

Pastor Jeff Loach helps spread the word in India

By Mark Pavilons

In our technologically advanced world, simplicity is often the best approach.

There's nothing like spreading a message by speaking to someone face to face and feeling the enthusiasm.

And that's exactly what a group of spiritual leaders from the GTA did, to receptive Christians in India.

The January mission trip included pastor Jeff Loach from Nobleton's St. Paul's Presbyterian Church. He and five of his colleagues helped guide students and administrators at the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) in Bangalore.

In the first exchange of its kind, the GTA contingent introduced spiritual formation/direction as a more integral part of SAIACS's studies. This is a new concept for them, and the "retreat in daily life" program had an overwhelming response.

Some 82 participants from India's pre-eminent seminary took part in the two-week program, producing some interesting results.

Pastor Loach noted Hindus make up the majority (80%) of the country, with Christians a meager 2%. "But, with a population of 1.2 billion, that 2% is significant, and growing. Loach and his colleagues shared prayer and personal scripture readings, offering guidance to their Indian brothers and sisters. This leading to an outpouring of emotion.

Loach's job was that of listener and guide, and the team members were "conduits" to a deeper sense of spirituality and connection with God, something that was well received.

So successful was the retreat they were invited to return, to train the seminary's leaders, who assist a student body of some 200.

It was exciting and a privilege, Loach said, to present this ground-floor spiritual formation to them. He was touched by the generosity and hospitality they received.

Loach had to be convinced by his elders to take the trip, his first adventure "across the pond." It was an "immense blessing" and he admitted his travelling and cultural learning curve went from 0-60.

"We did find that many men and women found themselves spiritually nurtured through our ministry of spiritual direction and sharing the word in chapel services and small groups. We were honoured to be so warmly welcomed by everyone there.

"What is especially exciting is that the key administrators of SAIACS now have a vision to see the foundational principles of spiritual formation more intentionally integrated into the academic life of the community. There is a vision that the Lord has given, and the leadership there is prepared to do what it takes to make that vision a reality."

Most of the Christians there are converted Hindus, offering a different perspective. And they are eager to share their faith with others.

The mission's purpose was, essentially, to equip those Christians to "be the church." To that end, they are serving their communities and making a difference in the lives of their neighbours.

India, Loach observed, is a country of extreme wealth and poverty. It's contradictory in many ways "the majority have cell phones, yet manual labour trumps automated factories.

"You have to see it to appreciate it," Loach observed.

Bangalore itself is a city of upwards of 12 million people "more than the province of Ontario. Rush hour in that city is unfathomable, with every type of vehicle and conveyance imaginable. While known as a global high-tech centre, India still feels underdeveloped, Loach said.

We have a "ridiculously affluent lifestyle in North America," Loach said.

One of Loach's motivating factors in going on the mission was to help spark his own congregation and stir up a passion for Christian work beyond the confines of our own communities. Loach was able to participate in Sunday services at St. Paul's via Skype, to include his congregation in his mission work.

The mission took place under the auspices of Toronto's Tyndale University College and Seminary, which helps supply SAIACS's electronic library.

From his experience, Loach said he has a fresh perspective on Christian life. In India, the Christians are so very passionate about Christianity, despite being in the minority. Yet here in North America, 80% of believe in God, yet less than 15% go to church on Sundays.

As pastor of St. Paul's for the last four and a half years, Loach sees his role as moving forward to engage the community. The church is a depot for the King Township Food Bank. The congregation is made up of young families and has quite an active youth group.

"It's an exciting place to be," Loach said.

Translated into English, a line in India's national anthem means "dispenser of India's destiny."

A heavenly message?

Loach and his colleagues delivered and can take comfort in the fact they planted some seeds that will firmly take root.