

Our India Connection
A Brief History of the Wisconsin Synod's
Mission Involvement in India

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Involvement in India

India has long been a place of mystique. The mystique of India is what drew Columbus out on his history making voyage. In many respects, there is a similar mystique in doing mission work in India. According to tradition, the apostle Thomas was the first Christian missionary to India. Over a period of two thousand years one would think that a good portion of India would have been converted to the Christian faith. However, this is not the case. Only three percent of India can be connected with Christianity. Much of India, a land of over 720 million people, remains in the grips of Satan's deceptions.

With our Savior's commands in mind to go and make disciples of all nations, one can't help but be concerned about these people also. They have nothing to look forward to but an eternity in hell. What has been done to tell them of the Savior who died for them? Currently, our sole contact is the 63 year old Evangelist, Pastor T. Paul Mitra. Although Pastor Mitra is an outstanding example of being a proclaimer of the Gospel message, there is an acute need for someone to take his place when the Lord calls Pastor Mitra to his well deserved rest. Pastor Mitra at this time is the sole thread holding the mission door open to over 720 million people. Though this

thread is strong in faith and conviction, there is no future generation to tie the door open. The door which is open to us in India may well close for the foreseeable future without a future generation of Gospel proclaimers.

Understanding the India situation can be very difficult indeed. As noted on the data sheet, there are over 720 million people in India, over three times the population of the United States. These people occupy an area one-third the size of the United States. The poverty is no where worse in the world than it is in India. Those considered lower to middle class in our society are rich beyond comparison by Indian standards. Salvation and malnutrition are no strangers here. Of 720 million people, 83% are lost in the pit of Hinduism. It is in this field that Pastor T. Paul Mitra works. Quite a job for one man, especially when one considers how richly blessed our Synod is, with over 1500 active pastors and professors.

The story of T. Paul Mitra is an interesting one. When he came in contact with the Wisconsin Synod in the late '60's, he was head of The Gospel Mission. This mission was founded in 1910 by the now-sainted Mr. and Mrs. S. Thiruvengadiah, who were converts of the Hermansburg Lutheran Mission. Since 1950, this work has been carried on by T. Paul Mitra. In the late '60's, the wife of a Wisconsin Synod pastor sent a New Testament along with a care package to India. On the flyleaf

of the Bible, she had printed her name and address. This Bible found its way into the hands of the then Mr. Mitra. He began corresponding with the pastor's wife, and then with the pastor himself, Pastor Edward Zacharias, and finally with Pastor Edgar Hoenecke, the Executive Secretary of the World Mission Board.

The first Synod-wide notice of Mr. Mitra came in the 1969 Book of Reports and Memorials. By that time, Mr. Mitra had displayed his desire for fellowship with our Synod, along with his life-long prayer for theological training in a sound Lutheran seminary. A portion of a letter from Mr. Mitra effectively displays his exuberance for preaching the Gospel:

Therefore I solicit further spiritual guidance from such as you that Christ may grow in my own soul and that my life may be right in the first place before Him, before I presume to go out and tell of Him to those in darkness. I also earnestly solicit the prayers of you and your friends that I may be kept by the power of God in Jesus Christ and that He may burn me as unrefined gold to make me refined and purified, fit for the master's use.

In November of 1969, Pastor's M. Schroeder and L. Koeninger met with Mr. Mitra in Madras, India, and found him to be in full agreement with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. What a door the Lord had opened for us to a land in which we were, and still are, prohibited by the government from setting up any permanent mission presence.

One year later, In November of 1970, the life long prayer of Mr. Mitra was answered, when he arrived in Wisconsin to attend Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon. After five months of intensive training in privately tutored classes, which began in January of 1971, Mr. Mitra was made Pastor Mitra in an ordination service in Appleton, on May 23, 1971. Seven members of the Seminary faculty dedicated many long hours, over and above their normal duties, to training Pastor Mitra. Although this service was willingly performed, it may well be expecting more than is reasonable for the faculty to carry out such a function on a full time basis. This again points up the need for the Worker Training Counselor as proposed by the Synod.

Upon returning to India, Pastor Mitra found his work as difficult as ever. Again, his situation is best described by his own words:

Most of the people to whom the Gospel is presented do not accept it. They consider

us bigoted fanatics, but most of them accept the Christian literature offered to them. A few throw it away without reading it, and a few more politely return it to us. The gospel still has no sale in India and it is violently opposed.

We are easily reminded of John the Baptist, who also was a voice crying in the wilderness.

This letter was the last time that Pastor Mitra was quoted in a report to the Synod, this being in the Report to the Districts in 1972. For the next eleven years, from 1973 to 1983, the reports from India became brief and repetitious. Different members of the Board for World Missions wrote the reports, and different delegates to the Synod Conventions noted our fellowship, but the situation seems to have stagnated to an extent. Part of this may be due to the emphasis Pastor Mitra lays on street evangelism, over against an emphasis on the spiritual growth of a congregation. Without a doubt, there needs to be a proper balance between preaching the Gospel to the unchurched and the ongoing strengthening and nurturing of those within the church. This is not to fault Pastor Mitra in the least, for he can easily put to shame many Christians with the testimony he gives for his Lord and Savior. No one can ever be faulted for being strong on personal evangelism.

ism. For example, he was on a soap box in England in the famous Hyde Park, and has been physically persecuted for the witness he gave. He can easily set a fine example for all of us on how not to be ashamed of the Gospel of Christ.

The door is open. It may be only open a crack, held open by one strand, but is open. By the grace of God, the door has been opened. We should, by continued reliance on God's power and grace, do everything we possibly can to open the door as wide as possible, so that the Gospel light can shine fully, not only in Madras, but also throughout India. The road to that end may seem long and foreboding, and possibly not worth the effort, but we've only been in the field for thirteen years. It took Pastor Mitra twenty years of prayer just to get his theological training. Though the way be drear, let us follow calm and fearless. Currently, the only avenue we have is a voice crying in a wilderness. Through the position of a Worker Training Counselor, we can give Pastor Mitra much needed support and encouragement, and we can make the effort to tie the door open by training the next generation.