

As we prepare to head to India, Rev. Dr. David Charles Smith shares these reflections:

The summer of 1986 changed my life for the better. I was between my middler and senior year as a Master of Divinity student at Princeton Theological Seminary, and was encouraged to apply for the very first PTS sponsored Cross Cultural Immersion Program. As a farm kid, I never traveled too far from home and hadn't traveled internationally. Until I was selected to be part of a four-person delegation to travel to India. Over those 10 weeks, my perspectives on how I viewed poverty, racial relations, differing cultural norms, the blessings of a flush toilet, even my use of fresh water were challenged and transformed by the experience. I celebrated my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday August 15, which is also Indian Independence Day.

Although I've followed news about India with much interest over the years, and was even a long-time member of the Southern Asia Working Group as a member of the Board of Directors of the former United Church Board for World Ministries (now the Common Global Board of the United Church of Christ Wider Ministries and the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]), I really didn't think I would ever have an opportunity to return. Until now.

For several years, I've helped represent the Penn Northeast Conference on the joint Ecumenical Mission Resource Team, which gives leadership our global partnerships. Beginning in 1986, I've been part of the initial delegation to establish relationships: *Kirchengemeinschaft* with one of the regional churches (conferences) of the Union of Evangelical Churches (*UEK*) in Germany, which now continues with the Anhalt District in the former East Germany; with the Ecumenical Council (*Consejo*) of Guatemala (which continues as the PNEC Amigos de Guatemala); and now with the Diocese of Medak and the Diocese of Karnataka, both part of the Church of South India. It's a real honor to be asked to serve in this way to support and encourage our fellow sisters and brothers in a nation where they are in such a small minority (2-3% of the total population identifies as Christian).

This is a particularly critical moment for the Christian community, as well as Muslims and other non-Hindu faith traditions. The far-right leaning Prime Minister and national government have changed the relative peaceful co-existence of a wide variety of religious traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Even the Indian flag represents this concern for unity, with the top (saffron-colored) stripe associated with Hinduism, the green stripe across the bottom for Islam, and the white in the middle for other religions, with the 24 spoked spinning wheel (chakra), representing peace, a legacy of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Christians in the south in particular feel threatened, with violent attacks against church buildings and pastors themselves. They prayed for someone who might accompany them through this "valley of the shadows," and our Conference Ministers, The Revs. Bonnie Bates and Bill Worley, felt called to be part of the answer. The Rev Homer Royer, chair of the EMRT, and two men of Indian origin from Philadelphia, Mr. Charles Kuthuru and The Rev. Dr. Chandra S. Soans, complete our delegation.

It's a long way there, but we leave Newark to arrive in Hyderabad February 6. Bishop A.C. Solomon Raj, will be our host for the first week, allowing us to visit church-related agencies, including several hospitals and a medical college, home for the aged, boarding schools for boys and girls, rural churches, pastors, lay leaders and projects, as well as being a guest at the Bishop's Bungalow (sound fun?!).

The second week we will be shown hospitality by The Rt. Rev. Dr. P.K. Samuel, Bishop of the Karnataka Central Diocese, whom we previously meet in Pottstown. Much of the same goals of discussions with pastors and other leaders, seeing first-hand the mission work the church does, visiting schools, colleges,

and the United Theological College in Bangalore, where I stayed during my first visit so long ago. We will visit Mysore, a heritage city, and each of us will preach one Sunday: I'm scheduled for the 9:00 a.m. service February 16 at the Wesley English Church. Our trip wouldn't be complete if we didn't take the final two days to fly into New Delhi to visit the capital city, including the Red Fort, taking a train to Agra, to see the incomparable Taj Mahal. We return to the US February 21.

The Christian community in India goes back to St. Thomas, who reportedly first brought the gospel of Christ there in the first century. They have been faithful across the generations, but now need our prayers and encouragement. It's our delegation's greatest desire to have our hosts and those with whom we meet to see our visit as both an embodiment of the love and concern of the United Church of Christ in the USA, and as living letters to help them endure and overcome the trials they are currently facing with the promise that they are not alone. "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10 *ESV*)

Please also remember our delegation in your prayers, as the US State Department is cautioning US citizens about political protests in various locations throughout India.

With the peace of Christ---

*Doctor David*