

Sharing love and Building Lives of Hope!

Catholic Charities Solidarity Team's Delegation Trip to SE India, Jun-July 2011

On June 27, 2011, the Catholic Charity Solidarity Team (CCST) sent a delegation team to visit the varied sponsored projects in the Diocese of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, southeast India. Bishop Davadass Ambrose, a man with a vision of justice and hope for his people, gently and hospitably welcomed the CCST team: Father Arulraj Singaraye, a Thanjavur priest studying social work at Kean University and assisting at St. Bernadette Church in Parlin, Sister Donna Brady, a Sister of Christian Charity from Nativity of the Lord Parish in Monroe, and John Schweska, a counselor and program coordinator at Catholic Charities. The Diocese of Metuchen first became involved with assistance to this sea bound diocese after the great tsunami of 2004. The CCST, a global and local outreach program for peace and justice, pledged to continue work with Bishop Ambrose on varied needed projects for his people. Two years ago, one poor, remote village celebrated a new chapel and cyclone shelter through the fund raising work of CCST. Another valuable project, which is ongoing, is with Our Lady of Health Nursing School—helping young ladies from the Dalit caste, (a people that suffers much from prejudice), to receive a professional degree—enabling them to return to their communities with healing and teaching skills.

During this current CCST 2011 visitation, another chapel was beautifully erected in Chellapanpettai, a sub parish of St. Mary's Parish in Baladur, shepherded by Father Gnanadurai. These people are also of the Dalit community and depend on their agricultural work and livelihood, renting from landlords of a higher caste. The new Chapel of Our Lady of Refuge, a sacred space for prayer and Sacraments, also serves as a community center for events of celebration, meetings and a refuge from storms. There is a Catholic saying in SE India: "A village without a chapel is not a village". "How beautiful it was to be present for the dedication of this building for such a people of faith," says John Schweska, "after having heard their ardent plea for help two years ago". Smiles of love and joy on the faces of adults and children witnessed to their deep appreciation and the priority of faith in their lives, sustaining them and giving them greater purpose and meaning. Supporting people's very identity and self esteem is a powerful, sustainable channel toward their sense of independence, self care, and healthy pride.

The Nursing School educating young ladies from poor rural areas has expanded, moving to a newly constructed building next to the Catholic Hospital of Our Lady of Health in the heart of the city of Thanjavur. The delegation team met with students and staff, and gathered valuable academic information and a portfolio to present to St. Peter's Hospital's Nursing Department in New Brunswick for a potential collaborative partnership and professional collaboration. The Team also visited the hospital wards where intern nurses from the Program were diligently and joyfully at work with the patients. A very practical request from the staff and students is a plea for a greater amount of nursing and medical journals for their school library. Individual young ladies can also be supported by a parish or an individual donor. Tuition and hostel fees for the first year amount to \$1296.

Finally, the delegation team visited the Social Services Division of the diocese—specifically to embrace a new project—the Widows’ Program. Widows are shunned and deeply devalued in society and even by one’s own family—a cultural issue stemming back for many centuries. The diocesan program advocates for these women, assists with jobs and helps open up savings accounts for them, provides lawyers, as needed, and tries to promote a new way of thinking about widows in the small villages where the old customs prevail. Groups are help to offer support, guidance and engender self esteem. The team also was invited to a farm where a community of widows was working, building thatched roofs and milking cows. These women are asking for a better system of micro managing funds—so that land can be rented for farming, pots obtained for cooking or a cow bought for milking—three of many working possibilities. CCST would be able to give details as to how a contribution could be used for anyone wanting to assist a widow with micro financing,

On July 7th, as the delegation team was boarding the plane home, they had much to reflect on; it was clear that Bishop Ambrose consistently wants to bring the power of hope and justice inherent in the Gospel to his people—beautifully supported by and focused in faith, worship and prayer as its foundation. The CCST, and all who feel a desire to assist in any way, have the opportunity to be part of a dynamic diocese—globally reaching out to be a viable part of building lives up, and in our very giving of ourselves—experiencing the presence and friendship of Christ in our own lives—He Who is the source of all life, justice and hope. (For more information, please contact Sister Donna at sisterdonna@nativitymonroe.org or John Schweska at jschweska@ccdom.org).

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Catholic Charities Solidarity Team