

CONSIDER JESUS

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Lessons from the
Life and ministry of
An Indian Evangelist called
Azariah

David Johnson Rowe

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This Book is Dedicated to Sister Mary Seethamma

Married at age 10, widowed at 12, Sister Mary found herself living the lonely, outcast of life of India's widows. For all intents and purposes, her life was over. When she sought solace in the Bible, she earned the wrath and punishment of family and villagers. Her attempts at running away and suicide only led to more brutality and isolation, eventually even to an attempt on her life.

Finally, Mary Seethamma escaped to Father Devadas who had been prepared for her through a dream. Like Azariah, Mary's relationship with Father Devadas led to a lifelong ministry of evangelism and compassion. Working as a team, Mary Seethamma has served God uniquely with a special love for the elderly, the widows and the people of her own high caste background who snubbed the gospel as being only for the deprived.

With patience, she drew her own family to Christ. With boldness, she brought the love of Christ to those long deprived of any Good News. With love, she has met the challenges and difficulties of a life given over to God's use. To the neglected and rejected elderly folks at The Faith Home, she has been a true daughter. To me, she has been a second mother. To rural villagers, she has been like a "candle set upon the hill", bringing light for all who wish to see.

Long ago, God intervened in her life with the message, "Save this child for me. "The God who said "Save this child" has used her wisely to save multitudes from every form of despair and hopelessness.

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PROLOGUE

In the north of India, living in exile, is a man I have always wanted to meet, The Dalai Lama. In the east of India is a woman I have long hoped to meet, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I have settled for knowing these two spiritual giants through their writings. The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibet and the major force in Buddhism, writes eloquently about compassion. I especially recommend his Policy of Kindness. Mother Teresa's writings and her sayings, which line the walls at the Sisters of Charity headquarters, always call the reader to more love. Both have won the Nobel Peace Prize.

God's timing and purpose led me, instead, to a fascinating relationship with a man called Azariah. He lives and serves God halfway between The Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa. Azariah would be embarrassed to be mentioned in the same sentence with such spiritual bright lights, but they, I am sure, would be quite content to be mentioned in the same sentence with Azariah. They would rejoice in the blend of compassion and love which lives so effectively in his ministry. They would welcome the way his deep personal faith can respectfully embrace the faiths of others in the great spiritual landscape which is India.

A twenty-four hour train ride from Delhi in North India and another twenty four hours from Calcutta, Azariah lives out his faith in Andhra Pradesh. Andhra, one of the breadbaskets of India, is home to sixty million people. Its capital, Hyderabad, was the center of a great Muslim Kingdom, the last princely state to join the union of India.

Andhra Pradesh is my home away from home. I have children there that Bonnie and I count as our own. Our ministry, in partnership with Azariah and friends, is the most definite calling from God in my life. In many ways, Andhra is a genuine microcosm of the world with all its hopes and despairs. Hyderabad is a vital urban center, but the state is also a vital rural economy. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity thrive in a spiritually vibrant atmosphere that purposefully nurtures all while trying to avoid threatening any. The geography is stark and beautiful, the land is fertile, the political process is lively without being deadly, the daily struggle is undertaken with dignity.

Is Andhra Pradesh heaven? No, but I consider it a worthwhile stopping place on the way! In Andhra Pradesh, I found a style and capacity for ministry that is a valuable case study for all who are engaged in ministry. Out of the limelight, far off the tourist path, God's love is served in daily portions that we can both understand and copy. It is a model lived out among the poor in a developing country where Christianity is a distinct minority. But it is perfectly adaptable to the worldwide church as we all seek to serve God in our own neighborhoods.

The Dalai Lama's compassion is not unique to Tibetan Buddhists. Mother Teresa's love is not copyrighted for Albanian nuns serving in Calcutta. They are qualities of God performed admirably by a few people who would hope to see more people try them out.

Azariah lives those qualities out in daily ministry among one hundred villages in the Khammam district of Andhra. When God opens Azariah's eyes in the morning, what he sees in the hours ahead becomes his job description. Homeless lepers living under a bridge, little children without the resources to learn, old folks left to wander the streets, amputees one leg short of being self-sufficient, patients too poor to afford health, everyday people confounded

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by personal problems, people everywhere hungry to know God in a personal way, low caste and high caste people lost in a changing world, families with dowry burdens, people too poor to have decent shelter, a village suffering from bad water, beggars and school children and Rotary Club business leaders all doing their best. When Azariah begins each day, they all become his church - his family in God.

I have worked in partnership with Azariah since 1983. He has been colleague, mentor, friend, pastor, elder brother and teacher for me in a thousand ways. In 1983, we began a small ministry together called FOCI, Friends of Christ in India. At the same time, we initiated the first Habitat for Humanity project in South Asia which stands today as one of the most successful housing efforts in that part of the world. In addition to FOCI and Habitat, Azariah has started, funded and/or arranged an incredible variety of ministry covering every imaginable form of Evangelism and social action.

Each and every effort has been carried out with great integrity. Each and every dollar donated has been used with great care. His work is testimony to good stewardship, personal integrity, lasting humility and faithfulness to our loving God.

Amazingly, everything I have seen in Azariah's life and ministry is relevant to, and reapplicable in our own lives and ministries. When we look at the unknown heroes of faith, like Azariah, or to those whose spiritual strengths have become known, like Mother Teresa, we are not looking for hero-worship or a glimpse of sainthood. Instead, we should be looking for inspiration for our own lives, for directions and guidance by which our own spiritual journeys will be more fulfilling.

Mother Teresa has said,

Be kind and merciful. Let no one come to you without coming away better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: Kindness in your face, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting. We are the light of God's kindness to the poor. To children, to the poor, to all who suffer and are lonely, give always a happy smile. Give them not only your care, but also your heart.

(pp.69, Something Beautiful For God, by Malcolm Muggeridge, Harper and Row)

Azariah lives that kindness, giving his heart to any and all. If we seek miracles in our ministries or personal lives, beginning with a person of exceptional kindness is a good place to start.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

I never anticipated the success of Consider Jesus. It was written simply to tell the story of Azariah's life in such a way that readers would apply the lessons of his life and ministry to their own. In the process, people would learn the full story of our humble work in India, done together with Azariah.

Who would read such a book? Self published, inexact printed in Bombay (now Mumbai), filled with typos and publishing mistakes, never to be displayed in a book-store, it tells the story of a generally unknown evangelist half way around the world written by an author with no sales appeal.

The mailing list that supports our work in India has never been more than 250, and Azariah's own list of supporters, mostly in England, is no larger. Where was the market, who was the audience, what was the good? 3000 copies later we are amazed at how God has used this imperfect book.

- A US Congressman read it, went to India to see the work personally, and ended up honoring Azariah in the House of Representatives.
- A woman gave a copy to her grand daughter who gave it to her Bible College teacher, and the college sent a dozen students to work in India for six weeks.
- A friend gave it to a man on death row, the last book he read before his execution.
- Churches have used it for study groups to deepen their understanding of mission.
- People have sent it to church leaders and missionaries in a dozen countries.
- A friend speaking at his mother's funeral, drew strength from Azariah's story and drew parallels between two lives of great service.

Consider Jesus was never meant to be a fundraising tool. My greatest hope is that it would inspire individuals, churches, and ministries to emulate Azariah's spirit and practice.

Yet along with this book (not because of it!) has come a long season of growth and expansion in the work led by Azariah. That work is the result of several separate efforts that find unity in the spirit and practice of ministry as described in this book. Years ago, friends in England organized themselves as Christ For All in Andhra Pradesh, providing the first true support that enabled Azariah's team to respond without hesitation to the growing opportunities provided by God.

The Pillar of Fire, a US based denomination, has jumped in with both feet, expanding the ministry's reach into many more villages and lives.

Together with FOCI (Friends of Christ in India), these ministries provide Azariah and

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his team with the resources to offer God's tender touch. In Consider Jesus I am primarily concerned with telling Azariah's story, and by the early 1980's that story parallels the stories of FOCI and other friends who work in partnership with him.

Dare I pick the high points of our ministry? I am irritatingly fond of asking friends and family to list their favorites of everything, their best memories and events and books and movies, the Top 3 of this and the Top 5 of that.

So let me force myself to list just three not told in the rest of the book.

Cooperation

Jesus prayed for unity (John 17), that we would act and live as one in Christ. Unfortunately, the history of Christianity is far more filled with stories of division, hostility, unhealthy competition. Not so in the world of Azariah's ministry. From Day 1 there has never been the slightest hint of jealousy, turf battle, favoritism. As the various partners described in Consider Jesus work together there is no rush for credit. On some projects several groups work together providing funds as best they can, and no one worries about who gave the most or least. It is the purest example in my life of everything being done for the glory of God.

Microloans

A woman named Lydia walked into Azariah's office one afternoon while I was visiting. She brought a note written in Telugu, the language of Andhra Pradesh. Through her interpreter I learned her story.

Lydia was 21, the sole supporter of her family. Her mother was dead, her father was sick, her sister was in an abusive marriage in which the husband and in-laws were constantly demanding more dowry. All Lydia needed was a sewing machine. She wanted to start her own business, make money, pay the bills, care for her family, save her sister's life. All that stood between her and that hope was \$75. We gave Lydia the money, she repaid quickly, her life is on track, and the money is available for others.

FOCI's microloan ministry has over 200 such stories of women emerging from poverty on the strength of their own vision and a little capital. This project was fueled by the vision of another woman, Lynne Murguia, who trained in the concept of microloans with Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, and then offered up her own savings to get started.

A Magical Morning

Slogans: "God is One", "Unity in Diversity". Or in America we hear talk of "melting pots" and "casseroles". Each slogan or image tries to offer the promise that beneath all of the differences which divide people, we do have the ability to get along, respectfully.

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In the United States our diversity is the result of 300 years of immigration, people from all over the world choosing America as their home. In India diversity is a factor in culture and religion. The caste system within Hinduism, India's dominant religion, categorizes most of the nation's 1 billion people into hundreds of castes and subcastes, with all the privileges and prejudices that go with being in one group and therefore not part of other groups. To be included in some things means to be excluded out of other things.

Furthermore, the religions of India separate people one from another into Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists, each with not only distinct liturgies, rituals and doctrines, but also names, habits and lifestyles. You know who you are, and you know who you are not.

Yet, people talk and hope that unity and oneness can be experienced in a way that overcomes every "dividing wall of hostility", as St. Paul call it.

I saw it happen one morning.

Every year I take students from our school in Hyderabad on a holiday retreat which includes an immersion into all the other ministries of Azariah. Often, a group of American visitors arrange their trip to coincide with this retreat, creating a great cross cultural experience for all.

One January morning I invited a Sikh boy, a Christian girl, a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy and girl to tell us about their religion, their religious life, and then to answer questions. It was an experience we wish we could bottle and distribute to the world! Each young person spoke articulately, reverently, and personally about their own religious experience, with obvious pride but without arrogance. They listened to one another respectfully. Then in answer to questions, they persistently offered a spirituality steeped in their own traditions, excited and intrigued by the traditions of others, and confident in the reality of the oneness of God. This was so much more than "different strokes for different folks" or a watered down inter-faith exercise. This was the result of people seeing a vision of God beyond the limitations and boundaries of doctrine or tradition, enabling them to imagine and realize and believe in the God who is greater than everyone's best efforts at definition. Above all, I saw young people who desire the truth and reality of God's loving presence more than tradition or ritual. This was Christ telling us once again that we must become children.

Updated Statistics

No book with statistics can keep up with the changing numbers. As we prepare for the year 2000 with this second printing of Consider Jesus, these are the updated figures for the outdated statistics you will find in the original telling of Azariah's story. The Christian Service Unit:

- A team of 112 people, serving 100+ villages in which we have built 67 churches.
- 7 SCHOOLS for 1300 STUDENTS in grades K-10

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- 30 SCHOLORSHIPS for school children and 12 for college students annually
- 2 centers for 100 MENTALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN
- 40 homes in a village of 260 people for families with LEPROSY, plus water, medicine and food provided
- 150 boys and 65 girls live at our REDEEMER CHRISTIAN CENTER hostels, and another 207 children cared for in their native villages
- 30 have lived out their final years at FAITH HOME FOR THE AGED
- 1100 HOUSES built through Habitat For Humanity
- 220 MICROLOANS provided to start small businesses
- 40 WELLS provided
- 100 MEALS provided daily for the poor
- 20 BLIND students and 26 DEAF students live in our supervised homes and attend school
- 4 free SURGICAL CAMPS have provided over 200 surgeries
- 80 graduates of our Bible School, THE ASIAN SCHOOL OF EVANGELISM

May the 21st Century be blessed by the efforts and spirit of those described in Consider Jesus.

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ONE

Can anything good come from there?

When Jesus was organizing his original group of disciples, he found and gathered an interesting bunch. One that I have always admired is Philip.

Philip's call to ministry began with Jesus' simple request, "follow me" (John 1:43). What followed is a pattern of ministry that set the tone and the agenda for Philip's life. John's Gospel tells us that Philip immediately sought out his friend, Nathanael, and invited him to consider Jesus. "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth."

Nathanael's answer is evidently a combination of good humor and cynicism. "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

Philip's answer finds incredible power in its simplicity, "Come and see".

I want to tell you a story about a man worth knowing, an approach to ministry worth emulating. In part, it is a story about Jesus because I agree with Thomas a Kempis' challenging spiritual classic, *The Imitation of Christ* and Charles Sheldon's, *In His Steps*. It would be wonderful and earth moving if we ever managed to imitate Christ in our ministries and walked in Jesus' steps in our daily life. After all, Jesus seems to be expecting as much when we are invited to follow him and even dared to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

But this story is more about a person like Philip, someone entirely human, rather noble and very willing. Experience has taught me to avoid putting people on pedestals. Recent history has shown us that, even in religious circles, the old proverb is still true, the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

So this is not an attempt to put my Philip-like friend on a pedestal. I hesitate to call it an Authorized Biography since that phrase seems reserved for popular stars, politicians and sports heroes. Telling his story makes it a biography, but the value of the story is not in mastering the facts of one person's life, no matter how nice or effective that person might be.

Instead, I offer this story as an inspiration to ministry, a new style of ministry that hearkens back to an old style disciple, Philip.

Christian ministries have tried patterning themselves after a lot of other Biblical characters. We have produced a lot of Davids who can't keep their hands off Bathsheba. There have been plenty of Jonahs, gleefully threatening doom and destruction, and disappointed when it doesn't happen the way they want it to happen. How many Stephens have ridiculed and mocked others until their dying day? And frankly, there have been way too many who mistook themselves for Jesus and tried to get people to follow them instead of him. They stood pointing the way while standing in the way as if they were The Way! There have been sorcerers like Simon who just wanted power for themselves.

Maybe it is time for some Philip in our ministry -someone with the confidence to say, "look what I found, look who I found, check it out, try it on... come and see". When I have

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had to purchase a car, I've always come across two types of sales people. One kind insists on getting all sorts of information first and giving a lengthy presentation, hoping that my investment of precious time will make me want to go home with something to show for it. The other kind just tosses me the keys to the car and says, "give it a try", fully confident that their product is what I want. Philip was confident in what he had found in Jesus. Therefore, his sales pitch to Nathanael was simple, unencumbered, direct. Come and see!

That is the style of my friend, K. Azariah. He is my colleague, brother in Christ and mentor, but prefers to be known as an itinerant evangelist. Since 1953, Azariah has travelled the dusty roads of the Khammam district of the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. His message has been a simple one. In the words of Philip, "Come and see." In his own words, "consider Jesus." In a world of people who can't wait to talk, tell, demand, order and coerce, Azariah has spent a lifetime offering, sharing, introducing, presenting and doing. The Biblical model is Philip; the strategy is effective; the results are obvious. The Biblical offer still stands, to go and see for yourself. But for those who may not like curry at every meal, you are invited to come and see through my eyes.

This brings us to Nathanael's response. Hopefully, tinged with a little humor, but also betraying some provincial bias, Nathanael wondered how anything (or anyone!) of value could come out of Nazareth! If God was going to let loose a movement to change the world, why would it begin with someone from a rural hick town where the only activity was to sit and watch the grass grow? Give me someone from Jerusalem, Nathanael was saying, someone with credentials and background, someone sophisticated, educated, exposed to the great minds and teachers and spiritual centres of the day. Instead, Philip offers Nathanael some country bumpkin who may have apprenticed as a carpenter. Not much of a recommendation for the Messiah, Saviour of the World. We do the same today. In the United States we may not have royalty or a caste system, but we do look for a pedigree. When Republicans wanted to poke fun at the aspirations of Bill Clinton, they would ridicule him as the governor "of a small southern state".

I don't even bring you a governor. Azariah is just an itinerant evangelist from a southern state in a developing country that is mostly agrarian, hot, unheard of and non-Christian. He is not the pastor of a mega church, not on TV - he is not even ordained. Yet there is a style to his ministry that is not only Biblical, but may well be a tonic for Christianity as we head into the 21st century and a world that is diverse, complex and increasingly spiritual (yes, increasingly spiritually hungry!).

When there are religious leaders out there having photo opportunities with presidents and ex-presidents, with Billy Graham used as a go-between with North Korea's dictator during a crusade at a volatile time in US/North Korea relations, when some preachers dominate the airwaves and oversee huge budgets with impressive political clout, it would be easy to ask, "Can anything good come from Khammam, Andhra Pradesh, India?"

M. Scott Peck can't get his books off the best seller list. Paul Cho has a 75,000 member Presbyterian Church in South Korea. Yes, 75,000! Reverend Moon's Unification Church has scored a coup with the success of G. Gordon Liddy's favorite newspaper, The Washington Times. Pat Robertson may have lost his own election for the Presidency, but his organizational skills have inspired impressive grass roots victories for like-minded candidates. Betty Eadie, in *Embraced By the Light*, tells about her near-death experience with Jesus on the Oprah Winfrey Show, and America rushes to buy the book. Reverend Johnnie Ray

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Youngblood in Brooklyn and Calvin Butts in Harlem tackle the tough issues of the day on the front doorstep of their dynamic churches. Baby-boomers are back in church. Outside the Christian sphere of influence, Islam is growing by leaps and bounds, Islamic fundamentalism grips whole nations, the Dalai Llama takes home the Nobel Prize and takes Hollywood by storm, and Hinduism is growing in the West while enjoying renewed interest in India.

As we draw this millennium to a close and await the new one coming up, aren't those the stories that need to be told? If Christianity is to succeed shouldn't we be co-opting those styles? Do we really need to look way off the tourist beaten path of South India to find a model for ministry?

I think so. There are times when a fresh voice with a new accent can catch our attention. That is one of the reasons I enjoy foreign films and world literature. They help me to step outside myself, and I end up seeing myself and my surroundings more clearly. When I read R.K. Narayan's novels set in South India, I actually appreciate and understand the neighbourhoods and characters in my life even more. Sometimes we are simply more willing to learn a lesson from an unheralded source ten thousand miles away than we are from the success story next door.

This story is offered not as an interesting biography, but as an interesting example of what ministry can be like, of what we can be like when we minister, and of a style and process of ministry that is absolutely relevant for any time, any place.

Come and see.

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TWO The Man and The Call

So who is this south Indian itinerant evangelist, Mr. Korabandi Azariah Rajasekhara Rao, and why should we care? That is our story.

In 1958, five years after beginning his ministry, Azariah wrote the beginning of his own story. It's a good place to start.

“In a country like ours it is a great blessing to have Christian parents who bring up their children with necessary Christian instruction. I am one who enjoys this blessing, especially because I have such a devoted mother, who has told me many stories about how, when I was born, I was dedicated for the service of Our Lord. In answer to my mother's prayers, God gave her me for a son and revealed to her that my name was to be Azariah, an entirely new name to her.

“When I was seven years old, my mother had a vision, after which she decided to dedicate me to the service of God. This was done in a church service, which I can still vaguely remember, and of which my mother constantly reminded me in my student days. My replies to her always disappointed her, so that she used to recite this Telugu poem.

“O God, Thou who caught Moses, who tried to escape Thy work by saying five excuses;

Thou who caught Jacob who was running away from deceiving his brother, and gave him the name Israel;

Thou who caught Jonah, who was running away, being afraid to go to Ninevah;

Thou who caught Saul, the Jew who was persecuting Thy servants; Come now, O Redeemer Jesus, and catch this little fellow to make him Thy servant.’

“When I was fifteen, and had passed my matriculation, I was again reminded of that dedication, so I thought I would fulfill it by serving humanity as a doctor. I studied in college for two years, when financial difficulties compelled me to leave and work in an office. While in this government office, I became determined never to be subordinate under anyone. I made efforts to satisfy an ambition to be a film actor and was called to an interview in Bombay, but I was discouraged from doing this because I had not enough money for the train fare.

“Before the date of this interview, an old evangelist asked me to help in his work. He had lost his sight and needed someone to read and write for him, so out of love towards him personally, I offered to stay with him for a few weeks.

“There, when people asked me my name, for the first time in my life, I started to use my first name, Azariah, to make it clear by my name that I was a Christian. Until then I had used my second name, an Indian name, RAJASEKHARA RAO, which my father had insisted upon when I was named. Since then, I have always been known by my God-given name.

“The necessity to read the Bible, and to write tracts dictated by the elderly evangelist,

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created in me a new interest to know what Christianity really was. I bought a Bible in my mother tongue, read it from the beginning and tried to understand it. It took me one and a half years to read it. As I went through the Bible, I found that this was a message for our people, and I must preach it.

“After staying two years with this old evangelist, who is known as Father Devadas, I felt ready, in the strength of Jesus, to preach the gospel to the non-Christians. I spent several days in prayer about this and one night, I had a vision which convinced me of the call of Christ. I told Father Devadas about this, and he told me to write down what I hoped to do. This brought me to decide to remain celibate, devoting all my time to the service of Christ without depending on a regular salary. I believed that God would look after my needs as I work for Him. With two others, the work was begun. We had Rs 30 between us with which to start”.

That was then, this is now.

Today, Azariah’s ministry stands as a testimony to perseverance, patience, consistency and determination. But above all, it is glowing recommendation of the power of love. As such, it is worth our investigating and, I suggest, our emulating. His work takes us back to the simple basics of the earliest New Testament Christianity.

Preachers and pastors talk a lot about New Testament Christianity. For a long time, I was under the impression that there was sort of a golden age of the church in the good old days that lasted for ... not very long! Our church spent a year studying the Book of Acts and the golden age of New Testament Christianity may have lasted a few months. Pentecost brought power, great preaching and lots of converts to Christianity. People shared and looked out for one another. Peter and John worked a miracle, and an angel staged a jailbreak for the apostles. That early church was certainly a place of courage, commitment, fellowship and opportunity. But in short order, Ananias and Saphira caused the first church scandal by trying to rip off the Lord and they died in their lies; the first deacon, Stephen, is murdered; Paul’s conversion is met with some skepticism and a cool reception by the disciples; a sorcerer tries to become the first Christian leader to personally exploit the faith of others; and Paul got rid of Barnabas, an event that gave birth to the one real constant in church history - church splits.

But there were those few joyous weeks when the power of Pentecost and the truth of Easter were all that drove the church to ministry. Those two events were convincing evidence that the God of Love, the God who is Love, was in their midst.

That is the kind of church in action I have found in far away Andhra Pradesh, under Azariah’s direction. I do not hold it up as a perfect model, nor do I imply that it is the only ministry worth imitating. Simply, it is offered as proof that the church that bears the name of Jesus can work humbly, effectively, powerfully, lovingly, dramatically, sacrificially and dynamically. Such ministries are needed urgently all across America and around the world which makes Azariah’s story worth sharing.

On Christmas Eve, 1993, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale died after a long life of great service in Christian ministry. A few weeks later, I used his classic book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, as the basis for a sermon in his honour. I made the point that Peale was not beyond criticism. Many people dismissed him as simplistic fluff. In popularizing the Gospel, Peale had made it easy for the masses to digest and that was unacceptable in some religious

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circles. Indeed, when I was in seminary, it almost seemed a requirement that, in order to be taken seriously, you had to be incomprehensible, obtuse, difficult. But Peale just did what Jesus did, telling stories that linked everyday people up with God. A lot of people got saved that way, saved in every sense of the word.

Getting back to the basics has become quite acceptable. William J. Bennett, former Secretary for Education under President Bush, hit the Best-Seller List with *The Book of Virtues*, a celebration of some of humanity's most basic values. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey, takes the mystery out of business success and puts in our laps. And Robert Fulghum brought a lot of us back down to earth with his best-selling reminder, *All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.

At Andover Newton Theological School, back in the late 60's my favorite professor was an Old Testament scholar, Dr. John Scammon. He was ridiculed by some students for teaching us like a kindergarten class. Perhaps so, but at the end of the semester, we knew the material. When he taught *The Prophets*, he showed us a group of people whose very purpose was to cut through the complex baloney of the religious leaders and institutions of their day. Prophets were sent by God whenever religion had lost its way.

Perhaps Azariah's life is a Kindergarten Class on effective church ministry. If so, then only those who desire an effective church ministry will welcome it! Perhaps he is kin to those prophets of another age, making the Gospel practical and simple and Christ-like.

I first met Azariah on the grounds of St. George's Cathedral in Madras. For two weeks, I had been walking high in the cotton - an old southern expression for inflated/self-importance. Habitat for Humanity had sent me to India to scout around for the best place to start Habitat's first project in that part of the world. I spent one week as the guest of the Church of South India's (CSI) Bishop of Vellore and another with the Bishop of Madras. These occasions were filled with ceremony and celebration, with generous hospitality and royal treatment. I was in command, and I was in demand, I was busy and important. This was definitely the place to begin!

Exhausted one Sunday afternoon (I actually went running in the South Indian summer sun!), I was called out of my room to meet Azariah. My first impressions of him are vague. After all, I was caught up more in my own exotic adventure than in noting everyone who shook my hand. But I remember that he seemed small and humble.

He invited David Purushothaman, my colleague, and I to his area. It was in the next state, only a ten hour train ride away.

Arriving in Khammam, Andhra Pradesh, I was in for a rude awakening. There was no one to meet us at the train station, no one to carry our bags, no Bishop's house to stay in, no grand gestures or chauffeur driven car. It was hot, dusty, and mid-july, 1983.

Exactly thirty years before my arrival, Azariah had arrived in Khammam just as unceremoniously. His diary entry for July 20, 1953, a Monday, reads, "Started from Ponnur on Gospel work, leaving two sisters at Ponnur itself with auntie, but I have no idea of any place to go".

What brought him to that point in his life? What has he done since? What does it have

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to do with the rest of us?

It is what he has done with his life through his ministry that can enrich us. But the back ground to that life of ministry is also informative.

Azariah makes no pretence of poverty. He showed me a picture of himself as a little boy sitting on a tricycle as evidence of a middle class upbringing. His father had the security of a government job as an inspector of cooperatives, giving poor people a chance to own land. He was a peripheral Christian. So it was his mother who exerted the strongest Christian influence. Azariah was a direct answer to her specific prayer and in gratitude, like Hannah of the Old Testament, she gave her son back to God.

As any parent knows, it is one thing to be given to God, quite another to surrender to God. The former is done by others, however well intentioned; the latter you must do for yourself. Babies are regularly dedicated to God all over the world, or baptized and the vows confirmed when the child is twelve or thirteen. But how many dedicated lives and confirmed vows result in a life of commitment?

Azariah's mother did her best and then, like all parents, she had to wait for life's events to shape him. Life has that effect on us, turning us this way and that for good or ill. Mahatma Gandhi was forever changed by the rude awakening he received in South Africa when he was thrown from a train for sitting in the white section, and by other indignities caused by racism. Similar events turn other people to hatred and violence. But Gandhi chose an intentional path of non-violent civil disobedience in direct response to those events. Most of us can pick two or three events that turned us in the direction our lives have taken. Three events in Azariah's young life were especially important. One was an experience, the second a mentor, the third a crisis.

When he was twelve years old, he went on a long twenty-mile bicycle trip during the hot season. The title of the movie, "Heat and Dust", accurately describes life in South India when the sun pours itself down day after day. After fourteen miles, the young Azariah was ready for a break. By a village roadside, he noticed an older man standing by a well. He controlled the bucket and the rope and therefore, the well, but he was doing a good deed at the same time, drawing water from the well and giving it freely to thirsty travellers.

Azariah got into line and soon it was his turn for a drink. Just as the glass was about to be given to him, the man asked Azariah about his caste background and his religion. Azariah told the truth, that he was a Christian. So the man withdrew the glass and poured the water into Azariah's cupped hands so he could drink - without polluting the glass.

The story sounds cruel to us fifty years later, with our emphasis on civil rights and human rights well entrenched. Before judging too harshly, we would do well to remember our own imperfect treatment of strangers in our midst of a different colour. In 1952, about ten years after Azariah's experience in Andhra Pradesh, my father and I took a bus trip from Maine to Florida. I was five years old at the time and on the trip I was befriended by a soldier in uniform. When you are five, the uniform is all you see. I did not realize that the soldier was black and certainly did not attach any significance to that colour. But when our bus arrived in Washington, D.C., drawing close to the old South, the soldier was advised by the bus driver to sit in the back of the bus. All I knew was that I was deprived of a friend.

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Ten years after Azariah's lips were not permitted to touch a Hindu's glass, in America we were still ten years away from getting rid of "whites only" water fountains, lunch counters, public schools, bus seats, and cemeteries.

As a child of the 50's and 60's, I am also a product of the Vietnam War era. One of the stories that turned me against that war was the death of a black soldier in Vietnam whose body was returned to his hometown, his casket draped in the flag for which he had died while trying to gain freedom for others. He was denied burial in his hometown cemetery.

Yes, we are shaped by events. The good among us try to see the good in others and turn the event to good advantage. Azariah had that spirit early on. He was not particularly offended by the caste-conscious well watcher. In fact, he was glad for the water. He remembers the man as a kindly man, and the act as an act of kindness. The prejudice of the style of the act was a way of life. That was where Azariah drew the line. While prejudice was a way of life for many that could permeate even a kindness, Azariah took instruction from the event. It served to heighten his awareness later on that the Christ he would serve was the Lord of all without gradation or separation. His service to Christ would mirror Christ's acceptance of anyone and everyone.

Some years ago, a popular book in Christian circles offered an arresting critique in its very title, *Your God is Too Small*. As Azariah developed a pastoral style, he could remember a kindly man doing a much appreciated thing, only to have its true effect limited by a limited view of God. Growing "in wisdom and stature," as the Bible says, he chose to serve the limitless God without any limitations.

"No man is an island," John Donne reminds us. We are shaped by events and people. If fortunate, we run across good people, positive role models. For Azariah, the unlikely mentor was an elderly, blind, Lutheran cleric called Father Devadas. Father Devadas toiled in relative obscurity in the Guntur section of Andhra Pradesh. His doctrinal priorities put him out of the Lutheran Church's domain, so he was, a renegade, establishing his own India Bible Mission. Above all, he emphasized Christ, the promised return of Christ, the need for the Church to be the visible Bride of Christ, and the possibility of God's spirit dwelling in the believer.

Despite those doctrines, he was not doctrinaire. Like all of us, he chose various emphases, but he never lost sight of the one thing that mattered, God's love shown so purely in Jesus Christ.

Azariah remembers Devadas calling another worker, now known as Sister Mary Seethamma, and giving her an assignment. "Take the megaphone, go outside where people are and shout to them, "We will not tell you what to eat. We will not tell you what not to eat. We will not tell you how to dress, or how not to dress. We will only tell you that God loves you'."

That simple message would always have the profoundest affect on Azariah. When he was twenty and working on a tobacco farm for low wages, Devadas asked Azariah to help him out for two weeks while another assistant was away. Glad to get out of the fields, he agreed. When the assistant failed to return, he agreed to stay on for two months, which became two years.

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Azariah is not given to praise, so it is revealing that he almost always refers to his mentor as “the saintly man”. For two years, they were guru and disciple, teacher and student. Old, blind and infirm, Devadas was dependent totally on Azariah’s total care. He provided food, did the wash, served as secretary, and when Devadas preached, he took down every word. This proved a useful teaching method. Since Azariah had to read and write everything for him, this became his classroom. He was especially instructed by the task of writing pamphlets on the life of Christ and the teachings of Christ, always careful to write in such a way that the pamphlets would be acceptable to Hindus and not offensive. The tone was carefully being set for Azariah’s life work.

Azariah was a gift from God to his mother and, in gratitude, she dedicated him to God’s service. But like my own father, he seems to have been raised from day one to not only be a Christian, but also a preacher and pastor and servant of God. I remember when The Jesus Movement was popular, my father was troubled by those who demanded to know his conversion experience, even the day and the hour of his exact salvation.

But even when your whole life has been on a path with Christ, there is a moment when you make that journey yours, a light goes on and the path, somewhat winding before, becomes clear. For those of us raised and working in a Christian majority, surrounded by the so-called jjeo-Christian milieu, these are the moments that separate Christianity from just being another cultural inheritance. It can also happen in Andhra Pradesh, while working as a disciple for an eccentric saint.

One day Azariah was reflecting on the cross when he realized that he did not really understand suffering. In the tradition of Hindu ascetics, and among some Islamic groups, he knew that the strong and faithful among them would seek out suffering, inflicting pain on their own bodies. Anxious to prove that his commitment to God was both genuine and courageous, he took off his shirt, grabbed a leather belt, and began to hit himself, hard. He told me, “as the pain came, I told myself, “Azariah, you deserve this. Because of your human nature, Jesus had to suffer for you on the cross?”

Azariah withstood this self-punishment as long as he could, and knowing his persistence it was a thorough beating. He simply recalls that he hurt himself so long and so hard that eventually he could not stand anymore.

Upset with this failure to endure longer, he threw himself on the mercy of God. “Jesus, forgive me, I could not bear the pain, I could not do more than this.”

Our view of God is limited. The very fact that the Bible states that no one has seen God puts some restrictions on what we think we know about God. We all respond to this lack of divine knowledge in different ways. Many religions have created images of God according to the limits of their understanding. God tried to discourage that practice in The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), but Christians, in particular, have wavered in their adherence to that particular law. No matter how hard we try to explain the Trinity to others, it still sounds like three Gods to some folks. Stained glass windows, crosses, crucifixes, icons, paintings and statues must make it hard to convince Hindus, for example, that they are idol worshippers, and we are not. I remember an article in the worldwide newspaper, *Hinduism*, in which the publisher addresses his ten favorite criticisms of Hinduism in a light-hearted way. He wrote of the first criticism regarding idol worship, “Hindus are idol worshippers and have too many gods. One is tempted to respond that Hindus are among the most vigorous devotees

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in the world. By no means could our worship be called idle - pun intended.” (Hinduism Today, December 1993, page 2)

To increase my understanding of India, I audited several classes at Harvard Divinity School and it's School of World Religions. In a class with Lamin Sanneh on Islam, he stated that of all the religions, Islam has retained the purest form of monotheism. But to the outsider or casual observer, the role of Mohammed, the exact nature of The Holy Quran, the exalted state of various saints and Imams is all evidence of the very human desire to know God well, especially in human terms.

Furthermore, in Christianity, whether through idols, stained glass or Sunday School classroom paintings, we all try to draw a picture of God that will give us greater appreciation. In my preaching, I often quote a forgotten source who said, “Jesus is the near end of God.” If God seems remote, vague, nondescript, ill-defined due to lack of graphics, then we can concentrate on the earth bound Jesus who walked and lived among us in our very form and substance. We need something to latch on to.

For Azariah, Jesus definitely was the key that opened up the right door to understanding the real loving nature of God. After beating himself, it suddenly dawned on him that he was trying too hard to zero in on God; he was trying to do all the work; he was trying to recreate God in his own image. The idol-maker crafts an image and says, “Aha! This is what God is like.” Azariah was doing the same thing, crafting himself into an image of God by taking upon himself as much pain and suffering as possible.

Finally, like a dawn breaking before his eyes, Azariah understood the futility and folly of this self-torture. He did not have to hurt himself to become one with God, or like God. God had already accomplished that through Jesus Christ. He remembers sensing that Christ was saying to him, “You don't have to do it, you don't have to hit yourself. The suffering is done already, it was done in my body and it is yours if you accept it.”

I asked him what “it” referred to.

“It refers to Christ's suffering. God doesn't require any more needless suffering. There is enough pain in the world already without people seeking to bring more upon themselves. Whatever suffering we must endure is only meant to alleviate suffering. Even martyrdom is not sought, though it may be accepted. But Jesus did all that was needful.”

Azariah rose up from that whole experience with a new appreciation of the Cross. He now understood the Cross as a place to come for forgiveness, not punishment. He could view the Cross as an expression of God's love, not an attempt to overwhelm us with guilt. Most profoundly, he understood that the event, act and purpose of the Cross was for all people. “I realized that if God loved me, then God loved all, and therefore, I must do something to bring the Gospel to all. I realized once and for all that I was connected to my mother's prayers offered before I was born, and to my dedication at seven years of age, and to the prayers of many offered in my behalf. I knew then that God had chosen me to make the truth of Christ and the truth of God's love clear to all through my life and ministry.”

The last hurdle to this integrated life of service was a disconcerting scandal in the family. During World War II, his father had run a store, using borrowed money for capital. Later, when he was unable to repay the loan, he was arrested, tried and found guilty of a

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breach of faith. The six-month jail sentence was made rougher by the loss of his government job, pension and benefits. From the comfort and security of a relatively middle-class lifestyle, the family stood on the edge of disaster.

According to Azariah, this was, “a time of testing. As the first born and the eldest son, I began to consider if I should leave the work. Should I return to the family, help my mother? Especially, I felt responsible to provide support and opportunities for my brothers and sisters.”

How many times are we confronted with good and noble reasons for diverting our attention from God? And how exasperating and depressing it can be when, despite our best efforts to serve God, insurmountable obstacles seem placed in our path. We almost are ready to scream that if God is so all-fired determined to use us, why can't some of that divine intervention be used to at least clear the path!

However, Azariah was blessed with a powerful constant in his life, the faith of his mother. When she heard that he was inclined to return home, she reminded him of the umbilical cord that linked him not to her, but to the Author of all life. “Do not think of us as your responsibility,” she admonished, “You have been separated, dedicated to God for God's purposes.” The time of testing was over, and Azariah returned to God's service. Years later, his brother, Raj, now a Methodist District Superintendent in Bombay, remembers the anxiety of that time. As a child, he wondered if he had lost his brother. Only time would prove the Biblical promise that losing for God's sake inevitably provides again. Azariah's ministry, contacts and influence actually resulted in increased opportunities for the whole family to carry on with education and to find their own ministries.

Hindsight offers an excellent view, especially in spiritual matters. But as Azariah concluded his time of apprenticeship and testing, the path ahead looked uncertain, the destination unknown, the wherewithal unsettled. Nevertheless, Father Devadas had determined that it was time for him to leave the spiritual nest in order to fly or fall. Before this step was taken, the teacher and the student developed a six (6) point spiritual contract, in writing, that would express Azariah's dedication and commitment to a particular ministry.

- He was an evangelist, aiming to preach His Gospel to those who had not had a chance to hear it.
- He would do without a regular salary, giving freely, living by faith in order to avoid giving the impression that he was telling about Jesus only because he was paid to do so.
- He should remain single in order to devote all his time to the work.
- He was to avoid close attachment or fondness with children that would lead to any partiality or preferential treatment. In personal relations, he was to treat all people the same.
- He should not engage in lengthy conversation with older women for that would inevitably lead to discussion of marriage.
- He would present the Gospel in the frame work of Hindu thinking with special concern to not cause offence or criticize.

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In 1953, an elderly mentor at the end of life's journey sat down with an aspiring evangelist about to take his first real step on his own. It was another culture and another time far from our own, yet the wisdom of that simple contract translates easily. Azariah was to stay focused, to remember who he was and what he was doing. It addressed issues of personal morality, pastoral style and goals. The mentor's task was complete.

Short of Christ, our mentors are never perfect, and the best mentors are often peculiar. As a teenager, I lived the life portrayed in the wonderful Robin Williams' movie, "Dead Poet's Society." During four years at The Northfield Mount Hermon School, my mentor was Burt Clough. He hated sports, smoked incessantly, and was the object of every imaginable rumour. But while hitting me upside the head with a full edition of The New York Times, he taught me to love poetry, reading, writing, and the power of language. Professor Clough had given his life to a certain discipline, and he knew how to share it with those who were interested.

Mentors are those few people in life who shape our lives, somehow making sense of the events and inequities and disturbances of life that might otherwise derail us on our journey. Azariah was blessed with two mentors. The persistence of his mother and the consistency of Father Devadas gave him the opportunity to serve God equipped for the task.

In February 1953, Azariah jotted a few inspirational sayings in his diary. Always in quotes, but often unattributed, they were gleaned from magazines and tracts that made the rounds. With the advent of his ministry just around the corner, Azariah wrote,

"Oh the joy of having nothing, seeing nothing but a living Christ in glory, and being careful for nothing but his interest here below."

He certainly was beginning with nothing but God and a faith in Christ in Glory. Over forty years later, we can see that his full attention went to Christ's interests here below.

That same month he reminded himself, "We must not wait till we are kindled for prayer. We must pray until we are kindled."

Azariah was kindled. By July, in the intense heat of a South Indian monsoon season, he would get on a train bound for God-only-knew-where.

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THREE Khammam's Book of Acts

Darkest day of my life, but happy in Lord Jesus

(Diary Entry for Saturday, August 22, 1953)

The first half of the New Testament's Book of Acts is a fast moving account of the first months of Christianity. A little waiting and hesitation is followed by an explosion of power and miracle. Great preaching, answered prayer and dramatic healing, lend both popularity and credibility to the fledgling movement of Christ's followers. People are intrigued and attracted, fellowship and sharing develops. It's a great story in the making.

Those heady times for the early church are followed by fast paced problems. Dissension, jealousy, hostility and persecution all rear their ugly heads as the church emerges from a tiny camp following to a world wide movement of God.

Listening to Azariah describe the first months and early years of his ministry is a chance to experience the excitement of the first century AD in Israel. South Asia is not the Middle East, and almost twenty centuries have passed by, but a time traveller from the days of St. Peter, St. John and St. Paul would not feel out of place in the Khammam of today. Bullock carts, crops growing everywhere, herds of goats and water buffalo in the roads, merchants at work, a hot sun and spiritually minded people all hearken back to the pace and priorities of New Testament days.

Azariah has always referred to himself as an itinerant evangelist. While his living quarters have become more Khammam's Book of Acts settled in recent years, the ministry is continually on the move. He bears a self-ingrained responsibility for the work in over a hundred villages with over a half a million people. That responsibility is viewed in the most holistic sense. For over forty years he has visited these cities, towns and villages, making their concerns his own. In the early days his itinerating was done mainly on foot with the occasional help of a bicycle. Scooters, jeeps and vans eventually made the itinerant part of evangelization easier, although India's notorious paved roads kept up the spirit of adventure. During the rainy season, travel to the many villages off the main road has the dramatic appeal of a thrilling roller coaster ride. Now, as Azariah and Sister Mary settle into their sixties, the road work continues, the mileage remains high, but they enjoy the comfort of a little car provided by concerned friends in England.

I noted earlier Azariah's diary entry for July 20, 1953, "Started from Ponnur on Gospel work ... but I have no idea of any place to go." The story actually began, as all good Indian stories should, at a train station. There is a romance to Indian train travel that nowhere else can match. From remote stations to the overwhelming masses at big city stations, it looks as though each passenger has a great story to tell as they embark on some exotic adventure.

Perhaps some observer thought the same of Azariah as he stood at the train station in Vijayawada. Looking over the list of possible destinations, he chose Kazipet, a railway junction. When he got off the train in Kazipet, a railway porter took him to a Christian Prayer Hall where the pastor listened to Azariah's story. Noting his age, he was only twenty two, and his relationship with Father Devadas, the pastor suggested that he travel to Hyderabad and stay with a Christian leader of growing fame, Bhakt Singh. But Azariah was not looking

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for a safety net. He was looking for a place to exercise his faith.

He went back to the train station, looked again at the names on the board, and chose Khammam.

Robert Frost wrote so accurately, Two roads diverged in a yellow wood And I, I took the one less travelled by. And that has made all the difference.

All along life's way we face such choices. Decisions about career, marriage, where to go to college, where to live can all feel like Robert Frost staring at two roads diverging in the woods, or Azariah standing on a lonely train platform looking at a long list of possible destinations.

Why not opt for the big city? Why not attach yourself to a fast growing group like Bhakt Singh's? Or join an established mission agency or respected denomination like the Church of South India?

He picked a place called Khammam, and that has made all the difference. I can look back now and see that there was no better place to begin, no better place for building the foundation on which all of today's ministry stands firm, no better place for trying your wings, stepping out on faith, daring to love. But I cannot imagine that anyone would have predicted that of Khammam way back in the early 50's.

Azariah stepped off the train in Khammam, into the arms of another friendly porter who, mistaking him for someone important, helped him to get settled. Then it was time to scout the area. He saw a bus moving out, jumped in, and when the conductor asked his destination, his answer was, "first stop, please". What little money he had to start a life's work needed to be conserved.

That first stop took him eight miles to the village of Tallampahad. There he found a group of people gathered under a tree in the village center. They were all men and farmers, passing the time while blacksmiths and carpenters repaired their ploughs and cart wheels. It was a scene played out in rural villages down through ages. People just taking care of business.

Azariah approached the men with the intention of giving them small "Life of Christ" pamphlets. Since none of them could read, they asked him to read it to them; so he started with a simple introduction, "I'm here to tell you about a loving God called Jesus."

People in India love to talk about God. Religion may well be the national pastime, surpassing even cricket. Of course, cricket is tougher to understand. But as open as people are to spiritual matters, things have their place. For many years in India, the place for Christians was among the people known as untouchables, backward castes and tribals. When the modern missionary movement began two hundred years ago, Christianity proved an attractive option for oppressed peoples who had been kept down by the vestiges of a rigid caste system. In other words, numerically, Christianity had some stunning success in India. The Mass Movement produced great stories of conversions and baptisms that fueled the passion for missions. What the outsider, the westerner, failed to notice was that Christianity's inroads among certain groups firmly closed the doors to other groups. The word "untouchable" is not an idle word. It is a very personal expression of the huge gulf between purity and impurity by

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which social contact is determined. Once Christianity became identified with untouchables, which was fine and understandable, it lost its impact for many other Hindus.

All of this was background to Azariah's mid-day conversation with a group of Hindu farmers in Tallampahad. They were, no doubt, glad that there was a Jesus and a living God, and they wanted to encourage this young, enthusiastic evangelist. As soon as they heard "Jesus", the farmers told him about a Christian community living on the outskirts of the village. They were the untouchables, a concept supposedly outlawed, but old habits die hard. In any event, they were Christians who would surely welcome the presence of someone like this evangelist.

Instinctively, Azariah knew that this moment would decide his future. He had to make another choice, right then and right there: would he offer himself to the Christians or to the non-Christians?

Think through the Book of Acts. Is there one moment that captures your imagination, where you wish you could have been present? With Peter on Pentecost, or Paul on Mars Hill? I've shared a lot of powerful experiences with Azariah and have heard many more. That day in Tallampahad is the one I wish could have shared.

I imagine him with quiet steadiness and a gentle smile as he made his decision. He told the farmers, "the Christians you mentioned who live nearby, they may have God's book, the Bible and have a pastor already. So I don't need to go there. God wants me to be with you. That's why I have come to you with these papers."

He began to read parts of the pamphlet to them, especially the stories of "Jesus healing the sick people, Jesus answering prayers and meeting our needs, Jesus giving healing".

Preaching is a strange art. As a preacher, you want to believe that God has given you a message that is not just generic, but that someone is waiting just for that message. In Tallampahad, one farmer had gone to work that day with a heavy heart. His daughter was sick at home, burning with a fever. With health care unavailable to most, especially the rural poor, every sickness was potentially life threatening. Azariah's message spoke directly to that farmer's heart, and so he was invited to the home to offer prayers in behalf of the girl. Traditions would not permit Azariah to be invited into the house, but the girl was brought outside on a cot where he prayed for her and anointed her with olive oil. A crowd gathered to watch. Even today, a visitor or a religious ritual of almost any kind attracts a crowd. One can be sure that, alongside curiosity, there were also questions, "Who is this young man? What is he doing? How could that family allow him to touch their daughter?"

Meanwhile, Azariah prayed. Prayer was the only weapon in his arsenal, the only tool in his tool box. Nowadays, there is a vast array of good works and resources that the ministry can call upon in behalf of anyone in need. The work touches people in every imaginable way to the glory of God.

But, way back at the beginning, Azariah had nothing to offer but God's love. In preaching, God's love was shown through Jesus. In practice, that love was expressed in prayer. Outside a simple hut in Tallampahad, it was time for prayer.

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Forgive me, but I often wonder what goes through God's mind. How does God decide which prayers to answer, or in what way? As God watched this scene unfold in Tallampahad, was there a special reason for answering this prayer? Was it faith, courage, boldness, need?

One of those inspirational saying that Azariah kept near to him was on this subject of prayer, by Mary Slessor. "My life in one long daily, hourly record of answered prayer. For physical health, for mental overstrain, for guidance given marvellously, for dangers and errors averted, for enmity to the Gospel subdued, for food provided at the exact hour needed, for everything that goes to make up life, and my poor service. I can testify with a full and often wonder-stricken awe that I know that God answers prayer."

Mary Slessor wrote it, but Azariah continues to live it. His daily diary then and personal schedule now is filled with references to "taking prayers". Even the slightest kindness, the most mundane activity, the simplest intervention in life, is answered prayer. Today we can be grateful that friends in America, England and Australia care deeply about Azariah's ministry and share generously so that the needs of many people can be met. For all the houses built, the children supported, the elderly cared for, the medicines provided, the limbs attached, for the school in Hyderabad, the Boy's Home, the many churches, the mobile clinic and free operations, for all this and more we can thank God and pat each other on the back. But it is all built on a firm foundation of prayer when nothing else was available, nothing else sufficed. On that record of prayer, a reputation 'and ministry were built that have moved in myriad directions -but always centered in prayer.

On his very first day in Khammam, his very first outreach beyond the protection of Father Devadas, it all boiled down to one little prayer for one little girl. Quickly, as the crowd watched the fever broke, the temperature dropped, and a ministry was launched. Others brought him to their homes, still keeping him outside on the street, for prayers and blessings.

By the end of that day, Azariah knew that God wanted him to stay in this Khammam area.

In athletics we call it "beginner's luck". All of a sudden you are thrust into a game but, to everyone's amazement, you perform brilliantly! It all seems so easy. Then reality sets in, you find out how tough the game really is, and how strong the opponent is.

Azariah had a great start, but tough days were waiting. The next few months were filled with the kind of qualities that have held him in good stead all these years. Nothing spectacular or fancy, just day by day persistency and consistency. Soon joined by his own sister, Rajeswari, and sister Mary Seethamma, the three moved steadily out in the community and into the villages. They would go to a place, give out pamphlets, introduce themselves, share the story of God's love, pray for the sick, encourage those who showed interest. Each day built on the one before. People responded to the positive message of this ministry. Hindus and Moslems did not hear their religion ridiculed or minimized. People were not invited to reject or scorn their past or their traditions. Instead, this new ministry in Khammam simply told their own stories of God's love, acting through Jesus, in their lives. They offered a new realization, an affirmation, something positive to turn towards, not threats about what to leave behind.

Two events in that first year took the measure of Azariah, and helped prepare him for the long haul. They would teach him patience and the disappointment of opposition.

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Still rejoicing from the apparent success in Tallampahad, he went to Taldarpalli. This was another ball game, entirely. The village was heavily influenced by the local communist party, and even among the lowest castes, the Gospel has not made progress. However, the village leader was impressed by the medical work done by Christians in Khammam, and he took a quick liking to Azariah, admiring his education and motives. As a result, Azariah was welcomed in the village, permitted to visit and speak, even invited to stay overnight. Azariah kept visiting, kept speaking, kept praying. These early days turned into years, then decades. Eventually, forty years later almost to the day, the people of Taldarpalli dedicated a church, and seven people were baptized. For four decades Azariah's ministry produced good will. But as they say "You can't eat good will". Good will doesn't show up on any bottom line. For most of us, good will is not enough to keep us interested, or trying, or feeling that it is worthwhile.

But Azariah's faithfulness never wavered. Most people engaged in ministry have no concept of waiting forty years for fruit! We are more inclined to quote Jesus' advice to "shake the dust off our sandals and move on" if we are not adequately welcomed. In my own life, I am far more likely to look for an excuse to abandon a project or criticize slow progress or leave a lukewarm situation, than to look for an opportunity to show patience. The very idea of remaining faithful to something for forty years without any tangible return on the investment of time, energy or compassion is inconceivable to me. Needless to say, my own pastoral style can learn some valuable lessons from Azariah's style.

Part of his style is the ability to exemplify hard work on the one hand and patience on the other! Hard work without patience can look like obsessiveness. Patience without hard work can look like laziness. Incorporating both qualities in his pastoral style gives Azariah's ministry unusual strength and endurance. He realized he was responsible only for the quality and quantity of his work. Every day he was to put his faith into practice, manifesting the call he had accepted to be an itinerant evangelist. There was no need to worry about results. He had the self confidence to do his best, and leave the rest up to the Holy Spirit. If the people to Taldarpalli wanted to wait forty years to build a church and to provide a public witness to their faith in Christ, that was between them and God. Azariah's job was just to be faithful to them, offering prayers, showing concern, building good-will.

The 1953 diary gives a clear picture of the work ethic that drove this new ministry. The diary entries are always brief, almost staccato. For example, here is a synopsis of the first few months.

"Praise Cod arrived at Khammam. Gave message on the way near Khammam and all agreed to believe in Christ...Distribution of tracts in Venkatapuram from house to house. Healing prayer was made for 3...Conducted an open air meeting in the middle of a village and preached with the trumpet (megaphone). Many heard the Gospel...Went with lights, pictures, trumpet and tracts, and preached. The whole village came and heard with good interest...Went to street, preaching along with the missionaries...Went to Tekulupalli and preached for all elders and convinced them that Christ is the only Savior...Preached in the night and 8 persons gave their names for they are willing to be baptized...We 3 went and preached. All readily agreed to be baptized. Praise God. They are 16 families. We have to prepare them for baptism...Had prayer meeting among Madigas and gave new names to those that are willing to be baptized...Went to the Bazaar and preached in the night on Jacob, and they heard with good interest...Prepared board for posters (with Bible verses on them, Romans 5:8 and John 3:16) and arranged it by the roadside and all that passed by read it with

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interest...Had a special short prayer for all youngsters after telling them about John the Baptist...Started a night school for new converts.”

In reading the diary, I was struck by the reappearance of one short phrase, “Had a special prayer at home.” It led me to ask what those days were like that compelled him to pray, always. He smiled, filled with memories of a time that was both simpler and more difficult.

“The work was the same,” he told me, “just as many villages - just as far away. But the times were different. We rarely had vehicles, not even a bicycle, unless a missionary was taking us. Proper roads were few and monsoons made village roads almost impossible. Yet we always travelled, every day, even long distances to various villages. Our method became our routine. One or both of us would go to a village and seek out a busy place. I would begin to show pictures of the life of Christ, telling stories of his life, and giving out pamphlets or tracts. They always were scripture, or about Jesus. Then I would ask them to consider Christ. You have many Gods, I would tell them, ‘consider Christ along with others. Just listen, and read, and consider. We would always pray for the sick, whether it was a small or big sickness. The sick would be brought to us, or we would be asked to visit a sick person, or we would seek out those who were sick. Whenever possible, I would take people to St. Mary’s, the mission hospital, for medical treatment, where the staff was always helpful. That was how we began to provide medical care for the poor. Often, they could not afford to come, or to pay even the low fees, or to buy the necessary medicines.

So we would try to help, or find help. But always the care of the sick was part of each day. Then sometimes it would be too late to go back, and we might be invited to stay overnight before going the next day to another village. Each day was much the same. Go to a village, find people, tell them about God’s love, ask them to consider Jesus, pray for the sick.”

Just as the one thing they had to offer was prayer, the one thing they could fall back on was also prayer. Prayer sustained them as day by day they went somewhere, prayed with somebody, preached among some people, distributed some scriptures. There was always something to do with someone, somewhere.

Reliving those early years through diaries and conversations reminded me so much of the work ethic of the first generation of church leaders in Biblical times. St. Paul explained his methodology, “I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some.” (Romans 11:14)

Azariah certainly made much of every day’s worth of ministry. Following the advice of Proverbs 31, he “does not eat of the bread of idleness”. I would not say that his goal is to arouse the “envy” of people as much as to pique their interest, to provoke both thought and response. His method is to spend as much time as possible out among people, teaching and living the Good News.

The work in villages like Taldarpalli provided lesson in the need for a healthy balance between hard work and patience. It also helped strengthen their reliance on prayer.

Another event proved just as vital in preparing the young team for a life’s work. The August 22 entry in his diary reads, “Darkest day of my life, but happy in Jesus.” Just as the

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village of Taldarpalli taught them patience, August 22 brought home the reality of opposition and disappointment. If the ministry was to last, they would have to learn to be happy in Jesus even during the darkest day.

I've had dark days in my life, and happiness in Jesus, but I've never had the spiritual maturity to experience both on the same calendar day. I tend to be a brooder, anyway. What good is an argument or a depression if it doesn't last for awhile! But when we live immersed in our faith, we never let the darkness of any experience blot out our happiness in Jesus. That must be part of what John tries to teach us when he writes, "in Him was life, and that life was the light. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1)

August 22, 1953 was a dark Saturday filled with the kind of dissension, evil and division that Christians seem particularly good at producing. Azariah's young ministry was yielding results. Results in one part of the-Christian family have a way of creating jealousy in the rest of the family. For Azariah, his work posed a threat to the established church and was taken as an affront by the local missionaries. It all came to a head in late August.

Sixty-one people were ready for baptism. In the modern western church that might not mean much more than that sixty-one youngsters had reached puberty so it is time to fill the baptismal tank for the annual Palm Sunday baptism of 13 and 14 year olds.

In 1953, in India, that was not the nature of baptism. These sixty one candidates were men and women who had looked at life, searched their souls, compared this new Good News with the traditions of their past, and then made a conscious, voluntary, intentional decision to accept God's love in Jesus Christ as their savior. It was a big step. In those days especially, but today to a lesser degree, baptism was a major challenge to family unity and the social structure. The reaction of family and friends could range from ostracism to violence. Also, the taking of Biblical names made doubly sure that each baptism really was an outward sign of an inward change.

Given the minute size of the Christian family in India, the addition of sixty one people could have been welcomed as cause for celebration. But the local Church of South India and the missionaries were cautious and skeptical. The pastor wanted the people to wait six months before the very church that had never shown interest in them would agree to accept them. Finally, these new Christians pressed their own cause and urged Azariah to baptize them. On Friday, August 21, they all met together in the house and Azariah baptized them.

The next morning local church leaders stormed the house, shouting, wanting to drag him outside, accusing him of starting a competitive mission and threatening to drive him out of Khammam.

Now let's review the situation. Azariah came to Khammam, worked hard, risked everything, and concentrated his effort among people ignored by the church. He was, in the purest sense, a missionary and an evangelist, and the results showed great promise. The local church and missionary leadership saw this as competition, danger and effrontery, something to be challenged and defeated.

I have a tendency to anthropomorphize God, which is a fancy way of saying that I often think of God in human terms. This leads me to imagine God, up in heaven, looking at the situation there in Khammam in 1953 as it unfolded from uncertainty, to effort, to success,

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to mayhem. God smiles, energized by those events, turns to whatever entourage surrounds the Throne, and says with some satisfaction, "Alright. Excellent! Now let's see what he's made of, let's see how he handles this."

Consider the options available to Azariah. He could have given up, returned to Father Devadas. He could have gotten on the train and started over somewhere else. Andhra Pradesh is a big state. If competitive fires burned inside him, he could have fought back, literally or figuratively, turning the Christian witness in Khammam into a contest, winner-take-all. I'm fairly certain of the course I would have taken. There would have been a good struggle right on the street corner from which I would have emerged bloodied but unbowed. Then I would have called the team together, plus the sixty one new converts, and challenged them to become the biggest, strongest church in South India, rendering my competitors impotent and irrelevant. Hardly a very noble, helpful or Christian response!

Fortunately, I was not there to advise Azariah so he was free to try another approach more consistent with the pattern of his life. His spiritual contract with Father Devadas committed him to a ministry that affirmed Christ without causing offence to Hindus or Moslems. Quite obviously, he was not looking for a ministry that would affirm Christ and cause offence to other Christians! Therefore, Azariah moved quickly to reassure the local church and missionaries that he was not competitive, undermining or divisive. This new work, he explained, should be seen as strengthening the witness of Christ in the area. He was not there to establish his own church or develop his own following. Religion was not a business or a power base for Azariah. But while being conciliatory, he also helped them to appreciate how the established church seemed to be neglecting large segments of the population. They seemed too satisfied with their own kind and the status quo.

His attitude won the day. A missionary, Canon Jackson, along with the local pastor consulted with the Church of South India Bishop, A.B. Elliott. Bishop Elliot encouraged a meeting between Azariah and church leaders that resulted in significant steps that assured the most healthy and unified Christian witness. Azariah was invited to join St. Mary's, the CSI congregation in Khammam, which he did the next week along with the sixty one freshly baptized Christians. This assured the recognition and acceptance of all future candidates for baptism without delay or question.

This also opened the door for formal working relationships with the missionaries. In the early 1950's, missionaries were still a formidable force in the churches and community, not only in Khammam but across India.

The next two decades would see a dramatic decline in missionary presence. Today, the Church of South India and the Christian Church, in general, is firmly in Indian hands. The institutions and charitable works begun by missions over the past two hundred years are thoroughly directed by Indians. But in 1953, missionaries were still the power behind the throne if not on the throne itself.

It was not long before the formal working relationship with some missionaries became a lasting bond of friendship. Mona Mee readily extended the hand of fellowship to Azariah and they considered themselves as co-workers in the great vineyard of Christ. Around this time, Dorothy Tate returned from furlough in England and quickly became the spiritual mother for Sister Mary. They worked together as a team until Miss Tate's retirement in 1969. These friendships provided many opportunities over the years which greatly

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strengthened the ministry in Khammam to this day.

Azariah's willingness to choose reassurance and cooperation over combativeness quickly paid dividends for the ministry which soon became known as the Christian Service Unit (CSU). Within a few months, another sixty people desired baptism. Dr. Hanson of the Theological College at Dornakal, the Diocesan headquarters, happily officiated. As time went on, the missionaries provided travel support that enabled Azariah and Sister Mary to take on responsibility for more and more villages distant from downtown Khammam, far off the bus route, and further than legs might carry you in a day.

The acceptance and fellowship of the wider Christian community was a timely blessing and source of encouragement. But the daily struggle to survive, to literally put food on the table, would remain a great occasion for faith. Azariah was determined to not take a salary from any church or organization, but to live entirely on faith. When I asked him for a list of favorite scriptures, the second listed is Matthew 10:8, "freely you have received, freely give". He did not want anyone to suffer under the impression that the zeal of his ministry was the result of employment, or tied in any way to a job description or a paycheck.

Instead, he merely trusted that if he took care of God's work, God would take care of him. Decades later, he can look back with satisfaction and say, "God has always wonderfully supplied enough to meet our needs." He told me about one period in their lives when they were so hungry and so out of food that they chose to turn their lack into a fast. Perhaps that is one way to open the door for a miracle, by adopting a spirit of love rather than complaint. Instead of sitting around concentrating how to finagle a meal, they concentrated on praying for sick people whom they knew.

Meanwhile, God was already at work in that mysterious way made famous by those who live by faith. A local cobbler had been hired to repair the railroad station master's wife's sandals. During the course of conversation, the cobbler mentioned Azariah's ministry and their idea of relying on God to provide for their needs. Soon after, even as Azariah and Sister Mary were praying for the sick, there was a knock on the door. When the door was opened, dinner was ready! The station master's wife had sent over a student girl with a quantity of rice and lentils, plus a few rupees. Village people also gave the team gifts of grains, rice and lentils.

Part of being a faith mission is having the faith to believe that God is working at that very moment on the hearts of others to care for your needs. Back in the days of working with Father Devadas, Azariah had a friend, Paul, who joined the Indian Army. Being in the Army gave Paul a regular income and better mail service. Every month, Paul sent a donation to support Azariah which, thanks to the Army, arrived promptly the second of each month. This was not a moment too soon because their landlord was a miserly and unforgiving businessman who demanded payment the third of every month, or else!

These young evangelists were also resourceful, not passive recipients of God's grace, but active partners in the miracles that kept the ministry going. Sister Mary came from a farming background and many times put that experience to good use. They kept water buffalo and sold the milk to help underwrite the evangelism. She made lace which she sold to earn money for daily needs. I have seen photos of Azariah harvesting fields as a day labourer. They even borrowed ideas about self-sufficiency from Gandhi. Gandhi was a strong advocate of small village industries and emphasized his support by the daily practice of

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sitting at his own spinning wheel, weaving his own home-spun cloth. One year the government's Khadi Board wanted to launch more of these village industries. Azariah and Sister Mary not only enrolled a number of poor people who needed the extra income, but they signed up also for a three-fold purpose. First and foremost, it gave them an opportunity to identify with a new group of people, to serve as a Christian witness among a class of ordinary people who had never had the chance to hear the Gospel. The very act of sitting at a spinning wheel breaks down artificial barriers and gives people a sense of unity and common purpose. Not surprisingly, the spinning wheel is at the very center of the Indian flag. But beyond its symbolic value, the second reason for participating in that village industry was to save money by making their own cloth. Third, whatever extra they made could be sold for the benefit of their ministry. When the training period ended, the villagers were given the spinning wheels. At that point, Azariah became a non-profit entrepreneur. He would buy cotton then give it to villagers when he would be out doing evangelistic work. Later on, when he visited again, he would pick up whatever they had made, sell it, and again, return to the villagers to give them the money. In effect, the villagers got fed twice - spiritually and financially.

It is said that the more things change, the more things remain the same. During my 1994 visit, I found Azariah's team headquartered in the farming village of Gollapudi with chickens and water buffalo having the run of the yard, providing eggs and milk to be added to the produce of the vegetable garden. This bounty nourished the team, the eighty boys next door at the Redeemer Christian Center and the twenty elderly friends living at the Faith Home for the Aged. Furthermore, the ministry has now branched out into providing employment opportunities for village women. A FOCI friend, Lynn Murguia, after training with Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, brought the concept to Khammam. Now, Azariah is back encouraging the same goals that he promoted in the old days when he was ahead of his time. Over fifty village women have been trained and funded to begin their own small businesses, and their repayments are simply recycled to help more people get started.

Azariah's 1953 diary ends with the joy of Christmas, a sharing of gifts and cards with new friends and with new hopes.

The ensuing years were a geometric progression of doing more of what they had started out to do in the first place. There were more villages to be visited, more prayers to be offered, more sick people to care for, more opportunities to ask people to consider Jesus, more needs to be met. On one level, the work remained the same, there was just more of it.

On another level, each decade provided Azariah and the CSU with some significant new dimension. In the 1950's, Azariah was given the opportunity to study at United Theological College in Bangalore. The 1960's took him to Cambridge University in England. The 1980's were a bitter sweet period as the modern missionary movement came to a close in India. As the old-time missionaries reached retirement, missionary agencies were not issued visas to provide replacements. Thus ended a source of support and fellowship. In the 1950's, Azariah's ministry drew the attention and partnership of colleagues in the United States, and included several very important visits to the USA. The 1990's seem to be bringing the world to Azariah's doorstep, as people seek opportunities to serve and to learn.

These four decades have certainly extended the influence of this small ministry tucked away in the anonymous heart of Andhra Pradesh. The development of friendships and relationships around the world has dramatically increased the scope of the work. Certainly

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my own life and ministry is an example of the dramatic effect that involvement with Azariah can have. My pastoral style, career goals and family life are completely focused in new and exciting ways. The two churches I have pastored during my years with Azariah would unanimously affirm the impact he has had not only on me, but on the churches.

In the process, through FOCI, I have raised almost \$200,000, every penny of which has been put to work in India. The Habitat project I introduced to Khammam in 1983 has provided over a half million dollars for house building among the needy. These and other partnerships are explored in a later chapter.

My point here is to suggest that as the years went by, Azariah had ample opportunity to digress from his calling. Temptation, lure, enticement, advancement, security, acceptance, prosperity, recognition, power, prestige were all possibilities placed in his path. They were all attractive alternatives to trudging through muddy clay during the monsoon season to say prayers for a few believers in a remote village.

Yet, as Azariah's exposure to the rest of the world increased, his decision to serve the Risen Christ by serving the poor became more determined. Indeed, the new experiences and opportunities provided in each decade become important only in the way they impacted on God's love being shared in Andhra Pradesh.

In the 1950's, the lure was United Theological College (UTC) in Bangalore. Bangalore was, and is, one of the most beautiful cities in India, even called the Garden City. UTC is a highly regarded seminary, an excellent place for study and personal growth.

The initial invitation from Dr. Hanson provided a one year scholarship. A missionary paid for his travel to Bangalore after the local church refused, citing that since he was not a paid church worker, he was not eligible for travel expenses. For a South Indian, Bangalore is far enough up country to be considered cold. He arrived without pocket money, without warm clothes, feeling a bit out of place. The experience at UTC however, was entirely positive. A "loving, good attitude", which everyone admires in him, brought a return of love and interest from other students.

The diverse student body provided one of the key benefits. UTC brought together students from Canada, Sri Lanka and Iran in addition to the many states of India. Classmates later went on to become bishops in four different states. The faculty was an added bonus, bringing together the top Christian theologians in India along with distinguished professors from other countries. Such diversity is India's bane and blessing, depending on one's perspective. Azariah chose to enjoy it as a blessing, giving him the opportunity to identify with high and low caste people, and to be exposed to the great breadth of theological discussion.

However, the greatest benefit was to find his basic understanding of Christianity reaffirmed by his studies. I learned years ago that that is a great feeling. Early in my ministry, I was deeply committed to the Christian work and human struggle in Africa, and travelled four times to several African countries. For five years, I had been developing thoughts, plans and conclusions based on assumptions drawn from my own experiences, however brief. One wise friend told me that it was time for me to put some knowledge with my intuition. In other words, it was time for me to get my doctorate and to do it in the area of African studies. Within months, I was at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia preparing my

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thesis under the guidance of Dr. Orlando Costas. His goal was the same as my friend's, to enable me to put my assumptions up against the accumulated wisdom and experiences of the ages. Such opportunities give us the chance to be affirmed, corrected, challenged and, in the end, strengthened for our task.

Some people welcome these experiences, some avoid them. Azariah has always enjoyed the chance to share ideas, to listen and learn as well as to give and teach. His evangelistic trademark, 'consider Jesus', is, itself, an invitation to dialogue, not a drop-dead statement. It is an opening gambit, not a final offer. No wonder that he has been able to carry on over forty years of successful evangelistic endeavor, all the while gaining respect and avoiding offence.

The year at UTC gave Azariah the precious opportunity to compare two thousand years of Christian thinking with what he had learned from Father Devadas and from three years of practical experience as an evangelist and teacher. He found that the theological and Biblical studies at UTC underscored the basic, underlying assumptions of his ministry. Azariah told me, "I returned to Khammam more convinced than ever of three thoughts. First, God loves all. Second, Christ died for all. Third, all want and need Jesus Christ. My time in Bangalore also showed me that I must make two special efforts. First, I saw the importance of identifying with the ordinary person, not to seek favour or advantage. Second, I saw that my central task was to help others to see the need of knowing Christ. It was one thing for me to realize that all people truly need and want what Jesus could give. But it was quite another thing to try to show others that not only did they have a need, but that Jesus was God's answer for their need."

Azariah was anxious to return to Khammam, to put into practice with renewed zeal what had been affirmed in the classroom. One temptation was placed in the way. UTC, impressed by his ability, offered to continue the scholarship so that he could pursue a theological degree. But Azariah had already made the decision that he was more interested in his calling than in professional standing. A theological degree, ordination and official status as a paid, professional church worker were all viewed by Azariah as potential hindrances to his work. He wanted nothing to get in the way of being received in homes and villages as a humble servant of God.

Grateful for the year at Bangalore, he wanted to get back into action. He realized that he could always be a serious student, but he did not want to lose the relationships he had started by staying away for two more years.

During his absence, the work in Khammam prospered, the mark of any good ministry. Although still in its infancy, this wasn't a one horse show. Sister Mary's ministry with Miss Tate took off in new directions, each dynamic woman further energized by the other. Travelling by bullock cart and bus, they built up strong work among village women. Their relationship, and increasing awareness of just what Sister Mary was doing, led to surprising reconciliation with Sister Mary's family. From being hunted and then ostracized, she was now admired and trusted for the genuineness of her faith. Soon, her family members entrusted their children and grandchildren to her care so that they could be educated in Khammam under her guidance. This turn of events was an answer to prayer, and a great emotional and personal gift to her heart. As time went on, it would prove beneficial to the wider ministry as well.

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Khammam was proving to be a fertile field, and Azariah's compassionate style and emphasis on God's love proved him to be the right farmer to work that field. The ministry was a model of steadiness and follow-through. Each day was useful in and of itself, but also seemed to produce some new direction that would be faithfully pursued the next day. Four stories that continue to produce blessings to this day follow that pattern of events interwoven together in a design that God must have arranged.

One day Azariah heard about a group of forest dwellers who were reading the Bible. They had no pastor or teacher, but had been led to the Bible through the heroism of their natural enemy, a forest ranger. The forest dwellers had been stealing wood when they were confronted by the forest ranger who happened to be a Christian. The group had the upper hand in the confrontation, and they were deciding whether to kill him, beat him or threaten him. To their surprise, a bit like St. Stephen at his execution, the forest ranger showed no fear. He told the wood poachers that he had put his faith in Jesus Christ and that, if they were interested, he could get them the story of Christ written in their own Telugu language.

What happens in events like that? History is filled with such stories. Some end with murder, some end with freedom, escape, even conversion. I am inclined to call such a murder tragic, or such an escape as miraculous, but evidence shows that God produces miracles out of both endings. The blood of martyrs has nourished Christianity for two thousand years. Harassment, persecution and martyrdom only seem to invigorate the Good News as it spreads even quicker. In Uganda, for example, the Christian Church traces its strength to the slaughter of several young people who refused to give up their new relationship with Christ in the last century. Their example powered a church that has withstood the horrors of colonialism, post-colonialism, and the world's largest AIDS epidemic. Yet witnesses to the execution of the youngsters could be forgiven if they saw the deaths as futile and wasted.

It has been suggested that the end of the Soviet empire was caused by their debacle in Afghanistan. The debacle was fueled, some say, by the summary execution of Soviet Christian soldiers who refused to participate in the mass murder of Afghan civilians. The rumour has the ring of truth if only because the deaths of martyrs have often hastened the fall of the oppressors and the growth of the church. The forest ranger lived to realize Jesus' promise that "whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). The forest people were intrigued by this man's courage and that fueled their curiosity about the book.

The leader of the gang agreed to take the Bible and let the forest ranger go.

My own Bible is 1,273 pages long. In a recent difficult period in my life, I knew I needed a disciplined study of the Bible. But with all my training and experience, I still worried about where to begin. For some reason, I began with the Gospel of John. Evidently, the same guardian angel whispered in the gang's leader's ear and soon the poachers and would-be killers were reading John 8. It is not a particularly famous chapter, but it is a rather lengthy explanation by Jesus of just who he is.

We often hear that it is the Holy Spirit who does the convicting and convincing. The forest ranger had done his job, the gang did theirs, then the Holy Spirit convinced that group of forest people that the Jesus of John 8 was the Savior of all people.

The group lived in the village of Satyanarayanapuram. Life in such villages is an open

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book. The decision of one person invariably impacts on the lives of the whole village, for good or ill. When this group began to meet together for prayer and Bible Study, the rest of the village was strongly opposed. In such a setting conversion, or just plain nonconformity, is not a personal matter. Christianity's long association with low castes and outcastes threatened the harmony and fabric of village life where everything was set in stone since time immemorial. People grew up knowing with certainty who they were, and who they were not.

The prospect of several families in a village changing their status was a major threat. By the time Azariah heard about this new fellowship, they were already the objects of scorn and violence. Stones and human waste were thrown at them, and they were in danger. But they were not alone.

Azariah, Sister Mary and another devout woman, wearing disguises, snuck into the village at night. The group of believers welcomed them joyously, recognizing Azariah as their St. Philip who had been led by the Spirit to a lonely Ethiopian who had been studying the Bible (Acts 8: 26-39). Immediately, they asked for baptism. After all, Phillip had baptized the Ethiopian without delay. But Azariah wanted to accomplish more than water baptism. "I explained to them that I was not trying to cause delay. But if we arrange a special gathering with other church leaders present, it will be a witness to all that you are part of the wider family of God." In effect, they would see that they were not losing caste, they were gaining family, and that message would not be lost on the rest of the village.

The people agreed. On July 27, 1957, forty eight people, representing four caste groups, were baptized. The forest ranger becomes one of the vast anonymous heroes of faith, a person whose confidence in Christ caused a series of events that reverberate joyfully decades later.

As Azariah's team developed a ministering relationship in the village of Satyanarayanapuram, they began to pass frequently through another village, Jamalapuram. Forty years later, Jamalapuram stands as one of the best examples of God's grace, a place that has blessed thousands of Indian Christians seeking fellowship and hundreds of visitors from abroad who have seen the power of God at work in that environment.

However, Jamalapuram was already famous in its own right as a prominent Hindu pilgrimage site. Living there was a young woman, a child widow, now know as Sister Mary Sarojini. Like Sister Mary Seethamma, she had been married as a little girl only to face the awful isolation of widowhood while still a child. The two Marys had begun to know each other when Mary Sarojini's family came to St. Mary's Hospital in Khammam for medical care. God used the bond of high caste and widowhood which they shared to forge a lasting friendship. As they talked and compared life's notes, Mary Sarojini saw in Mary Seethamma the hope and love and acceptance for which she so desperately yearned.

She asked what had made an orthodox, high caste Hindu decide to follow Christ? As Mary Seethamma told her story, Mary Sarojini began to see that Christ was, indeed, the unique Savior.

It may be impossible for most people to comprehend the painful existence of a widow in a traditional Indian village only a few decades ago. We can barely grasp the idea of arranged marriages that still account for 90 percent of marriages in India. When we add to the discussion such topics as child marriage, the ostracism of widows, and the images of sati

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(widows joining their husbands on the cremating funeral pyre), we realize that we are out of our element.

India is a great civilization that does not need me to defend it. It may be sufficient for our purposes to do as Azariah has done, to offer our respect and affection for a people whom God loves so much that Jesus was sent to die for their forgiveness and eternal life. Whatever evil quirks of Indian life that are reprehensible and unfathomable to us are, no doubt, matched by reprehensible and unfathomable quirks in our society. None of us are let off the hook, except by the grace of God, which is also unfathomable.

Nevertheless, the status of women in India is an urgent and powerful concern today. At the World Book Fair in Delhi, I found more books and materials on women's issues than on any other subject except Hinduism itself.

Elisabeth Bumiller has written with great insight in, *May You Be The Mother of a Hundred Sons* (Penguin, 1991). She travelled India for three and a half years, meeting women from every level of society. Included was a visit to the village of Deorala in Rajasthan where an eighteen year old girl, Roop Kanwar, had been burned to death on her husband's funeral pyre. Bumiller explores the Hindu mythology that gave rise to sati, as well as the pressures of traditional village life and their impact on widows. Those pressures may not be easily understood, but they are not easily dismissed. In the two weeks following Roop Kanwar's sati, a half-million pilgrims came to the village to honour her example. This was 1987!

Mary Sarojini is more the product of village life in the 1930's, 40's and 50's Sati has never been widely practiced, but the stigma of widowhood has had a powerful presence throughout history. For Mary Sarojini, she took one quick step from the innocence of childhood to the lasting sorrow of life as a widow. Widowhood is the ultimate rejection, a total disassociation from the general life of the community. For many years she was confined mostly to living indoors, serving others, kept away from social contact, often hidden behind a curtain while doing chores. Other than breathing, her life was over.

Mary Seethamma held out the promise of a new life in Christ. Here was a woman who had faced what she had faced. From the same background, bearing the same burden, Mary Seethamma had emerged as a whole new person. The source of that new life was a simple Savior who would not disassociate himself from her, but instead reached out to her.

When Mary Sarojini shared the story of this Savior, Jesus, with her mother, the response was surprisingly happy. With a mother's love she could see that this Christ offered the one chance for a meaningful life for her daughter. Little by little, the family developed a close relationship with Azariah's team and the missionary personnel at the hospital. Eventually, the family invited their new friends to hold a three day meeting under the trees just outside Jamalapuram. The Christian community from Khammam made the long trip in good numbers, with missionaries and the Bishop joining the team to show again that Christianity was not an outcast religion, but a worldwide family united in God's love. At that meeting, Sister Mary Seethamma's mother chose to follow Christ, and then received baptism.

The progress of the gospel proceeded step by step, person by person, with Azariah never losing sight of the loving spirit which prepared and eased the way for each step. For example, Mary Sarojini's father never became a Christian. He was impressed by the compassion of the Christiansⁱⁿ all their ministries, and he was pleased by the happiness

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injected into his home and village. As a result, he never opposed these remarkable changes all around him. He was, however, traditional enough to insist that when Christian visitors came to Jamalapuram, only the women of the team could visit his wife and daughters for prayers. Always careful to not give offense, Azariah kept that agreement and they became trusted friends. Such matters may seem insignificant, but it is on the basis of that depth of sensitivity and detail that a village like Jamalapuram could become a major worship center. Today, Jamalapuram is a monthly fellowship center for Christians all over the area. A church has been built with money given by Sister Mary Seethamma, and even Hindu pilgrims who come for the temple will go to the church and give offerings. Something good, something like a miracle has happened in that place.

Mary Sarojini has since moved to the interesting village of Gollapudi, now the thriving center for so much of Azariah's work. At Gollapudi, she is the devoted right hand of Sister Mary Seethamma. Together they oversee Mary Seethamma's special calling, The Faith Home for the Aged, and coordinate the many activities that operate from the center. Her faithfulness to Mary Seethamma has strengthened, and perhaps lengthened the life of the one who introduced her to Jesus.

Meanwhile, the ministry back in Jamalapuram is not neglected, thanks to the cycle of events begun by a courageous forest ranger. Mary Sarojini's friend, Gnanamba, looks after the church and makes arrangements for its ministry. Gnanamba came to Christ after reading a New Testament given by Mary. At first, she was "amused" to be given a book meant for untouchables, but Mary said, "God's book does not belong to a particular caste, it is for all!"

The lesson Azariah learned at a roadside well, that was ingrained in him by Father Devadas, that became clear when God called out to him, that was reaffirmed in Bangalore, was effectively passed on from Mary Seethamma to Mary Sarojini, from village to village, and now it reached the heart of Gnanamba. Reading the scriptures, her gift for grasping spiritual truths opened her to a deep understanding. She was particularly taken by Hebrews 9, where she read, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God (Verse 14)... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Verse 22)." This made sense to her, and she asked to be baptized. When she was asked if she would have her father's permission, she responded, "My father will not object, for this is the only thing I am doing of my free will."

Gnanamba's life had also been a struggle. Her father had arranged a marriage for her to a man who was mentally disturbed, as a favour to his boss. On the wedding day, she renounced the marriage. Her father begged her to reconsider, fearing that he would lose his job, but she persisted. The father was fired, but Gnanamba's fierce determination helped the family to prosper. She opened a corner grocery store, worked hard, made it a successful enterprise, and was able to support the family and even put her brother through college. The same determination in following Christ led her whole family to accept Christ as their Savior.

In making Jamalapuram her home and ministry, Gnanamba has responsibility for an outreach that goes way beyond a few isolated villages in Andhra Pradesh. Something special does happen there. Over the years, I have brought over a hundred visitors to the monthly gatherings at that worship center. One friend, Dick Stuart, was a classmate of mine at Andover Newton Seminary. For many years, he had suffered a disease of the vocal chords that took away his voice and caused him to leave the pastoral ministry. Scientific advances provided a partial cure, but he has continued a secular career. When I asked him to preach at

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Jamalapuram it was his first sermon in years, and he gave it with power and beauty, telling his story, sharing the Good News among people who understood a miracle and message of love when they saw it.

When worship ends at Jamalapuram, something extraordinary happens, especially for foreign visitors. People will rush up to us asking for prayer and the laying on of the hands. They do not speak English and our visitors never know a word of Telugu, but it doesn't matter. Like the miracle of Pentecost, the people offer their prayer requests in Telugu, and we offer up our prayers in English, and the God of all does the rest.

I will never forget the experience of another friend, Nextor Lutin. Nextor was an immigrant from Guatemala who joined my church when I was a pastor in New York City. A wonderful and enthusiastic Christian, he was a frustrated minister at heart. For a few brief hours in Jamalapuram, he became a pastor. People seemed to flock to him as if they sensed his great hunger to serve. As they spoke in Telugu, he responded in Spanish, placing his hands tenderly on each head, and asking God to bless them. When the day ended, tears of joy seemed to fill the place. Jamalapuram, the home of Mary Sarojini, the church built by Mary Seethamma, the work cared for by Gnanamba, continues to be a place that God uses so mysteriously to touch the lives of people all over the world.

As I have listened to the stories of especially the first twenty years of Azariah's ministry in the Khammam area, I do feel like I am reliving the Book of Acts. Consider this story from Acts 16:13-15:

“On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.”

That was an event from the life of Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke, but it accurately describes a typical day in the life of Azariah, Sister Mary Seethamma and their friends in ministry. They would go to a village, seek out people, talk about Jesus, someone would respond, and they would follow up. Just as Paul found in Lydia someone “Who was a worshipper of God”, and someone whose heart has been prepared by the Lord to hear the Good News, Azariah's team was always confident that the villages and towns were filled with people who truly desired to know God and whose hearts were opened by God's grace.

Devadas, a long time friend of the ministry, is much like Lydia. Back in the 1960's, he was brought to St. Mary's hospital. An Australian missionary doctor gave him a pamphlet on the life of Christ to read while waiting for results of various medical tests. By the time the test results were ready, Devadas had finished the pamphlet and wanted to know more. The doctor sent him to Azariah because he wanted “a bigger book about Jesus.” Azariah provided a New Testament and Devadas was quickly back asking for six more New Testaments. Soon, the team went to Devadas' village to show filmstrips about Christ and that led nine people to ask for baptism. In 1972, the people built their own church.

Another person hungering for God like Lydia is David Venkateswar Rao. He is a tall, imposing man who has had a successful career as a builder. Today, he is a valued member of

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Azariah's team, but in 1969, their confrontation was highly charged.

Gollapudi is now the center of Azariah's work. From the headquarters a ministry branches out that deeply touches the lives of thousands of people each week. But in 1969, the only ministry in Gollapudi was prayer. Three Hindu families had asked for healing prayers, and as God answered those prayers, they felt led by God to ask Azariah to hold three days of meetings about the Gospel. Working through those Hindus who, like Lydia, had their hearts prepared and were desiring only to worship God, the Holy Spirit even dictated the dates of the meetings. In Hinduism, people often seek "auspicious" dates for important events, and evidently God also had specific dates for accomplishing something special through these events in Gollapudi.

The Gospel meetings were successful, fourteen people requested baptism, and by 1977, a church was built to accommodate the growing Christian family in the Gollapudi area.

David Venkateswar Rao was at those first meetings, but openly skeptical, even hostile. He considered a relative who chose to follow Christ as mentally deranged. But David was there, he put himself in a position to be confronted by truth if there was any. Even now, he is a person of quiet dignity with a serious demeanour. He applied that seriousness to a consideration of the differences between Christianity and Hinduism, he studied the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible diligently, he probed and questioned and even fasted to heighten his search.

Azariah explained to David that the real difference is not in teaching, but in the person of Christ. Christ is the distinctive feature, the cornerstone of Christianity, not doctrine. "In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna came to save the righteous from the hands of the unrighteous," Azariah remembers telling David. "But Christ came to save the unrighteous, to forgive repentant sinners."

The rest David could figure out for himself. If he was a completely righteous man, then truly what he needed was Krishna to protect him and stand with him. But if he was a sinner, if there was unrighteousness in him, then he needed Christ. That led David to the tough and universal question, "Who am I? What am I, really?" The answer led him to the waters of baptism.

The Book of Acts describes the early years and the struggles of the Christian movement. The ministry in Acts is short on strategy, structure, money and doctrine. It is long on commitment, personal sacrifice, intensity and hard work.

There is a moving hymn that proclaims, "I walked today where Jesus walked." In the one hundred kilometres around Khammam district there is a ministry that has walked the walk of Peter, Paul and Philip with results that are just as miraculous and impressive.

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I have one passion and that is He, He alone.

- Count Zeinzendorf

I found that quote in one of the early diaries, and it is an apt description of the single-minded zeal that drives Azariah - Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

India is a land of religion. The western world, Europe and the United States, has been described as being in the “post-Christian era”, we have moved beyond religion. That may be an exaggeration, but there are certainly signs that religion in general and Christianity, in particular, have had their best shot, permeating society and culture, only to find itself on the sidelines as we face the twenty-first century.

Religion is not on the sidelines in India or in most of the rest of the world. When my father went to Egypt, he remarked on how refreshing it was to be in a place where everyone believed, where faith was central to life. They may believe different things, but everyone believes.

I once attended a conference where Hans Kung, the renowned theologian, was the key-note speaker. In particular, I remember the opening address where he seemed to be saying that the number one challenge for the Christian Church, in dealing with the rest of the world, is atheism. Granted, that was a speech from the Cold War when so much was viewed as the Battle of Armageddon against godless communism. But it has never been true that atheism is a major competitor for the minds and souls of the peoples of the world. Whether we look at world affairs from the front pages and the Evening News or from the perspective of campesinos, peasants and low caste dalits - faith is front and center.

Nowhere is this more true than in India, a fertile ground for spirituality that has nurtured Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, and the followers of St. Thomas' Jesus.

With all these religions in a country where the major form of tourism may well be spiritual pilgrimages, it would be natural for any serious, spiritual-minded seeker to ask, “What has Christianity got to offer?” Especially given the Christian emphasis on evangelism, it is vital to know what is so special, so distinctive that it must be shared? It is one thing for a person to say, “I have accepted Jesus as my personal savior, he is now our family God, our household God, we keep his picture, we say our prayers to him, we give him offerings.” All that would be readily accepted and understood.

But it is quite another thing to accept Jesus and then to feel compelled to take Jesus into the whole world, from every nook and cranny of your own village all the way to the ends of the earth.

When Azariah chose to accept God's calling to be an itinerant evangelist, he made a conscious decision that Jesus was not his possession, something to be kept, a private and personal matter. Instead, he quotes Gandhi, “Christ is not just for Christians, Christ is for all.” That dramatic realization provides the boldness necessary to offer anyone and everyone the

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opportunity to “consider Jesus.”

The offer to “consider Jesus” has long been Azariah’s trademark. It is an approach that is steeped in respect for what others hold dear and true, and in confidence in his own experience with Christ. Because God is so real and so loving, nothing about Azariah’s ministry requires the denigration or ridicule of another belief. For him, evangelism is not a competition, a game or a war. Instead, it is the natural result of just having so much good news and love that it would be impossible, even selfish, to keep it to himself.

“All over India people seek for God”, Azariah said once, as we discussed evangelism, “We even make ourselves the center of the search by saying, I am seeking god.’ But now, with Christ, we find that God seeks for us, God sent Christ looking for us!”

In effect, Azariah is saying that God’s effort in Christ is so special that it deserves our attention. Some things in life do stand out, some things are extraordinary and should be looked at - or considered - carefully. The first time I went to India, in 1983, my schedule was so tight that I was not able to visit the Taj Mahal. It was two years before I had the chance to return to India. In those two years, I had to face countless people, Indians and non-Indians, who were completely flabbergasted that I could spend all that money, fly half-way around the world and not take one day to see something as unique as the Taj Mahal.

Azariah uses the same sense of the word “unique” to invite people to consider Jesus. His message is that Jesus is too special to be missed.

When I asked him to summarize his message, he said, “To ask you to consider Jesus only recognizes that you have already thought about God, you already know that you are looking for something from this God or that religion yet you are still looking for more! So I say that if you will look at Christ you will find what you are looking for and more. You will see in Christ a very different ministry than what other Gods have done.”

Azariah always begins the evangelistic task with respect for the integrity of the spiritual life of others. He respects the fact that people genuinely want to know God, and that their devotion to Buddha, Rama, Krishna or others is a sign of spiritual desire.

“I am not an idol smasher,” he told me, “I don’t go into people’s homes to tear down pictures of other gods. I just ask people to consider Jesus, just like Paul did on Mars Hill in Athens.”

Acts 17 tells that story of Paul’s sensitive approach to evangelism. Verse 16 reports that “He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” When we are distressed about something and want to see it changed, we are confronted with a choice. Shall we be positive or negative? Shall we express anger or love? Do we offer condemnation or understanding?

Paul’s choice was a model of respect, wisdom and gentleness. “Paul then stood up and said, I see in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To An Unknown God. Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you’.” He then explains that God’s effort in Jesus Christ brings us so close to God that people no longer need to search for comfort or security in handmade idols.

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It is this distinctive feature of God's love, acting in Jesus Christ, that gives Azariah's team the confidence to suggest, "Consider Christ". Christians often boast about having faith in Christ, but we often act as if we have no confidence in Christ. We may believe in Christ and we may demand that everyone else believe in Christ if they wish to be saved, but we sound uncertain. Scared people, lacking confidence, resort to bullying tactics. This is as true in religion and in business as it is on the street corner or at the playground. Confident people do not bully, oppress, persecute, ridicule, or humiliate. They simply look for the opportunity to share, to invite, to offer, to say, "consider".

For Azariah, the images and ideas of God that permeate India and the world are not competitors to be beaten or enemies to be defeated. They represent the yearning of humanity to know and understand God, to be close with God.

I asked Azariah, "If a person says to you, I have Krishna, Rama, Buddha already. Why should I think about Christ?", what do you say?"

"I say that these should help you to consider Christ, also, for you will find in Christ all you need - all that God is." He continued, "You can find Rama, Krishna, Buddha in Christ, but you cannot find the fullness of Christ in them. Christ is more. Christ is the all."

Azariah is serious about looking respectfully at the gods and goddesses that attract the loyalty and worship of people. After all, the history of the world is the history of humanity trying to come to grips with the reality of God. The result, he says, "is a world in which there are so many pieces of the truth, pieces of the revelation of God. Creation, good and evil, salvation, eternity, all religions are trying to understand and explain. But Christ encompasses all those pieces that others have revealed to be true, plus the pieces that have been missing or misunderstood, to give us the full revelation of God."

In the Old Testament, Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a spiritual contest, winner take all (1 Kings 18). When Elijah and his God emerged victorious, all the other priests were slaughtered. In contrast, Azariah issues an invitation to know God, not a challenge to kill or be killed. "Look at other gods," he says, "and try to see Jesus in them. See what truth about God is true in them. But you will also see that even they need Christ to be fully revealing of God. In the New Testament there was truth in Paul, Apollos and Cephas, but it had to be made clear that they all belonged to Christ. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam there is truth, there is help, there is comfort and strength, but it is Christ that gives us all of God, it is Christ that belongs wholly to God."

God and people share a mutual desire and that is to be reconciled, to be together, to be in unity and harmony. The problem of sin gets in the way, making us feel separated from God, feeling God's disappointment and fearing God's judgement. Christ is the answer to this divine and human dilemma. Azariah quotes D.T. Niles as explaining, "Christ is the answer for man's (humanity's) question, Christ is the answer for God's question. Man can only say, My answer is Christ'. God can only say, My answer is Christ."

But having said this, what is so distinctive about Christ that all the world should take notice? Why should a genuine, worshipful, contented Hindu, Buddhist, Moslem or Jew take the time to consider Jesus? What could possibly be lost by passing up the opportunity?

The answer lies in the uniqueness of the entire Christ event. Like a preaching

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professor at seminary outlining a five point sermon, Azariah describes the reasons for considering Christ:

- Jesus is the unique person.
- Love is the unique motivation.
- Compassion is the unique quality.
- Good News for the Poor is the unique message.
- Crucifixion is the unique act.

Jesus provides a fresh approach to all the spiritual issues that faithful worshippers have struggled with through the ages. Take suffering, for example. Buddha taught the way to avoid suffering, admittedly a useful resource. But Jesus chose to enter into suffering, to suffer himself. Rama went toe to toe against the personification of Evil, but Jesus chose to deal with sin directly for the express purpose of saving sinners. Other religions have provided the images of a divine personality arrogantly waiting for people to search them out and bring them sacrifices and appeasements. But the god revealed in Christianity is a God who does the seeking, the pursuing and the finding. It is Christ whose love compels him to search for us. Azariah once remarked that it is customary for evangelists to invite people to come to Christ when it is actually Christ who comes to us. He asks people to consider a Jesus who taught the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost coin, which emphasizes the extent to which God will go to find us and keep us. This, indeed, is a unique God. While other Gods help good people to deal with bad people, this God, who comes to us via Nazareth, comes specifically for the bad people.

While Azariah tries to get the non-Christian world around him to consider Jesus, he is distressed by the unwillingness of the Christian Church, in general, to fully appreciate the uniqueness of Christ. It is as if we have wasted a golden opportunity, settling instead, for being a poor imitation of God's love and Christ's life. He sees a Church that has chosen to emphasize everything but being Christlike. We establish worshipping communities as building blocks for denominations and spiritual empires. Our priorities become programs and institutions. Speaking at my father's church, Azariah offered a sad commentary on the failure of the Church to grasp the distinctive ethic that is Jesus. "We have too often accepted being something less than Christlike. Instead of being like the One who chose suffering, humiliation and death, the Church has chosen to appear above and better than others. Whereas, we were once called to be like a candle set upon a hill to bring light to all, we have chosen just to be high up on the hill!" The already-Christians don't seem to realize what we have in Christ, while the rest of the world rejoices in the uniqueness of Christ.

During Azariah's visits to the United States, I have enjoyed his ministry to me, to the churches I have served during our friendship, and to the American churches that have received him. In the spirit of his evangelistic message across Andhra Pradesh, "consider Jesus", his message to Christians in America has been to reconsider Jesus! If we have lost sight of the several uniqueness' of Jesus, if we have been content to be high and mighty up on the hill rather than to use that vantage point for God's service, then it is time to look again, to reclaim what St. John calls our "first love" (Revelation 2:4).

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This love makes Jesus irresistible, which in turn, makes the evangelistic task so simple. People want to love and to be loved. If God is love, and God's love results in Christ, and Christ's life is a life of love, and if the crowning event in that life is the incredible act of love on the cross, then all we have to do is tell the story, bring the good news, share the Gospel. The world wants what we have to offer. Humanity wants to know God, and the essence of Azariah's message is that Jesus is the key to unlocking the whole mystery - the full knowledge of God.

He views religion as a family relationship in which the parent's (God's) love for us, the children, is something that we understand more clearly over time. God's love for this world has always been absolute, but our comprehension of it has been built one stage at a time. Through the ages we have seen God as Creator, Judge and Protector, but it is only with the coming of Jesus that we can see God as father, parent, the great and full love. "As a father builds a relationship with his child day by day," he explains, "lifting the child, smiling, talking, playing, teaching, encouraging so that over time the child knows in every way possible the father's love, that is what Christ does for us. Through Christ, because of Christ, God becomes Abba'."

Jesus did refer to God as "Abba" which scholars describe as a term of endearment and intimacy, much like saying "daddy". Then Jesus turns to us and tells us that if we want that depth of a loving, personal relationship with God, it is possible - through him. "No one can come to the Father except by me," Jesus said (John 14:6).

In Azariah's hands that seemingly exclusive, parochial, narrow statement becomes a generous, gracious, open invitation. I remember feeling thrilled and refreshed, as if the breath of the Holy Spirit was passing near, when he explained, "That verse does not mean that everyone else is condemned to hell, that if you do not accept Christ as the Son of God you are doomed. It means that if you want to know God fully, to know God as God wants to be known, to know God as your nearest and greatest love, then that knowledge comes through Christ. There are other views of God, limited at best, but true in their limited view, views of God as Judge, Law-giver, Creator etc..., and those you can still have with the comfort and guidance they provide. But the full revelation of God's love is found thoroughly in Jesus."

Azariah recognizes that we are not all we would like to be, our spiritual life is not all we would like it to be, and neither is our relationship with God. The invitation, then, is to find what we are missing in the Jesus who comes looking for us, the Jesus who brings to us all that we need: love, healing, forgiveness, hope, eternal life.

Often, in our conversations, he returns to the uniqueness listed earlier - Jesus as the unique person, Love as the unique motivation, Compassion as the unique quality, Good News for the Poor as the unique message. But he is especially attracted to the final uniqueness, Crucifixion as the unique act. It is the ultimate proof of God's love, and the ultimate evidence that this God deserves our fullest consideration. For him, the crucifixion stands on its own as a great victory. In Christian circles, it is customary to see the Cross as the necessary act to atone for the sins of the world. Emotionally, we are able to stomach the event of the Cross because it is nicely overwhelmed three days later by the Resurrection on Easter.

But Azariah sees victory and celebration in the crucifixion all by itself. As a student of world religions, he recognizes that no one else has ever claimed to love us so much that he

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or she, god or goddess, would suffer and die for us. “Only this God has taken this step for us, so if you will consider this act of Christ then it is not possible to deny Christ. How can we resist the one who comes to us as friend, brother and savior, even taking our place, being there for us in the ultimate way, on the Cross?”

Best of all, Azariah presents Christ as Victor, not Victim. Isaiah’s promise, “By his wound you are healed”, shows Christ making a conscious choice to conquer sin by the offering of his life. That is a victorious choice that gives us life.

Azariah’s offer to consider Jesus is a friendly and loving invitation that is meant to mirror the friendship and love offered by Christ to all of us. The challenge of evangelism ‘s to decide not only how we shall present the Gospel, but also what is the image, the character, the personality of Christ that we shall present. I once stayed at a Claretian Retreat Center near Bangalore and in their bookstore I found a book by Segundo Galilea, *The Beatitudes: To Evangelize as Jesus Did* (Claretian Publications, Quezon City, The Philippines). Galilea argues that most evangelism is shaped by the interests, biases, hang-ups of the particular evangelist rather than being shaped by Jesus who should be viewed as the Chief Evangelist of Christianity. He writes:

“The Church faces many challenges, conflicts and choices...But this is not the moment to get lost in the woods of academic discussion. Theory is secondary. The one great challenge to the church and to Christians is evangelization. It must preach and share Jesus Christ as the God who saves. The basic challenge of evangelization, then, is the challenge of hope. Our hope is not based on illusions, but on promises that Jesus has already begun to keep. Part and parcel of the Christian task is to give an account of the reasons for its hope (1 Peter 3:15) and to discover the seeds of that hope’s fulfillment in the very texture of modern life.

“Evangelization has already borne fruit. There are oases of solidarity and justice, defense of the dignity and worth of the individual, faith persisting in the midst of persecution, and people dedicate themselves to God in a morass of materialism.

“We must see evangelization from the viewpoint of Jesus. Evangelization is the following of Christ the Evangelizer or it is nothing. Either mission arises from faith in Jesus, love for him, and hope in his cause, or it is a mission impossible’.

“We are completely in the dark until we enter into Jesus Christ the Evangelizer, into his criteria, orientation, and attitudes. Our faith in and knowledge of Christ is essential, for the central message of evangelization is Christ.

“Thus, we have a problem. The Christ, and the God, whom we convey to others is often our own personal (view of) Christ. Often enough we believe in a ‘distorted’ Christ, an incomplete Christ, a Christ adapted to particular interests of our own. When it comes to our own Christianity and the idea we have of Christ, we ourselves need to be evangelized. Thus, we must ask ourselves what Christ we believe in and evangelize.” (pp. 4-8).

Galilea summarizes both the challenge of evangelism and the lessons Azariah has learned in a lifetime as an evangelist. There is a lot of religion out there whose evangelistic message is indicative of personal ego, organizational loyalty, denominational quirks, perceived orthodoxy, or some political or social agenda of the right or the left. The word

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“Christ” will be thrown in from time to time to help with fund-raising or to acknowledge their roots in “the founder”. It is more a Christ of convenience than the Christ of the Cross.

But Galilea calls us to learn the lessons that Azariah has lived. To repeat: “We must see evangelization from the viewpoint of Jesus. Evangelization is the following of Christ the Evangelizer or it is nothing. We are completely in the dark until we enter into Jesus Christ the Evangelizer, into his criteria, orientation, and attitudes.”

Such is the spirit of the ministry in and around Khammam. Christ is taught, preached and presented, but always with an eye on how Christ taught, preached and presented himself. Jesus had an air of authority, but not arrogance. Jesus knew how to sacrifice with confidence. Jesus could save someone without demeaning them. Jesus healed, but never exploited. Jesus’ correction often began with affirmation. Jesus never abused power. Jesus always left people better off than he found them. Jesus never asked anything of others that he was not willing to do or exceed himself. Jesus’ love was never self-serving. All of the attitudes that Jesus tries to instill in us through the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) are part and parcel of Jesus’ approach to ministry.

They are also part and parcel of Azariah’s ministry. All the way from meekness to hungering after righteousness, from peacemaking to happily accepting persecution, the goal of this evangelistic team has only been to faithfully represent the person of Jesus in word and deed.

That they have succeeded in doing this is testimony to their basic understanding of evangelism. The purpose of evangelism is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ which, if done successfully, results in change. Change is the basic component in any repentance. Repentance, by definition, requires change from one direction to another, dramatic and total change. Azariah pinpoints three aspects of repentance as it affects our intelligence, will and emotions. That about covers it all. Those three aspects cover how we feel, what we do, and how we use what we have. Through repentance, we turn all of that over to God, thus changing every aspect of our daily life. A lot of evangelism results only in a change of ritual, a change in what we say as our creed or what we read as our holy book, or a change in our loyalty. But when evangelism results in a whole new use of our intelligence, will and emotions then we are truly new people in Christ. That level of repentance is seen in Azariah’s total life and it, therefore, fits well in every aspect of the ministry.

In essence, Azariah offers to others what he has found beneficial in his own life. Having taken the opportunity to consider Jesus, and finding in Jesus all that he had hoped, he considers it a privilege to offer the same benefit to everyone else.

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FIVE Style of Ministry

The act of consecration is cancelled by one reserve. To give 99 parts and to withhold the hundredth undoes the whole transaction, because in all, at one piece of reserve, the whole self life entrenches itself, defying Himself.

- F.B. Meyer (JUN 12, 1953 - Diary Entry)

Given as a gift from God, returned for God's use by his mother, shaped by events and people that enabled him to accept that dedication personally, Azariah was ready to serve. But, thankfully for Azariah, that service began with a lengthy, intensive period of preparation. He considers his time with Father Devadas as an apprenticeship and laments the fact that today's Christian workers do not have the inclination or the patience to accept such training.

When I preached at The Lutheran Church in Hyderabad in 1994, the pastor was assisted by a young seminarian from Philadelphia. I was thrilled to see a future American clergyman getting such a precious opportunity and asked him how it came to be. He explained that his seminary is a four-year program: two years at the seminary, one out in the field, and the fourth back at the seminary. Five seminarians have the opportunity to serve a Lutheran church outside the United States, and he chose Hyderabad.

Our discussion brought back memories of my own seminary training. Mine was the first class to enter the seminary after the internship year had been eliminated. It was explained to us that students were anxious to get on with their careers, they had debts to pay, families to raise, things to do. The internship year seemed an unnecessary delay so it was abolished. As a young man who couldn't wait to get a hold of my own church and start up the career ladder, I was in full agreement - until my last year when I realized how inadequate I was to undertake the ministry of Jesus Christ! A few part-time jobs doing youth work were hardly preparation for building the Kingdom of God.

One part of my Andover Newton Seminary education was priceless. I spent twelve weeks at Tewksbury State Hospital facing Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). CPE was endless days and long nights of pastoral care, verbatim reports of visits, group therapy and individual counselling. But the power of the event for me was the first two weeks. I was an orderly. No pastoral collar, no title, no ministry to hide behind. I was just a bedpan, bandage, wheelchair pushing, gofer orderly. It was nauseating, humiliating, intimidating ... and priceless.

Why? Most Christian churches have elevated The Lord's Supper into an antiseptic, Eucharistic sacrament that somehow may still be Holy, but has little evidence of Communion. Meanwhile, except for a handful, the churches avoid the other powerful, symbol of Jesus' last gathering, the foot washing. It's too personal, too intimate, the logistics are too much. So we take the little cup in the privacy of our own pew, or the little wafer in the privacy of our own palm, but we won't touch one another.

As an orderly you touch and are touched in ways that will either make you or break you. As an orderly, you find out quickly whether you are willing to serve others or if you will develop a ministry designed to have others serve you, preferably at arms length.

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Whatever joy and success I have experienced in my ministry in India (and in my pastoral work in the U.S.) is due, in large part, to those days as an orderly. The touch of an untouchable, the stump of a leper, the hacking cough of a TB patient, the drool of a mentally handicapped adult, the cry of need or despair or sorrow are all invitations to love. Andover Newton could not teach me to handle curry, but in their wisdom they helped me to find a well-spring of love.

Interestingly enough, Azariah likens his tour of duty with Father Devadas to that of an orderly. Already an old man and blind, Devadas was an invalid. For two years, Azariah served him in a way that ingrained humility, discipline, and hard work. This was a seminary of hard knocks in preparation for a life of hard knocks. It was an apprenticeship of service in preparation for a lifetime of service.

Sister Mary Seethamma has been Azariah's partner in ministry every step of the way. I asked her to think about what qualities or characteristics in their ministry were essential to their success. She didn't need to think about it. They had come to Father Devadas from entirely separate paths. She was a high caste Hindu, married at age ten and widowed at twelve, consigned to a life of isolation and lonely sorrow. But Christ's influence began to touch her heart through answered prayer, miracle, Bible study, loving people, and visions. Persecution from her family escalated into attempted suicide, attempted murder, kidnapping and virtual imprisonment. Finally, she escaped to Devadas and a life of loving service. That service, thoroughly immersed in love, eventually brought her entire family into fellowship with Jesus. She, too, gives lasting credit to the intense period of preparation under the tender and watchful eye of Father Devadas. "From the beginning," Sister Mary told me, "Father Devadas taught about sacrifice that will be necessary. We learned will power and dedication and tireless work that is only made possible by the prayer support of so many."

After more than four decades of such ministry, Azariah is now the mentor for others who would follow Christ. But how well he knows what Jesus felt in Luke 9:57-62 when met by half-hearted followers. Three times men inquired about engaging in Christ's ministry. But each was put off by some personal concern that took priority. Their excuses all seemed reasonable, but often reasons are just excuses.

During one visit, I found Azariah accompanied by a successful man who I could tell was a source of frustration to him. The man lived a celibate life, wore the simple home-spun cloth favoured by Gandhi, and ate only fruits. These were his great sacrifices for Christ, and he could not understand why people did not flock to him to sit before his ministry. But he had no ministry. He did not really do anything. He was willing to not do things for Christ, but there was no ambition to take up something for Christ.

We were talking one afternoon about a young man with a great desire to save souls, especially young people. I had been hearing about some of his great youth work.

"What youth work?" Azariah exclaimed!

Azariah pinched the cheek of the would-be evangelist, and proceeded to stick the needle in with the blunt end while still delivering good medicine. "If it is truly your work, it will be all around you. As Jesus walked, the people followed all around him. If you are doing youth work, where are the young people? If it is youth work, children's work, work with sick people, poor people, whatever, they will be all around you! What are you doing standing

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here?!”

Later he told me that the man is a great prayerer, rises early, prays long, reads the Bible, and is convinced that all is bad. He wants to preach the Gospel, but it is always in negatives. But, said Azariah, somewhere along the line, the young man's ministry is supposed to be affirmative, turning people toward something represented by that someone whose love is so great, the Christ of Nazareth.

Men who would be pastors and evangelists come to Azariah seeking his support. I asked about one in particular, if he was hard working.

“Hard working? He thinks he is. He whiles away the day. He gets up, washes, says prayer, takes breakfast, thinks about the day, it is time for lunch, goes on a visit, takes rest, dinner, then it is night, time to get ready for tomorrow.”

This is not an example of a person of one generation not understanding the younger generation. We might call it a problem of a work ethic. Father Devadas trained Azariah to work. After all, St. Paul told the Colossians, “Whatever you do, work at it” (Colossians 3:23), and the Thessalonians, “Respect those who work hard” (1 Thessalonians 5:12). More to the point is Paul's advice to Timothy, and Azariah's advice to all who would serve Christ, “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5).

Azariah was trained by a servant of God to do just that, to do the work and discharge all the duties of ministry.

Wait! Is this a call for workaholism? Is it my message that I have found a totally obsessive, driven evangelist who, if we would copy would renew the modern church? Not at all. I always have the impression with Azariah that he is having the time of his life. His ministry is not littered with scattered bodies along the path. I have not known an Indian, American or European that has seen him get angry. He has lived with our family for six weeks, I have visited him six times in India, my daughter has been almost four months in his household. Azariah proves that a life of service need not be a life of blind ambition, or cruel and insensitive obsessiveness.

Instead, Azariah brings a style to ministry that is uniquely attractive. That style has six components that I witness every day I am with him. They are constants. Azariah is accessible, loving, challenging, peaceful, accepting and doing. He is not accessible some days and loving on others; or peaceful some days, and challenging on others. These qualities of his style are so ever present that I doubt that they are conscious. These constants are not his “Six Easy Steps to Effective Evangelism”. But they are worthy of our consideration. If they can work for him, they can work for anyone engaged in ministry. If they can work in Andhra Pradesh, they can work any place where people take ministry seriously. His work is overwhelming, under funded, besieged by need and opportunity, surrounded by urgency and challenge.

If these qualities of style can serve him well, we would be foolish to ignore them.

Accessible

I once heard Robert Schuller, pastor of The Crystal Cathedral, explain that one of the great problems of the institutional church is that we make ourselves look and sound so

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imposing and foreboding that it seems that we want to keep people out, not bring them in. Our church names are often a mystery, our architecture is not inviting, each denomination has its own doctrinal and programmatic in-house lingo. Schuller said that one can't help but wonder if each church has a secret handshake and a password. Meanwhile, let me add, western Christians are quick to criticize eastern religion for having mantras!

Schuller has gone on to argue that everything he has done in ministry has been designed to make people feel welcome, at home, wanted.

Some interesting steps have been taken in India to accomplish the same goal of being accessible and inviting. Khammam is part of the Dornakal Diocese of The Church of South India. The main cathedral is in the town of Dornakal, built over fifty years ago by a highly regarded Bishop, also named Azariah. The architecture was ahead of its time, blending features unique to the architecture of Hindu and Buddhist temples, Moslem mosques, and Christian cathedrals. It says, "Welcome!"

My old friend from Vellore Diocese, in the state of Tamil Nadu, Bishop Sam Ponniah, once brought me to visit a church he had built during his pastoral days. It, too, clearly borrowed design features from Islam and Hinduism in order to project a church image that is welcoming to all.

Not surprisingly, there are critics of such a visual and symbolic display of respect and acceptance of others. But accessibility is the absence of obstacles. In the west, we have narrowly defined accessibility as the building of ramps and provision of elevators and wide doors to make it possible (accessible) for physically handicapped people to enter our churches. Generally speaking, we are providing accessibility for people who already think like us and agree with us.

In India, ramps will not overcome the obstacles of caste consciousness, social stigmas, religious hostilities, or political loyalties. Accessibility, instead, is both a state of mind and a personal style.

From a magazine called "Over comers", Azariah copied this piece in an early diary that exemplified his personal commitment to be open, ready, accessible to all.

When you are forgotten or neglected or purposefully set at naught, and you smile inwardly, glorying in the insult or the oversight - this is victory.

*When your good is evil spoken of,
When your wishes are crossed
your tastes offended
your advice disregarded
your opinions ridiculed
and you take it all in patient and loving silence
this is victory.
When you are content with any food, any raiment,
any climate, any society, any solitude, any interruption -
this is victory.
When you bear any discord, any annoyance,
any irregularity, any unpunctuality - of which*

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*you are not the cause - this is victory.
When you can stand face to face with folly,
extravagance, spiritual insensibility,
contradiction of sinners, persecution, and
endure it all as Jesus endured it - this is victory.
When you never refer to yourself in conversation,
nor to record your good works,
nor to seek after commendation
When you care truly, love to be unknown -
this is victory.*

Those are also the keys to an accessible style of ministry. People know instinctively that Azariah is open to them and ready for them. Despite a daily schedule that is both mind-boggling and bone-tiring, he never seems rushed.

Above all, accessibility is an openness to people, a readiness to accept relationships no matter what the risks may be. The selection, “Over comers”, imagines every possible slight and hurt that can come to a person who dares to love. It recognizes that a life of loving service is likely to result in being forgotten, neglected, insulted, overlooked, offended, disregarded, ridiculed, interrupted, contradicted and persecuted. There will be inconvenience, discomfort, loneliness, lies and hostility.

But it is all worthwhile for the joy of serving a loving God by serving others.

Loving

In Ephesians 5:1-2, we are told, “be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Just as Azariah’s favorite Bible verses are “anything about God’s love”, his ministry constantly tries to mirror that love. In everything that is done in the hundred villages around Khammam, the goal is to “be imitators of God ... and live a life of love.”

All too often good works are done for the glory of the person or the organization at the head of the work. People become concerned with who gets the credit, whose picture or name will be exalted. For Azariah’s ministry, all glory goes to God, and the only name to be exalted is Christ.

Accessibility is an attitude that says, “You are important, you are welcome here, your concern and need can be brought in.” That is a crucial first step in any ministry. But love takes a relationship to the highest level.

One Sunday, we held our first worship service in Khammam at 8 a.m. for several hundred people. Sixteen hours later, we began our last worship about a hundred miles away. In between, we “took prayer”, shared communion, anointed the sick with oil and preached the Gospel in three other places. One place was a roadside chapel that served several small villages. Another gathering brought together people from twenty distant villages. We spent time in a little thatch prayer shed erected by six new Christian families, worshipping in the dark without even a candle. The final church service was in a town where a hundred people

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had waited patiently all evening, confident that sooner or later we would come to share God's love.

It was love that clearly motivated the people in each place. People may have come because of accessibility and the knowledge that they were welcome. But they stayed because of their desire to love and be loved.

With such a schedule, we were always behind schedule, at least as far as any watch could tell. But watches can only tell time, they cannot measure love. People made great sacrifices and efforts to be there, and waited happily, because love was the reward. At each place, we were fully present, not looking ahead, not worried about the next day (he did let me sleep late!), not cutting anything short.

When each worship celebration was concluded, we would begin to make our way toward the van. But every few steps another person would ask for prayer. As is his custom, Azariah would remove his sandals, place his hand on the people, and pray to God. After the "amen", he would say a personal word, patting the children, offering encouragement. If a material need was obvious, he would open his pouch, quietly present the necessary rupees, note the need in his little book, and move on another few steps.

Azariah's loving presence emulates the style of Jesus. With the exception of the Sermon on the Mount and the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus' ministry was a determined effort to be truly and fully present with one person at a time. His great loving heart was readily apparent to the Roman Centurion seeking healing for his servant. Jesus spotted the lonely and troubled Zacchaeus hiding up in a tree. When the woman with the persistent haemorrhage of blood touched the hem of Jesus' garment, Jesus responded immediately. He never let himself get lost in the busyness of his ministry. After all, his ministry was love.

That truth is never lost on Azariah.

Challenging

Jesus never left anyone or any place the way he found it or them. American clergy, seeking new definitions for what we do, popularized such words as "enablers" and "change agents". Those terms may lack a certain spiritual pizzazz, but they are accurate. To those who seek to follow Christ, the inevitable goal is change. Repentance requires change, and so does conversion. One who repents by definition changes direction. Any sort of conversion requires a change from something to something else, whether in spiritual terms or in business. In short, ministry enables change.

Azariah's ministry mirrors Jesus' determination to bring change to every encounter. Questions to Jesus brought answers that showed a path to change. Sickness was met with healing. Lazarus' death was changed into life. The career paths of his disciples were changed completely. The Old Testament Law was changed, not in word but in spirit, when he redefined adultery to include lust, and killing to include anger. Even those who rejected Jesus were actually rejecting his challenge to change.

Very little change occurs without challenge. The two are so intertwined that I debated whether this characteristic of Azariah's style should be called challenging or changing.

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The ministry in Andhra Pradesh is challenging, not in the sense of being up against overwhelming odds, but in the determination to bring about productive and positive change.

Azariah challenges the old, historic, established church to shake loose from its apathy and smugness. The new churches he starts and builds are challenged to set aside caste prejudices, evangelists and pastors who come to the Asian School of evangelism are challenged to think of compassion and not career, to build the Kingdom of God not a personal empire, to put sacrifice before security.

Hundreds of American and English visitors have sought out the relatively unknown district of Khammam specifically to be challenged. I have brought over one hundred guests, including ten teenagers. A Boy Scout troop came from England. A doctor took a vacation to perform thirty operations. Work campers have built houses, dug ditches, poured foundations, and helped to construct FOO's Faith Home for the Aged and the Redeemer Center for boys. Guest pastors have taught seminars at the Asian School of evangelism.

From my first visit in 1983, to everyone else's visit ever since, every waking hour provides the opportunity for a healthy challenge. This is accomplished not by confrontation or guilt-laden lectures. They are provided by a wealth of experiences. Just as Philip said to Nathanael, "Come and see." and as Azariah says to all, "consider Jesus." he says to each visitor, "Come, see, and consider." The rest he leaves up to the Holy Spirit to work upon each heart.

In 1985, he took me and my friend, Saverio, to visit several families living in wretched conditions. They also suffered with leprosy. A lifetime of neglect and ostracism was further complicated by a government attempt to provide housing after years of living under a bridge. The houses were so poorly constructed that within months, they were abandoned as too dangerous.

In 1987, I took my first work camp to India and one afternoon, we visited the families with leprosy. There was no plan, just a visit. That evening my group gathered for prayer, but they were all too disturbed to pray. They wanted a plan!

The experience challenged our group. The group challenged me. In short order, the challenges went global. I challenged the work campers and FOCI to raise the money to build homes for twenty-two families. Then I challenged Habitat For Humanity to bend the rules to accept this as a project for the transfer of FOCI funds and the use of expertise. The work campers returned to the U.S. to challenge friends and families and churches to give the money. The men and women with leprosy challenged me to believe that they could help with their own "sweat equity" to build the houses. Azariah challenged the government to give the land, provide the permits, waive the fees.

Over the years the challenge has been ongoing. FOCI friends have provided clean, easily attainable water, a trust fund for food, and there is now a community center and a church. It all started with a subtle, non-verbal challenge that led to a determination to change.

Dan Fountain, a legendary American Baptist missionary doctor in Zaire, wrote a letter in 1994 about the change that can come from the right challenge, given in love.

One day, he was taken to the village of Milundu where the people were concerned

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about deforestation. In a traditional rural village, the destruction of a forest is not only an ecological disaster, but can easily destroy the health and welfare of all the people. Indeed, what caught Dr. Fountain's eye at the village meeting was the malnutrition of the children, directly traceable to the loss of the forest.

The answer to deforestation is reforestation. Grow trees! But it became clear that the problem in Milundu was not trees, or lack of trees. The problem was sin. Yes, sin. The sins of broken relationships, of mistrust, of oppression and poor stewardship were destroying the church in Milundu. The death of the forest was only the by-product of the death of Christ-likeness in the church.

Dr. Fountain's advice to plant trees was only useful in conjunction with his challenge to put their spiritual house in order. So he challenged the people to pray together, to study the Bible together, to repent and forgive, to receive God's healing forgiveness. Then, and only then, did the clan divisions and jealousies and personal animosities get defeated and the forest reborn.

You see, it was those divisions and hostilities that led to the misuse of the forest and that overwhelmed every attempt to regrow the forest. As long as the villagers were more interested in hurting one another, in thwarting another clan, in keeping the upper hand, there was no way to restore the delicate balance in the forest.

But when the people in Milundu gathered in the church in Milundu to heal their own brokenness, then the forest in Milundu was also healed.

The challenge of ministry is to constantly remain challenged, to believe that God's whole effort in history and with humanity is to effect change. It may be a change of heart, or of attitude, or of lifestyle, or of belief, or of physical and practical conditions. But it is all rooted in the belief that God wants us to be and have the best we can in this life and the next.

Peaceful

The ministry of Azariah began at a time and in a place that was decidedly non-Christian and occasionally hostile. In some circles in India, even today, being a Hindu is not only a matter of religious preference, but of national honor. In the United States, we can trace our national roots back barely two hundred years, and hardly four hundred years if we want to include the settlers at Jamestown and Plymouth Rock. Yet, with that brief history, we are still able to generate great debate over the importance of Christianity woven into our culture and history.

India's identity as a people, a culture and a history can be traced back several thousand years. Thus, the issue of how Hindu India should be is an intense controversy fueled even more by the so-called "communal violence", usually between Hindus and Moslems, during the past fifty years.

Into that historical mix steps any would-be evangelist. Evangelical zeal combined with youthful exuberance could have spelled disaster for Azariah in the early years. Instead, his zeal came across as commitment and the exuberance had the feel of love. His desire was always to share the wonderful story of God's great loving action in Christ, never to offend or defeat or ridicule.

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One of the most popular forms of evangelism has been the use of pictures. Over the years, the team has progressed from photographs and paintings of the life of Christ, to filmstrips, slide shows, and now feature length movies and videos. India's film industry is the largest in the world, and the people are devoted fans of the cinema. Attracting an audience is never a difficult task.

Years ago, Azariah brought the Gospel message to an outlying village. On that occasion, the plan was to show slides of the ministry featuring the stories of recent converts "telling what made them begin to follow Christ". A science teacher from the village was opposed to this intrusion of a foreign religion, so he encouraged some of his students to cut the wires that led from the slide projector to the generator. The teacher was openly hostile and confrontational, but Azariah's gentle spirit saved the day. By offering to meet the teacher the next day for extensive discussion, they were permitted to pack up their equipment and leave safely.

The next day, Azariah met with twelve villagers, including the teacher. Generally, what people are opposed to or afraid of in such circumstances is that conversion is being manipulated and enticed by fake promises or financial rewards. In other words, people like the science teacher see the social fabric of their community being torn apart by outsiders who take advantage of poor and illiterate villagers, playing to their suspicions, fears and desperate needs.

But Azariah does not generate division. Isaiah 52:7 declares, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace." When Azariah visits a village, the sole purpose is to present the Good News of Jesus who comes as the promised Prince of Peace. It is impossible to effectively represent the Prince of Peace with an attitude that is warlike, divisive, or with a message that is an attack.

When Azariah met with the science teacher and his neighbours, the goal was to allay fears, establish trust, and regain peace. At the beginning of the meeting, the mood was ugly, with all the emphasis on Azariah. "Who are you; what do you do; what do you offer; who do you think you are?" were the tone of the questions. But Azariah's gentle and patient responses quieted their anger and eliminated their bitterness. He made it clear that he did not promise anything, that there was no hidden power or agenda in him. He was not in their village to build himself up or to gain a foothold for his own benefit. Above all, he emphasized that any good work is the result of Christ's power, not his. When the teacher wanted to bring sick people to Azariah for Azariah to heal, his answer was unequivocal. "Do not bring them for me to heal. Did I say that I heal? No! If there is healing, it is Christ who heals, and Christ heals because there is belief. I am not taking credit. Whatever I have told you about others is their testimony, a testimony dependent on their relationship with Jesus Christ. We seek nothing for ourselves."

The humility, earnestness and gentleness of Azariah's response convinced the villagers that these people came in peace, so tea was ordered for all to share together.

This story reminded me of an experience I had walking across Harvard University to take a class. In an open courtyard during the lunch hour, I came across a public debate between a representative of a campus Christian group and an atheist. Throughout the hour long debate, the atheist was loving and compassionate, the Christian was stern, combative, judgmental and angry. When I told this story to Azariah, his response got to the heart of the

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matter. “Did he want people to know the love of God which is for all, or did he just want to make his point?” For Azariah, God’s love in Christ is the point.

Accepting

For many years, Azariah’s work as an itinerant evangelist took him mainly from one village to another in rural Andhra Pradesh. The very presence of a stranger would spark interest, and as he became known to the villagers, people could anticipate his purpose and message. The fact that people were accepting of him was due, in large part, to his own accepting nature. There is nothing in Azariah’s ministry that is combative, threatening, or judgmental. He looks for the best in people, he accepts and loves them as they are.

In the last fifteen years, the itinerant part of his evangelism has taken him regularly across America and England, bringing him a whole new audience. That audience runs the gamut from a fellow passenger sitting next to him on a long airplane trip to guest appearances at Rotary Clubs and visits with churches that may not be used to an evangelist in their midst.

I asked him how his Christianity gets revealed in such situations. “I always desire to know someone in a gentle way,” he explained. “Conversation can be helpful, especially if your concern comes through. Your conversation is like the salt that adds taste, just as Jesus said, You are the salt of the earth.’ So I try to be like salt, not taking away, but adding. Through words and actions, you can make a person happy to be sitting next to you. Like Paul, in such situations, I try to be all things to all people, I try to understand them. It is very important to be receptive to their conversation, to listen to their difficulty. We are taught to go an extra mile, that means, sometimes, to go beyond good manners. That is what I mean when I say I desire to know someone in a gentle way. Let people see Christ in you.”

Among Christians, it is easy to have so much zeal for the Good News that we just wish everyone would sit down, be quiet and listen to us. We want to be accepted, heard, understood and followed. Our enthusiasm to share God’s love and the opportunity for salvation is understandable, but it can make us seem overbearing to others.

Azariah’s suggestion is that we must begin by accepting, listening and understanding. There is always the opportunity for people to hear about Christ from us. But the gentle way begins with allowing people to see Christ in us, revealed in our acceptance of them as worthy of being known and heard.

The idea of acceptance is an important one. Acceptance is a lot stronger than tolerance, but it does not imply agreement.

The relative value of these words was driven home to me when the clergy in my community purchased a full page Thanksgiving Day newspaper ad to promote tolerance. To my surprise, tolerance was controversial enough to generate letters to the editor in opposition to the ad and to cause many clergy not to sign the ad. Yet tolerance is about the lowest level of human interaction possible. It really implies nothing more than to allow another person to exist without being oppressed or hurt.

Acceptance goes a step further. This is the willingness to accept another person as a total package, recognizing that there is intrinsic value in who they are, what they believe, in their hopes and dreams, in their ideas and in their daily life. It does not weaken your identity

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to recognize that someone else's identity has value.

During my years of auditing courses at Harvard, my favorite professor was Diana Eck who has written the book I wish I had written. In *Encountering God* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1993), Dr. Eck tells her own story, spiritual and otherwise, with great pride and emotion. But woven through her life's journey are the stories of Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems and Jains told with great respect. She has not settled for "tolerating" them in her life or in her classroom, nor has she denounced her Methodist Protestant Christianity. Instead, she has learned to rejoice and celebrate the faith that is so real in the devotion of others outside her very mainstream Christianity. Eck asks, "How can those of us who are Christians articulate our own faith fully aware of the depth and breadth of the faith of others? How do we affirm our own holy ground even as we sojourn in the holy lands of other faith traditions?" (Ibid, pp.11)

She then quotes A.G. Hogg, the principal of South India's Madras Christian College when he addressed the 1938 International Missionary Council. His relationships with devout Hindu students caused him to feel not only respect, but "religious reverence". This led him to say to the Council, "is there any such thing as a religious faith which in quality or texture is definitely not Christian, but in the approach to which one ought to put the shoes off the feet, recognizing that one is on the holy ground of a two-sided commerce between God and Man? In non-Christian faith may we meet with something that is not merely a seeking, but in a real measure a finding, and a finding by contrast with which a Christian may be helped to make fresh discoveries in his own finding of God in Christ?" (Ibid, pp.21)

This is an attitude of acceptance that can grant to another person not only the right to exist, but a "real measure" of respect, acknowledging that something genuine and reverent is going on between the worshipper and God, Hogg's "two-sided commerce".

Azariah extends this acceptance to everyone, choosing to assume the best in others at all times. During our many years of friendship, he has helped me deal with a full range of pastoral, professional and personal matters, and his advice always begins with an attitude of acceptance.

In Azariah's corner of the world, acceptance is a precious gift to bring to daily encounters.

With regard to religion, we might look at it in these terms. If a Christian and Hindu were to agree to simply tolerate each other, they might be saying, "You are wrong! You're a pagan, a fool, you're walking in darkness. You'll never get to heaven or nirvana that way. But we won't have you killed or beaten up in the middle of the night, or treated unfairly during the day!"

At the other end of the spectrum is agreement and affirmation. In this instance our Hindu and Christian neighbours in the Global Village would paraphrase an Hispanic proverb to say, "My religion is your religion. It's all the same, we're equally right, you are as true as me, there is no particular merit or advantage to my story."

Instead, Azariah has chosen the attitude of acceptance. He can look at others and see people who are working hard, who are trying, who are struggling to survive, who are yearning to know God, who will wrestle as Jacob did hoping to be blessed. He brings to such encounters such spiritual maturity, confidence and level of respect that he receives, in return,

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something that everyone prizes: trust.

If we are concerned with a style of ministry, looking for characteristics that work for the glory of God, then we should take seriously an element of style that results in trust.

Doing

I once asked the pastor of a large African-American Baptist church how it became so big. “It’s easy. As soon as they walk in the door, I give them a job. Before they know it, they’ve been saved, baptized and here for twenty years!”

Azariah knows that ministry, by its nature, is active. Certainly, there is a place for piety, quiet, reflection. But, he told me, “Even waiting on the Lord takes energy. Even praying and waiting is not the same as doing nothing.”

Doing does have its down side. Busy work, for example, is active, but it is purposeless, it is done just to consume time. Purposeful doing, however, is vital to Christian ministry.

Doing can also be a substitute for believing. For many years there was a crisis of faith in some mainline churches, and as they searched for a reason to be, they started to do. Noble social projects were undertaken, causes were espoused, good deeds were done. In the process, a lot of people drifted away because the doing was devoid of the faith component.

For Azariah, the doing and the believing are inseparable. Jesus, if you will, is the foreman of every project.

St. James wrote in his Epistle, “Faith without works is dead.” (James 2:17) Azariah would be among those who believe that the reverse is equally true. Faith and works go hand in hand, each is evidence of the other, they compliment each other, each is lost without the other. Indeed, in real ministry, they are indistinguishable.

This can give rise to confusion. In 1994, I attended a mammoth World Book Fair in New Delhi, India’s capital. Books from every corner of the world, often unseen and unread in the West, were available. I made some purchases from an intriguing author who had written several books against Christianity and especially against their missionary activities. It is his contention that every good work done by Christians has the hidden agenda of destroying Hinduism, undermining Indian culture, and converting everyone who benefits from Christian social action. Quoting liberally from missionary letters home and from U.S. and British church magazines, he makes his point that every good work is but a front for coercive conversion.

It was impossible for him to accept that any good work done by a Christian could be motivated solely by love or a faith response to Jesus Christ, without an ulterior motive corrupting the “doing”.

He would change his mind after one visit to Khammam. From early in the morning to late at night, faith is lived out in good works without any hidden agenda or ulterior motive. For more than forty years, Azariah’s team has been crystal clear in purpose and motive. Motivated by God’s love, they simply try to do everything in their power to make God’s love real and personal. That may mean medicine or food, a house or an artificial limb, education

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or a marriage. It may mean the promise of eternal life or the forgiveness of sins, the Parable of the Prodigal son or the Good Samaritan, the value of the Cross or of prayer. Drawing from the well of spiritual and physical/material resources, the team is ready to use whatever they have to do whatever they can.

Earlier, I quoted the popular rendition of James 2.17, “Faith without works is dead.” The King James version provides a more telling translation, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” Faith and works need each other. Alone, each is empty and dead.

This chapter began with an F.M. Meyer quote found in Azariah’s diary. Meyer wrote, “The act of consecration is cancelled by one reserve. To give 99 parts and to withhold the hundredth undoes the whole transaction...” This speaks to the endless debate about faith and works, evangelism or social action. St. James, F.B. Meyer and Azariah all argue in favour of 100% consecration and against withholding any part. If, in the practice of our evangelism, we withhold the hundredth part of social action, or in the practice of good works, we withhold the hundredth part of faith then we “undo the whole transaction”.

Azariah is an itinerant evangelist who refuses to allow that “act of consecration (to be) cancelled by one reserve.” In a lifetime committed to believing his time is devoted to doing.

For the visitor to Khammam, the hardest part to imagine is how Azariah’s team can possibly determine what gets done and what does not. Even though Khammam is far away from the storied slums of Calcutta and Bombay, or just the urban crush even of Hyderabad, nevertheless, the needs and opportunities for ministry are literally endless. Prioritizing would seem to be a hopeless task.

For Azariah, the answer lies in a simple concept he calls, “doing the needful”. That is our next chapter.

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SIX

Karmika Nagar: Doing the Needful

Unbelief always considers it too soon or too late for God to Work. Faith always expects God to work now. God is the God of the present moment and the present need.

(Diary, February 24, 1953)

Karmika Nagar

Azariah has never asked me for anything, not for himself, not for others. After a dusty work camp during the still hot monsoon season, I have left behind clothes that were too soiled and dirty to be brought home only to find Azariah wearing them two years later. When we talk long distance in the weeks leading up to my visit to India, I will press him five or six times to name something I could bring and eventually he will mention some item like batteries or a calculator to help in the office. Through FOCl, we have sent generous funds in support of various ministries nurtured by Azariah. But he has never asked for a penny. When a Habitat For Humanity official leveled some unjust criticism at the Habitat project in Khammam, Azariah was unfazed. "If you want to send the money, that will be fine. If you don't want to send the money, we will go on, it is fine."

This underscores one of the great recurring themes in this ministry, Doing The Needful. I capitalize it because it is as close to unwavering doctrine as I've found in the work. Eventually, everything boils down to God's unqualified Love pushing us to Do The Needful. As with everything else in this ministry, the motivation comes from scripture and the desire to do what Jesus would do.

When Christians think about helping others, we usually gravitate to Matthew 25:31-46, a portion often referred to as The Final Exam. In these verses, Jesus described the final judgment that will take place "when the Son of man comes in his glory" (Verse 31). The world will be divided into two groups of people. One group will be invited to "Take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Verse 34). The other folks will have to hear these awful words, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire" (Verse 41).

On what basis is the final judgment to be made? Jesus' criteria deal simply with the needful. Verses 35 and 36 state, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. "Those who are condemned are described as people who had exactly the same opportunities to do the needful, but chose not to.

In Jesus' telling of the story, both groups of people are stunned by the criteria on which their eternal life is being determined. Both groups of people have no recollection of ever having seen Jesus in any of the conditions he mentions, and they have no recollection of either helping or ignoring him. Jesus' response has forever defined a crucial role for Christian ministry. "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me ... whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." (Verses 40 and 45)

This is certainly one motivation for doing the needful. In part, Jesus' point seems to

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be that if we actually saw Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior, the Son of God, standing in front of us hungry and thirsty and cold, we would fall all over ourselves trying to help him. To our everlasting (literally!) surprise, Jesus is saying, “that Is me standing there!”

But when Azariah considers the needful, he points to other scriptures. He points to the great prophet Isaiah, who wrote:

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs.”

(Isaiah 58:9b-11a)

Azariah cites a similar message from St. Paul to the Philippians. After thanking them for their concern and gifts in caring for him when he “was in need” (Philippians 4:10, 16, 18), Paul then promises them that “God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus”. (Verse 19)

Isaiah and St. Paul both invite us to hold a mirror up to God in such a way that we can see God and us in the same frame. Are there any similarities? Do our actions at all resemble the God who “will satisfy your needs” and “meet all your needs”?

These verses tell us what God is like, the One who is constantly doing the needful in our behalf. What, then, are we doing?

The slaughter that took place in Rwanda in the spring of 1994 is a case in point. It was estimated that 500,000 people were murdered for no reason other than being in some way different from the one doing the murdering. God has done the needful in Rwanda. God provides a pleasant and fertile land for the present, and eternal life for the here-after. So, I dare say, it was not God who neglected to do the needful in Rwanda. Instead, humanity has to look at itself. Germany, a nation with Christianity as its state religion, was the colonial power in Rwanda. After Germany lost World War 1, Belgium, another predominately Christian country, took over the colonial responsibilities. Exactly how concerned were either of these allegedly Christian and enlightened countries about doing the needful in Rwanda? Then, as this massive slaughter took place, was there any determination to do the needful by neighbouring countries, the Organization of African Unity, the United Nations or the former colonial powers? No. God took care of the eternal, spiritual needful. Humanity failed to act on the earthly, urgent, needful.

The needful are our opportunities to do unto others as if we were doing for Jesus.

What is the needful? When Azariah and I were discussing this we were sitting with my father at his dining room table. Dad had been listening to Azariah’s stories and scriptures when the concept became crystal clear. “Doing the needful is when we don’t have an angle.”

My father is right. Doing the needful is a heartfelt, gut level, often spontaneous response to the opportunities placed before us. It is devoid of ego, personal gain or any advantage. Azariah goes so far as to suggest that the needful takes precedence over our evangelistic goals. He told us, “We need to help people see the need for showing concern for the neighbour, whoever or wherever that neighbour may be, just as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The very act of doing the needful is our response to following

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Jesus' call to serve, whether people see the name of Jesus, or our church's name, or not. We don't seek credit for ourselves or for God. God doesn't need our credit. We simply seek to be Christ like. When we do the needful, it is Christ in us doing it, even if we do not necessarily say Christ's name."

The idea of "The needful" is compelled by two forces coming together: urgency and opportunity. If something urgent needs to be done and you are aware of it and in a position to help it to happen, that is the needful. We don't need to be looking for what someone else should be doing. Instead, focus on what we can be doing. When you have the opportunity to address an urgency, that is the needful. Doing the needful is taking advantage of the opportunity to meet the urgency. As James wrote, "Anyone who knows the good to do and doesn't do it, sins." (James 4:17)

It's not surprising, then, that Azariah's ministry is not the product of three or five year plans. When one is constantly open to the spontaneous call of God, that takes priority over planning. There is no angle to this work, no ulterior motive, no hidden agenda.

In 1992, I wrote a book that sought to expand on the popular idea of the theology of the hammer, which put some Biblical principles to the efforts of volunteers to do good works. I want to take that level of energy, enthusiasm and commitment that Christian volunteers often bring to soup kitchens, house building or any other efforts among the needy, and bring it into the workplace, retirement, the classroom or the other more secular voluntary activities of good people. I suggested that our goal should be to use every effort as an offering to God, thus making sacred all that we do. (Faith At Work, Smyth and Helwys, 1994).

In effect, I was enlarging a theology of the hammer to encompass a whole theology of work. One chapter, "The Fire Tender", got to the heart of the matter when it comes to doing the needful, I wrote about "The Theology of the Obvious" which calls us to deal in a Christ like way with whatever is in front of us. When we are face to face with compelling human need, the urgent need for a response ought to be obvious.

I first read about The Fire Tender in the New York Times just before I brought a large group of teenagers from Massachusetts to spend their mid-winter vacation in New York City serving God by serving others. The Fire Tender was a mysterious, eccentric middle-aged man who showed up one day on the lower east side of Manhattan and started to cook. He took over an empty lot, gathered some scrap wood, built a fire, put on a kettle and a pot of coffee and started to peel vegetables. As time went on, the Fire Tender's stew became famous. By the time I visited him he was feeding a thousand people a day, twenty hours a day. I think he told me it cost him 19 cents a meal. The Fire Tender and his wife lived at the empty lot, sleeping in a tent. They were both left-over hippies who had not surrendered their idealism. Yes, they were different. They were not mainstream. They would never be funded. In this long-forsaken corner of urban hell, once poor people started to get fed from a stew pot on an empty lot for 19 cents a meal, suddenly an empty lot became precious property.

What a perfect setting for my teenage work campers from suburban U.S.A.!

While our youngsters cut, peeled, sliced and diced I asked the Fire Tender, "Who are all these people, what are they like?"

"Murderers, rapists, drug addicts, pushers, muggers, the like?"

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I don't know if he was pulling my leg or testing my resolve. They sure looked like what we expect such people to look like. But as they lined up for their stew, as they bantered back and forth with the kids, as they helped out washing the pans at the fire hydrant, they seemed just like people, neighbours, even friends.

“You a Baptist?”, yelled one, “I'm a Baptist?”.

“Hey, you with the Yankee hat, I'm a Met fan - you must be crazy!”

“Hey, sweet thing, what are you doing here? This is your vacation? You paid to come here!! You are crazy God bless you. We love you.”

Late one afternoon, before the evening winter cold set in and the dinner rush began, I sat down with the Fire Tender in the tent. I felt it was time for me to learn something profound, deep, spiritual, and I wanted to learn this truth from someone who lived and worked on the cutting edge of real ministry.

So I asked the Fire Tender, “Why do you do this?”. He looked at me with incredible patience. “Isn't it obvious?” It was a statement, not a question. It was a creed. It was a theology.

Years ago, the comedian Flip Wilson had a popular television show. One of his weekly skits had him portraying a minister, pastor of The Church of What's Happening Now. Everyone thought it was funny, outrageous, a bit irreverent.

The Fire Tender lived in the world of the obvious. So, on one corner of the world of the obvious, he established a Church of What's Happening Now.

What was happening, what was obvious was that people were hungry, lonely, thirsty, hopeless, cold. Thousands of real human beings had nothing to eat, nowhere to go, no community, no warmth, no one to count on. For the Fire Tender the solution was simple, cheap, obvious. He took over an empty lot, gathered some fire wood, put on a stew pot and kettle of coffee and invited in the neighbours, a thousand of them!

The Fire Tender was simply being Biblical, following the example of Jesus. In Luke 14, Jesus tells the Parable of the Great Banquet. “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, “Come, for everything is now ready.’ “ (Luke 14:16-17, NIV.) My friend, the Fire Tender, was such a servant. In his world of the obvious, he looked around at his neighbours and he saw need, urgent and appalling need. Society, too busy with other priorities, could not imagine needing what the Fire Tender offered at his corner lot Great Banquet. (Luke 14:16-17) Most people could not imagine wanting to be surrounded by the raffraff of that neighbourhood, but the Fire Tender saw them as guests, friends, neighbours.

That is the spirit which Azariah brings to doing the needful. In our conversations, Azariah began to list the ministries that are needful in his little corner of the world. “Water,” he said. “Water, just clean water is often the most needful. When we know that someone needs help and we don't give it, it is Christ we ignore. Also, food. There are always those who need simple food. When FOCI built the homes with the families with leprosy, then we saw the need for water. Then your friend (Lynn Murguia), saw that they could not easily draw the water because of the leprosy disease in the hands, so she arranged for an easier

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system. But there were some so sick or ravaged by leprosy that they could not even beg for food, so she provided a trust fund for food. This is the needful, as step by step we see what needs to be done and what we can do.”

“And there is so much more. Hope is needful. If we will show Christ with love, we show that there is hope for all. There are so many people with none to give an assisting hand. Widows, outcasts, and so many children that are so poor and isolated that they are not even within reach of government programs.

The needful means to help children have a better future, to provide for health and education, to give immunization. Azariah is an itinerant evangelist by profession. That conjures up an image of preaching on street corners and at revival service and, as we have seen, doing everything possible to present a loving Christ to all. But Azariah brings the same evangelical zeal to doing the needful. An evangelist, by definition, is one who brings the Good News. Azariah is as zealous for bringing the good news of immunization, of good health, as he is for telling the stories of God’s love in the Bible. Very active in the Khammam Rotary Club, he led the Polio-Plus Program for his district that immunized children against seven childhood diseases. His Rotary contacts led to the establishment of the Artificial Limb Center in Khammam that provides legs for those whose lives would be otherwise cheated.

For a ten-year-old girl who lost her leg in a bus accident, or for the thirty five year old farmer who lost his foot in a farm injury, the needful is an artificial limb. Paul Davis and I took eight students from FOCI’s school in Hyderabad to visit the Rotary Artificial Limb Center. We met two men who now have a career of building and fitting the limbs. On two occasions, we saw a person walking for the first time with the freedom of a new leg. In all honesty, I felt the joy that must have been present in that house when Jesus said to the paralytic, “Rise up and walk!”. I witnessed a miracle as God’s grace worked through the generosity of the Rotary Club, the vision of Azariah, the skills of limb makers, and the joy of the recipient. The needful was definitely being done.

Doing the needful is not very complicated. Azariah explained the overall philosophy of it to me in a way that made it clear that every church, every person who loves the Lord and wishes to serve the Lord God, can put into practice. “First”, Azariah said simply, “We can always begin by praying with a person which is like introducing the person to the Greater Person who can meet all the needs. We can help people to know that someone cares for them and loves them just like Jesus does. After all, we must remember that when we know there is a need for help which we can do and don’t give it, it is the same as not giving help to Christ in need.”

All this sounds well and good, but when I consider the overwhelming needs in my modern city and my middle class church, I cannot even begin to imagine the process of determining what to do among the poor in India. My problem, of course, is that I am focusing on the size of the problem... not on the size of God. In seminary, I remember reading a book, *Your God is Too Small*, by J.B. Phillips. That is not a problem for Azariah. “Whatever comes my way or crosses my path, I see it as God providing an opportunity.” Azariah smiled, as only a person who is fully trusting can smile, and went on, “If God chooses to place the opportunity before me, God will provide the way. So every opportunity to do the needful is not a burden or inconvenience. We do this together!”

I must confess that as an American pastor, I find myself defending against being taken

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advantage of by people who claim to be in need. The spiritual side of me would love to think that God is placing before me an opportunity to do the needful and that God will be my partner in fulfilling the need. But more often than not, I feel like I'm being conned or exploited or scammed. When I said these things to Azariah, he understood the frustration without accepting it as inevitable. "It is always important," he emphasized, "to help a person to see the needs of others to whom both should be giving a hand. Even if someone is taking advantage of us, that person can learn to care, but not if we just reject them. Why not talk with them, why not listen; why not tell them that you feel used, why not let them explain, why not follow up with them? Why just give and forget them, or reject them?! Besides, poor people also know others poorer than them, so help them to see their situation in light of others even as you help them, so that they may be content with what they have and compassionate with others."

For Azariah, the needful is the obvious and the urgent that God seems to have placed before him, and it runs the full gamut. He is vitally concerned about overcoming social evil, like the dowry and caste differences, because he recognizes that such overarching social evils have a very ugly practical ramification.

For example, when one considers the issue of dowry, we might agree that it devalues women and turns marriage into a marketplace. But Azariah sees it on another level. The burden of providing a dowry in an arranged marriage (more than 90% of Indian marriages are arranged) falls entirely on the bride's family. While a poor family might be able to graciously accept the economic hardship of providing a dowry for one daughter, one can imagine how the second, third or fourth daughter becomes a liability. Being viewed as a liability damages the whole family relationship leading to anger, resentment, bitterness which in turn, leads to violence.

That violence takes several forms. At one extreme, a greedy husband might "accidentally" kill his wife in a suspicious kitchen fire, or drive her to suicide in the hopes of marrying someone else to gain more dowry. At the other extreme, families may take horrible steps to prevent having daughters to have to "marry off". Modern technology enables middle and upper class women to have a sonogram to determine the sex of an unborn child. If it is an unwanted daughter, an abortion will take care of her. For a poor family, the option is infanticide, the killing of a newborn who just happens to be a female. In one of the most difficult of Elizabeth Bumiller's chapters in her book, *May You Be The Mother of a Hundred Sons*, she recounts with powerful detail the killings of infant daughters in rural Tamil Nadu, a state just to the south of Andhra Pradesh.

In such circumstances a social evil takes on a very personal face, and doing the needful becomes the care and nurture of girls in the villages of Khammam district. Azariah's child sponsorship program has grown to include almost three hundred children. FOCI cares for ninety children. We are beginning a small girl's home as an experiment while continuing to provide support for girls in their village so that they will not be thought of, or treated as, a liability.

For someone whose life is threatened, the needful is the opportunity to live. For someone who is devalued, the needful is to be valued. Step by step, family by family, daughter by daughter, village by village, the social evil that causes the threat and the devaluation can be defeated.

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Doing the needful requires the openness of an open mind and open eyes. It means avoiding the act of being oblivious. I have heard tourists boast of developing the ability to not just ignore but to actually not see the poor, the beggars, the homeless on the streets. Business people and shoppers in major cities try to travel the subways and walk the streets with a determined step and a straight ahead stare that blocks out the needs that can seem to harass from all sides.

The art of doing the needful is exactly the opposite of the act of being oblivious. With God's perspective, the needful is not harassment, it is opportunity. The opportunity then requires discernment, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which helps us to know what the priority need is. (1 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Azariah told me a story about some handicapped people that he knew. He did not specify whether they had polio, or were accident victims, or if they had been born with birth defects. Whatever the cause, they were recognized by the Indian government as handicapped and therefore deserving of some special help.

A particular form of help was housing. The families were given building lots by the government with the understanding that the people were to dig the foundations and then fill in the foundations within a certain amount of time. If they did this, then the government would complete the houses by raising the walls and putting on the roofs.

I have dug foundations in India, and I am not handicapped. With the sun beating down, the sweat pouring off, cool drinks in short supply, hard ground underneath, huge rocks in the way, and only the simplest of tools to work with, it takes a monumental effort to dig a foundation. When the foundation trenches are dug all around, then they are filled with large stone blocks carefully arranged so that the foundation is solid and even. It is hard, back breaking work under the best of conditions.

For the handicapped people, the task was next to impossible and as a result they were in danger of having the lots taken away from them.

When Azariah heard of their plight, he sold his camera for 5,000 rupees, about 400 U.S. dollars at the time and found additional money to get the job done. This was the needful at that time.

The needful is when urgency and immediacy come together with opportunity. For those families struggling with debilitating handicaps, the immediate need was not the house, it was to avoid the forfeiture of the lots which would have prevented them from ever having a house.

The government had been willing to do its part of the needful, the providing of lots and the completion of the house. From an administrative and governmental point of view, they had done their job. But Azariah, close to the scene, could see that there was a needful urgency that had to be overcome first. The lots had to be saved, and he had the will to make the personal sacrifices necessary to accomplish the needful.

Seventeen families, probably a hundred people or more, now live in a healthy environment because of this unique definition of the needful.

Sometimes, the needful is obvious, but the gift of discernment helps us to know what

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is truly needful. Remember the story of the Christian forest ranger who was set upon by poachers who were wondering whether to kill him or not? What would be the needful at that point? One suggestion might be that with his final breath, he should warn the poachers that their murder of an innocent forest ranger would lead them to eternal hell fire. The poachers were on the verge of losing eternal life with Cod. Such a message might seem to be the needful.

However, the forest ranger saw the needful in one last opportunity to express confidence in Cod's love. Simply and humbly, he made it clear that he was not afraid, that a man named Jesus gave him courage and strength even in death and that he would be glad to help them know the full story of Jesus. That was the needful. If he was to be exiting this world, he was going to exit with faith and integrity. If the poachers were considering an evil deed, they would first know that there was another option for their life and their attitude. It turned out that what he needed to say was what they needed to hear, and they all lived happily ever after right into eternity.

Doing the needful may lead from one opportunity to the next, opening door after door until what seemed like one good deed becomes a life's work. In the 1950's, when Azariah was still building a team and relationships and credibility, a Hindu man came to him with a surprising request. He wanted help in sending his son and a neighbour's boy to a Christian school. A missionary advised Azariah against getting involved in such an issue that would only take up time and distract him from more useful work as an evangelist.

Azariah admitted that he did not want to do it, it was not a top priority, but.... the man asked! The needful, however surprising and puzzling, was dropped into his lap.

He made arrangements with a local school, promising to raise the necessary money at a time when he and Sister Mary were living on faith entirely.

During the week, a number of people gathered to study the Bible. They were interested in the Christian Gospel brought to them by Azariah, but they still kept some of their old habits, like smoking. This led him to throw out a challenge to the Bible Study group, "You spend a lot of money on smoking, cut back a little and give one and one half rupees for these boys to go to school".

Their response was delightful. "Don't tell us to cut smoking, just ask for one and one half rupees!"

From that humble and totally unexpected beginning, the ministry in Khammam has become a major force in the education of poor children. As years went by, people who learned of his work or who visited him or who met him on visits to England would insist on giving him "pocket money". Since the evangelistic team counted on God to provide for their needs, the "pocket money" went into this new ministry providing support and education for the children. A German mission agency took interest in helping the local St. Mary's School which has over one thousand students. During my second visit to Khammam, I found St. Mary's overcrowded with six large classrooms started, but unfinished for lack of money. FOCI took that on as one of its earliest projects, completing the classrooms.

When Azariah agreed to chair the Habitat for Humanity committee which launched India's first and certainly most successful Habitat project, they began in a neighbourhood

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called Pakabanda. As the first houses were completed, the need for a neighbourhood school was obvious. In other words, one example of the needful, houses, was replaced by another example of the needful, education.

A third example of the needful entered into the picture. Under Habitat guidelines, a family is required to pay for their house over a period of ten to twenty years. Khammam Habitat has been a great witness in building the most simple and decent house for a very low cost (now about 1,000 U.S. dollars) for very, very poor families. Many of the families are right on the edge of being able to afford or not afford even the tiny monthly payment.

One widow in Pakabanda just could not make the repayment. Here, all the needfuls in Pakabanda came together.

Azariah arranged for the woman to rent her small house, just during the day, to the community for the beginning of a little grammar school. Education came to Pakabanda, the widow could make her repayments, she and her son had a house.

Nowadays, Azariah's work includes the support of almost three hundred children. This support makes sure that they can get proper health care, can go to school and reassures desperately poor families that they can afford to let their child go to school.

FOCI's Redeemer Christian Center is home to over two hundred and thirty children who quietly study their lessons early each morning, march off with great zest to a nearby school and loudly rehearse their lessons in the evening.

Another school has been started near a large cluster of Habitat houses, and FOCI is beginning to help that school.

In the nearby village of Kothur where untouchables have long felt the cold ostracism of society, doing the needful grew from evangelistic visits by Azariah, to a well funded by an English Rotary Club, to a church and school built by FOCI, to a new school built and supported by the government. By responding to the needful, Kothur has gone in one decade from being untouchable to being blessed.

As mentioned earlier, Azariah never asks me for anything. Whenever I am in India, I am simply given the opportunity to see things as they are, to meet people, to make what I will of the myriad needfuls that need doing.

In July of 1987, I took a work camp of twenty seven people to India. On our first day in India, after overcoming jet lag, the group went on a tour of Hyderabad. However, four of us were asked to join Azariah for a visit to a school.

"God works in mysterious ways", puzzled humans always say to one another. The previous day my daughter, Camaron, had been quite sick. Yet we had been expected to visit a woman for no apparent reason other than courtesy. She was a spiritual woman, still struggling with the Hinduism of her upbringing and the Christianity that intrigued her. A year earlier a dream had led her to send me an unusual stick, a piece of cloth, and an auspicious amount of rupees, though we had never met. When she consulted Azariah about her dream, I was the only one who fit the situation of the dream.

With that unusual background, I took my sick daughter along for a visit to a complete

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stranger ten thousand miles away from home in one hundred and five degree heat. Our hostess was a pleasant and hospitable person, a judge's wife, with a picture of Christ hanging among the gods of Hinduism along the living room wall. Santa Claus was there on the wall, also.

When she discovered that Camaron was sick, she immediately excused herself to go to the kitchen. In a short time, she returned with a tall glass of hot goat's milk generously infused with peppers. Too sick to argue, Camaron drank the milk and was immediately all better.

That set the stage for the next day. If she had still been sick, we would certainly have to spend the day quietly resting while the others toured. Instead, we accepted Azariah's invitation to visit a school with my friend, Saverio, and Camaron's best high school friend, Jennifer.

Robert Frost wrote, "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I, I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference." Visiting that little school in the Karmika Nagar neighbourhood has certainly made all the difference in my life, the lives of our family, the progress of FOCI, and the hopes of hundreds of students.

It is also a fascinating example of doing the needful.

In the summer of 1987, the Karmika Nagar school was barely 3 sheds housing the education aspirations of two hundred students. The environment was an obstacle to learning, hot and dusty in the long dry season, muddy in the monsoon season, without electricity or water, dark, unsanitary, and overcrowded.

But none of this was mentioned, pointed out or discussed. Instead, we were greeted enthusiastically by the principal, K. Vidya Sagar, and the few hardy teachers. The students put on a short welcome program of songs and dances, then it was time to go. End of visit.

Weeks later, we returned to the United States with hundreds of memories of our work and visits that took us from humble villages to the Taj Mahal, from dynamic church services to dawn worship along the Ganges River in the sacred city of Varanasi, from our visit to the struggling village of leprous families to the place where Buddha found enlightenment.

Karmika Nagar was long forgotten.

As Camaron and I were reunited at home with Bonnie and Aaron, Bonnie broke the news to me that my mother was very ill. Three weeks earlier she had visited us to watch Aaron play baseball. Three months later my mother, Astrid, would be dead of leukemia.

Like many families, we tried to make sense of our sorrow by thinking of a way to honor Mom's memory. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Camaron and I came up with the same idea to build a "proper" school for the children in Karmika Nagar. The word "proper" in India is used to convey the idea of permanent, lasting, appropriate, worthy. As we shared the idea with our family, everyone agreed that a project dedicated to children would truly honor my mother. My father was especially pleased, and very quickly we put together a plan for the school.

The land under and around the sheds had to be purchased, plans drawn up, supplies

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purchased, masons and carpenters hired. To this day, some of my favorite photographs show about a dozen children, perhaps eight or nine years old, carrying bricks and water and slate, helping to tear down the sheds and build the new school.

By July, 1989, the Astrid Rowe Memorial School (ARMS) was built and bustling with the energy of over four hundred children. We brought another work camp of thirty three people, and this time everyone went to the school for the official dedication ceremonies. Gifts and garlands were given to us, my dad and I were asked to speak, and then we were treated to hours of songs, dances and celebration in honor of the new life this humble school brought to the community.

As time went on, our involvement with ARMS brought to light more and more opportunities to serve our loving Cod. Each opportunity presented another example of the needful right before our eyes. A school without resource books needs books. Classrooms without blackboards need a blackboard. A science lab without equipment needs equipment. Children without benches need benches. Overcrowded classrooms need additional space. Temporary spaces need permanence. Such basic needs as water and toilets for a growing school became urgent and obvious.

One by one, FOCI tackled these items of the needful. Yet to this day not one thing has been requested of me. We write back and forth, I visit regularly, and as God chooses to stir my heart or guide my eyes upon some need, we do the needful. Over the years, I have learned to accept Azariah's wisdom that if God lays before you a need, God will also assist you in providing the way to meet that need. Therefore, doing the needful is never a burden. As we respond to one area of need, another point of the needful is not made to suffer.

For example, as we have increased our attempts to do the needful at the Astrid Rowe Memorial School, we have also increased the number of children at FOCI's Redeemer Center and elderly at The Faith Home, we have expanded our ministry with the mentally handicapped and involvement in evangelism.

I am often frustrated that I can so easily accept doing the needful in India while failing to convince people in my pastoral ministry in the USA that we can make the same choices on faith. One exasperated church member said to me, "You're wasting all that money on TV ministry when our roof needs to be repaired."

Our Sunday service is broadcast live on radio and cable TV. To improve this outreach, our church invested in equipment. That church member could only see it as competition for dollars making it possible to only do one thing, and in his mind, we were choosing the wrong one. What Azariah has taught me is that if God is convinced that both are needful, then both will happen, both will be funded somehow. I don't want to believe that it is poverty that enables us to be bold and daring in living our faith, while prosperity results in being cautious and halting, but it does seem that way.

In my relationship with Azariah's ministry, the underlying assumption has always been that God will provide a way to get done what God wants done. The needful is there, right in front of us, awaiting our attention. God is there, right alongside us, ready to help us with the details.

At The Astrid Rowe School, the details of the needful have stirred the hearts of many

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people who have been generous in response. In the classroom we now have benches for the students, a desk and chair for the teacher, blackboards, electricity for light and overhead fans. A thousand dollars worth of reference books were sent and are considered so precious that a sturdy cabinet was purchased to protect and preserve them. A small library has been started. Temporary classrooms, erected quickly under the sweltering sun, have been improved and enclosed. Educational toys, rudimentary sports equipment, the beginnings of a science lab have been provided.

To think that it all began with a simple invitation by Azariah to come and see, an invitation made possible by a tall glass of warm goat's milk generously peppered!

In 1994, Paul Davis and I were able to enjoy an extended visit with ARMS and the students. We spent our first five days interacting with the school, visiting the classes, talking at length with students, teachers and staff. The Annual Sports Day competitions were held, and on the national holiday of Republic Day, we participated in all the formal activities. That day culminated in the ARMS Annual Science Fair, a school wide project that has improved dramatically year by year.

Paul and I then took eight students on a week long retreat to Khammam, along with the principal, Sagar. They stayed in the new hostel at the Redeemer Christian Center, and we stayed next door on the grounds of the Faith Home. For seven days, we were all immersed in one another's lives, eating, travelling, sharing, worshipping together.

The retreat coincided with FOCI's Tenth Anniversary celebrations, so together we visited all the FOCI projects, met with our co-workers, laid the ground work for the future. Day after day our eight students from ARMS enjoyed the fellowship of the mentally handicapped youngsters at Bethel, the boys and girls at Redeemer, the elderly at Faith Home, the families with leprosy, the Habitat homeowners, the children at St. Mary's Polio Rehabilitation Center, the friends getting a new lease on life at the Rotary Artificial Limb Center.

What were they thinking? Each night we would gather to debrief, sometimes sitting in the dark after a power outage or next to a kerosene lamp. The eight students were four girls and four boys, five Hindus and three Muslims, ages thirteen to sixteen. They were city kids from Hyderabad, the fifth largest city in India, who had spent their lives in a poor neighbourhood of hard working people.

Suddenly, they were in rural India, attending river baptisms, listening to us preach nine times, exposed to people and problems and solutions quite unknown to them.

They were filled with fascinating theological questions stemming from all they were hearing and seeing. But even more interesting were their own theological insights forged from the interaction of their own studies with their Imam or worship at the Temple back in Hyderabad, blended with the Jesus stories they heard, and the Christ-motivated work they were seeing.

My hopes for the retreat had been simple. I wanted them to have fun, I wanted to really get to know a representative group from the school which honours my mother's memory, and I wanted them to feel a part of the larger FOCI work. Instead, mining for silver I had found gold. One by one, at different times during the week, the students expressed a

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commitment to use their lives in some way to help others. The idea of doing the needful caught their imagination!

After the retreat, we all returned by train to Hyderabad for four more days together, celebrating our friendships and our common hopes. In all, we spent fourteen straight days in the company of some or all of the Astrid Rowe School family. One of the highlights for us was the chance to visit these eight students and several others in their own homes, meeting their families, talking about their lives.

As always, no one asked for a thing, not even a hint. Instead, we were given gifts. Hand crafts, paintings, cards, earrings and bangles, food, and best of all, cool drinks! But as we visited, thought and prayed, the needful came into sharper focus.

Before there was time for doubts or excuses to get in the way, a scholarship program was established to help three students to go on with their education beyond ARMS. Sagar was sent off to visit an experimental school recommended to us by a distinguished researcher, Dr. Lahti, to consider new ways to improve education at ARMS. When I returned to the U.S.A., Jennifer, who had first visited the school when it was a shed in 1987, started the plan that brings two students to the U.S.A. for an extended visit.

The needful? Yes. The needful is not always a response to grinding poverty or horrific events. It is simply a matter of doing what is right and what you are in a position to do.

I witnessed a delightful application of the quote from Azariah's diary, "Unbelief always considers it too early or too late.... God is the God of the present moment and the present need". Our visit with the Astrid Rowe School in 1994 was not all work. One afternoon, we were invited to play cricket, one of India's great passions, and we were made the captains of opposing teams.

Paul and I have competitive fires that burn brightly inside each of us so we could not resist bragging and boasting that inevitably led to a bet. That very day, we had attended the annual School Science Fair and came away quite impressed by the students' interest in science, their ability to produce experiments and exhibits with an absolute minimum of supplies. Literally, they had no scientific laboratory equipment of any kind.

So we threw out this challenge. The loser of the cricket game would purchase the school's first microscope. With great fanfare, the game progressed, but I had the advantage of Paul. From previous visits to India, I knew that cricket games can go on forever, each inning can last for hours. In the U.S., in baseball, the advantage is to the team that bats last. But in cricket, in Hyderabad, under the hot Indian sun, I figured the advantage would be for my team to bat first, to have fun, while Paul's team could expend an hour standing in the sun, chasing down our hits, wilting, and getting frustrated as we piled up thirty two runs! My strategy worked. They went to bat hot and tired and could not quite catch up.

Several days later, we jumped into an auto rickshaw (a three wheel, small engine, open air taxi) and were driven to the area where merchants sell medical and scientific supplies. With money in our pockets and a favourable exchange rate, we were like kids in a candy store. Paul was shown several microscopes, the owner brought out samples of prepared slides, we examined charts and models for biology and chemistry. It was obvious we were on the verge of doing a lot of business in this little shop.

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Suddenly, the owner excused himself, explaining that it was time to go to the mosque for prayers! If we wished, he would order tea for us, then he would return in a little while.

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From a business point of view, the shopkeeper was taking a big risk. Americans don't like to be kept waiting or inconvenienced. He was close to finalizing his biggest deal of the week, perhaps of the month, but he was willing to risk our annoyance or the loss of business to do what he considered "the needful". For that Moslem shopkeeper in downtown Hyderabad there were certain priorities. Some things were needful, other things were optional.

In the spring of 1994, as I was working on this book and especially this chapter, I felt a need to preach a sermon on leadership. I discussed what we had learned in seminary about the pastor being part prophet, priest, king and judge. Then I described some of the leadership fads that came along in the last twenty years, the pastor as enabler, change agent or CEO.

But I surprised myself by being drawn to the Twenty Third Psalm. "The Lord is my Shepherd", the Bible tells us. Nice, folksy, nostalgic image, but what does it mean? As you go through the Twenty Third Psalm phrase by phrase, line by line, you come to grips with an incredible description of the Good Shepherd being one who is always doing the needful! What an example of leadership!!

When we were led by the Good Shepherd, the Psalmist assures us, then we shall not want, we are led to places of renewal, our soul is restored, we learn the paths of righteousness, we fear not even the evil of Death, we are strengthened and protected and comforted, we are taken care of and affirmed even in the face of enemies, we are overwhelmed by blessing, and goodness and mercy follow us all the way to the House of the Lord. The beautiful poetry of the Twenty Third Psalm does not obscure the fact that the Lord does the needful in our behalf.

I have not met Mother Theresa, but I have seen her work in Calcutta. Her work is a direct response to this obvious Theology. Abandoned children are taken in, loved and nurtured. Dying people on street corners and in alley ways, are tenderly touched and caressed, living out their final days in dignity. I am sure there is a time and a place for spirited debate about the differences between Hindu's reincarnation and Christianity's Judgment Day, but Mother Theresa's Home for the Dying is not it. When our family visited there, I was drawn to a young German man in the corner who was cradling a young Indian man in his arms. Softly and gently he stroked the man's hand, whispering assurances of love, of nearness. This was the Theology of the Obvious at its best, a Christian doing what was most needed in a way that was thoroughly pure and loving.

No book has touched my life more than Dominique Lappiere's City of Joy. He tells the dramatic story of the squatter settlements in Calcutta and the daily heroism of the world's poorest people. Father Stephen Kovalski, a young Polish priest, chooses to live and minister in the slum. Theologically trained, Father Kovalski could easily have out-argued and verbally bedazzled the Moslems and Hindus who lived there. With the entire population in a daily struggle to survive, the whole community lived at death's door. What better time and place to bring to bear the weight of such theological subjects as sin, death, repentance, atonement and hell?

But there was the boy, dying in excruciating pain, who needed morphine. There was the dying rickshaw puller who wanted to see his daughter properly married before

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surrendering his cadaver to the skeleton brokers. There were the lepers, too feeble to escape the rising flood waters. There was the local mafia chieftain's heart to soften. There was anything and everything that always needed to be done right in front of his very being. It was all obvious. The God of Love, the God who claims to be love, was constantly calling for those who would "Do all that I commanded" (Matthew 28:20); who would fulfill the commandments "the greatest of these is love," (1 Corinthians 13); who would love their neighbour and love their enemy; who would do unto the least of these "as if doing directly for Jesus". Simply stated, the theology of the obvious became more urgent than the theology of leisure and academia. Not better, or more true, just more urgent. That is what makes it obvious.

Jesus was master of the obvious. His three-year ministry was a constant response to the needs and opportunities placed right in front of him. He rarely had to go out of his way to meet an opportunity waiting to be grabbed, a need waiting to be met, a person waiting to be loved.

When Jesus fed the multitude of over five thousand, it did not require a PhD to see the need. They had sat before him, listening, all day long. So he took what was offered, a few loaves of bread and fish, gave thanks, blessed the food, and shared it.

When ten leprous outcasts cried "Lord, have mercy", the miracle-in-waiting was all set.

When the friends lowered a paralytic on a cot from the roof above, everything that Jesus needed was available.

When the woman, troubled by endless bleeding, pushed through the crowd to touch the hem of Jesus' robe, he felt the touch and, more importantly, felt the need. The disciples wondered how Jesus could distinguish any one touch, but for Jesus it was obvious.

A face, a look, a touch, a cry, an act, a word. These were what captured Jesus' attention. Nothing fancy or spectacular, just obvious, everyday occurrences that Jesus noticed. There was no shout from heaven saying, "heal the lepers", no archangel pointing out the woman who was bleeding, no divine handwriting on the wall telling Jesus to notice the paralytic. It was all right in front of him.

Jesus lived in the world of the obvious. What needed doing as it came his way, he did. Without publicity, hype, fan-fare; without concern for safety, decorum, what others would think; without hesitation, a federally funded study or legislation -Jesus just did it. Nike may own the trademark to the slogan "Just Do It", Bo Jackson may have popularized it, but Jesus lived it.

The Fire Tender was the person who simplified my search for an adequate theology capable of defining a social activism. "It's obvious", he said. Father Kovalski's witness in The City of Joy gives me the dose of inspiration we all need to keep motivated toward caring. But Jesus gives us the right to call this obvious stuff a real theology, genuine God talk, a spiritual construct on which we can hang our determination to love fully, personally, directly. Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, raises the hammer and all the other tools of our doing to the level of instruments of worship.

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SEVEN The Word of God

The February 15, 1953 entry in Azariah's diary states, "Between 3 and 4 A.M., in a dream, I read the following in a (greeting) card after which it was finally given to Sister Mary:

May Christ be your crisis, Let John 1:1 be your lead'

That is quite a combination, Christ and scripture. Christ was to be the motivating force in his life, and God's word would lead the way. The idea of Christ as a crisis is fascinating. An old slogan reminds us that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. That can be the value of a good crisis. In a healthy way, a crisis can force us to focus - to concentrate. I once coached my son's YMCA basketball team. In one game, we fell behind by over 30 points at halftime. A/hen I gathered my downtrodden, battered team in the hallway for a halftime pep talk, I said, "O.K. boys, now they've got our attention. So here's what we do. For 20 minutes, all you think about is victory. Every time we have the ball, we score. They can't score one basket. Not one. This game is ours. The ball is ours."

We won.

As a coach, you can't give that speech at every game. In life, every day can't be lived in a state of crisis. But there are those occasions when a crisis can force us to zero in on what is important.

There is a story told about Arjuna in the Hindu scriptures, The Mahabharata. Preparing for the great battle that would become the Hindu Armageddon, Arjuna and his brothers are introduced to Drona who is to teach them the art of war and life. In order to gauge their ability, Drona places a vulture made of straw and rags on top of a distant tree. He then asks each would-be archer to describe what they see as each draws their bow and aims the arrow. One by one, they describe seeing the vulture, the tree, the sky, a cloud, their hands and the bow.

Each brother is rejected, with Drona commenting, "Back. All of you. Useless to shoot."

Then he turned to the last brother, Arjuna.

"What do you see?", asks Drona.

"A vulture."

"Describe the vulture."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I can only see its head", Arjuna explains.

At last, with satisfaction, Drona tells Arjuna, "Release your arrow. I'll make you the

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finest archer in the world.” (pp. 29-30, *The Mahabharata*, Jean-Claude Carriere, Harper and Row, 1987)

Arjuna had the necessary discipline to focus on the target, to avoid unnecessary distractions.

Many of us are able to focus in times of crisis. Nations often rally toward unity and sacrifice during time of war. A church may pull together when fire destroys their building. As families and individuals, we surprise ourselves (and one another) with strength and compassion when there is death, illness, financial ruin near to us. A great sports team knows how to come from behind to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Like Arjuna, a crisis can narrow our field of vision so that we deal only with what is vital, urgent, critical.

The problem comes in trying to decide what to treat as a crisis. If we treat every dilemma in life as a crisis, we run the risk of becoming like the little boy who cried “wolf” so often that when he really was in trouble, the trouble defeated him. When we lurch from crisis to crisis, we end up wearing out our friends and loved ones, and wearying ourselves to such a degree that eventually some crisis will claim us completely.

One leader of a fast growing ministry used crisis as an aphrodisiac. “Create a crisis,” he said, “then find a solution. I like to live on the edge.” In a worldly way, the method worked as the ministry gained fame and followers. But the game claimed a lot of victims along the way.

God’s message to Azariah in the dream was vital to the success of his ministry. God needed Azariah to succeed in a way that would not leave the path littered with burned out or abused bodies, or take him out of the picture prematurely. In this instance, God was calling for a long distance runner, not a sprinter. Therefore, God’s advice was a brilliant strategy: make Christ your crisis. Nothing else is to matter.

We can’t all live that way. We are not all called to celibacy, or evangelism for that matter. I believe that if there are four billion people on earth then God is issuing four billion job descriptions. There may be a lot of cross-over, but the God who knows us so intimately that even the hairs of our head are numbered also knows our unique circumstances. We have marriages and families, jobs and responsibilities, people that count on us and need us. In these areas, things often go quite well, but sometimes they don’t. Then we need to give them our attention, sometimes our undivided attention, our focus.

When my son started college, his grades were almost as bad as the grades that got me expelled twenty years earlier. But God gave me the grace to focus on Christ, not the grades. The key issue is how God can use Aaron whether he gets A’s or D’s. Aaron and I ended up even closer as a result.

For Azariah, Christ is at the center of every crisis, or else it is not a crisis. This eliminates needless worry, wasted energy, futile action. It prevents debilitating anxiety, or the need to manipulate events or people.

Furthermore, the presence of Christ in a crisis draws Azariah’s attention like Arjuna was attracted to the target. All his energy can be poured out like an offering to Christ.

Like so many pastors, I am constantly besieged by people demanding help. Out of

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some sense of stewardship, I become cautious and suspicious in using the money I am given in order to help. I spend more time worrying about being ripped off than I do in actually helping. This led me to ask Azariah if he ever felt that he was being taken advantage of. India is a nation of one billion people and on any given day, it seems like half of them turn up at his front door. His good will and gracious style must leave him exploited, right?

“No.” he told me simply, “If I am serving Christ, what does it matter.”

I sit in my office worrying about the word getting out on the street that David Rowe is an easy mark. Azariah only worries about getting the Word out on the street that Jesus is an easy mark.

The dream said that Christ is the crisis, and John 1:1 was his lead. The first chapter of John is a beautiful theological image of God’s love acting in Jesus Christ. We read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word as with God, and the Word was God.... In Him was life, and that life was the Light.... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.... From the fullness of his grace, we have all received one blessing after another.... Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:1,4,14, 16-17)

You cannot read those words without wanting to jump ahead to what D.L. Moody called “the Gospel in a nutshell,” (John 3:16-17) “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

Azariah was told by God in a dream to narrow his focus to Christ, and to allow himself to be led by the Word that became flesh, Jesus Christ. That Word has dominated every facet of his ministry. Whenever I have asked him about his favorite scriptures, he always hearkens back to those verses that express a single-minded devotion to Christ and the loving spirit of Christ. This is true in his preaching, teaching and living.

Gollapudi has become the headquarters for all work conducted by Azariah’s ministry. Each day begins with devotions in the chapel. A few yards away from the chapel, the children at our Redeemer Christian Center rehearse their lessons before heading off to school. A few yards in the other direction, the residents of our Faith Home for the Aged are preparing to start the day. The yard is filled with the activity and sounds of farm animals and of mortar and pestle beating and the ancient rhythm of food preparation.

In that environment, Azariah’s team pauses for a brief period of worship which sets the tone for the day. A few hymns and choruses sung in Telugu, then scripture and message, followed by a time of prayer. When I am visiting India, these are precious moments. My visits are always whirlwind tours of our FGCI projects, filled with business and ceremony and worship where I usually do the preaching.

These morning devotions give me the rare opportunity to listen, to be quiet, to let God take charge of the day. Above all, it is a chance to hear Azariah at work with the scriptures. The Bible is the foundation for his understanding both of how God works and of how we are to work with each other.

One morning, he spoke about Matthew 9:1-8, the story of Jesus healing a paralyzed

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man who had been brought to him by friends. Usually, when I preach on this story, I use the version from Luke 5 so that I can emphasize the role played by the friends of the paralytic. But, as is so often the case with Azariah, he is interested in the role played by Jesus, and that is Matthew's focus.

Azariah lifted up three points that helped us to understand Jesus and to understand the kind of ministry which we should be doing.

First, Jesus calls the paralyzed man, "my son". In Luke's Gospel, he is called "friend". For Azariah, this familial tone is necessary preparation for the healing to take place. He reminded us that in Mark 5:34, when Jesus healed the woman with the "issue of blood" or haemorrhaging, he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." It is Jesus' desire that we be freed from our suffering, but he recognizes that sometimes certain steps must be taken to set the stage for healing. The most important step is to gain the confidence and trust of the one to be healed. By calling a person "my son" or "my daughter", Jesus establishes a relationship so deep and intimate that the individual can say to themselves, "He called me his son, so I am O.K., I am in good hands. I know he will take care of me and heal me". This provides a solid foundation for healing and ministry. So often in ministry, people are treated like clients or numbers, but Jesus, by example, shows us how to treat those in need like family.

Second, this healing story takes a surprising twist when Jesus forgives the sins of the paralyzed man. Those who were there that day were waiting for something dramatic to happen to the man's physical condition. Even those reading the story anticipated that the central feature of the story will address the man's physical condition, his paralysis. Instead, Jesus stuns everyone by addressing the man's spiritual condition, saying, "Your sins are forgiven".

We can imagine the crowd of onlookers whispering to one another, "big deal". But that was precisely Jesus' point. The forgiveness of sins is a big deal! Jesus goes right to the heart of the real, eternal matter. Paralysis is a physical inconvenience that may last a lifetime. Sin, however, has ramifications that are measured in the aeons of eternity. That is why forgiveness is the central feature of the story. By dealing with sin, Jesus clears away all the obstacles standing in the way of a full life. Jesus is interested in the man's future, so the path ahead must be cleared to allow progress.

First, Jesus reassures the paralytic of love calling him "my son". Then Jesus assures the future by forgiving his sins. The third step in the healing process (it is a process) is the physical healing. It is not an afterthought or a side issue, appearing last. Jesus just chose to do first things first.

With the healing, Jesus offers a new life to go along with the new relationship that has already begun. With the path ahead cleared of the obstacles of sin, the man is now free to walk that path with energy, confidence and strength.

Azariah ended the devotions by reminding us that it is by the shedding of Jesus' blood that we become blood relations. His sacrifice convinces us of our closeness with God. Like two childhood friends who cut each other's finger or hand and then press their wounds together to mingle their blood as a sign of their binding friendship, Jesus takes the first step in that direction for all of us. He is wounded, and he offers to mingle his wounds with ours,

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promising an eternity together.

Azariah's devotions in the rural church at Gollapudi probably lasted seven or eight minutes, but it provided an ample Biblical basis for ministry. In a hundred villages of Khammam district in Andhra Pradesh, and now spreading beyond as new work emerges, Azariah brings people into the family of God, assuring them of a human love and concern which mirrors God's. Even the forgiveness of sins is offered as a gift, not an condemnation. It is interesting to note that the paralytic doesn't even ask for forgiveness, it is just given by God's grace because Jesus wants to help the man eternally and internally. Healing is then given as practical evidence of God's love. In the same spirit, CSO and FOCI and all of Azariah's ministry reaches out to exemplify the love of God.

Whenever we discuss favorite scriptures, Azariah's fall into three categories. First and foremost are the verses and stories that emphasize God's great love. Second are the verses that provide directions for life and ministry, and the principles by which he has been guided in his own calling. Third, he makes great use of scripture that makes clear the universality of the Gospel, the fact that God's love expressed in Christ is good news for all the world.

It is not surprising that Azariah returns so often to the theme of God's love. His ministry is not driven by a sense of duty or service, nor by guilty or urgent responsibility. Despite all the good works so evident throughout the ministry, he is not a slave to the Social Gospel. He has spent more than four decades liberating people from every imaginable bondage, but we have never discussed Liberation Theology. Although he founded The Asian School of Evangelism, and is highly regarded as an evangelist, he does not act as if someone's salvation is completely dependent on him. Surrounded by overwhelming need, there is never the sense that he is burdened or obsessed. Instead, the entire work of this ministry is motivated by love.

It is popular nowadays, and helpful, for organizations to develop a mission statement. In this sense, the word "mission" has nothing to do with the church idea of world mission, but it is used to signify purpose. Businesses and corporations, as well as churches and ministries, can benefit from the exercise of trying to define their purpose in a mission statement.

If Azariah's ministry wanted to have a mission statement, they would probably just xerox a copy of 1 John 3 -4, St John's moving treatise on the primacy of love in Christian ministry. In a symphonic celebration of love, John lays out a logical job description for everything that I have seen done in Andhra Pradesh.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God (1 John 3:1). This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another (1 John 3:11).

This is how we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother (or sister!) in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18).

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: God sent his one and only Son into

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the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:7-12)

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. In this way, love is made complete among us... because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear. (1 John 4:16b-18a)

We love because God first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out God's commands. This is love for God: to obey God's commands are not burdensome." (1 John 5:2-3)

Just as St. John brilliantly lays out the argument for the priority of love in our ministry, Azariah's team effectively carries out this job description. It is no wonder that Azariah's answer to my queries about favorite scriptures is always the same, "All the verses about love".

John's argument is circular. God loves us, the evidence of that is the sending of Jesus, Jesus' love is shown by his absolute sacrifice on the cross in our behalf, we are to demonstrate the same depth of love in our dealings with others, and that behaviour is our love back to God.

These views are theological, with practical implications. The profound theological statement is that "God is love". It doesn't just suggest that God likes love, or prefers love, or has a tendency toward love. God IS love! The very nature and essence and substance of God is love.

Theology is God-talk, talk about God. Any talk about God, John states, must begin with love. Everything else God does emanates from that basic understanding of who God is.

The other crucial theological element in John's teaching is that God wishes to dwell in us, to permeate us, to be thoroughly at one within us. This is accomplished only when the way of love becomes our life. We are born of God and know God, with God fully at home living in us, when we love.

Azariah has chosen this as the dominant theme of his ministry. Nothing else can account for his success as an evangelist coupled with the high regard and great respect he has earned from Hindus and Moslems as well as from the myriad types of Christians across India.

I have been in the presence of renowned Christian leaders whose sense of urgency filled the room, or whose charisma and power fill the room, or where ego filled the room. With Azariah it is a soft, gentle, non-threatening love which fills the room.

John's second letter neatly summarizes the lengthy passages from the first, with this simple definition, "And this is love...his command is that you walk in love". (2 John 1:6)

Walking in love brings out the practical implication of John's teachings, and shows the determination with which Azariah's ministry mirrors the love of God. The entire image of walking in love reminds us that it is an effort that requires all of our effort, attention,

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involvement. When you go for a walk, one hundred percent of you goes along. You can not leave behind half of yourself, or some part of you that you think is too valuable, or not needed.

As a runner ! have a good idea of how fully involved the entire person is in the act of walking or running in love. If I have a cold, the cold goes along with me on my run. If I am angry or happy, the anger or happiness comes with me. If I gain weight, the extra weight comes along.

St. John wants love to permeate us, to become our very essence, so that love goes wherever we go, doing whatever we do. For Azariah, love is full time. Any single part of his work might be part time, but love is full time.

Azariah has also turned to the Bible seeking guidance for his life and clarity for his particular style of ministry.

St. Paul was one of the first evangelists, and the most itinerant, so it was understandable that some of his personal style would be imitated by Azariah. Likewise, Jesus' teachings, when he sent out the disciples to evangelize, provide a model for ministry.

Jesus said, "Freely you have received, freely give". (Matthew 10:8) It was never Azariah's intention to establish a religious empire that would reward him financially. Instead, all that has happened and been established over these forty plus years is a result of a Biblically based investment plan. Azariah has invested everything in God, and God has chosen to invest a great deal in him. To the amazement of many, the whole investment plan is based on the freedom detailed by Jesus. Everything about the ministry has been enacted as a faith mission, just as Father Devadas taught. Throughout the decades the Azariah team has given faith its best effort without concern for their personal welfare, "Freely given" to all who need. Likewise, they have lived on faith, fully trusting that God will meet their needs.

The end result of this investment plan has been astounding. The hungry have been fed, the naked have been clothed, the sick have been healed, the outcasts have been visited, the thirsty has been provided with water, children have been immunized and educated, houses and schools and churches have been built, Bibles have been provided, pastors and teachers have been trained, people have learned skills and started businesses, artificial limbs have been attached... the list is seemingly endless. Yet God has never failed to "Freely give" to the ministry that has spent itself "Freely giving". If anything, the more the ministry undertakes, the more it prospers.

My own life and ministry illustrates the validity of this investment plan. I have pastored three churches during the years that FOCI has been at work with Azariah. During these years our family and our churches have "Freely given" to support their work in Andhra Pradesh. But we have been unable to out give God! The more we give, the more we receive. Our family and our churches have prospered and the same is true of many FOCI supporters who have given sacrificially. As we take care of God's business, God faithfully takes care of our business.

1 Corinthians-4:17 gave Azariah the confidence to go into the ministry without the security of a church sanctioned ordination. The professional pastoral ministry does not lead to wealth, but it does provide a level of comfort. Nevertheless, Azariah chose a ministry that has

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directly benefited the larger church without seeking any personal benefit from the church. St. Paul wrote, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel”.

For Azariah, this has meant a life lived entirely open to God’s purpose without the benefits or the restrictions of a churchly function. The role of a pastor or anyone in church employment is often narrowly restricted by church members or hierarchy. However, Azariah’s choice has left him free to pursue God’s work in whatever direction it takes him. This has allowed the freedom to “Do the needful” instead of “doing the expected”

A driving force in this ministry from the beginning has been the understanding that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is Good News for all people. In India, there was a willingness to let Christianity become good news for the untouchables, for those people long kept at arm’s length by orthodox Hinduism. More recently, there is a strong movement to reassert Hinduism as the true religion of India. This has political, social and of course, religious implications. By inference, if Hinduism is meant for those within the national boundaries of India then Christianity is no doubt meant for those whose national boundaries are elsewhere, presumably the west.

Such thinking results in religious chauvinism and a religious xenophobia, implying that which is from India (i.e. Hinduism) is good and that which is foreign (i.e. Christianity) should be kept out. In the United States, the combination of national chauvinism and xenophobia is at work in such areas as immigration and imports, even resulting in official attempts to declare and teach that our “culture is superior to all others” in some school districts.

In the face of such ideas in his own country, Azariah discovered the universal appeal and truth of Jesus Christ. The idea of a loving God who provides for the forgiveness of sins through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the very Son of God, was not something to be tossed like a bone to the downtrodden untouchables, or kept for the private use of the so-called western world that first heard of it or for those few Indians who were born into it thanks to the efforts of St. Thomas.

God’s message is for all people and God’s purpose for Azariah was to share that message with any and all who would hear it. Therefore, many of his favorite scriptures make clear the all embracing nature of God’s love in Christ. Luke 14 includes Jesus’ Parable of the Great Banquet. In the parable, the host of the banquet sends invitations to all his long time friends and neighbors and to his beloved family. As Azariah explains, this was what was expected and normal, that’s the way the existing world is. But the host, God, does not get the desired result! God wants the banquet hall filled, but everyone has excuses for not responding. People just did not care, they had better things to do.

The world was like that for a long time as various religions did their part in their own little corners of the world to fill up some anteroom near the banquet hall. But this vision of little private parties here and there did not match God’s plan for a joyous celebration of The Great Banquet. With the sending of Christ, God issues a new invitation, sending servants out and out and further out with the invitations for any and all to come to the celebration! The periphery becomes the center, the forgotten becomes the priority, and from every corner and outpost people flock to The Great Banquet.

That is Azariah’s promise for the ministry. God’s banquet is for all, God’s invitation

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is to all, and as one of God's servants he is entrusted with the task of extending the invitation to all.

The question then becomes how to do this effectively?! The initial invitations in the Parable were no doubt proper and sincere, but ineffective.

Azariah's method has taken two forms, both of which require him to subjugate himself, to make less of himself, in order to make more of Christ and more of others. He cites specifically 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 where St. Paul exhibits a surprising flexibility. Paul stated, "Though I am free and belong to no one, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I become like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the Law I become like one under the Law, so as to win those under the Law. To those not having the Law I become like one not having the Law, so as to win those not having the Law. To the weak I become weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."

Azariah, in the spirit of St. Paul, makes a conscious effort to become "a slave to everyone". Putting aside personal taste, opinion, priorities or desire, Azariah has developed the gift of becoming "all things to all people so that by all possible means" people will have the opportunity to know the love of God in Christ. He will not allow himself to be a stumbling block to anyone who seeks to know God. This is why I have found him to be so refreshingly free of hang-ups, dogma, restrictions, prejudice, fears, etc. Such attitudes get in the way, and Azariah will not permit anything into his life that might get in the way as he tries "by all possible means to save some".

Our mutual friend, Dr. David Purushothaman who first introduced us, told me a classic story of what it means to not let anything get in the way of sharing the gospel. When he was a young pastor serving in the rural area of the state of Tamil Nadu, he was struggling to introduce Jesus Christ to people who were skeptical or disinterested.

The Purushothaman family had sacrificed a great deal to follow Christ. His grandfather had been a Hindu priest and his conversion to Christ had led to the murder of his wife, David's grandmother, the destruction of all of their property and banishment from the area. When David became a pastor with the Church of South India, he carried with him the burden of the past as he tried "to become all things to all people that he might save some".

One day, while visiting in a remote village, he was invited into a hut and provided with a glass of milk. As David looked at the milk, he could see clearly that it was filled with flies. He looked around. The man and everyone in the hut were watching him intently to see not only his reaction but what he would do. To them he was something foreign and suspect. His family had become city dwellers in Madras, David was educated, he represented a foreign God and symbolized a colonial past. They watched him to see if he was still one of them, to see if he had the stomach and the fortitude (literally) to be a rural Indian.

My friend reached for the glass, slowly and deliberately drinking it all. From that moment on that man, that family and that village were open to David's presentation of the gospel.

Azariah has applied the same desire to be at one with his surroundings and the people

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there. “I do it all for the sake of the Gospel”, he explains. “My way of life should not be an offense to Hindus or Moslems, or to village people in general. Some Christians have chosen to emphasize that they are different from everyone else, which they show by standing apart, by dressing different, by becoming entirely western. This may be best for them, but I wish to show that I am one with them and that God’s redeeming love is for all of us equally. I go about simply dressed, I am plain spoken. I eat what is offered. In, our country, 97% of the people are not Christian, and 60% are from the rural areas. So it is clear that I need to present the Gospel in their platform, I must become all things to all people.”

A lot of Christian workers will admit to putting up with “all things to save some”, but it is hardly the same as the willingness to become all things. For example, if Davis Purushothaman had covered his eyes and held his nose while drinking the villager’s milk, or if Azariah expressed disgust or showed disrespect while enduring “all things to save some”, their attempts to share God’s love would fall flat.

If God’s love is genuine, our love for others must be genuine. Azariah’s love is expressed in the little things that mean so much. He has helped arrange and he has taken part in Hindu weddings, arranged cremations, become a Sanskrit scholar with a deep knowledge of Hindu scriptures. Whatever he has been called on to do, or invited to participate in, he enters into the spirit of the occasion bringing God’s love in a practical and personal form.

I liken it to the lovely story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-10). At the wedding, when the wine runs out Jesus performs his first miracle by turning water into wine. Some might wonder why the Savior of the world, the Son of God, would waste time at an unimportant wedding in a little, remote village? Or why use his great powers just to provide wine? But I have always seen this story, with the accompanying miracle, as proof of God’s desire to be intimately involved in our personal lives. That afternoon in Cana, Jesus was willing to become all things for the benefit of all those people gathered at the wedding. That same spirit is so evident in all this ministry in Andhra Pradesh.

The other type of scriptures that have informed Azariah’s work have to do with the need for people to be Christ like. Repeatedly, he expresses frustration with the age old attempts to turn people into Christians without any emphasis on being like Christ. Christianity has spent two thousand years building the church as a religion and an institution without much concern for emulating the Christ whose name we bear proudly.

Sister Mary Seethamma and Azariah both include verses from Matthew 11 as among their favourites. When I checked the passage, I recognized them immediately as among the favourites of many Christians. Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is heavy and my burden is light.” (verses 28 and 30) That is how most people remember that section and recite it, but my Indian partners are quick to include the middle verse, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.” (verse 29)

“Learn from me”, Jesus says. In effect, look at him, observe him, watch him closely, take notes, get it down right, do it his way. In sports, and in life, we know that it is wise to learn from the best, to model our behaviour or actions after those who have succeeded in their field. In the field of ministry Azariah simply believes that Jesus was the best and he accepts Jesus’ offer, “Learn from me”. St. Paul takes Jesus’ invitation a step further, suggesting that we are called by God to “be conformed to the likeness of his Son”. (Romans 8:29)

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In India a lot of effort has gone into conforming to the likeness of the Church of England, or the likeness of U.S. fundamentalism or denominationalism. Indian Christians have learned to mimic the hand gestures, the hairstyle, the dress, the voice of famous evangelists or big time pastors from America. They have copied our divisions, hierarchy, priorities and squabbles. But Azariah makes the same emphasis in Andhra Pradesh that he makes when preaching in U.S. churches, “be conformed to the likeness of God’s Son”.

We are to learn from Jesus and be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. That likeness includes the very qualities Jesus used to describe himself in encouraging people to learn from him. He said, “I am gentle and humble in heart”. That same Jesus knelt to wash the feet of the disciples, he taught that the first must be willing to be the last. (Mark 9:35) , he called us to be his friends. (John 15:15)

One of Azariah’s top priorities in his ministry, he told me, “is to study the scriptures from the perspective of Hindus and Moslems, thinking as they do from their own backgrounds, so that I can better communicate Christ likeness to them”. It is never his desire to have people understand FOCI, or the Christian Service Organization, or even to understand him or his views. The goal is always Christ.

This determination to present Christ likeness at every turn gives this ministry its unique standing in India, cutting across the lines of religion, caste, state, tribe or denomination. Through their ministry, Christ becomes the common denomination, not something that divides but someone who unites.

Azariah called my attention to the beginning of the book of Hebrews, Chapter 6. It is written, “Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.”

It takes a lot of confidence to move on from “elementary teachings” in order to get to matters of “maturity”, but that is a confidence Azariah has. There is a time and a place, a season for everything, as Ecclesiastes reminds us, and so there is a rightful time for emphasizing the elementary teachings. Neither the writer of Hebrews nor Azariah is underestimating the importance of such teachings. Indeed, you can’t go on to maturity without first mastering the basics anymore than you can rightfully expect to do well in high school and college without first understanding the basic concepts taught in elementary school. But if there is an appropriate time for these elementary teachings, it is obvious that there is also an appropriate time to “go on to maturity”, and Azariah feels this is essential for the work of the Christian Church.

Over the years of our friendship, I’ve heard Azariah gently complain that a lot of Christian leaders from Europe and America who come to India treat Indians like Kindergarten Children, willing to impart only the most simple Christian truths without ever daring to stretch the spiritual limits and imaginations of the Indian audience.

This is not to suggest that the simple truths of Christianity are not important, or that the simple stories of the Bible are not wonderful. But the people are hungering for more. They’ve heard the story of Noah, they know that Jesus died on the cross... but now what?

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The answer is, maturity. Azariah believes in a ministry that goes beyond the elementary teachings of do's and don'ts, of rules and doctrine, of liturgy and membership, and takes people to the maturity of Christ likeness.

“All over the world”, Azariah says gently but powerfully, “In England and the United States and in these villages across Andhra Pradesh, we need to be able to go from simple things to mature faith. To be mature means to be where the fullness of God dwells in us, to be Christlike. To be mature in faith means that we become fully able and willing to be accountable for being holy as God is holy, and for loving as God loves. Jesus showed us tremendous love, love for the individual no matter what their station in life or their condition. Can we love that way? Yes, if we are mature! If we are mature, we can love and serve, just like Jesus, even the sheep that are not in the fold. Think of Jesus with the woman at the well, with Nathaniel, Zacchaeus, the woman caught in adultery, the lepers, the lost.”

For Azariah, Jesus is not an English export, a western religion, a vestige of colonialism or an American fad. Rather, Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the great Lover of all. Our maturity in faith is measured by our approximation of Christ.

If we agree that maturity in faith means to be like Christ, then what are the specific marks of that maturity? What, specifically, does it mean to be like Christ? Azariah's answer included two lists: the Beatitudes that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), and the fruits of the Spirit as listed by Paul. (Galatians 5:22-23)

In the Beatitudes, Jesus calls us to a life that mirrors his life, that takes seemingly weak and unattractive traits and elevates them to prominence as core values of the Christian life. We are “blessed”, Jesus said (or “happy” in the translations) if we are poor in spirit, mournful, meek, if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, if we are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and persecuted. Such a life style, patterned after Christ, has its own rewards. With each Beatitude, each example of a truly blessed or happy life, Jesus supplies a specific promise. The pure in heart shall see God, the peacemakers are the children of God, the meek inherit the earth, the mournful are comforted, the persecuted and the poor in spirit have the Kingdom of Heaven, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled, and the merciful are granted mercy. It is a good deal all around! The mature Christian understands this. At its most basic, Christianity is concerned with a personal relationship between the individual believer and Jesus Christ. But having established this much, Azariah wants to see the relationship go further, become deeper, strengthen its roots and results.

St. Paul identifies those results in Galatians 5:22. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” He follows that in verse 25 with the advice, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us walk in the Spirit”. In other words, that is what we should be like, that should be our essence, that is who we are.

Azariah is anxious to see the development of such Christ likeness in the church, among those who call themselves by Christ's name and within the ministry of everything done in the name of Christ. After more than four decades as an itinerant evangelist, after leading thousands to Christ from more than a hundred villages now settled into a score of churches, it is time to produce fruit. Traditionally, in evangelical circles, we have narrowed the definition of producing fruit to the single task of bringing in more Christians. If I bring you to Christ, then you bring someone else to Christ, that is production! In one important sense that is true. At its most basic, that is true, and Azariah never overlooks the basics.

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But after the basics, then what? Having directed one of the largest Habitat for Humanity projects in the world, Azariah knows full well the value of a foundation, of good basics on which to build. Indeed, it is the custom in India, after the completion of the foundation of a house and the placement of the door frame, for everyone to stop and have a special prayer of dedication and celebration. Good basics, a firm foundation, are important.

But the Habitat project in Khammam is not world renowned and successful for having completed more than a thousand foundations and door frames! That is only the beginning. It is a good beginning, necessary and worthy of celebration. Yet the real measure of the work is the thousand completed houses built well on those firm foundations.

Azariah merely wants the same ongoing construction to continue in the lives of Christians. It is easy to see why he finds Hebrews 6:12 so attractive, that we should “go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation”! He is anxious to see the Christianity of Christians mature into Christ likeness.

For two thousand years, the Church has called people to rally around creeds, articles of faith, dogma, ritual and the peculiarities of denominations. At the risk of putting words into his mouth, Azariah looks at those exercises as he looks at the foundation of a Habitat house, as if to say, “nice start, now let’s finish”!

I have watched Azariah recite the Apostle’s Creed, he enjoys providing the sacraments and ordinances of church life, he is a valued and respected partner in a ministry in the Church of South India. Such activities are important to the practice of his faith. But, he declares, let’s not stop there, “let’s go on to maturity”. That maturity is in Christ likeness, not religiosity. Hence, the scriptures that call us to be like Christ are every bit as essential as the scriptures that invite us to accept Christ as Lord and Savior.

Perhaps it is fitting that the last scripture he emphasized with me is from Philippians 2:5-8 which begins, “Having the mind of Christ...”. The New International Version puts it this way, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”. Either way, the challenge is the same and Azariah has accepted it as not only the goal of his life but also of the entire ministry he undertakes each day.

In 1987, Azariah lived with our family in Melrose, Massachusetts for six weeks. After a while such a visit is no longer a visit, you just settle in with each other. As the sayings go, you let your hair down, you don’t stand on ceremony.

As time went by, we discovered that he never was standing on ceremony. He was the same kind of person morning, afternoon or evening, midweek or on Sunday, publicly or privately. Bonnie told friends that it was like living with Jesus. His Christianity was not a matter of what was expedient or convenient. Trying to be like Christ was his constant objective.

During these weeks, which happened during a very busy time in our church life, we had the opportunity to discuss the whole range of pastoral, professional, political and social issues. Every day, we discussed local, national and world events. I would often bring to him issues and concerns that arose within our congregation, including conflicts and disagreements. Also, his speaking schedule took him to many different places and occasions, secular and sacred.

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The one constant was Azariah's determination to bring the mind of Christ to bear on every situation. Much like Charles Sheldon's book, *In His Steps*, the central question was always, "What would Jesus do?"

This is another example of Azariah's determination to seek maturity in faith. In everyone's spiritual journey there is that moment of decision when one chooses who to follow. We call it making a decision for Christ, or accepting Christ. In Jesus' own ministry he called people to choose, to decide, to follow, to become disciples. That was an important and appropriate beginning.

Jesus then offered to take the relationship with the believer to another level, that of a friend. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my father I have made known to you". (John 15:15) We grow from a master/servant, teacher/disciple, savior/follower relationship to one of truest friendship, where we share all that is important. Then, with Jesus' personal work on earth completed, we are charged with the challenge and the opportunity to become as much like Jesus as is humanly possible.

The great hymn suggests the same progression. "I'll go where you want me to go" can become "I'll do what you want me to do... I'll be what you want me to be". It is not too lofty a goal if we are willing to have the mind of Christ.

One summer, I had the joy of leading a Bible Retreat for Tamil (people from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu) Christians in metropolitan New York. In one message, I told them about a popular guru in India who is believed by devotees to be the reincarnation of Jesus, among other spiritual greats. I admitted that the western, Christian mind recoils from such an idea. Yet, I said, even if we are not called to be Christ, we should be so Christlike as to give the impression of Christ wherever we go, whatever we do, whoever we are.

I wrestled with the title for this chapter, looking for one that would be most appropriate, yet, spectacular enough to catch the reader's attention. Several times, I rejected, "the Word of God", as too obvious. But what could be more spectacular? For two thousand years Christians have struggled to define just what the scriptures mean to them, what are they in their daily lives? We hear words like myth, story, infallibility, inspired.

For Azariah's work, it is the Word of God, a Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ, a Word that is meant to be put into practice. That Word first began to touch him personally as he worked tirelessly with Father Devadas. The power of that Word became clear when the mere presence of scripture verses he erected on roadside billboards produced results. The value of the Word was obvious when the poorest of the poor would go to great lengths just to have a Bible. The purpose of the Word is realized when we choose to let it rule our lives, as we take on the mind of Christ.

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EIGHT Give Us Friends

David Gossling, a long time friend of Azariah's from England, wrote a report on the ministry in Khammam after a visit in 1985. He recalled the famous words of Asia's first native Bishop, another man called Azariah. Bishop Azariah, speaking to missionaries at the 1910 Edinburgh Conference in Scotland, gave this heartfelt plea, "Give us friends".

Gossling went on to draw parallels between Bishop Azariah of the Dornakal Diocese early in this century and the Azariah of Khammam who has served within the same district and diocese throughout the second half of this century. Both Azariahs sought the partnership of friends that would create "patterns of ministry and service which will enable the Church to grow." Gossling adds that the Azariahs of Dornakal and Khammam "have created a climate of mutuality and openness which has drawn countless people." and that they both realized "that true evangelism can only flow from relationships and lifestyles which reflect the teaching and practice of the early Church."

In 1953, Azariah got off the train at Khammam Station with a few rupees in his pocket and a convincing call from God to make it clear that God's love in Christ is for all. Decades later, that ministry has blossomed into a network of partners that extend around the world. Every day people in Australia, England, Germany, mainland United States and Hawaii lift up the work in Andhra Pradesh to God, and dig down in their pockets to give sacrificially, so that the work is blessed and strengthened.

Who are these people, and why are they involved? The "why" takes us back to Bishop Azariah's hopeful request, "Give us friends". Christian missionary history is filled with people who travelled the world with a full range of motives. While most went with some form of a desire to enact "the Great Commission", "go ye into the world" (Matthew 28), their styles and attitudes and even goals varied widely. Some were sacrificial, humble, respectful, servant minded, open, egalitarian. Others, unfortunately, were selfish, arrogant, disrespectful, bossy, narrow, chauvinistic.

It is useful to remember that by 1910, the Christian Church was an ancient and powerful institution whose missionary ways were well known. Furthermore, mission work, intentionally or unintentionally, went side by side with colonialism. Where missionaries came first, colonialism followed. When colonialism arrived first, missionaries arrived on the next boat. Sometimes it was impossible to distinguish the conquering and the exploitation of colonialism from the purposes of the Church.

Therefore, Bishop Azariah's call for friends was really a call for a new relationship, a breath of fresh air to enliven Christian ministry.

The work of Azariah's team has put that hope into practice. Today, the ministry around Khammam and across Andhra Pradesh is a testimony to partnership and friendship. All around the world those who share in this ministry do so with complete trust and confidence in the leadership and integrity of Azariah and his team. This relationship has grown steadily over the decades but really began to flower in the early 1980s.

It is a relationship worth studying because, even after two thousand years of

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missionary endeavor, much of it is still conducted with paternalism, mistrust and questions of control. One mission organization that began in Africa not long ago was started by a man who never trusted or respected the people, and was served by a succession of missionary workers who felt the same way. In Haiti, I was warned against sharing any authority with Haitians. Before I went to India, I was told repeatedly that Indians can't be trusted. The recurring theme was always that "white" people must always control the funds and that "we" must retain all decision making authority. The racism and cultural imperialism that are the foundation for such thinking is obvious not only to those who care about such things in the west, but also to those who are supposedly being evangelized by missionary good works! This only reinforces the "dividing wall of hostility" that Jesus came to tear down.

In Andhra Pradesh, with Azariah's team, such destructive attitudes have been avoided. The key is that at the center of the work there is always the love of God as known in Jesus Christ and as shown in acts of kindness among the needy.

A few years ago, when the Jim and Tammy Bakker scandal with PTL became known, I was interviewed on radio about how Christian ministries could avoid such problems. "As long as the focus of the work remains on Christ and the poor there are no problems," I said, "but when the focus becomes the founder, or personality, popularity or growth, then anything can happen."

For Azariah, the focus has never changed. The same God he chose to serve humbly in Khammam in 1953 remains at the heart of the work decades later. The same desire to show God's love among the poor is a burning desire today. As God has sent friends to share in that work, they have been welcomed inasmuch as they can share that focus.

Christ For All In Andhra Pradesh

English missionaries first began to work in the Khammam area in 1888. A few years later, a missionary society called Church of England Zenana (woman) sent women missionaries to do medical and evangelistic work.

By 1953, when Azariah arrived in Khammam, missionary work was firmly established in the area and throughout India. After an initial period of mistrust, the missionaries in Khammam accepted Azariah's work as legitimate and helpful. Over time, these relationships changed from suspicion to mutual respect to friendship. Men and women missionaries began to affirm the ministry of Azariah, Sister Mary Seethamma and their small team. Gradually, people in England began to know of their work through the letters which missionaries sent to churches and individuals back home.

Dorothy Tate spent thirty years as a missionary in Khammam under the sponsorship of The Church of England's Church Missionary Society (CMS). She had great impact on the lives of Sister Mary and Azariah, providing the benefits of experience, nurture, fellowship and what Sister Mary calls "a mother's support."

Such friendships opened up unexpected and miraculous opportunities for these young itinerant evangelists. From 1964 to 1966, Azariah was able to attend Ridley Hall, a theological college at the famed Cambridge University, on a scholarship from CMS. These two years of study began many lifelong friendships with fellow students who went on to become pastors, church leaders and active Christians in various capacities. After his return to

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Khammam, he kept in contact with these friends through circular prayer letters which described the ongoing ministry of the team. An informal network of supporters soon began to develop as classmates from Cambridge sent occasional gifts to help the work with children and poor people.

Meanwhile, dramatic changes were on the horizon for Christian ministry in India. India achieved independence in 1947, and the same year India produced The Church of South India, a pioneering effort in ecumenism crafted by five denominations. Like all of the newly emerging nations that gained independence after World War II, India wrestled with what to do with vestiges of the colonial past under the British Raj.

In church circles, the question was how Indian was the church in India to be? Who would be the leaders and where would they come from? On a more practical note, what was the future of foreign missionaries? What, if any, was to be the role of foreign missions?

A large part of the answer was provided by Indian government policy. As missionaries reached retirement age, or chose not to re-up for another term, visas were not granted for new long term missionaries. Exceptions were made for special skills and needs, but the days of the Christian movement in India being led by English or American missionaries who held the purse strings and exercised authority came to an end.

Sister Mary and Azariah felt the changing of the guard personally in 1969 when Miss Tate retired. After a distinguished and loving career, she returned home, leaving behind the jeep she had been provided by CMS. This opened the door for Azariah's first official relationship with a funding agency. For the next thirteen years, until 1982, CMS provided money for the operation of the jeep. Furthermore, Azariah was responsible for continuing Miss Tate's ministry in the absence of a replacement missionary.

God steadily opened new doors with the retirement or leaving of missionaries, Azariah prayed urgently that God would strengthen their humble ministry, Christian Service Unit, to take up the slack. God's answer was to show clearly that the leadership for the church was already there among dedicated Indians who were faithful within the various worship groups started by the team. In other words, the leadership was growing right there, it just had to be nurtured and encouraged.

The decision was made to establish three monthly worship centers across the Khammam district. People from the nearest twenty or thirty villages would gather at the center, many walking for hours in order to hear the Gospel and share in the day long fellowship. This became the proving ground for the new generation of church leaders.

CMS invited Azariah to England in 1972 as an exchange missionary, a recognition that Christianity in the west is as much in need of evangelism as the so-called unevangelized world. His time in England served both as a blessing for the churches he visited and for the growing work back in Andhra Pradesh.

By the time he returned to India, the ministry was ready to enter a new phase. Growth and enthusiasm within the various village fellowships of Christians resulted in a need for churches. A church building does at least two things. First, it provides a sense of permanence. Second, in a nation where Hindu temples and Muslim mosques are vital to the worship and identity of believers, the construction of a "proper" church lends credibility to the presence of

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Christians in the community.

With more and more interested friends in England, Azariah's newsletter became an important link between the exciting ministry in Khammam and committed supporters far away. The quarterly newsletters and visits from Azariah every three years heightened that interest and attracted visitors from England. Steadily, as more people saw the work in action or met Azariah and Sister Mary in person, the more people wanted to help.

Increased interest and need came together in 1983 to produce Christ For All in Andhra Pradesh as an officially registered charity in behalf of Azariah's work in Khammam. The previous year, CMS had a change in policy that ended their annual grant for vehicle support. With The Church of South India strapped for funds, they were in no position to extend support to Azariah's team.

In March of 1982, Azariah received formal notice from The Church Missionary Society in London. The letter stated, "We rejoice that God is at work through you in bringing so many into his Church in and around Khammam, and we do pray for their nurture and growth in Christ."

Experience teaches us that praise early in a letter or a conversation is usually followed by "but", and this letter was no different. After explaining new policies and priorities and "expressions of need", the South and East Asia Regional Secretary for CMS announced, "but I think that from 1983, we must ask you to release us from this contribution to your work".

Azariah's answer was typical of a spirit that trusts fully in God's own design and timing. He wrote, "I am very grateful to you and to the CMS for all the support that was given since 1970 to enable our team to visit villages, to preach the Gospel, to show films of the life of Christ, and to distribute scripture portions.

"The work was started in 1953. So far, 1,280 adults have received baptism in 62 villages. Churches were built at four places. Small prayer halls were put up at six places. The new Christians of these villages meet once a month at one of our three fellowship centres for worship and fellowship. Once in every month, we are having adult baptisms at one of these three centres.

"Kindly give our thanks to all those responsible to make this grant possible for 13 years to help us in our work. I shall continue to send you our news, and I request you to continue to remember us and our work in your prayers."

Coincidentally, the CMS street address was on Waterloo. Picking up from Napoleon's experience at Waterloo, we often use the word to describe those occasions when we must make vital decisions that will dramatically shape the future course of events. This change in policy of CMS and its resulting impact on Khammam proved to be such a Waterloo.

This crisis led Azariah's English friends to create an opportunity. They recognized the need to create a structure that could produce regular, timely support for the various ministries around Khammam.

The name they chose, Christ for All in Andhra Pradesh, is simple and direct enough, but actually had its roots in a vision given to Azariah way back in 1952. He remembers seeing the words, "India for Christ, Christ for India". Thirty-one years later, that vision was

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the inspiration for the organizational name, Christ for All in Andhra Pradesh.

Charles Rose, a retired builder and keen supporter of missions through CMS, visited India with his wife and urgently felt the need to establish such an organization. He contacted Rev. Ted Longman, a classmate of Azariah's at Cambridge who had faithfully circulated his newsletters since 1967. Together, they formed the committee that gave rise to a great movement which undergirds the special work in Khammam.

Today, scores of churches and hundreds of individuals in England support Azariah's network of ministry which touches lives in every conceivable way. Just as Azariah sees no limit to what ministry should do, Christ For All in Andhra Pradesh sees no limit to what they should support. In addition to all the administrative and vehicle costs of the Christian Service Unit, they underwrite the support of over two hundred and fifty children, food and medicine for the poor, the construction of a new church each year, health and water projects, the operation of six schools and vocational education, and help for evangelistic work.

This long term relationship with friends in England continually produces new fruit. Over one hundred college age students, in addition to clergy, doctors and medical students, have made their way to Khammam. Such interaction invariably blesses the visitors as well as those whom they go to serve.

One can barely imagine the emotions of those missionaries from England who first arrived in Khammam in 1888. It was a different world then. While India was "the jewel in the crown" of Great Britain's empire, Andhra Pradesh was primarily part of the fabled Muslim Kingdom of Hyderabad.

Now, over a century later, the age of traditional missions, like that of empires, has gone. In its place is a strong, vital and creative Christianity in which friendships still prosper and nurture across the oceans.

Habitat for Humanity

In 1983, I was President of a small Christian housing ministry. Habitat, to that point, had been building houses with the poor in two African countries, two Latin American countries, and in a score of communities in the United States. But with the interest of former President Jimmy Carter, Habitat was poised for tremendous growth.

In early 1983, I began to receive constant pressure from Dr. David Purushothaman to begin a Habitat project in India. David was a Presbyterian pastor in New Jersey whose family had served Christ faithfully in Tamil Nadu, South India, for three generations. On a regular basis, he would call, write and visit me urging me to go to India with him that summer.

I was already committed to Africa for the summer, having just completed my doctoral thesis on African Religion. But despite every effort to get others on the Habitat staff to go to India, no one was available, and I did not have the heart to reject David.

We flew to Madras to begin a three week exploratory journey. It was a wonderful experience. Bishop Sam Ponniah of the Vellore Diocese (Church of South India) introduced us to the overwhelming challenges and great opportunities that God's work presents. In Madras, Bishop Sundar Clark did the same, exposing us to the ravages of poverty as well as to the tremendous spirit and courage of the people. In countless dusty remote villages and

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great urban cathedrals, in mud huts and on college campuses, among people with leprosy and among the religious and political hierarchy, we saw great grace, powerful faith and determined good works.

The door was wide open to begin Habitat's work under the sponsorship of either of those respected and visionary church Leaders.

However, we had one more stop to make. A long train ride brought us to the same station that had welcomed Azariah thirty years earlier. A bicycle rickshaw driver loaded David and me with all our luggage into the carriage and delivered us at the gate of St. Mary's Mission Hospital. Over the next several days we did what we had been doing for two weeks, visiting one nondescript village after another, seeing the urgent need for housing among the desperately poor, meeting with hopeful groups and committees, being inspired by the heroic ministry already underway.

During our time in Khammam, we met with a committee organized to promote a Habitat project, chaired by Azariah who was again doing the needful. It was not his first choice for the needful that day. For a year he had been trying to gain admittance to a world wide conference for itinerant evangelists led by the Billy Graham Association to be held in Amsterdam. That would have been the one chance in Azariah's life to learn from and have fellowship with that unique brand of Christian workers, itinerant evangelists, who labour in isolation, living on faith, without the support of church agencies and institutions, moving about as God's Spirit leads. Yet repeatedly his application was denied, much to his amazement and disappointment.

As Azariah convened the first Habitat meeting, he remembers, "I looked over at the calendar on the wall, and I saw the date. To my surprise, it was the very day that I had long hoped I would be in Amsterdam to begin the conference with thousands of itinerant evangelists like myself. I could not help but wonder why the Lord prevented me from going to Amsterdam. Even so, I was chairing the Habitat meeting only at the request of our Bishop who could not be there. Perhaps, I thought to myself, this is what God wants me to do?"

David and I left Khammam very impressed by all that we had seen, just as we had been in Madras and Vellore. The need for housing was obvious and urgent. Everything that is necessary for a successful development project was readily available: building materials, good workers, a tradition of self help.

Above all, there was the desire to do the needful. What made Khammam stand out was the overwhelming spirit of compassion and cooperation. These were people without access to power, influence, money, international aid or any of the trappings of big time ministry. They were just people who steadily for thirty years have been doing what they could with what they had for whoever was in need.

I also felt that Habitat would get the attention it needed in Khammam. In Vellore and Madras, the Bishops were responsible for an impressive array of good works and vital ministries in their large dioceses, and I was afraid that Habitat might get lost in the shuffle. This was to be Habitat's first project in Asia and it needed to serve as a model, a foundation upon which its credibility could be built so as to spread across the sub-continent of India into the rest of South Asia. That was the underlying hope. In development work, the first project is always especially fragile so it needs the kind of leadership that is focused, determined,

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steady and faithful. I was sure that we had found the right place and the right people in Khammam.

To my delight, I was able to steer Khammam through the Habitat application process easily, opening the door for a series of God-driven coincidences.

The next winter Azariah visited the United States, including Habitat's international headquarters in Americus, Georgia. He was asked to speak at the weekly pot luck supper, an event that God used to stir the soul of a young couple from Michigan, Roger and Barbara Sneller. They had come to Habitat looking for an overseas assignment, probably in Africa. Instead, they felt the excitement of launching this new effort and accepted the call to India.

One big hurdle remained. While India welcomed tourists, students and business people, it did not welcome missionaries and long term volunteers. Indeed, even the Peace Corps was no longer working in India.

But the Peace Corps was not forgotten. Sitting on Habitat's Board of Directors, which I served as president, was former President Jimmy Carter. God's penchant for coincidences was working overtime. His home in Plains, Georgia was eight miles down the road from the Habitat headquarters, and Carter had become an active partner in the work. India held a special attraction for Carter ever since his mother, Lillian, had served a term in India with the Peace Corps! Building on that personal connection, he wrote the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, requesting a long term visa for the Snellers and it was granted.

In 1984, the Sneller family with two young daughters, moved into the St. Mary's Hospital compound and began the painstaking work necessary to start the project. By July 1985, two years from the day Dr. Purushothaman and I first met the Khammam Habitat committee, the first twenty houses were ready for dedication. It was my delightful privilege to preach at the dedication, to present Bibles in Telugu to each family, and to cut the ribbons at each front door as the families moved in. Prayers were offered, coconuts were broken open, biscuits and tea and bananas were shared in celebration of this new start in Asia.

When I first met with the Khammam Habitat committee, I spoke about "the Gospel as a surprise". It would not be surprising, I told them, that Christians in America would send money to Christians in India to build simple, decent houses for poor Christians in Khammam. But it would be a wonderful surprise if Christians in America raised money to send to Christians in India to build such houses for the poor Hindu or Moslem families; and if the people on the committee from one particular caste or another, should select families from another caste, perhaps a caste that had traditionally oppressed them or a caste whom they had previously mistreated. That would be the Gospel as a surprise.

This surprise has been miraculous. Over one thousand houses for seven or eight thousand people have been built in the Khammam area for poor people of every background. The seed first planted in central Andhra Pradesh has produced new projects across India. Khammam Habitat has been a pioneer in dramatically reducing the cost of each house (now about \$800 US), in creative payment plans that allow desperately poor families to participate, in hosting work camps from England and the United States, and in networking for the implementation of other community needs like water, jobs, education and health care.

In the process, the Gospel of God's love so evident in Jesus Christ has been affirmed.

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Hindus, Moslems and Christians, high caste and low caste, and no caste, have worked, built and lived together. In the years since Habitat began in India, the country has continued to be bedevilled by forces that would drive people apart on the basis of religion or caste. But for thousands of Indian families, the Gospel's great surprise of love has been a force for harmony.

The Asian School of Evangelism

If the early and mid 1950s were dramatic years for the young evangelism team of Azariah and Sister Mary, the early and mid 1980s were startling and dynamic as the ministry took new directions and found surprising new friends at every turn.

Azariah's brother, Raj, is a Methodist pastor in Bombay, one of the world's largest and most complex cities. Raj had once studied with John Rhoads in his Asian School of Evangelism in Honolulu, Hawaii. In 1981, Rev. Rhoads and Azariah met at a conference in Bombay organized for the Methodist pastors. Azariah had been invited to lecture on rural evangelism.

John Rhoads had served as a missionary in China, and when China was closed to outsiders, he went on to serve God in Japan for twenty years. Gradually, his real zeal became to provide intensive training for evangelists who were from Asian countries. From his school in Hawaii, he trained students from India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Korea and Japan.

Already, Azariah was keenly aware of the need for more people in the Khammam area to be strengthened in their faith, affirmed in their ministry, and equipped to effectively teach the scriptures and provide pastoral care.

One such person was John Mark, the son of one of Azariah's earliest colleagues. John Mark was a college professor with some theological training. When Rev. Rhoads offered to provide a full scholarship for one person to study with him in Hawaii, John Mark was the obvious choice.

God's hand has surely been upon John Mark, even to the point of helping him to survive a plane crash in the rice fields outside of Hyderabad in 1993. Evidently, God still has work for him to do! Nine years earlier, John Mark took the six-month training course with Rev. Rhoads in Hawaii. When he returned to Khammam, it was with the determination to begin their own training program in evangelism right there in Khammam.

This went right along with the thinking of Rhoads and the original Asian School of Evangelism. Just as Rev. Rhoads wanted to train people native to each country in Asia to "Do the work of an evangelist" (2 Timothy 4:5), he was just as excited to promote training in the country.

So many of those called by God to serve are poor, uneducated, with families and responsibilities that make it impossible to consider training in Hawaii, Bombay or even Bangalore. Travel alone rules out any possibility for most training.

The alternative, then, was to bring the training close to the trainees. The Rhoads family and their ministry were immediately supportive. In 1985, he inaugurated Khammam's own Asian School of Evangelism, and in 1989, a permanent building for the school was constructed next to John Mark's house.

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The Christian ministry has always emphasized the importance of “the call”, the sense that God has singled out a person specifically to do the Lord’s work. Jesus verbally called his disciples into full time service. The Old Testament is filled with dramatic stories of God calling people out from daily life into a lifetime of public service in God’s behalf. For people like Isaiah (Isaiah 6) or St. Paul (Acts 9), there was no mistaking the heavy weight of God’s hand on their shoulder and God’s voice in their ear calling them into ministry.

My own call was a combination of the dramatic and subtle. There was clear evidence of God wrenching my life around, trying to bend me to that divine will and plan, coupled with a feeling that the full time pastoral ministry was right for me.

Just as clear as the call, however, was the feeling of inadequacy. I felt completely ill-equipped, unprepared and downright ignorant. It reminded me of my freshman year on the baseball team at Colgate University. The coach called on me to pinch hit against Ithaca College and I was thrilled! But when the pitcher threw two fast balls faster than I had ever seen before, and then a curve ball that is still breaking thirty years later, I knew I was not ready, I was out of my element and overmatched.

To be called by God, to know that God wants you personally for specific work, is a wonderful feeling that is, at the same time, intimidating. People backed away from Jesus’ call with a variety of excuses after expressing initial excitement (Luke 9:57-62), Jeremiah claimed he was too young, and Moses was too shy.

The Asian School of Evangelism exists to affirm, nurture and strengthen the call that God gives across Andhra Pradesh to people who are excited by God’s invitation to work, but ill equipped for the challenges of daily ministry.

To meet the needs of the students without adding an impossible financial burden, the program offers two courses taught in Telugu, the language of Andhra Pradesh. The first is a six to eight week unit, the other lasts for nine months. All expenses for travel, food and lodging are paid for by The Asian School of Evangelism, with the Rhoads family continuing to raise funds for this project. For the nine-month course, students often bring their families, adding to the expense, but also enriching the experience.

The course of study is similar to what pastors and evangelists study all over the world: Life and Teachings of Jesus, Life and Letters of Paul, Survey of the Bible, Christian Doctrine, History of Israel, Outlines of Church History, World Religions, Methods of Evangelism, Worship and Pastoral Ministry, Biblical Teachings and Evangelism. Classes are held six days a week, 9-12:30 and 3-6 pm, with Sunday devoted to practical experience in the churches and worship centers throughout the Khammam district and beyond. To date, over 150 people have used this school to strengthen their ministry as pastors and evangelists.

One of the most exciting adventures in life is to pursue education at a time when you are hungry to learn. After I finished my Masters Degree, it was a long time before I wanted to sit in a classroom, listen to a lecture or Write a paper. But ten years later I was ready. When I enrolled in the Doctoral program at Eastern Baptist Seminary I couldn’t wait to get to class, to do the homework, or to write the papers.

At the Asian School of Evangelism I find the same hunger for knowledge that God can put to use in their lives. In 1994, Paul Davis and I were invited to offer four seminars for

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fifty evangelists in the area, most of whom were current or former students at The Asian School. As we struggled to put ideas in English that could be translated into Telugu and would make sense in their fields of labour, they were on the edge of their seats. It was not our brilliance that kept their attention! Inside each of them burned the desire to learn anything that might help them serve the living and loving God of Jesus Christ. People often talk about the eager faces of students, and that eagerness to learn is evident throughout this School of Evangelism. In the days following our seminars, I found the evangelists and pastors anxious to reflect on the messages and ask questions. Some have written letters months later quoting from the seminars and describing ways of applying what they had learned.

The Asian School of Evangelism is yet one more example of the ministry in Khammam doing the needful. In *Something Small for God*, I described Azariah's approach as "see a need, meet a need". With the enthusiastic response of people across Andhra Pradesh to the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ, the need was there for people to accept God's call to become full time servants of the Gospel. The church needed leaders whose leadership style would be humility and service.

The need for people to be called and to accept God's call was equalled by their need to be strengthened, encouraged, equipped, trained, taught. In the language of today, this is a "felt need", not a requirement imposed from the outside, but a yearning that comes from within these pastors and evangelists to be the best that God needs them to be. That hunger and desire sparks each class and seminar.

The Christian movement in Khammam and across Andhra Pradesh began thanks to the sacrificial efforts of foreign missionaries. Those missionaries offered their lives for the joy of sharing the Gospel. A century later, God has called forth leadership that is just as sacrificial and just as anxious to share the joy.

Pillar of Fire Mission

The impact of Dr. David Purushothaman has been felt repeatedly in the ministry around Khammam in the last fifteen years. Pillar of Fire Mission is only the latest example of the long and loving reach that David extends across the ten thousand miles from Jersey City, New Jersey to the heart of Andhra Pradesh.

David's story begins a long, dusty train ride southeast of Khammam in the state of Tamil Nadu. His own spiritual journey is worthy of a book, and I have not done justice to it in the several mentions of his ministry.

David is a third generation Christian, the grandson of a Hindu priest who accepted God's offer to know God personally in the power and love of Jesus Christ. That decision cost the family dearly, taking life, possessions and community from them. God's love persisted, and David took up the cross in years of tender service that are fondly remembered in Tamil Nadu to this day. When we have walked the streets of Madras, to his amazement and embarrassment people have prostrated themselves at his feet to thank him for his ministry and to rejoice in his visit.

Almost twenty years ago, David and Rukma came to the United States, raising their family and contributing mightily to America through their good works and chosen careers in ministry and public service. But India has remained on his mind and in his heart. He has

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always provided hospitality for visitors from India, and his pastoral care for Indian Christians in the New York/New Jersey area is exemplary. Yet that was not enough.

His persistent urging is single handedly responsible for starting the work of FOCI, Habitat and Pillar of Fire in India. Like the disciples who brought others to Jesus, David brings people to India in the hope that God will touch their hearts and open their eyes to the great opportunities to serve. Like Azariah, David never asks for anything or tells anyone what to do. Being a firm believer in the power of the Holy Spirit to cajole and convince, David is satisfied just to show and trust in the gentle way.

Living in New Jersey, David became familiar with the Pillar of Fire Church. Pillar of Fire is a small denomination with Methodist roots that is faithful to the teachings of John Wesley, founder of Methodism. They take their name from the Book of Exodus where God provided a pillar of fire to provide protection and guidance for the Israelites as they escaped slavery in Egypt. In their statement of purpose, they declare, "We are striving to remain faithful to our Lord and Savior by touching this broken world with His love. God continues to breathe new life and vision into the Pillar of Fire Church".

Thanks to David Purushothaman, that breath of life and vision moves not only into their church, but also into villages and churches bordering Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In February 1990, David called Azariah and asked him to travel to Madras to meet two Americans and to bring them to Vijayawada where they were to speak at a Gospel convention for four days.

The two Americans were Steve Nash and Paul Blue, pastors and representatives of Pillar of Fire. For fourteen years, their denomination had supported the work of two Indian pastors in the Vijayawada area, a separate district from Khammam.

Azariah did what was asked, but then stayed for the convention in order to translate their message - into Telugu. After the convention, Azariah invited David and the Pillar of Fire pastors to spend a week in Khammam. They witnessed the obvious dynamism of Christian ministry in action in every conceivable way through education, child care, health care, rural development, evangelism, housing and churches. Not surprisingly, they were deeply touched by the evidence of God at work.

The next year, Azariah was invited to preach at their annual summer camp meeting at their headquarters in Zarephath, New Jersey. His messages at the camp meeting and on radio were well received and, yes, friendships were formed. The trust that comes with true friendship led Pillar of Fire to ask Azariah's help in the effective establishment of Pillar of Fire Mission in South India.

This turned out, as always, to be a mutual blessing. While Azariah has devoted his life to the people of Khammam district, Christians throughout Andhra Pradesh are always asking for his help, support and guidance. His resources are stretched thin in "doing the needful", yet he is uncomfortable with turning down more and more requests. Pillar of Fire was clearly an answer to prayer, and Azariah was led by God to entrust that area to their care.

In a brief time this work has prospered. Pillar of Fire ordained Indian pastors whose ministry includes fifty village congregations and over nine thousand members. Azariah provides supervision with personal encouragement and opportunities for instruction and

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fellowship. He remembers all too well the loneliness and isolation of being an itinerant evangelist which gives him special empathy for the new generation of “bearers of Good News”.

The relationship with Pillar of Fire has extended the influence of Azariah’s example into the Krishna district, but it has also benefited the other long standing projects of his ministry. They have proven themselves to be good friends and willing partners, shipping books and needed materials to India, providing opportunities for Azariah to tell his story in the United States, and living up to their stated goal of “touching this broken world” with God’s amazing love.

LEND, International

Several years ago I watched a segment of a TV news program about an extraordinary development project called Grameen Bank. It first began in Bangladesh, and it was startling enough to hear a good news idea coming out of one of those countries so often dismissed as “a basket case”. It is true that Bangladesh has more than its share of difficulties and less of the world’s advantages, yet it has made progress and contributions in several areas.

Grameen Bank was established to provide amazingly small loans to incredibly poor people, giving an economic stake to people ordinarily excluded from loans, capital or any of the where-with-all necessary to make entrepreneurial dreams come true.

In 1992 two of our friends, Lynne Murguia and Bonnie Burns, went to Bangladesh for the express purpose of learning more about Grameen. Bonnie had long had a desire to serve overseas in some helpful way. A widow with a teenage daughter, Shawna, she was ready to find out what God had in store for both of them. It turned out to be more than she had imagined. Her time in Bangladesh led to a friendship that became a long distance courtship, and now Mrs. Bonnie Burns Shah lives in Dacca with her husband!

Lynne’s goals and results were different, but equally impressive, in taking God’s energy and turning it into something wonderful. A retired school teacher from New York City, Lynne has a strong commitment to women’s development issues.

I had offered Lynne, Bonnie and Shawna the opportunity to try out their ideas and hopes in the ever fertile area of Khammam, knowing that they would be well-received, well-kept, well-used and well-encouraged. In short, Khammam offered a perfect place to put into practice the training they received from Grameen Bank.

Now, over 200 rural village women from the Khammam area have started or improved small businesses thanks to Lynne’s investment, Bonnie’s and Lynne’s training, and an idea that grew up in Bangladesh. The latter contribution may be the most surprising and ironic. Bangladesh was first created as part of Pakistan during the violent partition of India after independence in order to provide a nation for the Moslems in Hindu-dominated India.

Scholars, with more expertise than I, have questioned the “how” of partition, if not the “why”. The most unlikely part of the scenario was that Pakistan consisted of two large territories not even connected, with Bangladesh lying to the east of Calcutta and the present Pakistan in the extreme northwest, with nothing but two thousand miles of India in between. That arrangement, born of partition, lasted until 1971 when Bangladesh won its war of

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independence.

Geo-politics notwithstanding, Bangladesh gave rise to the idea of Grameen which now blesses the lives of families in Andhra Pradesh, and many others across India and the world.

Lynne created her own entity, LEND, which now operates through FOCI. For Lynne, the beauty of this Grameen inspired project is its simplicity and replicability. It can be taught to anyone and done anywhere.

From village to village, LEND organizes women into six groups of five women each which become a loan center.

The requirements for admission are disarmingly basic. The main criterion is that each person must have a complete lack of resources or collateral, no access to even the smallest loans without giving in to usury.

With Lynne providing the start-up capital, in effect funding a small development bank, women are encouraged to form the small, five person groups. The purpose of the group is to provide mutual support, a peer pressure based on friendship and trust. Together, the group provides a community of responsibility, holding each other accountable for the loan payments, which are the lifeline of the project. As each person makes a repayment, the next person in line gets her loan. As a group of five is successful, a loan center of thirty is successful. One successful loan center, a village, creates opportunity for another loan center in another village.

Thanks to the commitment of each new small time entrepreneur, and the training and hard work by Lynne's on site coordinator, Chary, LEND's loan repayment rate is 100%, only slightly better than the Bangladesh's Grameen's rate of 98%!

Given the indomitable work ethic of most of the world's poor people, it has long been noted that what they need is capital not charity. The classic proverb, attributed to the Chinese, is that if we give a person a fish, they can have a meal; but if we teach a person to fish, if ponds are stocked and aqua-culture is promoted, then a whole village could be fed for a lifetime. Lynne's vision is similar. From her own resources, stirred on by a generous heart, confident in the environment of responsibility so fully encouraged by Azariah's ministry, she has dramatically affected the lives of 1 50 families. The loans are infinitesimal, even inconsequential, by American standards. Ranging from \$100 US down to \$66 US, women have used the loans to purchase water buffalo in order to sell milk, to stock the shelves of a near empty kiosk, to buy a sewing machine and become a seamstress, to buy a grain grinder in order to more efficiently run a tiny restaurant, to improve a bicycle repair shop by having spare parts and tire patches available. In short, the people have the dream and the work ethic, but without access to capital the kiosk in their minds remains empty. LEND opens the door, stocks the shelves, pushes the dream into reality.

Friends

Modern mission gives the Christian church the fresh opportunity to work in friendship, setting aside centuries-old patterns of domination, suspicion and control. This works in Khammam. There is no jealousy or competition among the contributing friends, no struggle

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for credit. Through the ministry of Azariah, each has found a niche for humble, direct, effective service.

In *Indian Tales and Legends*, (J.E.B. Gray, Oxford University Press, 1961, page 49), the story is told of “the Mouse and His Friends”. Time and time again, an animal is saved from avaricious holy men, terrifying hunters and selfish peers by the creative and surprising friendship of other animals. First a pigeon, caught in a snare, is saved by a kindly crow and a mouse. Then the crow and the mouse, befriended by a tortoise, save a deer. Finally, the deer, mouse and crow use their wiles to save the tortoise. At the end the deer says, “I am indeed fortunate in gaining you as friends, for today, without regard for your own lives, you have rescued me from death.” After these words of praise, the deer continued to dwell happily with the crow, the tortoise and the mouse, and they all enjoyed their friendship for one another.”

The mission field offers fertile soil for such friendships. Drawn together by the genuine need of others, diverse people can join together to do what might otherwise never get done.

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NINE

Friends of Christ in India My Life is Changed

Despite my willingness, when I first went to India to remind Indian Christians to let the Gospel be a surprise the real surprise was what God had in store for me. I wanted Christians in India to exhibit a Christianity that would not be predictable, routine, “the same old same old”. God’s intention was to impress the same message on my thick skull.

I traveled to India fully expecting the “heat and dust” made famous by Julie Christie’s film of the same title. The fact that generations of missionary activity had left a legacy of good works and a thriving church presence, significant beyond its small size, did not amaze me. Seeing overwhelming need in a developing country emerging from a long period of colonialism was to be expected. Meeting wonderful people who extended themselves in gracious hospitality was a pleasure I have enjoyed wherever I’ve traveled.

The surprise was what God wanted from me. I went to India as a favour to David Purushothaman, to pinch hit for Habitat staff that had other responsibilities, and to start a Habitat presence in South Asia. Then I fully expected to return my mission attention to my first love, Africa.

In May of 1983, I received my doctorate from Easter Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia. Under the watchful eye of the late Dr. Orlando Costas, I had spent three years on my thesis, “African Traditional Religion and Christianity” (University of Michigan, Microfilm). I had already been to several African countries on four visits and was determined to be an advocate for what is still the forgotten continent. In 1983, I had three family members serving God in Zaire, my sister, Donna and her husband, David, and Bonnie’s brother, Rob. Africa was the logical focus for my personal mission, energy and emphasis.

God’s logic, however, was the surprise. One night during that first Indian journey, I had a vision or a dream in which God clearly called me to a specific assignment. The call was so clear, so specific that I am inclined to remember it as a vision, something that took place while I was awake and alert. In any event, the message was distinct and certain.

God called me to a lifetime commitment to India, not as a missionary in the traditional sense, but as a servant of India. The charge was simple and direct. I was to start a ministry, call it Friends of Christ in India, it was to have the two distinct emphases of evangelism and development, and every penny raised was to go to work in India. In other words, I was not being told to start an organization that would benefit me, I wasn’t starting a business, or a structure or an agency. Trusting in God, I was to raise funds in order to help the folks in India, like Azariah and friends, to do their work, to do it better and to do more of it. My role in the work was to participate in the sheer joy of obedience to God’s plan.

So clear was the call that a few days later, as I left a rural village, when a woman Bible teacher asked me to remember her in my prayers, I blurted out, “I must do more than pray!”

The connection between prayer and action was to become the hallmark of FOCI. If it was God who gave me the call to start FOCI, it was the people of a little village called

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Janakipuram who provided the opportunity and challenge to begin, and to put prayer and action together.

On the last day of my visit with Azariah, he took me to Janakipuram for what was supposed to be a short service of worship. The village is about an hour outside Khammam, perhaps fifteen minutes beyond Gollapudi. Set back off the road and protected by trees, it is a picturesque farming community whose beauty belies the poverty of the area.

The day we arrived the monsoon also began, forcing us inside a small mud hut for our prayers and worship. Packed in to every nook and cranny, we enjoyed our time praising God, and I had the chance to preach. I had been in India for twenty-one days and had preached at sixty-five gatherings, ranging from several crowds in the thousands to small prayer fellowships. Adrenaline kept me going, although the crowd should not have given my ego such a boost. Steve Coll, writing in his *On the Grand Trunk Road* (Random House, 1994), recalls being told by a colleague “that he could attract a crowd of twenty thousand in South Asia just by changing a tire on the roadside” (pp.120). Nevertheless, I was energized by the crowds and the responses of the people wherever I went in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

But by this final day I was weary and a little slap happy. The previous day at a makeshift market stall near Azariah’s house, I had stopped for a “cool drink”, Limca, only to be so surrounded by curious onlookers (I was the tourist attraction in Khammam!) that I could not lift the bottle to my mouth. I was ready to go home, but not until God finished with me and that required the visit to Janakipuram.

After our worship ended in the mud hut, we went outside and the sun was shining. It was always Azariah’s custom to walk the village after a church service or prayer meeting, especially seeking out the sick, or bringing medicine or financial help to those in need. This day, however, the village leaders asked me to walk with them to a special place, an empty lot.

With great pride, they walked the boundaries of the land and then explained, “This is the place for our church. We have come to this place each Sunday for thirteen years, kneeling here on the ground praying to God that one day we might have a proper church.”

I’m sure they expected me to be impressed by their piety and patience, but I was much too tired for such high minded thinking. Exhaustion and exhilaration gave me a boldness that was quite unexpected. Suddenly, I heard myself saying, “That’s the silliest thing I have ever heard! Do you mean to tell me that you have come here every Sunday for thirteen years to pray for a church? Thirteen years times fifty-two Sundays is a lot of prayer with nothing to show for it. It’s time for you to get off your knees and do something. In thirteen years times fifty two Sundays, you have not dug a foundation, purchased one bag of cement or made even one brick!”

Faithfully, without hesitation, Azariah was interpreting my hasty harangue, but we had their attention, and I was on a roll. I continued, “If you will send me a list of every villager, Hindu, Muslim and Christian, and what they will donate to build the church, and send me photographs of everyone helping to dig the foundation, I am sure that I can find people in America who will help you to finish the church. But first, you must do something.”

Only later, as I reflected on what I said, did I begin to wonder if I had been out of line, too pushy, too American. But I did not worry about it. I had often given such challenges in

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my life and most of the time it was ignored. By then I was on my way back home and the little village of Janakipuram was long forgotten.

So was God's call to start FOCI.

People often make promises to God in the heat of battle, under the power of inspiration or the spell of emotion. We may have the best of intentions to make good on our vows, but when life returns to normal, we tend to neglect our relationship with God.

Yet God is not as willing to let go of a promise. I should not have been surprised, therefore, to receive a thick envelope from India a couple of months later. Inside I found a long list of names, the villagers of Janakipuram, and next to their names was the amount they had donated for the building of a church. Some gave rupees, others gave grains from the harvest. More exciting were the grainy black and white photos showing the people of Janakipuram as they cleared the land and dug the foundation.

Just as I had hoped, but perhaps had not dared to believe, Hindus, Muslims and Christians had joined together to call my bluff! It was time to build a church in Janakipuram and, therefore, it was time to start FOCI.

Quickly, in 1984, I put together a mailing list of two hundred friends, family and church members, sent out our first newsletter and immediately people responded. The First Baptist Church of Melrose, Massachusetts was excited about FOCI from the start. It was a fortunate coincidence that I became their pastor, went to India, and started FOCI all at the same time! Their mission committee adopted FOCI and by early 1985, began sending the first funds to Azariah.

Two years from the date when a monsoon had forced us to worship inside a mud hut, we cut the ribbon, unlocked the door and entered The Emmanuel Church of Janakipuram. My last words during the dedication service outside the locked doors had been, "May the doors of this church always be open to everyone, Hindu, Muslim or Christian, who wishes to come here for worship or to pray!" Mysteriously, as the door was unlocked and opened, we saw a gnarled elderly Hindu farmer, standing before the cross, hands raised in a prayerful gesture, an offering of grains resting on the altar.

FOCI has not lost its commitment to a balance between evangelism and development. As a friend to Azariah, we walk the path he walks, which means that we do the needful, a desire that has taken FOCI in several directions. Discovering the needful is an art that we have learned from Azariah. Whenever I am with him, we travel around, I keep my eyes open, he introduces me to people and situations and then he sits back and waits for the Holy Spirit to work on me.

In the previous chapter, "Karmika Nagar: Doing the Needful," I told the story of our school in Hyderabad. What has become a monumental ministry began with a simple and short visit to a struggling school in desperate conditions. Not a single request was made, not one need was even mentioned. I came, I saw, I left. The rest was up to God and me, Azariah and the school had done their part. The phenomenal success and growth of what is now the Astrid Rowe Memorial School is simply the result of seeing something that needed to be done, and doing it.

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Our work among families with leprosy followed the same path. Azariah introduced me and my work camp to the families, with them we toured their village and saw their plight. God sent angels to wrestle with our work campers until we all surrendered and said, “Yes, we can raise the money to build them proper houses.” A few years later other FOCI friends, Lynne Mirguia and Bonnie Burns, grasped the need for regular food supply and easily attainable water, and Lynne has made both dreams come true.

A more telling example concerns FOCI’s ministry with mentally and physically handicapped youngsters in the area around the city of Madhira. One morning, sitting with Sister Mary and Azariah in the kitchen at Gollapudi, before beginning an already busy day, I was introduced to Dr. Vasanthamma.

Dr. Vasanthamma is an imposing woman. She insisted that I must bring my work camp to her home, about an hours drive in the opposite direction from the place we were going! She is a medical doctor, obstetrician-gynaecologist, with her own small hospital. It was also the one year anniversary of the death of her husband, and she requested that we pray with her at the grave site. More out of pity and respect for her grief than anything else, I begrudgingly agreed to the visit.

To my embarrassment, we were greeted royally. Beautiful sarees were given to all the women work campers, gifts were presented, refreshments provided, and we had a memorable tour of her hospital.

While visiting in her home, I was shown a locked back room where her 18-year-old son was kept. Because of oxygen deprivation during the final stages of birth, he was born brain damaged. As I looked through the window, I saw a tall, hulking manchild crawling along the floor.

As we say in America, “He had no life”. It is only in recent years in the United States that progress has been made in welcoming people outside the norm into the mainstream of life. Brain damaged, birth defected, or retarded people in India are almost literally still in the closet, hidden away, with few if any prospects for even the simple joys of life.

Very soon, I learned that the young man in the locked room was the real reason for my visit. Later, we were taken to an empty lot on which a tent was erected. At the entrance to the lot stood an impressive dedication stone announcing that at that site I had formerly launched the “Bethel Home for Mentally and Physically Handicapped People.”

I was being softened up to be hit up, and I didn’t like it.

Under the tent, we were welcomed by dignitaries, garlanded and thanked for the great work that was about to happen on that empty lot. A banker was there to promise a favourable loan.

At the end of the festivities, a father pushed his way to the front, carrying his 5 year old retarded daughter. She was drooling, listless, seemingly oblivious to the events at hand.

Standing next to me at the microphone, the father thanked me for what I wasn’t even doing and had no money to do nor any intention to do, but I listened anyway. Only a stone could not be moved to tears when the father described his heartache, his fears about the future of his little girl, and his struggle to decide whether or not to “mercy-kill” her. In agonizing

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detail, he told of the many times he had thought that his kindest act would have been to let her die or help her to die.

Then, with emotion so deep you could cut it with a knife, the father said, “Today is the first day I have felt any hope, and it good that my daughter is alive.” At that very moment, the little bundle of life he was holding in his arms reached over to me and planted a big kiss on my cheek.

As I said, only a stone could be left unmoved by such a scene. Under a brightly coloured tent, hope was trying to burst out into the open. But I found myself more like a stone than I usually care to admit.

I left Madhira mad at being manipulated and mad at myself for feeling manipulated, reminding everyone in sight that this wasn't in the budget! A few days later at our FOCI board meeting, we went over all our finances and plans for the future. I explained to Dr. Vasanthamma that she had a very nice idea, wished her well, and told her we could do nothing. She was very gracious, the FOCI board was supportive of me, and we adjourned.

End of story? Not quite.

All this time Azariah never encouraged or discouraged me about the Bethel project. He never told me to go to Madhira or fund the project, and never criticized my anger at being manipulated by Dr. Vasanthamma or my preference for not adopting her work. As always, he left it all in God's hands.

God's hands finally started working on me. After returning to the U.S., I found myself thinking of mothers I had known who had become pushy, aggressive, manipulative - in defense of their children who were defenseless against a system or society that treated them as less than human.

And I remembered the kiss on the cheek from the little girl whose life was so close to being extinguished by her own father who saw no hope for her until Bethel.

While I was doing nothing but thinking, Dr. Vasanthamma was busy doing. Securing loans, going into debt, putting her own hospital on the line, Bethel Home became a reality. One by one, she convinced families to bring their children to Bethel Home for training. She found specialists in occupational and physical therapy, people with the patience to teach “life skills” to youngsters who had had no life before she had pushed her dream into reality.

FOCI's involvement began small. We really did have budget constraints, although caused more by my lack of vision than a lack of dollars. Our first gift of \$100 grew to \$200, then \$400, \$800 and now \$1,000, while we look for ways to increase support for Bethel.

In 1994, Paul Davis, Sagar and the eight students from ARMS, joined me for a days visit to Bethel. Over thirty people come to Bethel each day, usually with a family member. Tenderly they are taught gardening, personal hygiene, telling time, social skills, how to use a phone, or go to the market and shop. They paint, make hand craft items for sale, and exercise limbs that had long been neglected.

Together, they are learning to enjoy a real measure of independence. Our group of visitors was greeted with great enthusiasm, beautiful garlands, and lots of hugs. Soon,

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everyone was seated on the floor as the youngsters proudly displayed their art work, played games and shared refreshments. It was an affirmation and a celebration of all Bethel is meant to be. Proudest of the bunch is Dr. Vasanthamma's son who loves to greet guests, work in the garden and pose for pictures.

I don't know what I expected on that day of our visit. Perhaps the youngsters from our school in Hyderabad would be uncomfortable around the mentally handicapped youngsters. Or perhaps the kids at Bethel would not have made progress and the project would seem more like a warehouse or a babysitting service. Perhaps the memory of my own insensitivity would still haunt me.

But as we climbed out of the van all those thoughts disappeared. Dr. Vasanthamma's dream of a Bethel that would give life and hope to a group of people mostly ignored and forgotten, that dream was a reality. As we walked the path of Bethel Home, a beautiful garden bloomed on either side, created by children whose parents once wondered whether it was even fair to make them live. Inside Bethel, they showed off their skills, activities, art work, knowledge with joy and confidence. Around the room were parents and teachers whose pride was just like what you would find in any classroom of accomplished children anywhere in the world.

I am not always so stubborn in responding to a need, or so slow. With FOCI, we have sought a balance between evangelism and social action and with Azariah's long history in the area, we have natural foci for our FOCI!

For example, his pattern in evangelism has been to visit a village, share the story of God's love, nurture the interest of those who respond, develop a small fellowship for prayer, plug them into one of the monthly worship centers, and eventually encourage their desire to build a small church. FOCI, building on the experience in Janakipuram, has helped with the construction of over a dozen village churches, fitting into the natural progression of this forty plus year old ministry.

What does a church mean to a small group of worshipping Christians in some dusty rural village far off the beaten track, or stuck among the bustling conditions of an overcrowded, busy city, in both cases surrounded by incredible poverty and overwhelming need?

In some ways, our FOCI churches mean the same as churches all over the world. A church building anywhere is a home, a place, a center, an identity. But especially in India it is also a public testimony, a witness and an invitation. On my visits, especially at the church dedications, I have always been amazed at how important a church is to the whole community, not just to the small group of Christians. Often, as we approach a village where I am to speak, I will ask Azariah, "How many Christians live in this village?" Usually the answer is ten, twenty, maybe fifty. But invariably, when we arrived at the church hundreds of people would be there. Every inch of floor space inside the church would be packed with people. At the door and windows people would press together in order to hear and see. A makeshift sound system carried the worship service to crowds of villagers outside.

The church building provides a recognizable link to the act of worship, the presence of God, the power of prayer, facets of religion that are universal and attractive.

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In some cases, the presence of a church building becomes the center of God's miraculous care in action. The village of Kothur, just a few kilometres from downtown Khammam, is home to several hundred untouchables. When I first visited Kothur, the people asked me to tell a Bible story, so we gathered on a little dirt patch and worshipped together. As I left, they asked me to help build a small church, a promise I made and promptly forgot.

Two years later I was back in Kothur for worship in what they called a "prayer shed", four cement columns holding up a thatched roof with a grass floor and open sides. They also, very softly, reminded me of my promise.

When I returned to the United States, a series of family tragedies befell one of our families at the First Baptist Church of Melrose, the Sibleys. In short order, they lost a daughter, a granddaughter and brother. Hester and Al Sibley were people of great faith, but the sorrow still went deep. As we talked and prayed together, they decided to do something that was specific, tangible and a ministry in honor of loved ones. When I told them about the village of Kothur, they immediately made plans to raise the necessary funds. Friends, family and church united behind their desire and, in 1987, the Calvary Church was dedicated in joyous celebration, a testimony to the love and faith of the Sibley and Taylor families.

Al Sibley did not live until that celebration, but during his last hospital stay Azariah and I were able to show him the blueprints of the church which his love and family made possible.

At the dedication of Kothur's Calvary Church, the head of the village made an astounding statement, "This is the first time we have ever had anything beautiful in our village?" I wanted to correct him, to assure him that his village was beautiful, the children were beautiful, everything was beautiful. But when I looked at him, I knew that he was speaking from a lifetime and from generations of lifetimes as an untouchable. He knew what it meant to be considered foul, unclean, dirty, outcaste, all of the words so perfectly described by the term "untouchable".

Yet the beauty of our FOCI-funded humble church building only begins to tell the story of God's love at work in Kothur. An English Rotary Club installed a well, Azariah's team provided teachers to begin a small schooling program, the government came in to borrow Calvary Church in order to run a "proper" school and then built a school building.

A village of untouchables, with their simple desire for a prayer shed, became a place of beauty in the broadest sense.

In every instance, FOCI's help in constructing a church is a response to some effort and desire on the part of determined people to make their faith more real and more visible in the larger community. Often FOCI's contribution is a partnership with funds that come from other friends of Azariah, mingled with the "widow's mite" contributions of the poor and the faithful.

As the Gospel is joyfully received from one village to the next, as the Word literally spreads, it becomes increasingly impossible for Azariah to provide the pastoral care for all who need it. The Asian School of Evangelism, located in Khammam and led by Azariah's team, can train a new generation of leaders, but in the rural and remote villages, the offerings of the people cannot support even the meagre needs of a pastor who might serve ten villages.

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FOCI is providing the annual support of six pastor/evangelists so that the people can have the care, teaching and worship for which they hunger. Working tirelessly and selflessly, usually at great sacrifice, these servants of God are building churches, literally and figuratively.

Each evangelist/pastor has responsibility for as many as ten villages, travelling the circuit on foot or bicycle. My friend, Sam Ponniah, former Bishop of the Vellore Diocese (Church of South India) was fond of saying, “every pastor an evangelist, every evangelist a pastor”. This eliminated the artificial barrier erected in much of the church world that results in pastors being little more than chaplains to the already converted. The work of evangelism, outreach, expansion is left to specialists.

Azariah’s ministry agrees with Bishop Ponniah. Each pastor has the dual role of caring for those already within the church while nurturing the interest of those who are beyond the walls of the church. On each of my visits, I’ve had the joy of participating in the baptisms of people who have made the decision to accept and follow God’s gift of love in Jesus Christ.

In late January, 1989, on a Friday afternoon, Paul Davis and I were taken to one of the churches pastored by one of the evangelists sponsored by FOCI. After a jubilant service, the whole congregation marched about three kilometres to a river. A river is always a busy place in India. Water buffalo were enjoying a swim nearby. Laundry was being beaten on the rocks and laid out to dry along the shore. The bridge over the river was a busy thoroughfare, and a perfect place for curious onlookers to perch as the marchers entered the river.

That day, twenty five adults made a truly public profession of their faith in Jesus. In American churches that practice adult or believer’s baptism by immersion we state, by way of definition, that baptism is an outward sign of an inward change, and we go on to praise the public nature of this outward sign.

Truthfully, however, most such baptisms are a very private affair. They are conducted indoors, in comfortable baptism tanks hidden away in the safe recesses of a church building. Parents, family and lifelong friends from the church certainly enjoy the moving event. But it is a far cry from a public spectacle in which one’s baptism becomes the centrepiece for the whole neighbourhood, for truckers and herders and shoppers and bathers. I could not help but think of this very real witness as one by one the fruits of one pastor/evangelist’s labours entered the river, claimed a Biblical name to be added to their own, affirmed their choice to follow Christ, and then entrusted themselves to me as I immersed them in the river - while the whole world, as much of it as they knew, watched.

Since India is 97% non-Christian, it is safe to assume that almost everyone who observed this Christian ritual was not Christian. Yet the unmistakable feeling around the bridge was affirming, positive, gracious, as if they knew that something good was happening. This is due, most assuredly, to the spirit of Azariah’s ministry as it has been conducted since 1953, and as it has been taught to the students at the Asian School of Evangelism and to the folks supported by FOCI in their church work. In these hands, Christianity is a gift of love shared with all who desire a taste.

Any student of the Bible is impressed by the determination that God’s people must take responsibility of the truly needy. The weak, the poor, the afflicted, the oppressed, the stranger, the lost, the outcast, the one without food or drink or clothing, the widow and the

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orphan, these are the priorities for ministry wherever you turn in the scriptures. The Catholic Church summarized the concept well when it proclaimed, “God’s preferential option for the poor.” In laype, son’s language, that means that, when push comes to shove, expect to find God on the side of those who suffer helplessly.

Azariah’s ministry was sensitive to God’s preferential option long before it became a central tenet of liberation theology, studied in seminaries and preached from lofty pulpits. In Andhra Pradesh, it just came naturally.

Much of FOCI’s work is the support of ministry with the poorest of the poor, the most alone and helpless people. Sister Mary Seethamma has felt specifically called by God to establish the Faith Home for the Aged, caring for people without the benefit of family, social security or any other safety net. In her own old age, frail with sickness that would have incapacitated most people long ago, she greets each day with the zeal to make that day good for the elderly who live at the Faith Home. Faith Home is just outside her front door, so their needs and joys are always with her. She is determined that the final days, months or years of each of these friends, will be lived with dignity and surrounded by compassion, a life still worth living.

The logical expansion of our work in obvious ways is clearly seen in the ministry among children. Over the decades, as Azariah became aware of one needy child after another, his own informal network of child sponsorship has grown to over three hundred children! Medical care, school fees, food allowance, clothing, family problems, all this and more became the responsibility of Azariah.

During one visit to India, we had spent a long, but joyful Sunday going from one worship center to another. At our largest gathering, we had worship, baptisms, dedications, communion, and the auction of chickens. Then the sick came forward for the laying on of hands and anointing with oil. Late in the day, everyone enjoyed a dinner of rice and curries prepared by one of the participating villages on a rotating basis. It seemed like a great day, and I was ready to get in the jeep for the two hour ride back to my bed.

Instead, Azariah motioned to me to follow him into a small back room. One by one, children were ushered into the room. Each one spoke quietly but confidently to Azariah, and then Azariah would reach into a black bag, give the child some rupees, then reach into his top shirt pocket, pull out a small notebook and make a notation. As the youngster left, Azariah added a tender tussle of the hair, a pinch of the cheek, a word of encouragement.

This scene is reenacted wherever Azariah goes. Each child is a story, an opportunity to do the needful. A teenage girl, with the first sign of leprosy, needs medicine. An orphan needs a place to stay. One boy gets school fees, another an allowance for food. Someone’s crop has failed, or a father died, and this ministry is the last hope.

In 1989, FOCI opened The Redeemer Christian Center. Originally built for twenty boys, we have expanded to over one hundred. One of the most impressive experiences was to see the Redeemer Center in action for a full week in 1994 while I was living next door. Under the quiet leadership of our house parents (they use the term “warden”), the youngsters, from ages 5 to 15, got up each morning, washed, cleaned, rolled up their bed mats and organized the dormitory, fetched water, ate, studied, then marched off to school.

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I watched this scene unfold with amazement. There was no chaos, no loud barking of orders to keep the kids in line, no threats or punishment. The warden maintained a quiet, gentle spirit, the older ones helped out the younger ones, a sense of order and purpose prevailed without taking away the playfulness and energy of scores of young boys!

In the afternoon, the boys returned from school. The teenagers from The ARMS School in Hyderabad lived for a week among the boys at Redeemer, so we had a lot of interaction. We would play cricket, badminton, ring toss, box ball. Other times, we would just talk, about anything.

Through it all, the same feeling of joyous self-discipline was evident. Those two words don't often appear side by side, but at Redeemer, the boys seemed to truly understand the need for self-discipline without sacrificing one ounce of joy.

After dinner, while daylight was still available, the boys gathered outside on the ground to go over their lessons. One night, I had been writing in my room when the electricity went out, so I wandered over to the Redeemer Center only to enter one of those experiences that remind us why we are in ministry in the first place.

All the boys, about eighty at that time, were seated in a huge circle. The teenagers from Hyderabad were on the steps of the dormitory, sort of at the head of the circle. The darkness of rural India after the sun goes down and the electricity fails is absolute, but someone fetched a kerosene lamp and set it in the middle of the circle. For the next two hours we were family, community, the people of God with none of the distinctions so popular in the world of age, color, religion, caste, class or nationality distinctions.

Everyone shared songs, skits, talents, people sang in groups or solo, the city kids from Hyderabad taught fun songs and Jesus songs to the country kids from Gollapudi, the boys showed off dances and gymnastics. In a quiet village in the middle of nowhere, a ten year old orphan boy who lives at our FOCI Redeemer Center with no electricity went into the circle by popular demand to show us his "Michael Jackson dance"!

Another boy was brought back for an encore. After living at the Redeemer Center for a while, the whole idea of the project began to make sense to him. Despite the insecurity and fear that must envelope even a little boy when confronted with grinding poverty and loss of family, he had found something to hold on to at Redeemer. The Bible stories he heard from time to time, told by Azariah or the warden, began to make sense in the light of the tender care he found at Redeemer. As we say in America, "the walk was matching the talk", and that little boy was impressed. So he wrote a love song, a song about God's love, something he knew a little about.

We all went to bed that night with a fresh awareness of the purpose of ministry. Sometimes we act as though ministry is a burden, a responsibility, something that God imposes on us against our will or our better judgment. There are times in life when that may even be true, and people like Jonah, Elijah or martyrs famous or anonymous might agree.

But generally, ministry is a joy, a delight, a celebration of the spirit, human and divine, working in concert. Perhaps we don't take the time or look for the opportunity to experience the "why" of what we do for the Lord. If the electricity had not quit that night in Gollapudi, I probably would have stayed in my room, writing my book, with a Humphrey Bogart type fan

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overhead stirring the air just enough to be comfortable and exotic at the same time, with no idea of the wonder taking place next door.

We need to keep that wonder alive in ministry. In 1994, Azariah and I made the decision to try something new that we had contemplated for several years. We decided to add girls to the Redeemer Center, opening up a new dormitory. Redeemer had grown from twenty boys to over one hundred, and as we raised funds, people increasingly asked, “What about girls?” American television had carried stories about India’s preference for boys and oppression of girls, often driven by the dowry system which requires families to go broke in order to arrange a suitable marriage for their daughters. To avoid such expense, some families abort a pregnancy if a sonogram shows a female waiting to be born. Poorer families may simply allow a girl child to die, through active or passive measures. Furthermore, India’s own growing women’s movement reminded us of the needs of young girls deprived of families, hemmed in by poverty, perhaps unwanted.

None of this was new to Azariah. For decades, he had provided various levels of support and sponsorship for girls. Even now, of the over three hundred children he helps, more than half are girls.

With the success of Redeemer Christian Center in providing a loving community for boys, the natural question was whether FOCI should add girls. If so, how and where? Some people advised that girls are better cared for in the traditional setting of their village. There was concern about caring for girls near or on the same property where we are caring for boys. What of appearances? In an India which is traditionally conservative and modest, where the sexual revolution might be popular in Bombay nightclubs or imported American movies, should we risk the potential problems of raising young girls, and to do so near or among young boys?

As is always my custom with Azariah, we talk things over, and then leave the matter to prayer and the leadership of God’s spirit. Frankly, I left India expecting it not to happen.

A few months later, I received a photograph of our first group of girls standing in front of FOCI’s Redeemer Center. I remember thinking, “We did it!” There was a quick moment of happiness, and then I clearly remember my next thought - “They’re counting on me! I’m responsible for them.”

I’ve looked at that photograph many times since, and there is not a single plaintive, beckoning, helpless look on their faces. Instead, the picture has the serious, soft image so popular in Indian photographs, with just enough contentment showing that you can tell they are happy. Yet my first thought was of the great duty and responsibility I had adopted.

With Azariah, however, there are no burdens. He is not susceptible to manipulation, he does not surrender to guilt. His view is disarmingly simple: if God wants something done, God will provide a way and a will to do it. This eliminates worry, fear and other issues that can paralyze us into inactivity. His Theology of the Needful and the Obvious blend together to create an environment in which anything is possible if God delights in it. And if God delights in it, we should be delighted as well.

I have two photographs, one in my mind and one in my hand. In my hand, I look and see a bunch of kids who are now my responsibility. In my mind, I see all those kids, sitting in

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a circle around a single kerosene lamp, being a family. God allows me to choose whether to be overwhelmed by the burden of responsibility or delighted by the experience of God's love taking root in lots of young lives.

From day one, FOCI was meant to have two emphases, distinct yet equally essential to the Christian task: evangelism and social action. In my travel diary from July 1983, I sketched it out, originally calling it FOCII, Friends of Christ in India, with the words spelled out vertically below each capital letter. At the end of the acronym, I put in parenthesis the words, "evangelism and social action." Foci is the plural of focus, and we wanted to avoid the narrow focus that has disturbed the Christian church throughout the 20th century and especially during my adult years. The church has long been divided by the debate over whether we should emphasize telling people about Jesus (evangelism), or doing what Jesus wants us to do (social action). Conservative Christians drifted exclusively toward evangelism, while liberal Christians promoted their causes often to the neglect of the rest of the Gospel. The late 20th century began to see a rebellion against such an absurd division, as Christians took to the streets to do good and to tell about the One who is God.

God could not have been clearer in dictating that FOCI was to be part of that refreshing movement. There are churches to be built, pastors to be trained, evangelists to be supported, all without hesitation or embarrassment. There is a unique story to be told, people want to be baptized, prayers and Bibles are requested.

There are also families with leprosy who need a safe home, students who deserve a stimulating school, people of every description of need who can use the dignity of loving support.

Whether the need is for the Gospel or for food, for the message of eternal life or a prescription for TB medicine, for spiritual forgiveness or good teachers, there is a God who is "the author of every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17) who is also intensely interested in meeting that need.

One day, Azariah took me to the headquarters of a popular religious movement in Andhra Pradesh to explain the work of Habitat For Humanity. The religious official listened respectfully and at the end of our visit offered to lead us in prayer. He proceeded to pray to God fervently that Habitat would fail completely in India, reminding God to remind us that all who are saved have a home in heaven and so there is no need for a decent home on earth, and earnestly asking God to defeat Habitat so that no one would lose their focus on heaven.

That strident theology that separates hope from help had sadly found a home in India just at the time when Christians in America were waking to the power of hope and help that is in Christ. FOCI, like all of the "friends" joined together with Azariah in ministry, remains determined to serve God whose very being has been integrated and holistic long before those terms became popular, a God who refuses to separate human need from divine encouragement.

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TEN

Radical Evangelical Christianity

“In fire, you are the heat; in blossoms, the fragrance; among the stones, you are the diamond; in speech, truth; among virtues, you are love; in valor - strength; in the Veda, you are the secret; among elements, the primordial; in the burning sun, the light; in the moon light, its sweetness; You are all, and you are the substance and meaning of all.”

(Paripatal 111, 63-68, translated by Kamil Zvelebil, “the Beginnings of Bhakti in South India,” pp. 255, quoted from Hymns for the Drowning, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1981, A.K. Ramanujan Translator, pp.110)

I first heard that poem at Harvard Divinity School when I took a course with its translator, A.K. Ramanujan, a visiting professor from the University of Chicago.

The poem is pure radical religion. The views of the author, the worshipper, could not be more extreme. God is in everything. God is everything.

It is in that spirit that I use the word “radical”. Admittedly, I am hesitant to use the word to describe even a good and noble and gentle enterprise. The world, in general, has been terrorized by radical elements of social, political and religious movements. In the world of religion, radical fundamentalists have been involved in assassinations in Algeria, the murder of abortion doctors in the United States, kidnappings in Lebanon, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and the machine gunning of worshippers in a mosque in Israel by a Jewish settler doctor from Brooklyn.

As one who has studied the scriptures of most of the world’s religions, I feel confident in suggesting that it is not the scriptures or concepts of divinity that drive people to horrible acts in the name of religion. Within my own religion, Christianity, or even my own brand of Christianity, Baptist and Protestant, I can find no excuse for Protestants and Catholics murdering each other in Ireland, for the racist views of extremist Christian groups in America or South Africa, or for the condoning of violence, oppression or intolerance in any corner or the world.

India has paid a steep price for religious intolerance and extremism as radical elements within Hinduism and Islam battle each other. Of course, it is the innocent and the poor who usually suffer the consequences.

Steve Coil’s book, *On the Grand Trunk Road*, describes his journey into the maze of South Asian politics, religion, culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Against the backdrop of the special violence engendered by religious terror, he writes:

“The history involved is the kind you could bump into unexpectedly all over South Asia: mythical, pre-industrial, emotional, vivid, manipulated, and above all, alive and well in the imperatives of ongoing violence. (Page 190) The way history is seen ... is the source of the distortions that religious minded politicians find necessary to organize violence. (Page 191) Such is the language of religious violence in India: hot, intolerant, very much of the present, and yet woven from fragments of history and myth ... What matters today is that India’s pre-colonial history included enough religious wars, invasions, conquests, and

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appalling acts of slaughter and triumph to justify the anger of anyone who wishes to define the future by the past. (Page 198)”

However, a future defined by the past does not have to mean intolerance, violence or terror. Someone like Azariah offers hope for the future rooted in the past by his commitment to radical love, radical compassion, radical acts of kindness. Such radical love, steeped in the very nature of God, is every bit as effective in linking past and future as are the memories of past injustices, slaughters and defeats. Some might dare to argue that it is more powerful if we would only put that love to the test.

The legendary Emperor Ashoka ruled in India from 272-232 BC with an empire that extended from Pakistan to Bihar, Gujarat to Orissa and down to Andhra Pradesh. He was fond of issuing edicts which were carved into huge stones scattered about the empire. One is known as the Girnar Edict, a fascinating summary of Ashoka’s views which I found replicated outside the National Museum of Delhi.

It seems that the emperor was deeply troubled by the ravages of war, even when he was victorious. An “unprecedented slaughter” took place about eight years into his reign that led him to search his soul. The battle caused so much remorse that he determined that all future conquest would be accomplished through Dharma (duty, law, righteousness, justice).

Like the Old Testament prophets, Ashoka determined to have God’s laws written on hearts, to establish an environment in which doing the right thing was its own reward. He taught respect for all living things, trying to do away with animal sacrifice and establishing a nationwide health-care system for “man and beast” based on the ready availability of herbs, roots and fruit. Ashoka turned loose his own government officials to tour the empire, teaching “his people to obey parents, be liberal to friends and relatives and priests, to abstain from killing, to show reverence for elders and courtesy to slaves and servants”. He promoted religious harmony by seeking “restraint of speech, which means no praise of one’s own faith or disparagement of another” and requiring “all religious sects (to) live in peace and amity and stress self-control and purity of mind”. On a personal level, he sought to set an example by foregoing many of the traditional pleasures and pursuits of emperors and being so accessible that he even was willing to be interrupted “anytime, wherever he was, even if he were in the harem or in the bed chamber or on the march.”

The success of Ashoka’s way was so obvious that the stone edict declared it “achieved more in this way than has been accomplished in many hundreds of years by providing spectacles of celestial cars (huge parades of statues), elephants, hell-fire and so forth to the people.”

I mention this at length because we need not settle only for the violent acts of history as the determining factor for the future of a people. India can choose to allow the massacres of partition in 1947, or in response to the Ayodhya movement to reclaim Hindu sacred spots from Moslem mosques, to shape its future, assuring more rivers of blood. But the edicts of Ashoka, like the teachings of St. Thomas who brought the Gospel of Christ to Tamil Nadu two thousand years ago, may be more genuinely Indian.

If so, the radical love exhibited by Azariah’s ministry may provide a truer glimpse into India’s future. If it is true that “God is love” (St. John says so, 1 John 4:16) then love is not a matter of denomination, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, patriotism or any of the other

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divisions that separate humans into warring camps. With a radical adherence to love it is not a western religion that Azariah promotes, it is a truth necessarily attractive to a nation obsessed with divinity.

The many faces of God in India are not proof of paganism, idolatry or ignorance. They are proof of an abiding hunger to know the reality of God, a hunger that has taken people into every nook and cranny of existence. In the midst of that pursuit of God, Azariah steps forward to say, “Here it is. This act of love, like God’s loving gift of Jesus, is the essence of God. Come, consider.”

John R.W. Stott has said, “every Christian should be both conservative and radical; conservative in preserving the faith and radical in applying it!” (In Ministry, Eastern Baptist Seminary, Autumn 1994, pp. 12).

Azariah has that balance in his ministry. Respectful of the various traditions of India, sensitive to the feelings of others, helpful to historic and established churches, faithful to the age old Gospel, he is conservative. But in the application of the Gospel and in the practice of God’s love, he is radical. For Azariah, God’s love is real and his only desire is to make it just as real for everyone else who will give it a chance.

That message is just as clear when he shares it in churches across America and England as in churches across India. Indeed, the impetus for this book is that Azariah’s ministry and message is absolutely relevant for the whole world. The hunger to know God and the hunger for love are universal. Azariah’s methods for satisfying these hungers are also universal.

Whenever we travel together, we end up comparing notes about ministry. Driving the chaotic roads of South India, competing with herds of goats and water buffalo, dodging trucks and motor scooters, he manages to keep his eyes on the road and engage in heady dialogue. On one such trip we talked about evangelism.

“To do evangelism you must first show Christ in your life. This was just how the early church did it, personally telling and showing and exhibiting Christ’s love. This is what we must do wherever we are.”

Note the emphasis on “personally telling and showing and exhibiting Christ’s love”. As Christianity has become more structured, institutionalized and accepted, we have opted for programs and projects, often losing the personal touch. We hire out our good deeds, expecting government or denomination or missions or United Way to do it, whatever the “it” may be. Even with evangelism, we let the specialists do it. As Azariah observes:

“Too much evangelism is transplanted, it is done in the style of USA or UK just brought to India. We rely too much on mass evangelism. Mass Evangelism is quite nice and is very useful, for example Billy Graham’s work, in bringing people back to Christ, helping them to remember their initial love for Christ. But evangelism is a life, not an event. We must be willing to represent the love of Christ one on one in such a way as to be compelling.”

Evangelism is a life, not an event. In sports, athletes talk about putting on their “game face”, which refers to getting the look, the attitude, the mindset necessary to play the game with intensity. Unfortunately, in religion, we have adopted the same idea. When we are in

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church or teaching Sunday School or doing something that is overtly and obviously religious, then we get intense and serious about it for an hour or so. But then we take our religious “game face” off, in order to function in the daily world without looking or acting like a Christian.

John Stott’s answer to such waffling, fickle, undependable Christianity is that we must be “radical in applying it”. Azariah challenges us to a life which is “personally telling and showing and exhibiting Christ’s love ... (an) evangelism which is life ... willing to represent the love of Christ one on one in such a way as to be compelling”.

In Andhra Pradesh for more than four decades, the witness of this man and his friends has been personal and compelling. Even the invitation to “consider Jesus” is a personal response to the compelling presence of God in Azariah’s life. It is the yearning to represent the love of Christ, personally exhibiting Christ’s love, which is the most compelling and persuasive evangelism. If Azariah has impressive results to show from forty plus years as an evangelist, it is only because of the impressive love he has experienced in the blessings and guidance experienced in his relationship with Jesus Christ. Being himself compelled by that love, he has been able to make evangelism a life.

As a servant of the church, Azariah’s major regret is the weakness and reluctance of the church in the midst of great opportunity.

When I asked him if, after all these decades of sacrificial ministry, he had any regrets, I was almost afraid to know the answer. If he had no regrets, I would feel even more ashamed of my own life littered with regrets, wasted chances and missed opportunities. If he did have regrets, what word of encouragement could I offer?

Of course, everyone has regrets. But like any good athlete, if we have poured ourselves out on the playing field there is the satisfaction of having done one’s best and given one’s all in the effort. Let others - or God - judge if we are successful. St. Paul was quite comfortable with the language of an athlete, and when he reflected on his life, he used athletic imagery. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,” Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:7) and “I have not run aimlessly” (1 Corinthians 9:26).

Azariah’s complaint with the church is that it has become too timid, it runs the risk today of losing focus and becoming aimless, it is not finishing the race with the same zeal with which it began the race. Coming from an Indian tradition that could proclaim to God ages ago, “You are all, and you are the substance and meaning of all.” and having devoted a lifetime to a radical view of ministry which proclaims that we must “personally exhibit Christ’s love ... (and) evangelism is a life”, a lukewarm church is not acceptable. Azariah’s regrets are aimed at the failures of the organized, institutional church in the face of overwhelming need and unparalleled opportunity. Across America and Europe we may be bold enough to say, “Yes, that is our experience as well.”

Robin Williams, in the brilliant film, *Dead Poets’ Society*, challenges his students with the exhortation, “carpe diem” - seize the day. The phrase has been popularized on T-shirts and bumper stickers. Carpe Diem. God has delivered into our hands an era of tremendous potential. In the second half of the twentieth century, fantastic advances in communication and travel have delivered on the promise of a Global Village. We truly are neighbors to the whole world. Hardly anything or anyone is isolated or remote anymore.

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CNN could broadcast the Persian Gulf War from a hotel balcony deep in the heart of Iraq. USA Today is delivered to my hotel room in India. Satellites, videos and computers form an information highway that circles the globe. We can FAX the Gospel to so many places that fulfilling The Great Commission may not even require a passport. The Berlin Wall, the Iron Curtain, the Domino Theory, and colonialism seemed to have breathed their last. As my Indian friends would say, “they are no more”. In their place stands a massive gathering of humanity demanding spiritual nourishment. After ages of spiritual famine, the people of the world are hungry for God.

Azariah’s concern is whether or not the Christian church is ready. Two thousand years ago, Jesus could look around and say, “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for the harvest.” (John 4:35) Two thousand years later it is even more true, and certainly more doable.

As an itinerant evangelist, he has spent most of his ministry as an outsider. The recognized, organized, historical churches of India have grown to respect him, they make good use of his gifts, they welcome his efforts and his ability to attract the interest of Christians outside of India who support ministry in India. But he is worried that the church, as an institution, is concerned more with its structure, its internal politics and hierarchy and status, than with the Gospel call to so personally exhibit the radical love of Christ that people will be compelled to consider Jesus.

How does an evangelist, with such a profound sense of God’s great love and action through Jesus, manage a ministry of respect in a place like India? India is a pluralistic society, with a fragile democracy and a contentious history of division that often ends in violence. One would imagine that an evangelist with such a strong commitment to the message and person of Christ would only add heat to the fire.

This is where what I call his “ministry of respect” comes into play. His respect is two sided. First, he offers genuine respect for the traditions, beliefs and worship as practiced by others. Second, he gains the respect of others by a life of humility, service, patience, and gentleness. In other words, he is not a threat to people. Since his life is a blessing to people, those same people are willing to consider that maybe his message is also a blessing. Furthermore, the ministry of his life comes without strings attached. TB medicine, a child’s education, an artificial leg or a Habitat house are available to each person because of their need, and because God has placed their need before Azariah, not on the basis of religion or as an enticement. This enables the Gospel of Christ to stand on its own merit.

His great gift of respect is a lesson for churches, pastors and Christians everywhere. To be effective, our ministry does not need to stand on condemnation, judgment, ridicule, guilt, fear, division, manipulation, coercion, or other such tools sometimes employed for evangelism.

Azariah has been willing to trust in the power of God to work through the humble witness of his life. Simply stated, he is too busy living out his gratitude to God to be ridiculing the spiritual teachings of others.

In the fall of 1986, Azariah and I walked across historic Harvard Yard in search of the Indian and Sanskrit Studies Department. We found it on the second floor of the Philips Brooks House, and my first class was with Dr. Diana Eck.

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For the next three years, I regularly audited courses through Harvard Divinity School and The School of World Religions. Courses on Gandhi, Hinduism, Pilgrimage, Liberation Theology, Comparative Religion and even on Indian poetry or Hindu philosophy attracted a diverse and large following. Class trips to an Islamic Mosque in Quincy or the Hare Krishna Temple in Boston, or to a Hindu Durga puja, or lectures on Sati (the practice of a wife joining her husband's funeral pyre) or Tibet always drew sympathetic participants.

Azariah always encouraged my desire to know more about the religions and spirituality of the East. A healthy understanding and genuine respect for the traditions of others has been a hallmark of his ministry. He remembers all too well the prejudice he suffered for being a Christian or for being an Indian to inflict that on anyone else.

He is also aware that the religions of the East hold a special attraction for many people in the West. Given his commitment to the premise that "Christ is for all", it might be confusing to see westerners flocking to the spiritual practices, gurus, ashrams, and teachings of the very Indian Hinduism and Buddhism.

However, for Azariah spirituality is not a ball game in which we keep score to see which side scores more runs (or people). Spirituality, religion, is the pursuit of truth in which we can know the power and presence of God. That truth has been known to him in such a real and lasting way that he cannot help but want to share it. Furthermore, he is able to distinguish between the truth of God's love which is so real in Jesus, and the failures and weaknesses of the Christian church.

His goal, then, is to let the reality of Christ's love permeate and dominate the church. All too often, the church is the dominant experience, when, in actuality, the church is meant to be the servant of the dominant experience, which is God's love in Christ.

One of my professors at Harvard was Harvey Cox. Back in the mid-70s, Cox was amazed by what he called "Turning East", the spiritual movement of westerners away from the Christianity and Judaism of their childhood, youth and family trees.

In *Turning East* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1977), he cites six reasons for people striking out for the East in search of spiritual fulfillment: friendship through community, immediacy of spiritual experience, the authority of a teacher or teaching, the purity of something untried (as opposed to the "outworn religious tradition of the west," pp. 98), male domination of western religion, and "concern for health, ecology, conservation", (pp. 100)

In effect, a lot of western people have looked at their world and at their church and not found a connection. Their life and their religion remain separate. Cox writes, "Teachings about God and words about Christ and phrases about the Kingdom begin to replace the real thing." (pp.105) People feel disenfranchised spiritually, they feel cheated by religion whose walk does not match the talk.

Later, Cox, holds out a few examples of people whose Christian spirituality is so connected and so real that no one needs to turn east or west, just to the very real Christ whom Azariah is convinced is "For all". The Harvard professor lists Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Helder Camara, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil. "Like Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil hated the boundary the church had erected between believers and non-believers ... The Christ she loved dwelt also among scoffers and sinners. Bonhoeffer

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dismantled the wall by insisting that the ‘true church’ is nothing else than the world, claimed by God and inhabited by Christ.” (pp. 162-163)

Azariah also rejoices with confidence in a world claimed by God and inhabited by Christ. That view releases religion from the confines of culture, nation or region and frees all of us to pursue the truth wherever it leads. Scoffers and sinners, believers and non-believers, Christians and Hindus and Moslems, westerners and easterners are the objects of affection to the Christ who is for all.

The paramount success of Azariah’s ministry is a direct answer to Cox’s legitimate complaint that the real thing has too often been replaced by talk. What I have seen since 1983 is a humble work where the walk absolutely matches the talk. Around Khammam these forty years, the teachings about God and words about Christ and phrases about the kingdom never replace the real thing, they are only a prelude, an introduction to the real thing. For Azariah and friends there is no substitute for the real love of God, and there is no substitute for being the real love of God.

As Azariah approaches the twilight of his ministry, his zeal remains as focused as always - to let every aspect of his life and the ministry represent the love of God in Christ. A list of his achievements would only embarrass him and humble most of the rest of us engaged in ministry. Yet the focus remains firmly on Christ. There is no Azariah School of Evangelism, Azariah Housing Colony, or Azariah Boys and Girls home. While in America we struggle to keep Christ in Christmas, Azariah keeps Christ at the heart of everything. One of his pet peeves is that newly gathered Christians often name their churches after an obscure Biblical reference or a denominational attachment or a theological diversion. Whenever possible, he encourages churches to proudly bear the name of Jesus Christ, convincing one church to change from Hallelujah Pentecostal Church, which would mean nothing to most people, to Lord Jesus Prayer Hall, which makes sense to most everyone.

This commitment to Christ is not ritualistic, creedal or exclusionary. It is personal. “The job of the church is to help members grow into the likeness of Christ. This means three things. We should live a life of sacrifice, responsibility, and we should take up the cross. That was the life of Jesus, so that is our life.” I could only nod in silence.

The disillusionment[^] which Harvey Cox cited as reasons for walking away from Christianity would not happen if our religion was more like Christ and less like an institution. But in churches today, people can find themselves far removed from any semblance of the Christ who touched the untouchable, fed the hungry, died on the cross, was raised from the dead, and who said to Peter adamantly, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-17)

The whole purpose of Azariah’s life has been to present the Christ worth considering. He has not established yet another competing denomination, or built a little empire for himself. He is not a self-promoter, he does not thrive on applause or celebrity, there are none of the trappings of demagoguery or power. Such temptations are not tempting to him simply because he has kept his priorities straight.

“Our job,” he told me, “is to have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5-8).” We must get into Christ. We must carry the cross, be servants, accept the Manifesto that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed us to preach the Gospel to the poor. Christ’s work is our work. That’s why I say we must get into Christ, have the mind of Christ.”

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When I asked him to define the mind of Christ, a four point alliterative sermon flowed easily as he spoke with excitement about a serving mind, submissive mind, sacrificial mind, suffering mind. Before I could challenge his excitement with the thought that all of that sounded difficult, glum and negative, he moved to the heart of the matter. “The mind of Christ is not the mind of a victim. We do not serve and submit and sacrifice and suffer in order to be victims, we live as Christ who was a victor! His victory is our victory!”

One of the most delightful aspects of Azariah’s ministry is that if Christ is the victor then we are all victorious because it is all based on the triumph of God’s love. With Christ, for Azariah, none of the demands of the Gospel are burdensome. Sacrifice, responsibility, taking up the cross, having the mind of Christ are all the trappings of triumph.

Years ago, in Kenya and again in New York City, I had the chance to talk with Jurgen Moltman, the German theologian famous for his Theology of Hope. (Harper and Row: New York, 1967) Moltman argues for a God who is Way beyond what any of us can imagine, whose love is far greater than the justice, wrath and anger we might rightly expect from God.

In *The Experiment Hope*, Moltman lays out this radical view of God’s love:

“The resurrection of the cursed, outcast, and crucified Jesus is the unbelievable factor in the Christian faith. Paul saw the consequences most clearly. If Jesus died on the cross cursed by the law, then his resurrection means redemption from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13). And Christ becomes the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified’ (Romans 10:4). Therefore, if God raised this crucified one from the dead, he has revealed a new justice, namely, the justice of unconditional grace, which creates rights for those who have none, accepts the godless, and seeks out the lost.” (*The Experiment Hope*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1975, pp. 57, emphasis mine).

Moltman is only echoing the greatly loved hymn which declares, “Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me” (*Amazing Grace*, John Newton, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, Word: Waco, 1986).

In some Christian circles, however, the thought, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me” is accompanied by another thought, “thank goodness, it did not save that other wretch over there!” Any suggestion that God’s love, grace and forgiveness might extend to whole ranges of people who do not conform to certain pastor/church/denomination/religion standards is ridiculed as the theological daydreams of ultra-liberals who never really believed anything in the first place!

But Moltman argues from within faith not in spite of faith.

“The resurrection of the crucified Christ reveals a new justice, which is the justification of the godless. The hope in resurrection within Christianity is, therefore, no longer ambiguous, but straightforward and clear. It faces without fear God’s future as a joyous hope in the power of divine grace, which even death cannot resist. It is, indeed, a hope for the hopeless. Through the crucified Christ the future of resurrection and life, of freedom, joy, and justice is opened up to those who live in guilt without hope and who must die in fear without a future. To say it simply, the resurrection of the crucified Christ revealed the kingdom of the coming God as the power of anticipatory love. This love has no condition placed on it and knows no boundaries. Through the love manifested in the resurrection, that

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which is hateful is rendered lovable. Thus, hope is disseminated for the hopeless. The future is inaugurated, not by way of examples and commands, but through the love, the patience, and the sacrifice of God.

I will conclude this section with the following thesis: The cross of Christ is the sign of God's hope on earth for all those who live here in the shadow of the cross. Theology of hope is at its hard core theology of the cross. The cross of Christ is the presently given form of the kingdom of God on earth. In the crucified Christ, we view the future of God." (Ibid, pp.57)

What has this difficult and unorthodox theology to do with a humble, itinerant evangelist laboring in near anonymity in Andhra Pradesh? Both Azariah and Moltman have a gigantic view of God's love that simply overpowers any other theological impulse we might have. In the world, most everyone has a ready excuse for not liking, and thereby excluding, someone else. Thus, we can spiritually dismiss and ecclesiastically dislike someone outside our race, sex, religion, caste, nation, language, culture, tribe, party, point of view, class or image. To every attempt at exclusion, Azariah's ready response is, "Look at the cross. See how great is God's love," The cross shows God in action. In my book, *Faith at Work* (Smyth and Helwys: Macon, Georgia, 1994) I titled a chapter, "God is a Verb". God did not just talk or teach or demand, God went the extra mile to get intimately involved in our daily life through Jesus. Our response, then, also needs to be more than talking, teaching and demanding. Moltman states:

"One does not move to another country to find freedom and God. One remains where one is in order to correspond to the conditions of the coming kingdom of God through the renewal of the heart and by practical transformation of social circumstances. The front line of the exodus is not emigration, but liberation through the transformation of the present. By changing ourselves and the circumstances around us, by anticipating the future God, we emigrate out of the past into the future." (Ibid, pp. 59)

This is the path chosen by Azariah. He has not sought a more hospitable climate of being a Christian by emigrating to the US or England or by entering the safe shelter of the church by ordination. Nor has he stood at the side of his culture shouting, "Look what I've found, and you better accept it or else!" He has chosen the path of Emmanuel, God with us, offering "renewal of the heart, practical transformation of social circumstances ... (thus) changing ourselves and the circumstances around us".

He has simply proven in one little corner of the world that the resurrection of Jesus opened up a whole new spirituality, that God's power is everyday real, that everything the Bible promises is true. One could hardly get more orthodox, or more radical than that. His ministry is "God with us ... and in action."

One of my mentors has been Dr. Gabe Fackre, theology professor at Andover Newton Theological School. As I began Azariah's story, I knew that Fackre's book, *Word In Deed* (Erdman's: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975) would reflect accurately this life lived far away in India.

Word In Deed is about evangelism. It recognizes that the task of evangelism, to which Azariah has devoted his life, is truly "at the heart of the Christian faith".

Fackre outlines five crucial aspects of evangelism: orientation, proclamation,

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authorization, action, and conversion. To be evangelists and to do evangelism, we have to understand the world (the neighborhood) we live in, we have to know the Gospel story and make it our own, we have to do the work, and we must be ready for the changes that will take place.

Without knowing Fackre or his outline, Azariah follows the outline thoroughly. He has correctly understood the post Independence India of the second half of the twentieth century. A faithful student of Father Devadas, he learned the story of God's love and internalized it so that it was his story. With precision and patience, he has done the work. The results have been dramatic changes in Khammam, in the church, in the people, in the ministry, in his own life, none of which caught him off guard.

Fackre absolutely captures the spirit of Azariah's work in Chapter 4, "Action". He sets the stage with the story from Acts 3 where Peter and John meet a crippled man on their way to the Temple for worship. This encounter takes place at the gate called "Beautiful Gate", and Peter responds to the crippled beggar with this astounding and bold statement of faith, "I have no silver or gold; but what I have I give to you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk". (Acts 3:6)

Here, we see the evangelism of the young church taking its first steps of faith after the completion of Jesus' time on earth. Fackre writes, "Apostolic evangelists begin their work outside the gate. They find themselves led by the Spirit into the marketplace, where they are confronted with a suffering body.... the context in which this storytelling goes on is that of worldly agony and bodily need. In the face of human hurt, the evangelist uses the resources God gives. In the name of Jesus Christ, walk." (Word In Deed, pp. 53)

This is the ministry of Azariah and team. From the first steps taken in 1953, it is the marketplace, the village center where worldly agony and bodily need are known and where human hurt is an everyday reality, that attracts the itinerant evangelist. Time and time again, Azariah would be taken from the village center to a humble hut where bodily need lay under the weight of despair and hopelessness.

Surrounded by people who had a healthy mix of curiosity and skepticism with just a mustard seed of faith, he would offer the only resources he had. "Silver and gold I do not have; but what I have I give to you." A prayer for healing, a touch of oil, a kind word, a tender touch, a piece of bread, the promise of forgiveness and eternal life, a bond of friendship, these were the resources shared generously.

As years went by, the resources were multiplied like the fishes and loaves in Jesus' miraculous feeding. (Matthew 14:15-21) For those living in squalor there were affordable, simple houses. Touches for untouchables, food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, education for the children, medicine for the sick, a village for those with leprosy, training for the unemployed, schools and churches as beacons of hope, clean water, operations, love and community for the forgotten elderly or retarded or orphans.

All along for forty years, with silver and gold in short supply, the resources of God were sufficient for confronting and loving and healing the worldly agony and bodily need.

Fackre continues:

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“The Spirit empowers the evangelist to do a deed of shalom in which a broken body is made whole. Apostolic evangelists are called to minister to physical needs found outside the temple. And evangelism dares a miracle healing.

Why does apostolic evangelism begin with an act of mercy? First of all, the good news which the evangelist is called to report is the foretaste in Jesus Christ of a healed creation. The ultimate reconciliation of the world includes the knitting together of things physical as well as things spiritual. Testimony to that triumph must, therefore, include a witness to the promised wholeness of hope. As Emerson said in another connection, “the end preexists in the means”. The end to which the evangelist points, the fulfillment of the vision of shalom, should appear in the act of pointing. Evangelism in this sense is “hope in action”. (Ibid, pp.54; Hope in Action, Hans Margull, Muhlenberg: Philadelphia, 1962, Eugene Peters, Translator)

What was true outside “the Beautiful Gate” of Jerusalem two thousand years ago, and has been true in villages and towns across Andhra Pradesh, is just as true for ministry throughout the developed, sophisticated and western world: we are to knit together things physical as well as things spiritual as a witness to the promised wholeness of hope.

No one would pretend that Azariah’s team has done all there is to be done even in their small, remote district of the Global Village. But they have been doing all they can do, responding in faith to each opportunity to love whether or not there is silver or gold to underwrite the effort. The evangelistic effort is hope in action, pointing to a path that has no end short of the New Jerusalem. Until that destination is reached, the journey along the path continues, always open to the possibilities to be as well as to tell the Gospel of God’s love in Christ. The work alerts all who care to know that there is no end to the power of God to change life.

A significant part of the beauty of this ministry is that it does not point to itself, it claims no power or significance of its own, it does not seek its own survival, it is not impressed by its own importance. Instead, it has taken to heart Jesus’ call that we be yeast and salt and light (Matthew 5:13-15), in proving and encouraging “everyone in the house.” Today, in Khammam, the Rotary and Lions Clubs do their jobs better. The Church of South India in Dornakal Diocese and the independent churches are more effective in ministry, the Gideons have more to do, the District Government is responsive, the medical community has more outreach, “everyone in the house” (Matthew 5:15) enjoys and uses to good advantage the light lit by an itinerant evangelist and friends.

Dr. Fackre would enjoy seeing his words proven so right in the hinterland of Andhra Pradesh. Quite poignantly he connects the dots between evangelism of ancient Jerusalem, the Khammam District of Andhra Pradesh and the places where we do our work.

“The events that took place outside the Beautiful Gate, and many counterparts in the rest of Acts, are more than imperatives to imitate the vision of God. They are miracles of the future. That is, they are signs that the powers of night have been overcome and that the horizon light is making its presence felt in the world. Because the future of God has broken into history, the unexpected can happen. Out of nothing - “I have no silver or gold” (Acts 3:6) - shalom takes form. Thus, the confirmation of the evangelist’s message takes place in an act of empowerment; the truth about the proclamation that the powers of night have been routed is signaled by an actual routing of those powers. And it is a victory that flies in the face of all

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evidence of the evangelist's weakness and lack of resources. Apostolic evangelism is thus grounded in both the eschatological imperative and the eschatological reality. The evangelist is called to set up a sign to the wholeness of the 'promised shalom and is empowered to do a deed of the future, one that boggles the mind of those who do not expect miracles, one that witnesses to the in breaking of the Kingdom of God.' (Ibid, Fackre, pp. 55)

My mind is boggled by what I have seen in India, all the more so because every facet of that work is perfectly applicable to wherever I serve. There is nothing in this ministry peculiar to Khammam, Andhra Pradesh, India, the mission field, the developing countries or the unevangelized. It is nothing more, nor less, than the tasks we assume whenever we take on the name of Christ as individuals or as churches.

Fackre summarizes his thoughts on evangelism succinctly when he concludes, "Getting the good news out means telling it as well as doing it...But this word does not float ten feet off the ground. It comes from and returns to the earth. It is a word set squarely in the midst of a deed. Herein lies the essential character of apostolic proclamation. Authentic evangelism is an incarnate word. Hence Acts evangelism - action evangelism - is "word in deed" evangelism." (Ibid, pp. 56-57)

In the Book of Revelation, God offers a criticism of the Church in Laodicea for being "lukewarm ... neither hot nor cold" (Revelation 3:16). God is looking for people with passion and commitment, people who care about matters in a deeply personal way.

A radical is one who takes passion and commitment to an extreme. In that sense, Azariah is radical about God's love. In this ministry there is simply no doubt that God's love, so evident in the life and purpose of Jesus, is for all. It is their job, therefore, to go to any length to extend the loving touch and loving word of God.

The end result is a ministry without boundaries. Not even budget constraints can limit the outreach of love. A ministry which began decades ago with an evangelical zeal to bring the Word (John 1:1) quickly developed an evangelical zeal to do the Deed. Word and Deed go together so closely and so obviously that it is Word in Deed, and Deed in Word.

Another poem, translated by A. K. Ramanujan and which I heard him recite, speaks to me of the ever-presence of God:

THE PARADIGM

"We here and that man, this man,
and that other in-between, and that woman, this woman,
and that other, whoever, those people, and these,
and these others in-between, this thing, that thing,
and this other in-between, whichever, all things dying, these things,
those things, those others in-between, good things, bad things,
things that were, that will be, being all of them,
he stands there!"

(Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar, A.K. Ramanujan, Translator, Princeton University Press :Princeton, 1981, pp.3)

Is the poem Hindu or Christian? Is it about my God or someone else's?

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I think it is more interesting to note that the poem is true about God and about us. The Bible, from beginning to end, helps us to know God. We are challenged to emulate God. In the Lord's Prayer, we are taught by Jesus to pray, "thy Kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven". The One who died on the cross calls us to pick up our cross and follow him (Mark 8:34). The God who is love invites us to love. We are to become as much like God as we possibly can, holding nothing back. To our surprise, we are even told, "be perfect as my Father in Heaven is perfect". (Matthew 5:48)

Nammalvar's poem, "the Paradigm", is about God who is everywhere and who permeates everything. Among people, among things, throughout time, "He is there". That is the same message I wanted to convey when FOCI named the church in Janikapuram, Emmanuel, "which means God with us". (Matthew 1:23)

In ministry, we want to be the presence and power and love of God. In the spirit of Jesus, we become the ones of whom it is said, "He (or she) is there".

That is the testimony of Azariah's life. In the midst of people, events, and in the midst of "all things dying, these things, those things, those others in-between, good things, bad things, things that were, that will be ... he stands there". That is the power of Azariah's example. He stands there with the Rotarians and those with leprosy, with the Gideons giving out Bibles and the masons mixing cement for a Habitat house, with the orphan and the widow, with worshipers in grande cathedrals and in thatched roof prayer sheds, with children as they play and with abandoned older folks as they die.

He sees nothing unusual in this. It is simply word in deed, faith in action, the church doing what it is called by God to do.

Years ago, I met a missionary in Zaire who had been evacuated from the southern region during a particularly violent uprising. She was determined to get back to the area immediately, no matter what the cost. During my visits to Zaire, I have seen many graves of missionaries who paid the ultimate price for a lifetime of sharing the Good News. The civil war following independence in the early 60s took its toll on the missionary community and the Zairian people. The Shaba rebellion in the late 70s was another reminder that one should be very careful about wanting to do something "no matter what the cost".

When I asked the missionary why she was so determined to get back to such a dangerous area, she gave an answer that reflected the Biblical promise of a "peace which passeth all understanding". (Philippians 4:7) She made it very clear that she wasn't foolish or heroic, that she wasn't trying to be a martyr. Then she just quoted this hymn, combining verses one and four:

"When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died ...Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all."

("When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", Isaac Watts, The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration, Word Music: Waco, 1986)

That is radical evangelical Christianity. It is the Christianity lived out in the gentle lives of a simple ministry in Andhra Pradesh.

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ELEVEN The Mantle is Passed Nischala Chitram

(Still Life) Birds, stop flying

May the world's weeping halt too, sky, stop fading into blue ocean, calm those waves and breeze, those flutters silence. All still, even time, and death's shadows, World, cease motion, Hold silent and steady!

I want to repaint this torn, shattered, faded landscape with the red brush of this age just once.

I want to plant a kiss on the brow of the world with unselfish love.

(by Vimala, a Telugu poet, from *Women Writing in India, Volume Two*, Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1993, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Editors, pp. 601-602)

People always ask about the future of any good work. What will happen to FOCI after I am gone? Can The Astrid Rowe School meet the needs of students in the Twenty First Century? As Azariah and Sister Mary become older, can all the work in Khammam endure and prosper? What of the Gospel itself?

There are organizational, structural and financial answers, of course. But the real issue is the lasting value of the word and deed which Azariah has served.

Azariah took the mantle of ministry from Father Devadas. I am the third generation of pastors in my family. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is almost two thousand years old. Vimala's beautiful desire, to "plant a kiss on the brow of the world with unselfish love", is as timeless as the tender breath of God.

In other words, the mantle will be passed. God raises up in every generation those who will give of themselves tirelessly and joyfully. There is a popular saying used in fund raising for charities, "Give until it hurts". However, there is another view of giving that reflects a more beneficial purpose, "Give until it stops the hurting".

Giving until it hurts speaks admirably of the sacrificial nature of the giver, and keeps the focus on the giver. But if our motive in giving, through word and deed, is to alleviate the hurting of someone else, then our focus will be on someone else.

Azariah has chosen a model for ministry where the focus is always on the love of God touching the need of a person who is hurting. There is no room in such a ministry for empire building, power grabbing or ego tripping. Planting a kiss with unselfish love takes all the time and energy we have if we are serious about following Christ in a life of service. Azariah would echo the words of Mother Teresa, "I don't want the work to become a business. It must remain a work of love". (Mother Teresa, Navin Chawla, Penguin Books India: Delhi, 1993, pp. 74)

The mantle to be passed must be the mantle of love. But the Bible story about mantle

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passing provides an interesting twist. When the prophet, Elijah, knew that the end of his earthly life was coming soon, he wanted to spare his faithful disciple, Elisha, the trauma and sadness of witnessing his end. But Elisha was persistent, refusing to leave Elijah's side.

Finally, seeing Elisha's determination, Elijah offered him a blessing, saying, "Make your request. What can I do for you before I am taken from you." (2 Kings 2:9)

Elisha's answer is instructive for all who care about the future of the Gospel in any ministry. With uncanny boldness, Elisha asked, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit". (2 Kings 2:10)

Soon after, the famous chariot of fire came to earth, and Elijah was taken away to heaven. Elisha then picked up Elijah's mantle and made use of it with the double portion of the spirit granted to him.

Two features of this story must be emphasized. First, the mantle is not so much passed as picked up. Just as each person must decide to pick up the cross and follow Jesus, a person must also choose to take on the mantle of leadership and responsibility in ministry.

Second, from generation to generation both needs and opportunities increase. Elisha was right to dare to hope and to request that he would need and, make use of, a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

When I think of Azariah's ministry, and our own FOCI work, and the effort of each of his friends in ministry, it is wise to recognize that we should pray to God to send women and men with a double portion of his spirit. Given the realities of the world as we face the Twenty First Century, the gifts he brings to ministry will be more in demand. His unique blend of genuine openness, thorough commitment to Christ, absolute love, personal humility, and supreme confidence in God's will needs to be increased if the Gospel is to meet the equally doubled portion of needs and opportunities.

In particular, the world is experiencing a drastic rise in nationalism and in religious fundamentalism. People are turning more to whatever they consider "their own", while rejecting as foreign and alien and even evil what comes from the world outside their own. There is Hindu revivalism, Islamic fundamentalism, Sikh militancy, all paralleling similar trends among some Christians. Just as there are Christians who claim that America was founded as a Christian nation and should be one again, there are Hindus who claim the same for India, Sikhs who would have their own world in the Punjab, and Moslems who want Islamic rule in their countries.

If the world does become more divided and isolated by religious and national walls, paradoxically the world will also be more aware of difference. The ease of world wide, almost instant, communication is one genie that won't go back into the bottle. The information superhighway of telecommunication, computer, fax machine, CNN and MTV means that ideas, facts, trends and possibilities will be available almost everywhere to almost everyone.

Nationalist sentiments and fundamentalist theology may narrow the boundaries, but there is little chance for isolation.

How, then, can competition in ideas be waged? In the past, religion has been spread

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by colonialism and conquest. People have been lured into conversion by the prospect of political or economic gain, or threatened into conversion by the prospect of violence.

But faith should not be equated with religion. When Azariah spoke at my church, he emphasized repeatedly that people need to be called to Christ-likeness, not Christianity. Christ-likeness is a way of life which, by definition, seeks to be like Christ. Christianity, in modern usage, is just the formal name of a religion.

In years ahead, if Christianity as a religion wants to have any impact on the world, it will be through a doubled portion of Christ-likeness, not a double dose of religion.

Mother Teresa relates this conversation which led to the first approval of her work in Ethiopia:

“‘What do you want from the government?’

‘Nothing,’ answered Mother. ‘I have only come to offer my sisters to work among the poor suffering people.’

‘What will the Sisters do?’

‘We will give whole-hearted free service to the poorest of the poor.’

‘What qualifications do they have?’

‘We try to bring tender love and compassion for the unwanted and the unloved.’

‘I see you have a different approach. Do you preach to the people, trying to convert them?’

‘Our works of love reveal to the suffering poor the love of God for them?’

(Mother Teresa, Navin Chawla, Penguin Books India: Delhi, 1993, pp. 198)

The Ethiopian official was concerned about conversion. But conversion is change, and people are rarely, if ever, genuinely lured, coerced or beaten into life changes. Mother Teresa offers a ministry overtly dependent on Christ for example and power, which manifests itself in work among the poor suffering people, giving whole-hearted free service to the poorest of the poor, bringing tender love and compassion for the unwanted and the unloved, revealing to the suffering poor the love of God for them in works of love.

Sister Mary Seethamma, Azariah and their team have chosen a similar path that ministers lovingly, with those in greatest need, while also ministering prophetically and tenderly with all the rest of us who surround those in greatest need. This is also the greatest path to evangelism as the mantle is put in the proper place on the proper shoulders for the next century. It is also the truest form of participation in a world of spiritual diversity. We cannot enter the world of interfaith dialogue as competitors or conquerors. But as servants of the God who is love and followers of the great gift of love, Jesus, our Good News will be welcome communication across any boundary.

Earlier, in Chapter Five, I mentioned Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University.

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Encountering God is her spiritual and personal autobiography that weaves together the story of her two great commitments, God and India. She represents the kind of genuine interfaith dialogue that the world needs. All too often, interfaith and ecumenical activity results in a kind of watered down religion that sacrifices everything in order not to be offensive. It is as if people first must agree, “I won’t talk about what is really important to me, and you won’t talk about what is really important to you”.

Dr. Eck brings to interfaith dialogue and to the study of world religions the essential characteristics of confidence in her own faith and respect for the faith of others. Indeed, confidence and respect go hand in hand.

With integrity in her own spiritual journey, Eck is able to study, teach, feel, encounter the religions of India and the world, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, in all their variety.

Reading Encountering God while reflecting on the life and ministry of Azariah, two thoughts from Eck’s writings struck me.

First, she writes, “Our interfaith dialogue does not usually begin with philosophy or theory, but with experience and relationships”. (Encountering God, Beacon Press: Boston, 1993, pp. 2)

This has been my experience with Azariah, and it is one of the keys to the strength of the evangelism of his ministry. People often ask me why I love India. Why have I invested so much of my life and ministry in India and with this particular group of Indians in Andhra Pradesh? I have been to twenty two countries and had wonderful experiences in all of them, and I continue to have a great interest in Africa and Central America. In these places, the work of Christian ministry is dynamic and heroic. So what is there about India that draws me again and again and again?

Eck is right when she says it begins with experience and relationships. For whatever reason, God has opened wide the doors of experience and relationships in Andhra Pradesh so that I can share their life, work, hopes, fears, struggles ... and faith. Getting to know Hindu and Muslim young people as well as I’ve known the young people I’ve pastored, and to love them as I love my own children, has created a hunger for interfaith dialogue that has nothing to do, as Eck says, “with philosophy or theory”.

I have something precious in my life, the knowledge of God’s love acting through Jesus Christ, and I want to share it with people about whom I really care. But since I know them, I enter into the arena of interfaith relationships with respect and admiration for how they have been raised, what they have been taught, and how they put their beliefs into action. I have had conversations with, letters from, and heard speeches by Hindu and Muslim Indians with such eloquent faith in God expressed that no one could tell that these friends were unaware of the full Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, I still know that:

“(I’ve) a story to tell to the nations That shall turn their hearts to the right, A story of truth and mercy, A story of peace and light.”

“(We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations,” H. Ernest Nichol, The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration, Word Music: Waco, 1986)

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I also know it is a good story, as urgently needed in their town as in mine.

What these experiences and relationships do is to remind us to minister with humility, gentleness, respect, remembering that God's love and forgiveness, reconciliation and healing, Savior and Son are as much theirs as mine.

My initial experiences and relationships, of course, were with Azariah, Sister Mary Seethamma, and the other members of the team. It was through their eyes that I first saw India, under their direction that I first had experiences of India. Yet always the experiences and relationships were seen, heard and felt through a filter of gentleness, respect, cooperation and humility. They, too, have a story to tell and it is the story of a loving God, a saving Christ, and a compassionate Church at work. They take to heart the tender offer of Jesus:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30, NIV)

World wide there is too much ministry that is quick to condemn, rushes to judge, hastens to divide, and looks for those verses that are heavy with burden. But Jesus' own self description is, “I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”. In Khammam, through the work of Azariah, I found that promise lived out in a ministry that is thoroughly gentle and humble in heart, one that is constantly seeking to provide rest for those who are weary and burdened. This is what attracted me and is an attraction to others, with or without Christ, in the area; and it is the foundation for the most genuine interfaith relationships based purely on God's love and loving kindness.

Over the years, I've taken many people to India, and others have traveled on their own, for visits ranging from a few weeks to several months. These people are always exposed to the full range of ministry offered around Khammam and in Hyderabad.

It is always interesting to note which particular part of the ministry captures their interest. The church work is impressive, the evangelistic work is successful, the medical work is compassionate, the housing work meets an obvious need.

Yet people always point to the Faith Home for the Aged and the Bethel project with mentally and physically handicapped youngsters as the most inspiring. Why? Because there is no advantage, in an earthly or worldly way, to be gained from either ministry. It is ministry in its purest form, performed with the utmost gentleness and humility, giving rest for those whose lives had been troubled.

The author I met at the World Book Fair in Delhi can choose to be offended by evangelistic outreach, or be cynical about the motives behind building houses or providing medical care, seeing such efforts only as an enticement to conversion.

But with the elderly of Faith Home and with the mentally handicapped at Bethel, the purity of motive and sincerity of love is beyond question. That purity of ministry yields greater respect for all the work that is done in Jesus' name because it is clear that it is not numbers, power, guilt or gain which drives the work. It is love, pure and simple, that provides the best foundation for interfaith dialogue.

Another of Dr. Eck's insights came from her student days at Benaras Hindu

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University. She tells about some of the people she met that led her to value the religious experience of people outside her religion.

“One of those I met was Achyut Patwardhan, a former freedom fighter who had spent his share of years in the service of the non-violent movement for India’s independence. He was a man of simple, self-giving love. ‘You see suffering,’ he had said to me, ‘and you don’t debate about it or make yourself act. Those who love simply act, respond naturally with spontaneous good that is human. Perhaps all you can do is take another person’s hand. This, then, is sufficient.’” (Ibid, pp.8)

Azariah would not wish to be portrayed as a living saint. He does what seems reasonable to do, and if there is any wonder at all, it is only that more don’t do it. As Achyut Patwardhan says, “You see suffering, you don’t debate about it ... Those who love simply act”.

Azariah’s profound and personal relationship with Christ has led him to debate little, and “simply act” much.

Unfortunately, in a lot of Christianity debate passes for action. I remember someone in seminary calling it “theological navel gazing”.

Once, I took our youth group mountain climbing in New Hampshire. On the way home, we passed a Christian camp ground that seemed empty. We stopped and I asked the camp director if we could use a playing field for some football and frisbee.

“Absolutely,” he assured me, “we’re glad to have you, especially a church group!”

Then he reached into his desk drawer and took out a piece of paper.

“But first, you have to promise that you, your adult advisors and all the youngsters do believe the following statements.”

The paper had twenty articles of faith, from the truth of scripture and the evil of speaking in tongues, to the validity of the King James Version of the Bible. They were in the business of providing opportunities for young people to have healthy recreational activity, but they preferred the subtleties of theological debate to the joy of simply acting. To their credit, when I refused to sign and pointed out their missed mission, we were allowed to play on their grass.

That level of institutional, ecclesiastical silliness takes up a lot of the energy of the church, distracts us from our focus, detracts from our effectiveness.

In 1975, I took my first mission trip to Africa. Just before I left, another pastor came to my house to encourage me and offer his prayer support for my missionary journey. As he was vigorously shaking my hand, he asked me why I was going.

I mentioned our American Baptist mission work in Zaire, and my concern for the famine that was devastating sub-Sahel Africa at that time. He continued to pump my hand enthusiastically.

Then I mentioned that I would be attending the World Council of Churches meeting

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in Kenya. That man of God dropped my hand abruptly, uttered some growl, turned around and walked out of the house. The fact that two weeks later I would help baptize over two hundred and fifty new Christians in a river deep in Zaire could not matter to him because his focus was only on his personal hang-up with ecumenism.

Azariah has not allowed his attention to be diverted from the main task. There is a Jesus to be introduced to the multitudes along the busy roads and in the remote villages of Andhra Pradesh. To high caste and untouchable, to the sick and the dying, to those in need and to those with power, to the churched and the unchurched, to the young and the old, to Indian and American, he echoes the invitation Philip first gave to Nathanael, "Come and see". (John 1:46)

There is work to be done, a story to be told, people to be loved, a Savior to be served.

This doesn't leave much time for pettiness, church politics, internal squabbles, personal jealousies, institutional divisions, or gamesmanship. During the many years we have worked together, he has been confronted by all that and more, and it has never been important to him. His focus just does not waiver from Christ and those whom Christ loves - people. Institutions and dogmas simply pale by comparison with the Jesus who has called him into a life of service.

In the early 90s, I faced a period of persecution and injustice. Fortunately, with a combination of perseverance, a few friends and a good lawyer, I lived to see a brighter day. Nevertheless, I was weakened and distracted by the events, and left with bitterness and anger.

Finally, when Azariah and I had a long trip together, I asked him what to do. His answer was simple:

"Sometimes, when people mistreat us and hurt us on purpose, we are faced with only three good choices. Some things we must forget. What we cannot forget, we must try to forgive. And if we cannot forget or forgive, then we must forbear."

Forget, forgive or forbear. The unacceptable option is to allow things to distract you, to turn you aside from your calling, to weaken your witness, to diminish your vision. Azariah absolutely refuses to have his field of vision narrowed by the incessant would-be intrusion of pettiness, politics or personality conflicts that regularly consume other ministries. Nothing is allowed to infringe on the basic task, to present the loving Christ to all who are willing to consider him.

Again, there is a telling parallel in the ministry of Mother Teresa. Her authorized biographer writes:

"In her scheme of things, there was never a preconceived 'grand plan' towards which she worked. As she encountered problems in the slums, she never felt it necessary to travel the usual administrative path... She saw only the immediate need of a particular individual and tried to meet it then and there. If it were an undernourished child, she went by the shortest route to get food for that child."

(Mother Teresa, Navin Chawla, Penguin Books India: Delhi, 1993, pp.36)

The name, FOCI, was given to me by God just days before I first met Azariah. It is a form of the word "focus", and I was not aware at the time how vital focus is to successful

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ministry. Yet of all the traits of Azariah that I would pass on to new generations of pastors, evangelists and church workers, the ability to focus on what is truly important may be the best trait. Theologically, he is focused on God's love. Spiritually, he is focused on Christ. Practically, he is focused on the person in need right in front of him. Temporally, he is focused on now. Ecclesiastically, he is focused on the people. These foci define his ministry, and his ministry defines his daily life.

Father Van Exem, Mother Teresa's long time spiritual confessor, says of her, "For Mother Teresa, her religion is not only the main thing, it is everything. It is this religion that makes her love every human being. Her life is love for God, whom she sees in the poor." (Ibid, pp. 53)

To adapt this description for Azariah, I would make two changes which may very well be true of Mother Teresa, and is most often true of those who live life fully for God. First, religion, at least religion that matters, is not Christianity, Protestantism or even his own denomination, The Church of South India. His religion is the practice of following Christ in word and deed. Second, his life is love for God, whom he sees not only in the poor, but in all who surround the poor.

Latin American Roman Catholic Bishops spoke prophetically when they proclaimed God's "preferential option for the poor." (Liberation Theology, Phillip Berryman, Pantheon Books: New York, 1987, pp. 22-24, 42-44) But God's love is for everyone, and God's hope is that each person, regardless of their station in life, will choose to follow the path of love so clearly delineated by Jesus.

In 1994, a young man from our church in Pittsfield, Chris Sposato, joined Azariah for a short-term missionary experience of three months. He returned around Christmas at the same time my daughter, Camaron, came to visit before leaving for a six month trip to India.

I arranged for both of them to join me on my weekly radio program, "Community Insight: Religion in the News." Camaron has been to India four times and was returning for an in depth study of women and development issues in South India. Chris went to India to explore his own sense of call, a feeling that God wanted him in full time ministry.

The conversation eventually turned to what makes the work of Azariah so unique, both from the viewpoint of evangelism and development - the two foci of FOCI.

Their answers flowed together, even though they had never met before the program. But from different experiences and perspectives, they found the same common denominator: God's love.

Camaron said, "no matter what Azariah does it always has the same purpose, to show God's love. People in other parts of the world are often afraid of, or opposed to, western ideas and western programs, even a religion that they think is western. Why? Because these things have often come from the west along with colonialism and conquest, and domination. But with Azariah, the love is so clear and so real that no one doubts it!"

Chris added, "I would see him every day, the stream of people coming to him for help, the needs so overwhelming. It never matters to him whether the person is Hindu, Muslim or Christian, low caste or high caste, rich or poor. The same love from God, the same interest

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and respect and concern, is given to each person. And it's that way early in the morning, middle of the day, or late at night."

That is the way to share Christ.

Most people approach culture in one of two ways, with cultural imperialism or cultural sensitivity. Cultural imperialism is built on the premise that however we do things in our culture, it is bound to be better than how "they" do it in their culture, so if they are smart, they will start doing things our way.

Cultural sensitivity begins with the possibility that someone else may actually know better how to do certain things than we do, so we let them do it their way.

But the value of the life and lessons of this relatively anonymous itinerant evangelist from South India is that there are universal truths and good ideas that transport very easily from one part of the world to another. Some good things are good everywhere; some bad things are bad everywhere.

In a pizza restaurant in downtown Delhi, I was engaged by a person who wanted to defend the cultural superiority of all things Indian from the critical gaze of westerners.

"Don't talk to me about wife-burning," he bellowed, "That's part of our culture and it is our business."

Did I overstate it when I said, "That's not culture, that's sin! Wife burning has nothing to do with culture!" I don't think so. Some things are wrong anywhere.

Likewise, some things are right anywhere. Azariah's ministry is as applicable to rural, suburban and urban America as to rural India. His style of ministry, and priorities, could be adopted by any church and put into practice.

Tony Campolo, Ron Sider of Evangelicals for Social Action, Billy Graham's son, Franklin, of Samaritan's Purse, the united efforts of African American churches in Boston, Johnnie Ray Youngblood's ministry in Brooklyn, are only some of the public faces of the style of ministry practiced by Azariah's team. Evangelical and open, loving and practical, prophetic and redemptive, universal and personal, sacrificial and joyous, Christ-centered and people-oriented, this ministry believes that the Gospel really is good news, that God is love, that miracles do happen, that the church is the Bride of Christ, that our neighbour is really supposed to be loved as we love ourselves, that our life should be an offering to God.

Note two things about that last sentence. First, everything was stated in the positive, not the negative. Second, everything is relevant to any town, any church, anywhere. Ultimately, that is the purpose of Consider Jesus, to provide a refreshing style of evangelism. Azariah's life story is interesting to me and hopefully, to others. A preacher can always find good illustrations in the life of a person who has lived life with some adventure, sacrifice and purpose.

But aside from biography and a small slice of church history from a distant shore, it is the lessons to be learned from his life and ministry that make the story worth knowing. The modern church, if it seeks to follow Christ and as it enters a new century, needs inspiration. In the past, we have had evangelism by conquest and colonialism. Church growth has been

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accomplished by population explosion and population shifts. We have built churches by enticing people to leave other churches. We have bound people by creed, tradition, guilt and fear. Or we have lured people into our churches with charismatic leaders, mass movements, dramatic events and celebrity status.

That is not an exhaustive list of evangelistic styles, nor is it meant to be entirely cynical. Some good surely comes from almost every effort at evangelism. Still, we need a revitalized ministry around the world and Azariah's efforts offer a tried and true model. With all the popular calls for getting back to basics and keeping it simple, this ministry provides the basics in such unadorned fashion that they are recognizable, adaptable, replicable.

They also work. One major concern of all kinds of evangelism is that it should have a lasting effect. I've had the joy of seeing the results of this ministry alive with Christ into the third generation, not only of families who continue to live in Andhra Pradesh, but also those who have emigrated to the US. The evangelism of Azariah's team makes for deep roots because it is built on a solid foundation of God's love, Biblical and theological basics, and personal commitment to the life and teachings of Jesus.

We may be inclined to imagine more differences between Azariah, doing his work far away in India, and an American or English church or Christian, trying to do our work, than really matters. Across the miles, people are more alike than different. Especially, if we accept the basic premise of John 3:16, that "God so loved the world," then we are nudged toward the conclusion that all people have the same basic needs, spiritual and physical. Wants, desires, luxuries, tastes will vary from age to age and place to place, but God's interest in providing the Good News is in response to the yearnings of all people throughout all time.

Frankly, when it comes to ministry, there is not a single difference worth mentioning. After all, it is not Indian dress, harmonium or sitar music, Telugu language or jasmine that we are suggesting should be learned from Azariah. Matters of opinion and taste have little to do with the "Good News of Great Joy which is for all people (Luke 2:10)"

We are concerned with the essence of Christ-like ministry, what we say and do, and how we say and do it. The power of Azariah's ministry is that he lives the Gospel every day as if it is truly Good News not only for those who are served, receive, hear or are helped, but it is also Good News for those who serve, give, tell and do the helping. This makes evangelism a sharing, a two way street, an equal opportunity blessing for all who are involved. There is a Hindi proverb which advises:

*"If you have two loaves of bread
Give one to the poor,
Sell the other...
and buy hyacinths to feed your souls."*

(Mother Teresa, Navin Chawla, Penguin books India: Delhi, 1993, pp. 95)

St. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Do the work of an evangelist." Azariah has heeded that call with his whole life. With no desire for power, gain, adulation, or empire, he has been deeply satisfied to care for others in every way, finding his own soul well-fed by the beauty of God's every day love.

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