



INTERNATIONAL TRIP REPORT

CSI INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE - INDIA

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During November 2012, following an invitation sent from Church of South India (CSI) to Church of Scotland, I was selected to take part in CSI's international youth conference in Chennai, India. The event, titled 'Fest-Zoe' (Festival of Life), took place between 12th and 17th November, and was attended by 100 delegates from India, Nigeria, Japan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Scotland. CSI had sent out invitations to all of her partner churches throughout the world and this had resulted in 10 international visitors being present. The Church of Scotland's World Mission Faithshare Grant funded the trip with CSI covering local costs.

The conference programme featured a variety of workshops and seminars along the themes of Globalisation, Youth Culture and Mission. Each group also spent an afternoon visiting a project in Chennai ran by CSI. Throughout the week, there was also ample time for games, sharing culture and groups activities that gave a light relief from the full programme.

Church of South India was created 65 years ago following of an ecumenical union between reformed denominations within South India. The church is now the 2nd largest in India with a membership of over 4 million, between 15,000 congregations. Throughout South India, the church runs a significant number of schools, colleges, hospitals and projects and takes its Christian social responsibility very seriously.

Over the course of the week I had conversations with several people who helped me have a deeper understanding into how globalisation youth culture is shaping mission within India. The issue that seemed most common across the whole of South India was the infiltration of the Hindu caste system into Christianity. The caste system, simply put, describes from what part of the body people came from, and thus, what their role in society is. People would be born into a caste and it would not be possible to change. Therefore, it is the belief of Hinduism is that as people come from a specific part of the body they are for a specific job or purpose. That purpose could be from philosopher to unskilled manual labourer. Due to the nature of this segregation and the stigma it produces, one conference facilitator described it as 'Apartheid'. India has been working to eradicate the caste system from its culture and laws have been passed to ensure that the 'lower castes' are not stigmatised. Nonetheless, the feeling from conference goes was that the undertones and prejudices created from its deep seating within Indian culture, made the caste system a visible part of Christian and church life at grassroots level.

One of the themes of the conference was 'globalisation' and there were discussions on the negative and positive outcomes from our 'global village'. The progression of globalisation traced throughout history shows that it is not a recent phenomenon to be engaged in global conversation, however it is only now with the advent of technology that we can truly regard our international friends as close neighbours. Through this use of social networking, online video calling and instant news publication, anyone with access to the technology can benefit from a more in-depth understanding of society, politics and economics. Problems from this interaction occur when cultures clash and when traditions are mixed. For example, the inherent need for young people, throughout the world, to socialise and do so in greater numbers, is being fulfilled by the introduction of 'pub culture' to India. The Church

of South India is rightly concerned about this cultural shift and it is challenging youth ministries to uptake ideas such as 'coffee shops' which facilitate the need for social gatherings. Further, and more significantly, young people who have felt empowered by western ideologies are challenging the authority structures, which have been the foundation of eastern society. The historic view that eastern parents challenge the children to studying hard, work hard and live to their fullest, which has been one of the factors that have made countries such as India and China so powerful and influential, is becoming threatened by conflicting western ideas about youth.

When Christian missionaries first went east, they came with their own hymnbook and their own plans for spreading the Word of God. These words and ways came from a completely different environment: a place with different weather and from countries whose main religion was Christianity. An example of this comes from the Christmas carol 'Good King Wenceslas'. In a country where people have never seen snow and where, in places, the winter temperature is greater than Britain's summer, how can people relate to this? In the west, the notion of a white Christmas is often romanticised and the snowflake is a common symbol. Further examples can be drawn from the carol 'See, amid the winter snow' and the wider theme of the British Christmas from 'The Holly and the Ivy'. In India, and other eastern countries, new Christmas carols written in the local language and dialects reflect upon the environment during the season in their context. On returning, I have often thought of whether Christmas and winter have become too synonymised and perhaps we ought to move away from this.

Although many miles separate the Church of South India from Christians in the UK, both groups are facing similar issues, perhaps at differing stages. Even issues that at first seem to be different, do in fact share common ground. Over the course of the conference, there were opportunities for worshipping in different ways and a multi-culture approach was encouraged. Each group took their turn at leading either a morning or evening worship session. During this time, we heard songs and music from the countries and diocese represented. The historical and spiritual meaning behind these items and the English translation was provided. A worship band that played contemporary western Christian music also facilitated worship daily. For some of these songs there were no lyrics provided or displayed, and fortunately, I knew most of the words. Additionally, there were plenty of opportunities for times of prayer and reflection, both as individuals and as groups. As the conference schedule was full, these quiet times helped to digest some of the information. Throughout the conference, there were times of bible study exploring the themes and ideas presented. Overall, the worship styles varied but throughout all, there was a strong connection with God and people were very comfortable to express this.

In conclusion, my trip to Chennai was very insightful and provided many things to reflect on. Being able to share experiences of world Christianity has put many things into perspective and I look forward to the global east taking a leading role in Christianity. For all our cultural, ethical and physical differences there is one thing that brings us together as a universal village and that is our love for Jesus Christ.