



A Servant to the Nations

UN official Abraham Joseph, member of Bethesda Covenant Church in New York, is trying to make life better for people in the world's poorest countries.

LIZ VALLIYIL

Since the September 11 attacks and the war in Iraq, America's attention has been drawn to the international scene and the United Nations. While the media has focused on the UN Security Council and its role in the rebuilding of Iraq, the UN does more than deal with international conflict. It works year-round to provide humanitarian aid to impoverished nations.

On September 18, 2000, the United Nations approved the Millennium Declaration, which laid out a daunting set of humanitarian goals for the international community. They include eradicating poverty and hunger; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reduc-

ing child mortality; achieving universal primary education; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; improving maternal health; bringing about environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development.

"We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women, and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected," the declaration reads. "We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want."

One of the people working to achieve those goals is Abraham Joseph, a member of Bethesda Covenant Church (which meets in a building directly across the street from the UN). He is the first officer in the Office of the High Representative of the Secretary General for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Devel-

oping Countries, and Small Island Developing States. Joseph's office is charged with helping the poorest nations in the world through humanitarian aid and development projects.

Forty-nine nations fall into the category of least developed countries. These countries have no healthcare structure or educational tools for their people. They also lack clean water and have substandard housing.

Landlocked developing countries fight to survive because they are at the mercy of neighboring countries. Because they have no seaports, they have no way of exporting their goods. They rely on other countries to allow them access to waterways and are often subjected to high tariffs in order to trade their products with other countries.

Small island developing states suffer from being isolated from the rest of the world. Because ocean levels are rising, these nations are literally sinking into oblivion.

Joseph knows his job is challenging, but embraces it nonetheless. "There are many

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things to be accomplished," he says. "These countries face a lot of problems. They need health education, literacy, food security, clean water, and the capacity of foreign trade and investments."

Joseph assists UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in drafting reports for the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council on the status of the poorest of the poor countries. These reports detail the support that donor communities have given to help poverty stricken countries.

The donor communities are made up of three groups: prosperous nations like the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, who provide both financial and structural assistance; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the World Health Organization, UNICEF, CARE, and other relief and development groups; and businesses in the private sector, who are encouraged to do their part in stabilizing the economies of these nations.

"It is our purpose to raise these issues before the international community," Joseph says, "and to encourage donor countries to support poor and vulnerable nations in their economic growth and development."

Joseph's career at the United Nations began in 1988, but his commitment to service started as a young boy. He was born in Singapore in 1949, and lived there until middle school, when his family moved to his parents' native India. There they settled in Trivandrum, the capital city of the southern state of Kerala.

Kerala is known for its religious diversity, and while the majority of Indians are Hindu, Joseph's family is Christian. Tradition says that Jesus' disciple Thomas traveled to India in A.D. 54, baptized five Indian families, and formed the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. "Mar Thoma" is translated "his holiness Saint Thomas." Joseph's religious heritage is traced back to this time in India.

Joseph says his family and his community were examples of how to live life as a Chris-

tian. "Right from the beginning, I've had a deep orientation to serving others," Joseph says. "It comes from my family, my upbringing, my community, the church I grew up in. It's Christ's love in me that has taught me to serve."

Joseph completed his undergraduate studies in Trivandrum and then went on to Japan to pursue a Ph.D. in international economics. He came back to India to work with the government in the capital city of New Delhi.

He started out with India's planning commission and then moved on to the ministry of commerce and finance. Joseph met his wife, Takako Hamaguchi, in Japan. Hamaguchi works for UNICEF and because of her job in the United States, Joseph moved here as well.

Joseph has worked at the United Nations in several capacities. He originally focused



Abraham Joseph

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his work on analyzing foreign investment policies for developing nations. He followed trends in investments and worked on financial development. He also worked in the Office of Special Coordinator for Africa and the Least Developed Countries. He started his current position last year.

Joseph's ideas for helping poor nations go beyond simply providing aid. He believes these countries deserve a second chance and a clean slate.

"I would like to see bilateral and multilateral debts written off," he says. "That would give them space to breathe."

Joseph draws much of the strength of his convictions from his faith and the support of his church community at Bethesda Covenant. His initial en-

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counter with Bethesda Covenant happened during a chance visit after he moved to New York.

"One morning I just walked out in search of a church," he says, "and it just so happened that I stepped into this one. I felt very much at home here . . . the Covenant Church is like a family gathering."

Joseph's faith is present in everything he does at the UN. His every thought and decision for these impoverished nations extends out of this faith.

"I always have the feeling of the Lord in me," he says. "I try to be very fair and take my work very seriously. Many of these countries are in emergency situations. I can't sit back and relax knowing that these people are suffering. When they are being provided for, that's when I get my satisfaction."

Joseph's job involves travel to foreign countries, many of which are predominantly non-Christian. He says he has found non-Christians to be open-minded and tolerant of other beliefs.

"I have seen that Christians are very well respected in the poor countries.

They see the health and educational outreach services we provide and know that we are there to help. They feel very comfortable talking to us."

As a believer in Christ, Joseph says that regardless of religious background, everyone deserves the help the UN provides.

"Everyone is equal in the eyes of the Lord," he says. "There are often people who call themselves Christian who are more harmful than non-Christians. We should not discriminate, but love our neighbors as ourselves. That's how they'll see the light of Christ. If they see how we are willing to help them without requiring them to follow our religious beliefs, then their minds may become more attuned to Christianity."

Although Joseph keeps a busy sched-

ule, often not leaving the United Nations until after ten at night, he still finds time to take part in weekly Bible studies.

"I support Christian NGOs that are part of the UN. During the lunch hour once a week, they have a Bible fellowship. Whenever I have the time, I go, and I invite my friends. It's a time to share with one another and learn."

While his actions reflect otherwise, Joseph says he wouldn't necessarily call himself a missionary.

"I don't like to go around calling myself a missionary. I just do what I think is right. We can change many people's lives just by our actions. It makes more of an impact."

Above all, Joseph has one piece of advice: people's lives are their mission fields.

"Don't think you have to be in a foreign country to do mission work," he says. "We need to be missionaries wherever we are. Reach out to your colleagues—they need to see Christ in your life too. That's my philosophy." □

Covenant Church at UN Moving to New Location

Bethesda Covenant Church, which has met at the Church Center for the United Nations since 1969, will be moving to a new location at the end of July. Church Women United, the United Methodist group that owns the Church Center, canceled Bethesda's church office lease last August, giving them a year to move to a new location.

Bethesda, the oldest church in the East Coast Conference, was first organized in 1879. In the late sixties, the church, which had a declining membership, was offered space in the UN Church Center, says former pastor Cliff Johnson.

"So they rented an office in 1969 and sold their old building," says Johnson, who was Bethesda's pastor from 1971 to 1984. Since that time, the church has maintained an office at the Church Center and has held worship services in the center's chapel. The church's final service there will be on July 27, says pastor Gerry Swenson.

Because of its location, Bethesda is an NGO (non-governmental organization) member of the UN, a status it will retain even after moving, says Swenson. The church council is considering several options for a new space and should reach a decision soon.

Moving will mean the church has to rethink its mission "to some degree," says Swenson. He thinks that in a city with many large congregations, a small (twenty-five-member) congregation like Bethesda has something unique to offer.

"Being a small congregation can be an advantage," he says. "There are people who are looking for that kind of environment [in a church]."

Swenson says that Abraham Joseph is "the kind of person any pastor would be happy to have in their congregation."

"I would describe him as a tireless worker for the Lord," Swenson says. "He is a wonderful spirit." □