

In The Age of Wuhan Virus & AIDS: Notes from India Journey

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I returned home to Denver just in time for the Super Bowl game, after an excellent trip to India, with stopovers in Malaysia and Thailand. Nice not to be wearing a mask, as fears of the Wuhan virus prompted most of the people in the Bangkok airport to have them on, and perhaps up to 1/3 of the population of the city. No clear evidence they make a difference, but at least one way people try to respond.

When we landed in Denver, we were surprised when everyone was told to remain seated while they removed three Chinese people from the plane--no explanations were given. Flight attendants had not been wearing masks and no previous announcements had been made. Before leaving Thailand, everyone had their temperatures checked. Fortunately I remain healthy after an exhausting, but exhilarating trip.

Five of us traveled together to India rather than six. Ms. Linda Bales Todd of Dayton, Ohio, broke her hip the day before the trip and had to have immediate surgery--much to everyone's disappointment. This made for an all-male trip—Chin Keong Tan, William “Brad” Bradford, Burt Golub, M.D., and N. M. Samuel, M.D. Linda had been scheduled to speak at all three of the AIDS Conferences, so our all-male team at times proved awkward indeed. Plus I have always noticed how women in India tend to speak to women and men to men. In the Bishop Heber College conference of about 300 students, the men and women sat separately! A few women spoke to me, but not as freely as did the men. The women were eager, however, to take "selfies," with us!

Seminars on AIDS & LGBTQ

Everywhere we were welcomed enthusiastically. All three conferences focused on discrimination against both LGBTQ persons and persons living with HIV and AIDS. There is a great eagerness to address LGBTQ topics, as same gender sexual relationships are now legal in India, but knowledge is limited. Many Christians are ill equipped, as they have a dysfunctional theology that does not appropriately help them express their compassionate and rational tendencies. Conservative biblical interpretations have promoted condemnation. As one young woman master's social work student at Madras Christian College asked publicly: "How can I relate professionally as a social worker to a LGBTQ person, when the Bible teaches me to reject them?" The presence and witness of Brad and Chin were invaluable and their courage and graciousness in speaking made a great difference. Burt's frank professional medical details on contacting and mitigating sexually transmitted diseases were readily received. His short comic video clip on the proper use of a condom was probably what most enjoyed!

In Calcutta

In Calcutta we not only held a conference attended by the pastors, laity, and leaders of church schools, but we were entertained at several meals by the new

presiding bishop of the Church of North India. He seemed exceptionally eager to educate people about LGBTQ, HIV and AIDS, and social justice. His goal is to build a new facility for the AIDS orphans. The children and staff at the orphanage were delighted to see us return. They have some exceptional young people, several of whom need to attend college soon. (P.S. Anything you have ever read or heard about Calcutta being polluted, dirty, and impoverished is understated.)

In Chennai

In Chennai Dr. Samuel and I returned to Madras Christian College where we first met as students some 60 years ago. The head of the university went out of his way to host all of us. Dr. Miriam Samuel, the head of the Social Work Department had organized about 100 to 125 graduate students in social work and in other fields. An unplanned brief stop-over at the dormitory where I once lived--St. Thomas Hall--proved a highlight as the young men enthusiastically greeted us as celebrities! They insisted on checking my photograph in one the rooms (I looked like a ghost) and having me sing in the hall song! Other key visits in Chennai including meeting with women living with HIV, distributing economic empowerment grants, visiting dalit (or "untouchable" caste) children learning English, and three site visits to Center supported projects for men who are seeking new employment, in contrast to selling their bodies for sex. All three projects appear successful and a few more are planned.

In Namakkal & Kolli Hills

In Namakkal, at Dr. Samuel's free clinic that he calls the Messer Center for Women and Children, about 150 persons gathered to greet us--and to celebrate Chin's birthday with singing and a cake! Meals and food supplements were shared with every attendee. At the nearby hospital, we visited a few very ill patients struggling with HIV and AIDS. We discovered that the male nurse that the Center has supported there for 11 years actually sleeps in the store room of the infectious disease ward! He told us that seven times over the years he has had to use PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis), because of a needle slip that could have caused him to get infected by HIV. We learned he had been saving money to buy land so he could have a house in the area. (A Center donor has stepped up to make the purchase possible, as a reward for his extraordinary service.)

Other stops included Kolli Hills to a small clinic the Center supports. Driving there is not my favorite adventure--72 hair pin curves up and 72 hair pin curves down! With monkeys watching at every curve! At the top we dedicated four new sewing machines and met the teacher and eight women who will be learning a new skill. Also food supplements were shared. The people in Kolli Hills are very isolated--indigenous tribal people who are treated much as are the "untouchables" or dalits. Prejudice against HIV is so high that they don't even use the word!! Recently the Center helped 14 of the people to travel down to the Messer clinic for eye examinations, as persons living with HIV often have their eye sight impacted. A number need cataract surgery but funding is not currently available. (Original funding came from Bethany Lutheran Church in Denver.)

In Trichy

The final visit was in the city of Trichy, where we spoke to about 300 students and staff on their chosen topic of "Discrimination: LGBTQ and Persons Living with HIV." No workshop was long enough or adequate, so that was frustrating to me, but I guess we at least helped raise interest and answered some questions. Students literally begged for more information and conversation.

Summary of What the Center Does in India

So what does the Center do in India--the country in the world with the 3rd largest number of people living with HIV? Currently we are:

- Supporting an AIDS orphanage, where most of the children are HIV (computer & English teaching)
- Holding seminars in three cities about stigma and discrimination facing LGBTQ people and those living with HIV
- Sponsoring college scholarships for women (and a few men) whose families have been impacted by HIV
- Tutoring impoverished young girls who otherwise would not succeed
- Helping HIV positive women develop income generating projects
- Assisting MSM (men who have commercial sex with men) develop alternative economic opportunities
- Providing nutritional supplements for families living with HIV, especially women
- Promoting HIV prevention, talking about safer sex, condoms, PrEP
- Supporting a nurse in HIV/TB ward of public hospital (for 11 years)
- Sponsoring a free clinic for women and children living with HIV (men are welcome too), encouraging HIV testing and stopping the transmission of HIV from mother to child
- Teaching English to impoverished children from the lowest caste
- Starting to teach sewing skills to tribal women, most of whom are HIV positive and needing income
- Enabling tribal women and men to get eye care and glasses, since HIV negatively impacts eyesight
- What else? Probably forgot something!

During my "rest stop" enroute to India, I visited a drop-in center for stigmatized transgendered persons, urgently needing food and shelter in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.