

Taking the Long Road to Our Next-door Neighbors



How a church's vision to connect with its changing community led to a journey halfway around the world JAMES AMADON

Our church is at a crossroads. Actually it is in Crossroads, the Bellevue, Washington, neighborhood that Highland Covenant has called home since 1941. The church has been an anchor in the community for more than sixty years, but today we find ourselves almost overwhelmed by the increasingly multicultural kaleidoscope swirling all around us.

What once was gentle farmland teeming with strawberry fields harvested by farmers of European descent has been transformed into an urban, cosmopolitan, and high-tech hub that thousands of people from around the world now call home. Between 1990 and 2008, for example, Bellevue's foreign-born population rose from 13 percent to 33 percent. Many of these immigrants live in the Crossroads neighborhood, and one effect of these changes can be seen in our preschool and kindergarten. More than 50 percent of our 175 students come from India, which means our intentionally Christian preschool that has been a ministry of the church for nearly half a century is now predominantly Hindu.

As a church we have been asking: With so many cultural differences and obstacles, how do we identify the right road that will help us meet and love our neighbors? How do we overcome our fear of the "other" and cross into the relational unknown? How do we refrain from the refuge of politeness and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who connected deeply with the people he met and loved them regardless of their color, creed, or country? We are discover-

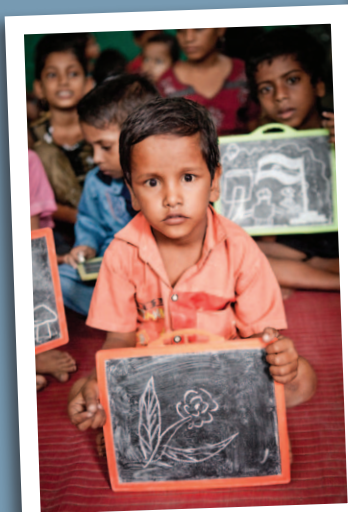


The team from Highland Covenant Church who traveled to India: Austin Bustad, Holly Bustad, Nina Bergman, David Regiel, David Ulfers



A woman tends her crops outside the town of Galbura in India

Rag picker children from the largest dump in Asia, located in Mumbai, receive basic education from agencies supported by the Hindustani Covenant Church.



ing that the answer is one step at a time.

Holly Bustad, a staff member of the school and active member in the church, felt God inviting her last summer to take such a step. Feeling frustrated by an inability to connect with the Indian families coming through our doors each day, Holly sensed God calling her to go to India.

As she sat in my study sharing her idea, she had that slightly incredulous look people get when God has just asked them to do something they aren't sure they can do. It wasn't clear to Holly why she was supposed to go or what she would do there, and as someone who deals with lupus, she wasn't sure her body was up to it.

Within a few months, however, she had gathered a team together. At first, much of the discussion centered on what mission project they would take on. But after time in prayer and discussion, it became clear that God was calling the team to India not because they had something to give but because they had something to learn. The team knew that to be successful



Above: Holly Bustad tries on a sari at a store in India. Right: Holly Bustad's hands were designed with henna by a rag picker trained to do tattoos by an outreach of the Hindustani Covenant Church so she could earn an income. Pictured next to Holly's hand are those of a young girl who approached the team for money and food.

they had to acknowledge that much of our faith has been shaped more by Western cultural values and norms than by biblical ones.

While there is much to honor in Western culture, our unwavering commitments to individualism, consumerism, and triumphalism can push our pride to the point where we see ourselves as the answer to what the rest of the world needs. We forget that when Jesus undertook his great mission he “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7-8, TNIV).

We forget that when God puts us at a crossroads, it is an opportunity to remember that we are called to take the road that looks most like the cross. For the India team, this meant beginning to see that God was doing something through the church in India that we needed.

After consulting with the Department of World Mission and the Hindustani Covenant Church (HCC), the team decided to travel to the cities of Mumbai, Pune, Solapur, and Gulbarga to meet HCC representatives and visit various ministry project sites. Their focus would be learning about Indian culture, catching the vision and passion of HCC leaders, and bringing back what they learned to help the church in our inter-cultural endeavors.

Travel to India is an expensive



undertaking, and the team began to feel the financial pressure. Needing to raise more than \$18,000 in just a few months, they started to plan a fundraising dinner to which they would invite local Indian families to hear about the trip and have the opportunity to contribute financially. The team quickly realized that this idea was about asking “them” to come to



Children at a school run by the Hindustani Covenant Church welcome the team.

“our” program, exactly the kind of mind-set they were trying to alter. Not wanting to wait until after the trip to begin making these changes, they asked, “What would it mean to take a step in their direction?”

After some brainstorming, an idea emerged. India would soon be celebrating Republic Day, a national holiday honoring the date on which the constitution of India was adopted after generations of British rule. The holiday is celebrated throughout India

James Amadon is pastor of Highland Covenant Church in Bellevue, Washington. Photos were taken by David Ulfers, member of Highland Covenant Church.

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with passion and pride, and the team wondered if the church could host a Republic Day party for local Indian families who were far from home.

Without a clear idea of what it would take or how it would look, the team set to work. Richard and Neelam Lewis, the only Indian mem-

bers of the congregation, provided assistance and guidance. Invitations were made, Indian food was bought and prepared, and a very tentative agenda (in honor of Indians' proclivity toward spontaneity) was put together. It was decided that admission would be free to all who came.



Highland Covenant Church's India Republic Day celebration

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The party was held in early February, and when the day arrived church members anxiously waited in the colorfully decorated gym to see if anyone would show up. And they did! By the end of the day more than 200 people had come out to enjoy the food and festivities.

As the sweet smell of Indian spices drifted through the air, men formed teams and played a version of indoor cricket, children competed in relay races and traditional Indian games, and women in colorful saris started singing and dancing. The Indian national anthem was played and everyone stopped to sing. A member of the church gave a brief presentation on the history of India Republic Day and some similarities between American and Indian cultures. Other than those brief formalities, however,

the day was marked by new connections, informal conversation, and laughter. The following week, some of the Indian preschool families thanked the church profusely for hosting the celebration. One mother commented how grateful she was because her son,

who was born in the United States, had never experienced a Republic Day celebration. People within the church caught a glimpse of what the team was trying to accomplish and support for the trip increased. Eventually more than enough money was raised,

enabling the team to set aside a financial gift for the ministries in India they planned to visit.

When August arrived, the church sent the five-member team off with its blessing. Over the course of two weeks they experienced the urban density and rural farmlands of western India. They visited a red light district in Pune where HCC ministries help sex workers find a

way out of despair and abuse. They walked through fields where farmers are being taught how to grow crops appropriate to the region. They met children whose families were rag-pickers, searching through garbage for recyclables or other items that can be reused. They saw a small school in Mumbai that has been supported by the Swedish Covenant Church where those children have a reprieve from their smelly work for a few hours each day.

They witnessed how the HCC people go to the places of deepest need, listen to the people and treat them with dignity, and then find the resources to meet the need. This is rarely easy. Christians make up only 2 to 3 percent of India's population, and they often face persecution and distrust. In one rural village five hours outside Pune, villagers threw rocks at the HCC workers when they first tried to offer medical aid and other development assistance. The HCC workers were undeterred, however, and now ten years later the villagers trust them and think about Christians every time they get fresh water from the pump HCC installed. This intentionally patient and personal strategy frequently opens doors for them to

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Playing indoor cricket in celebration of India Republic Day

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share the hope they have in Christ, and the church is growing.

The team also learned about hospitality. When they arrived at each ministry site, church, or home, they were treated as honored guests. Chai tea was offered everywhere, and when there was food, their hosts refrained from eating until the team was served first. These refreshments, and often comfortable chairs as well, would frequently appear out of nowhere for them in the most broken down, poverty-stricken places.

As the team took all of this in, they were overwhelmed by the grinding poverty, moved by the beauty and resilience of the people, strengthened by the worship and hospitality they received, and captivated by the sight of the gospel in action. They saw humble Christians crossing boundaries of race, religion, and caste to interact with people in need and offering them friendship, hope, grace, and new life in Christ. As all of this flowed over them each day of the journey, they were changed.

Holly and the team are now back in Crossroads and sharing with us what they have seen and heard. But more than that, they are sharing with us what God continues to teach them and how it will affect the way they live. As a church we are asking how their experience will affect the way we live as well. The truth is we don't know. We continue to take one step at a time, believing that God is more interested in showing us who we are supposed to be than what we are supposed to do.

One thing is certain, however. The people across the room are beginning to look a lot less foreign and a little more familiar. The distance between us doesn't appear to be so great anymore. And so we stand at a crossroads in the Crossroads neighborhood, our neighborhood, praying for wisdom to discern the road shaped like the cross, and for courage to take the next step.

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