There were many hair pin turns and it was basically a one lane road which switch back and forth up the side of a cliff. And when we met another bus coming up there was not enough room for both of us. We had to back up the road which was on a cliff. I suggested that we sing a song, and Dr. Bunkowski suggested it me “Nearer my God to Thee.”

Internot Stanley was elected the Mission leader of the IELC. He told us how the seminarians in India are sent out to villages on Fridays for 4 hours to make friends. This is part of their regular fieldwork. He said they are either greeted with stones or flowers. Sometimes the villages liked to see them and gave them flowers of welcome and other villages would see them and throw stones at them until they would leave. But, in spite of these stonings, he told us that many churches were being planted as a result. On Saturdays they would do field work in the hospitals and other places.

What we found was that besides the persecution that the IELC doesn't take very good care of it's pastors. They make about \$60 a month for having a church. And there is practically no retirement for them, maybe \$5 a month. The teachers make three times as much. John Sunderum says he's been asked a number of times why are we still pastors? And he answered this way: “Because we have seen the power of the Word.”

Sometimes I think how these people do so much with so little and how we seem to do so little with so much by comparison. Just imagine what they would do with our resources, and imagine what we could do if we set our hearts on it. Anything is possible for us, especially with God's miraculous help. The Bible teaches Christians that however much we go to the right **source** and are willing to **sacrifice** will determine the **size** of our blessing. The question we need to ask ourselves as Christians is, are we willing to lose ourselves in serving. Lord, help our church to die to self and live with you.

India was the very first foreign mission of the LCMS. This is a picture of the grave of the first missionary sent to India. He died at age 38 from the plague. Buried next to him are his two daughters



His wife died later and is buried in St. Louis. I show you this picture to remind you of the sacrifice God's people have been willing to make to be what he has called them to be. They heard God's call and followed and gave their lives and their children's lives so that many in India would come to faith. None of these people you have met today would've been there without such brave people.

Here is the picture of the first person baptized in India. He is honored as the first of many to hear God's call. As Paul said to Timothy: *"For you must teach others those things you and many others have heard me speak about. Teach these great truths to trustworthy men who will, in turn, pass them on to others, and to others, and to others..."* (2 Tim. 2:2). May God help us to catch this vision of his mission as well. Amen.



Illustrations

I was taken to a little church [picture] where we found everyone waiting quietly as we were paraded up front. Rev. John Sunderum leaned into me and pointed to the lectern and said, "We are ready for your message now; I will translate." What John didn't know, was that I didn't have a message prepared. But I managed a message around the theme: "Who Are You? You are the body of Christ to carry out his mission." Relieved and surprised that it went so well, we were then taken to another church, which was assigned to Alan Johnston who we somehow dropped off at the first stop. So John told me that I would preach instead and mentioned that it would be easier to translate this time since he did it once. He still did not know that I hadn't prepared any message. I told him that I would ask the Spirit if I should preach the same message. It was not the same message.

When we got to the church building in this remote village there were only a few there. Not until they rang the church bell did people start coming. And they kept coming. They not only filled the church but the yard outside the church was full of people too. People were looking in through the windows and gathered all around the building. It seemed like the entire village was turning out for this service.

Fortunately, this time I heard the text, which was about Mary and Martha and Jesus, and I had my English Bible with me so I could read it, and I knew I could preach on it very easily. Jesus told Martha about how she was busy with so many things, but one thing was needful—a relationship with Jesus. The first thing out of my mouth was how when I look out at all their Indian faces with my blue eyes I can see heaven. Looking at them I could see all the tribes and nations and cultures that are standing before the throne of God a little better. Then I asked them, "How many of you know for sure that if you were to die right now that you would go to heaven?" Amazingly only a few raised their hands. This surprised me a little, so I asked my translator to ask them again. Still, only a few raised their hands, so I went on to tell them how they could be sure.

I mentioned how so many people busy themselves like Martha with jobs and success, and religion. Religion is just busyness, but Jesus says it isn't about religions or success, but it's about a relationship with him. I quoted their text: "Only one thing is needed—Jesus." Your relationship with him insures heaven by the power of his love and grace alone. So the sermon went.

After my sermon, a Hindu girl was brought forward to be honored by the church for her high marks in dentistry school. I realized that I had not just preached the gospel to the local Lutheran church, but to the whole village which turned out to honor this girl. I thanked the Holy Spirit's guidance. If I had prepared a sermon, I never would have preached a sermon like this, and it was exactly what was needed. My translator was also impressed, and he sent at least two of his members to my mentoring group. I called them first and second Timothy.