

Report on a visit to Henry Martyn Institute, India

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Aims

- Visit Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) for updates on recent developments, to open a new building part-funded by Methodist Church in Britain (MCB), to have conversations with NMA and scholarship grant holders, to visit the innovative inter faith agriculture project and to discuss possible future grant needs and potential for income generation through the new conference centre.

Henry Martyn Institute

I arrived in Hyderabad for the first time in three years and was pleased to be back in the peaceful community of HMI. Now 90 years old, this



Institute is an international centre for research, inter faith relations and reconciliation, focusing on both languages and academic study for higher degrees and on the praxis of peace building and reconciliation. There are conflict transformation projects in five Indian states and five community development ventures across the old city of Hyderabad, a city with almost equal numbers of Muslims and Hindus. It receives an annual grant from MCB and has an NMA post and two scholarship holders.

Each weekday begins with an inclusive form of devotions taking place in the circular gathering space located in the richness of HMI's fine gardens and I was introduced to the students there. The new building at HMI aims to break even by 2025 and thereafter to generate 40% of the Institute's running costs. The World Mission Fund has supported its construction, including an additional £30,000 in this year's Annual Grant. As well as cutting the ribbon and unveiling the plaque, I watched the traditional boiling over of the milk and the Orthodox blessing of the house. The ground floor has a dining area, the first floor a conference



hall and the second

floor about 20 bedrooms. There is still some work to do but next week HMI is hosting the convocation of Serampore University, which has over 40 affiliated colleges across S Asia. Over 1500 people will attend, many of them potential customers, of course. A local church has already asked about renting the roof area for its Sunday services and the National Council of Churches Assembly will be in the building next April, so the prospects for rental

income look good!

There are two SALT students at HMI. Ms. Aorenla Longchar is on the Doctor of Theology programme and has completed the first of three years. The first year included a paper on 'The role and the challenges of Secularism in a pluralistic Indian Society' and her thesis will be, 'Allama Iqbal's Concept of *Khudi* (The Self) and its Contemporary Relevance'. Mr Pramor Thumla said, 'The study of religion, particularly in India, is not a choice, but a necessity.' His thesis will be "Philosophical Inquiry in the Study



of Islam: An Appraisal with Reference to Averroès' Defence of the Study of Greek Philosophy". They are both very highly regarded here and enjoying their work.



Rev Dr M M Abraham holds a National in Mission Appointment (NMA), he is Associate Director (Academics) and has successfully developed the MTh and DTh Programmes over the four years of the NMA grant.

Travelling 300 kilometres by road in India is no mean feat, but roads are improving all the time and on Saturday, we got from Hyderabad to Adoni in about 5 hours.

That is where the Interfaith Agriculture Centre is. It was initiated by Rev Dr R Daniel Premkumar in part as a response to the tens of thousands of suicides that have occurred in the Indian farming community. Daniel describes it like this, 'There is total disconnect between faith of the farmer and her primary occupation - agriculture. This is true of Hindu, Muslim, Tribal, Dalit and Dalit Christian agricultural workers. Sacred Scriptures and traditions of all living religions though are bursting with agricultural motifs richly dwelling on land, water, environment, yet, they

remain closed books as regards the fate of the farmers today. Moreover, people of all faiths have succumbed to a culture of distrust, denial or confrontation with co-farm worker of different faiths.'

Daniel has worked tirelessly and creatively over the three years since we began partnering this venture, developing Bible study and organic farming practices side-by-side. His latest realisation is that music and dance are ways to clarify and express these ideas. The farmers' stick dancing was amazing and so were the songs.

The result of much discussion and thought has been cow-based organic farming and today we celebrated the gift of two

cows from the Jain Temple and two more gifted locally that I was delighted to hand over to two farmers who are now committed to this style of agriculture. I was also impressed that the local minister of agriculture came and spoke at the ceremony.

It costs £130 to gift a cow and Daniel's aim is to create a hundreds-strong fellowship of cow-based organic farmers here producing what he call 'poison-free food', reducing the use of chemical fertilizer and lessening the risk of debt and suicide.

HMI has five projects in the old city of Hyderabad, which use community development as an interfaith methodology. Unlike the new part of Hyderabad (or Cyberabad as it is sometimes called), there is much poverty here and a clear division between the Hindu streets and the Muslim ones. The Aman Shanti building lies right on the dividing line and accommodates a school for 160 children of primary age, women's tailoring and embroidery classes and a health clinic. Over twenty years it has built up trust in both faith communities and inter faith activities are part of every event and activity. Girls seldom complete secondary education so the activities provide an opportunity to learn skills, read, or talk about, the newspapers, make friends and even play games. For many women it is the only time outside of the home. The small steps toward achieving trusted status in both communities are carefully and skillfully taken.

