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One World - Two Lives: Working with the children in Trichy

Challenging, exhausting, exhilarating and life changing!

All these words sum up my visit to Trichy, South India in February. It was a wonderful privilege to visit the Diocese of Trichy as part of our Ecumenical Indian Link. Several years previously I had met Bishop James and his wife Grace and other members of the Bishop's staff on their visit to England so felt my going to Trichy was renewing friendship. As a member of the Indian Link Committee and in my capacity as the diocesan children's training officer, I was invited by Bishop James primarily to lead a programme of seminars for pastors and children's leaders but also as a parish priest to broaden my understanding of what was happening in this part of the world church.

Trichy - Tanjore Diocese.

Trichy is short for Turichchirappalli, a city of about a million people, 200 miles north of the Southern tip of India, in the State of Tamil Nadu, right in the South of India. The Trichy-Tanjore Diocese extends 200 miles from the Western Ghats in the West to the sea in the East. The Church of South India was formed in 1947, when India itself became independent, by uniting seven denominations and now has 3.8 million members with 2000 schools, 130 colleges and 104 hospitals. My first week was spent travelling with the Indian Link Group but after their return home I remained for a further 8 days leading 12 sessions of training for all ages up and down the Diocese and meeting many leaders and pastors. My travels took me many miles across the Diocese: through villages, paddy fields and coconut palms (getting used to the coconut milk!), usually on narrow roads past sheep, goats, dogs, cows, bullock carts, motor taxis, buses, lorries, motorbikes, push bikes and people in abundance.

My memories are vivid.

Yes, I climbed the 437 steps to the top of the Rock Fort Temple, from which I saw in one sweep the city of Trichy and people below. My visit to Tanjore to see historic sites: Fort, Temple and the Palace all very interesting, but it was the people I met that had the greatest impact.

Take those I met in Valpari, a town 3500 feet up in the tea plantations. 42 hairpin bends to get there! En route we visited a tea plantation and factory meeting, inspiring Christian workers who had come to faith through the work of a faithful pastor. And Violet, the warden of the Girls Hostel who had lost her husband and son tragically and now was finding new hope in her new role. As to the main church with a regular Sunday congregation of 1000 people and at Christmas 7 packed services of 1500 each starting at midnight, 2am, 4am, 6am. But it was the Annual Sunday School Rally which I was asked to lead that was amazing. I did not imagine I would be leading 3,000 people of all ages through the town into the church for a lively rally. The sight of children arriving in lorries from all over the

area was astounding and reminded me of our Whitsun Treats in South Wales! For the adults we managed to draw aside 100 leaders for a teacher's seminar on leadership, something like our model in our Diocesan Wildfire events in Leicester Cathedral.

Then on to Dharapuram, a town of 70,000 people with a mission hospital and Nurses Training College on same site. Another rally of 400 people and an evening meeting with students of Bishops College of Nursing

Back in Trichy, for my final day, a third rally of 500. This was notably different from the previous two being led by a Youth Worship Group from Emmanuel Church Trichy, all dressed alike in denim jeans and red sweat shirts of the 'Next' variety!

School assemblies need a mention too. Think of 3000 for morning worship with ongoing translation into Tamil. An excellent opportunity to link up schools in both Dioceses. As to Higher Education, the Diocese was rightly proud of its excellent college Bishop Heber College with 2000 undergraduates in the morning and 2000 in the afternoon to maximize the use of college resources. A wide range of degrees on offer and the recently acquired IT block was something to be envied! Christian Fellowship Groups featured strongly. I was pleased to spend time with Revd. Daniel Vincent, the Chaplain who gave me opportunity to lead 3 worship services and an evening with students at the Christian Endeavour Hostel. As well as all this activity we had important strategic consultations regarding children's work with leaders of many organizations. I felt in some ways attitudes reflected where the church in UK may have been several years ago. Whilst children appeared in huge numbers in rallies, many committed leaders wanted to know how the profile of children could be raised in their churches and anxious for more advice on strategies and resources to equip them.

However, the most unforgettable experience was our visit to Nagapatnam, one of the sights of devastation following the tsunami. Sitting on the beach watching the waves beat on the rocks things seemed so calm but the words of one pastor who lost 20 children in his church, still ring in my ears 'But there were 8000 in our communities who died but God has given us strength to carry on and start life again'. A powerful reminder that this is a place where God is at work.

It was not just the sights and sounds of South India that makes my trip so memorable but the commitment, the love and generosity of those whom I met. Nothing was too much trouble for anyone, a real model in Christian love. I thank God for our friends in Trichy and the privilege of being able to see something of their lives. Yes, different lives but living in one world in which we can all learn together with our goal of glorifying God.

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